

More gender equality in workplace: ILO

■ *Pravit Rojanaphruk*

THE NATION

THE 1997 economic crisis has had an unexpected silver lining — pushing Thai women towards new occupational skills, such as commercial cooking, computers and electronics, and creating more gender equality in the workplace, a new report states.

The report, released last week by the International Labour Office (ILO), states that sex segregation in Thai workplaces has been reduced. However, experts expressed caution about premature congratulations.

“The government’s prevention of [gender] discrimination [in recruitment processes] has actu-

ally been a failure,” said Chalidaporn Songsamphan, a women’s studies lecturer at Thammasat University.

Other barriers to equal representation discussed at a recent symposium include preferential treatment of unmarried women, earlier fixed retirement ages for female factory workers, and the lack of the rights to organise and negotiate over working conditions among the growing number of female home workers.

Other findings on Thailand in the ILO report, which reviewed workplace gender equality on a global scale, revealed that people with HIV/Aids or believed to be carriers still face discrimination in many forms. These range from pre-

employment testing which results in a refusal to hire, to ostracising by colleagues.

The law cannot be depended upon in many instances,” said Supatra Nacapew, director of the Centre for Aids Rights (CAR). “It’s a problem of perception and some [people with HIV/Aids] simply cannot remain at the office because they’re ostracised by others.”

She said testing for HIV/Aids and subsequent discrimination was widespread.

Vitit Muntabhorn, from Chulalongkorn University’s Faculty of Law, said discrimination against the estimated two million migrant workers should not be overlooked. Women, young people and ethnic minorities faced a host

of discriminatory policies and attitudes, on top of being unskilled and often illegal labourers.

“We cannot simply rely on the law. People need to organise and pressure the government,” he said. “Children of migrant workers deserve to have Thai citizenship and their parents deserve equal pay and access to medical welfare.”

Wiwat Tami, from the Assembly of Indigenous Tribal Peoples of Thailand, said ethnic minorities in the Kingdom can face as much, if not more, discrimination as migrant workers with citizenship.

“More than 300,000 people have no citizenship. They need to get permission just to cross a district, and the society treats them as if they’re not Thais,” he said.