Single Mothers in Thailand

Women, Motherhood, and Going it All Alone

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To my grandfather, may your soul find eternal peace.

Acknowledgments

To God, the unseen guide. I am grateful for everything I have been blessed with in my life.

To all single mothers in Thailand, who took part in the study, their participation and contributions have greatly enriched my academic knowledge and life experience. I hope this book voices their stories and articulates their joys and sorrows. I have been truly humbled and touched by their enthusiasm and willingness to share their lives with me, and the trust they placed in me.

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Ribuan terima kasih.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia   Herbary Cheung

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> We face multiple challenges in our changing world, but one factor remains constant: the timeless importance of mothers and their invaluable contribution to raising the next generation. By rewarding their efforts and enhancing their living conditions, we can secure a better future for all. (Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary-General, 2009)

1.1 Prologue: Encountering Single Mothers

This study began when I became interested in attitudes toward and life experiences of single mothers—women who "go it alone" in raising their children—in Thailand. It aims to examine the discrimination and stigma that they face, which leads, in the majority of cases, to their social exclusion. The research looks at single mothers in terms of possible overlapping categories of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, which intersect with gender, class, and ethnicity but also with other significant categories, such as generation, geographical origin, religion, and health status.

In July 2019, when I was on a trip back to Thailand to visit my family, I learned that one of my aunts, Thanida,[1] had divorced her second husband and become a single mother, raising her 13-year-old daughter

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[1] All names used in this book are pseudonyms.

alone. Intrigued by her story, I talked to Thanida at a coffee shop in a *hi-so* (high society) department store in Siam Square, Bangkok. She was then 41 years old, highly educated, wealthy, twice divorced, and a single mother. Thanida was born into a wealthy Thai-Chinese family; as the youngest daughter in the family, her parents always doted on her. She studied at an international school and eventually earned her PhD in the United Kingdom. After graduation, she returned to Thailand and worked as a lecturer before becoming a council member of a university in Bangkok. There she met her first husband, a colleague, and they married in 2005. Three years after the birth of their daughter Taew, Thanida divorced her husband. She ended the marriage because she suspected that her husband was gay and could not satisfy her sexually, but she did not tell others about the reason behind the divorce. For a long time, she raised her daughter by herself. With her good financial position and support from her parents, her single motherhood did not bring too many difficulties. On the surface, it seemed that she and her daughter were managing well, emotionally and practically. After a period of dating and an open relationship, Thanida married her second husband, a handsome and charming young man without a decent job. Although her parents felt the man was unreliable and was marrying Thanida for money, they reluctantly agreed to the marriage not only to keep their daughter happy, but also for their granddaughter to have a "normal" family.

However, problems soon arose and, as her parents had anticipated, Thanida ended her second marriage because of her husband's irresponsibility and cheating. Many relatives and friends expressed sympathy and regret for what had happened to her, but Thanida herself was happy and relieved to be a single mother. In her words, "why must I get married, [when I can] be a free woman, and live for my daughter and myself? Isn't it good?" I was shocked and puzzled by her view that there is no problem with being a single mother and that single mothers in Thailand can live good, and free, lives.

During our conversation, Thanida explained:

> *I am interested in your research, and I like to share my story or even my secret with you, because I want you to conduct a different research to let other people know, especially to tell those people who always misunderstand single mothers. There are many single mothers in Thailand, **but we are different**, not all of us need their sympathy, some of our lives are even better off than many of theirs. Of course, some single mothers are miserable, like those teenage mothers, poor moth-*

*ers abandoned by their drug-addicted husbands, and some single mothers who are sex workers and raise their children alone. However, I also want to let you know that there are many good single mothers like me. **I am different from the others**, I have the ability and money to raise my daughter alone, and I am happy and proud to be a single mother.* (emphasis added)

During my research, I heard many study participants stating, "I am different from them," and distancing themselves from the stereotype of single mothers which is prevalent in the Thai social discourse. The Thai etymology for single mother, "mae leang diew" (แม่เลี้ยงเดี่ยว), is a translation of "mother who raises children alone." Before this term, the word "mae mai" (แม่ม่าย) had been used in Thai society for a long time. According to The Royal Institute Dictionary, "mae mai" is slightly different from the English term "widow" as it means both married women whose husband dies or those who get a divorce. The term "mae mai look tid" (แม่ม่ายลูกติด) has also been coined, referring to mae mai with a child(ren). Both terms, "mae mai" and "mae mai look tid," have a negative connotation. Only recently that the term "mae leang diew" or "single mother" has been introduced and used in Thai media and society. The term, apparently a Thai translation of the English term "single mother," to a certain great extent, tries to project new, powerful, and positive meanings on being a single mother and to replace the old derogatory term, "mae mai look tid." The use of the term "mae leang diew" has therefore reflected the change in the social attitudes toward single mothers in Thai society. However, much of the local and national mass media coverage of single mothers in Thailand still tends to focus on negative images of them, and many single mothers have not only been portrayed as "victims" and "pitiful" but also described as "stupid," "poor," "dirty," "cold-blooded," "cruel," and "promiscuous" (see Daily News, 2021; Thai PBS, 2017; Thairath, 2020, 2021). While Thanida's background and experiences were far removed from those prejudices and stereotypes of single mothers in Thailand, her narrative proved that the complex issues of single mothers are poorly understood in Thai society while the mothers themselves are negatively viewed by most Thai people.

Patchaya's story is perhaps more representative of these widespread perceptions of single mothers, which would view her situation as being a result of her bad karma. Patchaya, a 29-year-old single mother raising her 11-year-old son alone, is originally from Isan, the poorest region in Thailand, and dropped out of school at 16 when, unmarried, she became

pregnant. Despite family opposition, she became a teenage single mother. There are not many job opportunities in her hometown, and she couldn't stand the ridicule and discrimination of the neighbors. Patchaya decided to move to Bangkok with her boyfriend and their son to seek a job. Because of financial pressures and child-rearing issues, there were more and more conflicts between Patchaya and her boyfriend. A few years later, her drug-addicted boyfriend left without saying goodbye and abandoned Patchaya and their son.

With no support from her parents or the father of her son, Patchaya's life became increasingly difficult as a single mother, and the financial and mental stress brought her close to collapse. In her efforts to be a good mother, Patchaya worked hard—as a restaurant waiter, a hawker selling noodles, a telephone operator at the call center, and a housekeeper at a hotel—to make enough money to feed her son and herself. However, because of her poor education level and limited work experience, Patchaya's income never met her needs, and she lived in poverty. She could not get any support from the government because she fell pregnant out of wedlock, and there was no legal marriage. A friend who is a sex worker told Patchaya about the substantial income and flexibility of work in the sex industry and, eventually, she chose to work as a sex worker in the Nana area of Bangkok. Her monthly income increased fivefold, and she had more free time to take care of her son.

But unfortunately, Patchaya was infected with HIV by one of her clients, making her life even more difficult and hopeless as a single mother living with HIV. Patchaya feels that she has been discriminated against and unfairly treated because of her two vulnerable identities, as she shared with me:

> *Thai society has misunderstandings about single mothers and is full of unfriendliness and stigmatization. Single mothers could be discriminated against for many different reasons by different people. But for me, I think the worst discrimination was from other single mothers in my NGO, especially those single mothers who think they are superior to me. They always think I'm poor, uneducated, and a sex worker living with HIV, so they're different from me. They're good single mothers, but I'm a bad single mother. I think **we're the same, we're all single mothers**, and we will all be looked down upon by others in our society. I suffered worse because of my bad karma, but I think being a single mother is already a retribution for all of us.* (emphasis added)

Patchaya's story seems to confirm the perception and prejudice typical of people's attitudes toward single mothers in Thailand. She was a teenage mother who got pregnant outside marriage, was stupid and therefore abandoned by men, worked as a sex worker, was infected with HIV, and was rejected by her parents and family. Many people would think that Patchaya is incapable of raising a child on her own, unqualified to be a mother, or even a disgrace to all Thai women. However, as I delved into the life courses of Patchaya and many other study participants, I started to understand their unique single motherhood experiences. I found that, underneath her socio-economic class, educational background, health conditions, and the discrimination and stigma related to it, Patchaya was the same as Thanida. As single mothers raising children alone, both of them tried very hard to give a better life to their children, no matter how difficult their own lives have been and despite the discrimination and stigma they have experienced. The stories of Thanida and Patchaya seem to be two extreme examples. However, their very different experiences motivated me to revisit the term "single mother" within the Thai context and discourse, which is far more complex and diverse than it might first appear.

My study, therefore, aims to examine the discrimination and stigma faced by single mothers that lead to their social exclusion in Thailand. In this research, I look at single mothers in terms of possible overlapping categories of multiple forms of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, which intersect not only with gender, class, and ethnicity but also with other significant categories, such as hometown neighborhood, religion, and health conditions, which manifest significantly in the Thai context but are currently understudied. The main chapters which follow provide a detailed investigation of single mothers and address a number of empirical questions.

1. How do single mothers experience stigma in their daily lives in Thailand? Where does the stigma come from? What are the leading causes of the stigma related to single motherhood in Thailand? And what are the differences in stigma manifested at different levels in Thai society?

2. What are the different vulnerabilities and marginalized experiences among the various subgroups of single mothers in Thailand? What are the relationship dynamics of different subgroups of single mothers?

3. What are the differences in stigmatization experienced by single mothers living with HIV, single mothers with mental illness, and other single mothers? What strategies do they employ to cope with the stigma linked with their health conditions? How do they practice their motherhood despite their illness, and what are their family relationships and mothering experiences?

4. How does the Thai government view single mothers? Does it provide support to single mothers? If so, what social welfare does the government provide to help and support single mothers? If it doesn't provide support, why not? How do NGOs help single mothers? What is the relationship between single mothers, NGOs, and the Thai government?

My study not only unpacks the diversities and complexities of single motherhood in Thailand but also attempts to make single mothers' invisible feelings visible, inaudible voices audible, and unsayable stories sayable. The findings from Thailand will enable us to understand single mothers and single motherhood within a broader context; this study therefore goes beyond the current welfare approach that mainly focuses on single mothers and poverty in the dominant Western discourse.

1.2   CONTEXTUALIZING SINGLE MOTHERS IN THAILAND

The narratives of Thanida and Patchaya clearly show that different single mothers have complex and vastly different life experiences. According to a report released by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2016), economic and social development in Thailand has led to family structures becoming more diverse in recent decades. There are increased numbers of DINK couples (Double Income, No Kids), LAT couples (Living Apart Together, i.e., having an intimate relationship but living separately), elderly couples living alone (without their offspring), same-sex couples, and single-parent families, especially single-mother families.

However, the exact number of single mothers in contemporary Thailand, and who they are, is difficult to establish for two major reasons: first, the limited access to statistics from the Thai authorities because of bureaucratic and administrative opacity; and second, the fact that in a "loosely structured social system" like Thailand (Embree, 1950), relationships such as marriage are considered to be less strictly governed by "standard" rules and norms. The definitions and procedures of marriage and

divorce remain relatively unclear and ambiguous. As a result, many marriages in Thailand are not legally registered: through a Buddhist ceremony, elopement, or even simple cohabitation, these kinds of "informal marriages" are accepted by many Thai people. This creates enormous difficulties for the government's statistical work on marriage registration (Horstmann, 2011; Jampaklay & Haseen, 2011; Richter & Podhisita, 1992).

A report entitled *The State of Thailand's Population 2015: Features of Thai Families in the Era of Low Fertility and Longevity*, released by the United Nations Population Fund and the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (UNFPA and NESDB, 2016), defines single-parent families as families in which only a father or a mother lives with one or more children and states that the total number of single-parent families increased from 970,000 to 1.37 million between 1987 and 2013 (see Fig. 1.1), of which 80% were single-mother families (NSO, 2013).

The main factors leading to single-parent families are the end of a union, including divorce, separation, or the death of one partner. Statistics show that the incidence of divorce among Thais has increased from 77,735 couples (21%) in 2002 to 107,031 couples (26.5%) in 2013 (see Fig. 1.2).

In terms of single mothers, although the percentage of single-mother families decreased slightly from 83% in 1987 to 81% in 2013, as indicated in the *Labor Force Survey 1987 and 2013*, it has remained largely unchanged for the past 20 years (NSO, 2013); rural areas have more single-parent families (58.4%) than urban areas (41.6%) (NSO, 2013). In addition, an analysis of the current Thai family conducted by the Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development (2019) found that the rate of female-headed households increased significantly from 27.9% of all households in 2014 to 30.4% in 2016. When considering the marital status of the Thai population, an average of 15% of ever-married women are divorced, separated, or widowed (see Fig. 1.3). The figure also suggests that while the number of marriages has declined, the number of divorces has slightly increased and about one-third of marriages end in divorce.

Within the Asian context, many scholars have examined how single motherhood affects the next generation differently and often focus on economic, education, and health aspects. In the education study, Nonoyama-Tarumi (2017) examined relationships between single parenthood and student achievement in Japan, while Park (2007) used the data from the Program for International Student Assessment to explore the gap in the reading performance of students in single-parent and intact
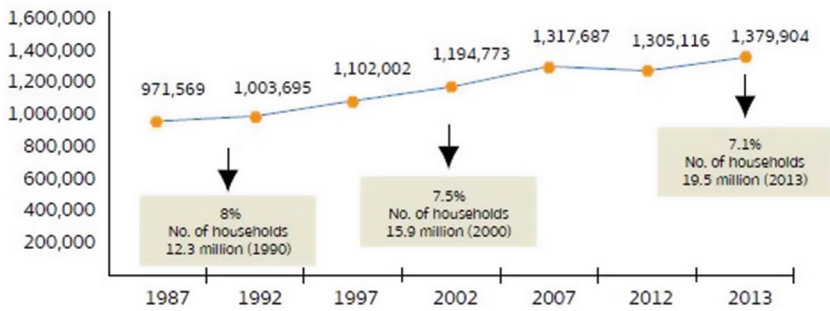
Fig. 1.1 Number and percentage of single-parent families with a child <18 years, 1987–2013. (Source: Labor Force Survey 1987–2013, Quarter 3 (NSO, 2013))
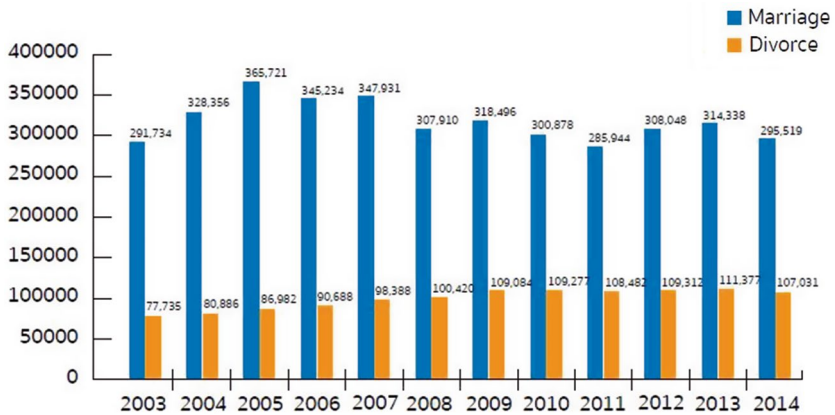

Fig. 1.2 Number of marriages and divorces, 2002–2013. (Source: Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, 2002–2013)

families in five Asian countries. Their study found that family systems have a significant impact on children's educational performance. While in psychology studies, many scholars have researched single mothers' physical and mental health and studied the relationship between their education, age, and income. They have also provided much advice to improve counseling and the social welfare system in Korea and Singapore (Ezawa, 2005; Subramaniam et al., 2014). In the social development and social policy field, scholars have explored the potential of single mothers to be involved

in entrepreneurship in Malaysia (Roddin et al., 2011), study the unique challenges faced by low-income single-parent families in Singapore (Glendinning et al., 2015), to value single parenthood, and reconstruct positive meanings of divorce from a stress and coping perspective in Hong Kong (Hung et al., 2004). These studies sought to gain greater insight into employment and finance, housing, social networks, and time poverty from the perspective of single parents.

Studies of single mothers and gender in Asia have provided vital insights about single mothers from education, health, and social policy perspectives. However, not much has been investigated regarding the stigma and
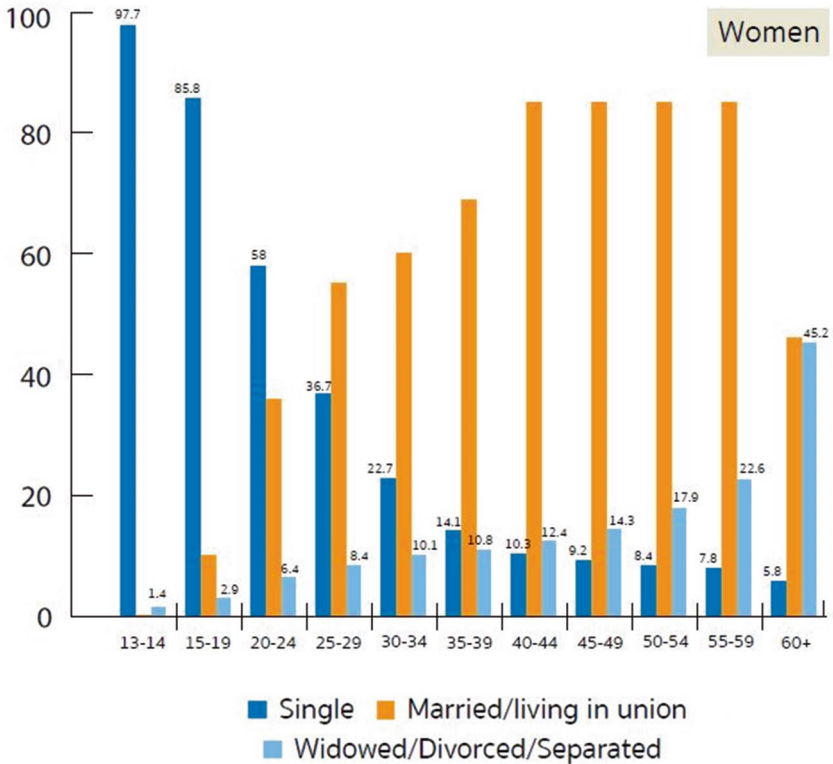

Fig. 1.3 Marital status (percentages) of Thai women by age, 2010. (Source: Population and Housing Census, 2010 (NSO, 2010))

social exclusion of single mothers and how they may have impacted their lives in Thailand. The majority of current research on single mothers in Thailand has been undertaken in two key fields. Firstly, researchers in the reproductive and public health field have focused on unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, particularly concerning young women and teenage mothers. Intaraprasert and Boonthai (2005), Warakamin et al. (2004), and Whittaker (2001) examine the problems associated with abortion in Thai women, which they all identify as an essential public health issue affecting the quality of life of women of reproductive age. Manopaiboon et al. (2003) focus on the prevalence of, and factors associated with, pregnancy and abortion among teenage mothers from vocational schools; they find that almost 50% of the students reported having had sexual intercourse. Of those who became pregnant as a result, 95% underwent abortion. A study by Dumrongpanapakorn and Liamputtong (2017) shows that family and social support play a very important role in the treatment and recovery of women with breast cancer and highlights that single mothers receive significantly less human, financial, or emotional support than married mothers. Therefore, they argue that medical professionals and the government should provide single mothers with more personalized support and care services. A survey conducted by Somchai and Charin (2004) in five regions of Thailand shows that most people in Thailand have negative attitudes toward mental illness. Marginalized women, especially sex workers with mental illness and single mothers with mental illness, suffer from the most severe discrimination and stigma in Thai society.

Secondly, social welfare and development studies researchers have investigated support services for single mothers and their children. Noting that single motherhood most commonly results from abandonment, separation, divorce, or the death of a spouse, Jiumpanyarach (2011) suggests that the end of a marriage is the most critical time and can influence how women manage their single motherhood. Wasikasin's (2002) work on the problem of abandoned children, which is associated with unmarried mothers, highlights the difficulties of single mothers in parenting on their own and the importance of providing support services for single mothers.

According to Anupong (2012), who compares support and non-support factors in the context of unmarried mothers' needs vis-à-vis their children, the most significant factor affecting parenting decisions is social support, especially receiving information related to service providers from social workers. Premwichai (2014) argues that negative attitudes toward services in public institutions were due to the low quality of services,