

On-Paper Parity, In-Practice Gaps: Assessing Labour Rights Realization among Men, Women, and LGBTQ+ Workers in Thailand, 2015–2025

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Abstract

This study examines whether Thailand's equality-related legal reforms have been translated into meaningful labour-rights realization for men, women, and LGBTQ+ workers during 2015–2025. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study integrates province–industry labour-force analysis, firm-level disclosure evidence, and qualitative interviews with 15 key informants. The findings are interpreted through a five-dimensional Rights Realization Index (RRI). The results reveal positive but uneven progress in workplace equality. Improvements are more evident in administratively mediated outcomes, particularly benefit access following the equal-marriage reform effective on 23 January 2025, than in deeper labour-market outcomes such as wages. Over the study period, the RRI increased from 0.47 to 0.63, indicating moderate but incomplete convergence between formal legal recognition and realized workplace equality. Integrated evidence identifies four recurrent mechanisms shaping practical implementation: administrative friction, symbolic compliance, inclusive policy design, and uneven enforcement capacity. The Thai case shows that legal reform is a necessary starting point, but its practical impact depends on institutional capacity to translate formal rights into routine workplace practice.

Keywords: Labour Rights Realization, LGBTQ+ workers, Gender Equality, Rights Realization Index, Workplace Equality

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ความเสมอภาคตามกฎหมายกับช่องว่างในการปฏิบัติจริง: การประเมินการทำให้สิทธิแรงงานเกิดผลของแรงงานชาย หญิง และแรงงาน LGBTQ+ ในประเทศไทย ระหว่างปี 2015–2025

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้ตรวจสอบว่า การปฏิรูปกฎหมายที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเสมอภาคของประเทศไทยได้แปรเปลี่ยนไปสู่การทำให้สิทธิแรงงานเกิดผลเป็นจริงอย่างมีนัยสำคัญสำหรับแรงงานชาย แรงงานหญิง และแรงงาน LGBTQ+ ในช่วงปี 2015–2025 หรือไม่ โดยใช้แบบแผนการวิจัยแบบผสมเชิงอธิบายตามลำดับ การศึกษาผ่านการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลกำลังแรงงานระดับจังหวัด-อุตสาหกรรม หลักฐานการเปิดเผยข้อมูลระดับบริษัท และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงคุณภาพกับผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญจำนวน 15 ราย โดยตีความผ่านดัชนีการทำให้สิทธิเกิดผลเป็นจริงห้ามิติ (Rights Realization Index: RRI) ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นถึงความก้าวหน้าเชิงบวกแต่ไม่สม่ำเสมอของความเสมอภาคในสถานที่ทำงาน โดยการปรับปรุงมีความเด่นชัดกว่าในผลลัพธ์ที่ถูกขับเคลื่อนผ่านกระบวนการทางบริหาร โดยเฉพาะการเข้าถึงสิทธิประโยชน์ภายหลังการปฏิรูปสมรสเท่าเทียม ซึ่งมีผลใช้บังคับเมื่อวันที่ 23 มกราคม 2025 มากกว่าผลลัพธ์เชิงลึกของตลาดแรงงาน เช่น ค่าจ้าง ตลอดช่วงเวลาศึกษา ค่า RRI เพิ่มขึ้นจาก 0.47 เป็น 0.63 สะท้อนการบรรจบกันในระดับปานกลางแต่ยังไม่สมบูรณ์ระหว่างการรับรองทางกฎหมายอย่างเป็นทางการกับความเสมอภาคที่เกิดขึ้นจริงในสถานที่ทำงาน หลักฐานเชิงบูรณาการระบุกลไกที่เกิดขึ้น 4 ประการ ได้แก่ ความตึงเครียดทางบริหาร การปฏิบัติตามเชิงสัญลักษณ์ การออกแบบนโยบายที่ครอบคลุม และศักยภาพการบังคับใช้ที่ไม่สม่ำเสมอ กรณีของประเทศไทยแสดงให้เห็นว่า การปฏิรูปกฎหมายเป็นจุดตั้งต้นที่จำเป็น แต่ผลในทางปฏิบัติขึ้นอยู่กับความสามารถของสถาบันในการแปลงสิทธิที่เป็นทางการให้กลายเป็นการปฏิบัติที่เกิดขึ้นเป็นกิจวัตรในสถานที่ทำงาน

คำสำคัญ: การทำให้สิทธิแรงงานเกิดผล แรงงาน LGBTQ+ ความเสมอภาคทางเพศ ดัชนีการทำให้สิทธิเกิดผล ความเสมอภาคในสถานที่ทำงาน

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Introduction

Thailand has become one of the most visible sites of LGBTQ+ legal change in Southeast Asia, yet the link between formal reform and everyday equality at work remains unresolved. Recent scholarship portrays Thailand as a context where public narratives of diversity coexist with persistent institutional unevenness. Reviews of LGBT+ inclusion and human rights suggest that progress has been real but incomplete, while newer syntheses identify marriage equality as a major legal milestone that does not automatically remove deeper structural and administrative barriers (Newman et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022; Hasan, 2025).

This tension has sharpened after two major legal milestones: the Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 (2015), Thailand's first dedicated statutory basis for addressing unfair gender-based discrimination, and the equal-marriage reform enacted through the Amendment to the Civil and Commercial Code Act (No. 24) B.E. 2567 (2024), effective from 23 January 2025. Together, these measures strengthened Thailand's formal equality framework. However, stronger legal recognition does not by itself guarantee that rights can be meaningfully exercised in workplace settings. The key issue is therefore not only whether rights exist in law, but whether institutions can operationalize them through documentation systems, benefit structures, complaint channels, and routine administrative practice.

Earlier research had already noted this gap between recognition and realization. Suriyasarn (2016) showed that discrimination and marginalization experienced by LGBT workers in Thailand cannot be explained by legal status alone. Sanders (2019), from a different perspective, warned that Thailand's association with "diverse sexualities" should not be mistaken for equality in practice. More recent literature extends this concern from recognition to implementation. Jarempanit et al. (2025) emphasize the continued importance of legal gender recognition, while Hasan (2025) and Reid et al. (2022) show that legal reform, institutional adaptation, and practical access continue to advance at different speeds. This matters because labour rights are exercised not only in statutes, but in workplaces, payroll systems, personnel forms, benefits administration, and grievance processes.

Against this backdrop, the present study asks whether Thailand's equality-related reforms have translated into meaningful labour-rights realization for men, women, and LGBTQ+ workers. It begins from a simple distinction: on-paper parity is not the same as in-practice equality.

A workplace may formally comply with equality law while still reproducing exclusion through documentary mismatch, weak procedural alignment, ambiguous benefit rules, or inconsistent enforcement. The Thai case is therefore analytically valuable because it allows closer examination of how formal rights are converted into usable and enforceable workplace arrangements.

This article makes three contributions. First, it shifts discussion from legal recognition alone to labor-rights realization in practice. Second, it introduces a Rights Realization Index (RRI) that distinguishes legal provision from administrative accessibility, implementation and enforcement, outcome equality, and institutional learning. Third, it uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design that links econometric pattern detection with qualitative mechanism tracing. The study argues that Thailand is best understood not as a case of automatic convergence after reform, but as one of partial institutional realization in which progress is evident, yet uneven and contingent on administrative readiness, organizational design, and enforcement capacity.

Literature Review

Workplace inequality and differentiated experiences of exclusion

Existing research suggests that LGBTQ+ inclusion in Thailand is not a uniform condition across workers or workplaces. One strand of the literature focuses on disclosed sexual minorities in formal employment. Punnakitikashem et al. (2019) show that job and life satisfaction among disclosed lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers depend on supportive organizational conditions, indicating that workplace outcomes are shaped not by identity alone but by institutional environments that enable recognition, belonging, and procedural support.

A second strand highlights how workplace inequality remains structured by discrimination, stigma, and socio-economic hierarchy. Research on transgender women in private organizations in Bangkok points to continuing gender-based discrimination, while broader studies show that socio-economic status shapes how exclusion is experienced and reproduced (Naradech, 2023; Ojanen et al., 2019). More recent evidence further shows that stigma is intersectional and cumulative. Srikummoon et al. (2022) document layered discrimination against transgender women, while Hlaing et al. (2025) show that LGBT Myanmar migrants in Thailand face multiple forms of abuse intensified by the intersection of sexuality, gender identity, and migration status. Together, these studies suggest

that labour-rights realization in Thailand is mediated by layered institutional and social inequalities rather than distributed evenly across workers.

Inclusion, stigma, and institutional contradiction

Another central theme concerns the contradiction between public inclusion and institutional exclusion. Berry et al. (2022) show that sex-, gender-, and HIV-related stigma in Thailand is socially reproduced and institutionally embedded rather than merely residual. Similarly, Nopas and Ueangchokchai (2025) demonstrate that LGBTQ+ erasure and institutional violence persist in Thai education even where public discourse appears more inclusive. Although these studies are not workplace-focused, they are analytically important because they show that symbolic recognition does not automatically eliminate exclusion inside formal institutions.

Culturally grounded work deepens this point. Ocha (2023) argues that sexuality and gender diversity in Thailand are negotiated through intersections of Buddhism, gender, and queer spiritualities. Institutional treatment of LGBTQ+ persons is therefore shaped not only by law and policy but also by broader moral and cultural frameworks. Inclusion may remain conditional or selective even when formal recognition expands. For workplace analysis, this helps explain why organizations may adopt inclusive language while still reproducing ambiguity or inconsistency in practice. Equality, then, cannot be inferred from symbolic inclusion alone; the more important issue is whether legal recognition is translated into accessible and meaningful workplace arrangements.

Research gap and the need for a rights-realization framework

Although the literature is substantial, it remains fragmented. Some studies examine workplace support and satisfaction, others discrimination and stigma, migration, institutional violence, or cultural framing. What remains underdeveloped is an integrated framework that treats these issues together as a problem of labour-rights realization. Existing Thai scholarship provides strong evidence that exclusion persists, but it offers less systematic explanation of how formal rights move from legal recognition into everyday workplace practice across administrative accessibility, implementation, outcomes, and institutional learning.

This article addresses that gap in three ways. First, it treats workplace equality as an implementation problem rather than a purely legal condition. Second, it develops a Rights Realization Index (RRI) to capture interactions among legal provision, administrative accessibility,

implementation and enforcement, outcome equality, and institutional learning. Third, it combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to explain why reform effects are stronger in some contexts than in others. In this way, the study builds on earlier Thai research by offering a more integrated account of how on-paper parity becomes, or fails to become, in-practice equality.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine whether Thailand's equality-related legal reforms have translated into meaningful labour-rights realization in workplace settings. The quantitative phase identifies variation across time, sectors, firms, and places, while the qualitative phase explains the organizational and administrative mechanisms behind those patterns. This design is appropriate because the issue is not simply whether equality exists in law, but whether it becomes workable in practice. In Thailand, labour vulnerability is often mediated by documentation status, gendered exposure, crisis conditions, informality, and uneven regulatory capacity rather than by legal protection alone (Meyer et al., 2019; Chuemchit et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Kongtip et al., 2015; Doane, 2016). The study links pattern detection to institutional explanation through the Rights Realization Index (RRI). Table 1 summarizes the overall research design, legal milestones, evidence base, and logic of integration.

Table 1 Overview of the research design

Component	Specification
Overall design	Explanatory sequential mixed-methods design
Quantitative purpose	Identify reform-related patterns in labour-rights realization across provinces, industries, and firms
Qualitative purpose	Explain the organizational and administrative mechanisms behind observed patterns
Integrative framework	Rights Realization Index (RRI)
Legal milestones	Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 (2015); equal-marriage reform effective 23 January 2025

Component	Specification
Quantitative evidence	Province–industry labour-force data and firm-level disclosures
Qualitative evidence	Key informant interviews with HR/compliance staff, workers, and inspectors/regulators/civil-society actors
Integration logic	Quantitative pattern detection followed by qualitative mechanism tracing

Note: The study evaluates not only whether equality law exists, but whether it becomes operationally meaningful in workplace practice.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

As Table 1 indicates, the study proceeds from quantitative identification of reform-related patterns to qualitative explanation of implementation mechanisms.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative analysis draws on three sources: Thailand’s Labour Force Survey (LFS), SET/SEC 56-1 One Reports and related firm disclosures, and supplementary administrative materials. The LFS is treated as repeated cross-sectional data and is used to track labour outcomes by sex, province, industry, education, and labour-force status. Firm disclosures provide annual indicators of non-discrimination policy, anti-harassment procedures, partner or spousal benefits, diversity reporting, and policy revision, while supplementary materials help contextualize implementation and enforcement. Table 2 presents the structure and analytical role of these sources.

Table 2 Quantitative data sources and analytical use

Data source	Level of analysis	Time structure	Main variables or indicators	Analytical purpose
NSO Labour Force Survey (LFS)	Province–industry–year	Repeated cross-sectional quarterly data	Labour force, employment, unemployment, sex, education, sectoral composition	Track labour-market patterns over time
SET/SEC 56-1 One Reports and	Firm–year	Annual	Non-discrimination policy, anti-harassment	Capture organizational adaptation and

Data source	Level of analysis	Time structure	Main variables or indicators	Analytical purpose
related firm disclosures			procedures, partner/spousal benefits, diversity reporting, policy revisions	formal policy commitment
Supplementary administrative and institutional materials	Institutional/contextual	As available	Enforcement context, complaint systems, implementation guidance, compliance information	Contextualize implementation and enforcement conditions

Note: The source design distinguishes between macro-level labour-market change and firm-level organizational adaptation.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Together, they allow the analysis to distinguish between labour-market movement and organizational adaptation, which is essential because legal development and institutional realization do not necessarily advance at the same pace (Kongtip et al., 2015; Laikram & Pathak, 2022).

A key limitation is that public NSO data report labour-force statistics by sex, not by directly observed sexual orientation or gender identity. The analysis does not claim direct identification of LGBTQ+ workers from the LFS; instead, LGBTQ+ inclusion is assessed indirectly through firm-level policy indicators, implementation evidence, and qualitative findings.

The empirical strategy uses a difference-in-differences framework:

$$Y_{pit} = \alpha + \delta(Post_t \times Exposed_{pi}) + \beta Post_t + \gamma Exposed_{pi} + \theta X_{pit} + \mu_{pi} + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{pit}$$

where Y_{pit} is the outcome for province p , industry i , and year t ; $Post_t$ marks the post-reform period; $Exposed_{pi}$ identifies more exposed units; X_{pit} is a vector of controls; μ_{pi} denotes province-industry fixed effects; and τ_t denotes year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the province-industry level. An event-study specification is also estimated to assess pre-

trend plausibility and the timing of post-reform adjustment, particularly because the 2025 equal-marriage reform is treated as an early implementation episode rather than a mature long-run shift.

Rights Realization Index (RRI)

The RRI serves as the study’s integrative measure of how far formal rights are translated into workplace practice (Srinivas, 2022). It is defined on a 0-1 scale as:

$$RRI_{pit} = 0.20L_{pit} + 0.25A_{pit} + 0.25I_{pit} + 0.20O_{pit} + 0.10F_{pit}$$

where *L* denotes Legal Provision, *A* Administrative Accessibility, *I* Implementation and Enforcement, *O* Outcome Equality, and *F* Feedback and Institutional Learning. Table 3 presents the dimensions, weights, and illustrative indicators used in constructing the index.

Table 3 Construction of the Rights Realization Index (RRI)

Dimension	Symbol	Weight	Illustrative indicators
Legal Provision	L	0.20	Legal recognition of equality and non-discrimination
Administrative Accessibility	A	0.25	Inclusive HR records, leave and benefit registration, partner/spousal recognition, document compatibility
Implementation and Enforcement	I	0.25	Inspections, grievance procedures, anti-harassment channels, complaints, remedial action
Outcome Equality	O	0.20	Wage gaps, benefit uptake, retention or turnover disparities, related employment outcomes
Feedback and Institutional Learning	F	0.10	Policy revision, benchmarking, public reporting, training, corrective action

$$RRI = 0.20L + 0.25A + 0.25I + 0.20O + 0.10F$$

Note: Higher values indicate stronger alignment between formal legal recognition and realized workplace equality. Greater weight is assigned to administrative accessibility and implementation/enforcement because these are treated as the main mechanisms translating law into practice.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

The weighting scheme emphasizes administrative accessibility implementation/enforcement because the central argument of the article is that rights become meaningful only when institutions can operationalize them in routine practice. In this sense, the RRI is used as a diagnostic

implementation index rather than a generic composite score (Kongtip et al., 2015; Doane, 2016; Laikram & Pathak, 2022).

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase uses purposive maximum-variation sampling to select organizations and institutional contexts associated with relatively high, medium, and low RRI patterns across regions, sectors, and organizational types. Its purpose is not statistical representativeness, but mechanism tracing and explanatory depth. Participants are drawn from three groups: HR and compliance personnel, employees or worker representatives, and inspectors, regulators, or civil-society actors. Table 4 summarizes the general profile of the qualitative sample.

Table 4 General profile of key informants

Category	Description	n	%
HR and compliance personnel	HR managers, compliance officers, employee-relations staff, or equivalent actors responsible for workplace rules, benefits, and complaints	5	33.33
Employees and worker representatives	Employees or worker representatives with direct experience of workplace rights and administrative processes	5	33.33
Inspectors, regulators, and civil-society actors	Labour inspectors, regulators, NGO/CSO representatives, labour-rights advocates, or equivalent external stakeholders	5	33.33
Total		15	100.00

Note: The qualitative phase used purposive maximum-variation sampling to capture internal administration, lived experience, and external oversight perspectives.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

To preserve confidentiality while maintaining analytic transparency, Table 5 presents the anonymized composition of the 15 key informants and their primary analytical contributions.

Table 5 Anonymized list of key informants

KI Code	Informant group	Indicative role	Institutional location	Primary analytical contribution
KI01	HR/compliance	HR manager	Private organization	Policy revision, benefits, grievance handling
KI02	HR/compliance	Compliance officer	Private organization	Compliance, documentation, equality procedures
KI03	HR/compliance	Employee-relations officer	Private organization	Complaint response, internal communication
KI04	HR/compliance	HR specialist	Public or quasi-public organization	Administrative interpretation of rights
KI05	HR/compliance	Welfare or benefits officer	Formal organization	Benefit access, documentation barriers
KI06	Employees/worker representatives	Employee	Private workplace	Everyday rights access, workplace treatment
KI07	Employees/worker representatives	Employee	Service-sector workplace	Administrative friction, informal practices
KI08	Employees/worker representatives	Worker representative	Organized workplace or labour network	Worker concerns, perceived fairness
KI09	Employees/worker representatives	Employee	Diverse organizational setting	Inclusion, exclusion, adjustment experiences
KI10	Employees/worker representatives	Worker representative	Formal or semi-formal setting	Practical barriers to rights realization

KI Code	Informant group	Indicative role	Institutional location	Primary analytical contribution
KI11	Inspectors/regulators/civil-society actors	Labour inspector	Public regulatory body	Enforcement conditions, inspection constraints
KI12	Inspectors/regulators/civil-society actors	Labour official or regulator	Public sector	Administrative oversight, implementation
KI13	Inspectors/regulators/civil-society actors	Civil-society advocate	NGO/CSO	Complaint systems, vulnerable-worker perspectives
KI14	Inspectors/regulators/civil-society actors	Labour-rights advocate	Civil-society or labour-support organization	Institutional bottlenecks, support pathways
KI15	Inspectors/regulators/civil-society actors	Policy or legal observer	Regulatory, academic, or advocacy interface	Policy context, realization trends

Note: KI = key informant. All identifiers are anonymized, and role titles are reported in functional terms to preserve confidentiality while retaining analytical relevance.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

As these tables show, the qualitative strand is designed to capture rights realization from the perspectives of internal administration, lived workplace experience, and external oversight.

Because the equal-marriage reform took effect only in January 2025, interviews conducted in 2025-2026 are interpreted as evidence of early organizational adaptation rather than settled long-run implementation. Interview material is analyzed through hybrid deductive-inductive coding: deductive codes are drawn from the five RRI dimensions, while inductive codes identify mechanisms such as document mismatch, uncertainty in benefit eligibility, selective compliance, symbolic policy adoption, and uneven complaint follow-through.

Integration, Validity, and Ethics

Integration is achieved through joint displays that align quantitative patterns with qualitative explanations. The qualitative phase is therefore used not as an illustration, but as a means of explaining why reform effects vary across settings. Table 6 presents this integration by linking econometric signals, interview-based mechanisms, and the RRI dimensions most implicated in each pattern.

Table 6 Joint display of quantitative and qualitative integration

Integrated theme	Quantitative signal	Qualitative explanation	RRI dimension(s) most implicated	Interpretation
Administrative friction	Lower RRI gains where HR/payroll systems are weak or inclusive fields are absent	Interviewees reported document mismatch, manual processing, duplicate records, and uncertainty in partner/spousal registration	Administrative Accessibility; Implementation and Enforcement	Legal recognition weakens when organizational systems cannot operationalize it effectively
Symbolic compliance	Equality language in disclosures does not always align with higher implementation scores	Respondents described policy statements unsupported by training, grievance systems, or clear routines	Legal Provision; Feedback and Institutional Learning	Formal commitment may advance faster than practical realization
Inclusive policy design	Higher-RRI organizations show stronger benefit outcomes and more consistent implementation	Interviewees linked clearer policy language and procedures to fewer disputes and better usability	Administrative Accessibility; Outcome Equality	Inclusive design supports both access and realization

Integrated theme	Quantitative signal	Qualitative explanation	RRI dimension(s) most implicated	Interpretation
Uneven enforcement capacity	Stronger monitoring and enforcement environments correspond to higher RRI performance	Inspectors and civil-society actors highlighted uneven expertise, complaint support, and enforcement reach	Implementation and Enforcement; Feedback and Institutional Learning	Rights realization remains uneven across institutional settings

Note: This joint display integrates econometric patterns with interview-based mechanism tracing in the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

As Table 6 shows, uneven rights realization reflects multiple mechanisms, especially administrative friction, symbolic compliance, inclusive policy design, and uneven enforcement capacity.

Validity is supported through methodological triangulation across labour-market trends, firm disclosures, and stakeholder narratives; interpretive clarification and limited member checking where appropriate; and analytic transparency in coding, variable construction, and model specification. This strategy is suitable for a Thai labour context in which vulnerability is frequently intersectional, and implementation may vary sharply across sectors and populations (Meyer et al., 2019; Chuemchit et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024). Ethical safeguards include participant anonymization, reduced institutional identifiability, and caution in interpreting early post-2025 evidence because equality-related workplace experiences may involve stigma, privacy risks, and documentary vulnerability.

Results

Descriptive Overview of Thailand's Labour-Market Context, 2015–2025

Before assessing reform-associated change, the analysis must first be located within Thailand's broader labour-market context. As shown in Table 7, the labour market between 2015 and 2025 moved through three broad phases: a relatively stable pre-pandemic baseline during 2015–2019, a period of severe disruption during 2020–2021, and a recovery and normalization phase from 2022 onward. Across the full period, the population aged 15 years and over expanded steadily, while the labour force and total employment remained broadly resilient despite a sharp short-term shock

during the COVID-19 period. This context is important because equality-related reforms did not occur under constant macroeconomic conditions. They unfolded in a labour market affected by crisis, recovery, and uneven institutional adjustment.

During 2015–2019, unemployment remained low and relatively stable, generally ranging between 0.80% and 1.24%. This period provides a useful baseline for interpreting later reform-associated change. By contrast, 2020–2021 represented the most severe labour-market disruption in the observed series. Employment fell markedly in 2020 Q2, while unemployment increased and reached its highest level in 2021 Q3. From 2022 onward, the data indicate a gradual recovery, with employment improving and unemployment declining. By 2025 Q4, labour-market conditions were considerably less strained than during the pandemic peak. Table 7 provides the macro-level background against which the econometric, index-based, and mixed-method findings should be interpreted.

Table 7 Thailand’s labour-market context across reform phases and key turning points, 2015 -2025

Period / reference point	Population aged 15+ (million)	Total labour force (million)	Employed persons (million)	Unemployed persons (million)	Unemployment rate (%)	Interpretive significance
2015 Q1 (opening baseline)	55.09	38.28	37.61	0.36	0.94	Establishes pre-reform labour-market baseline
2015–2019 (general range)	55.09– 56.68	37.91– 38.77	37.20– 38.37	0.31–0.47	0.80–1.24	Relatively stable pre- pandemic environment
2020 Q2 (major disruption)	56.82	38.17	37.08	0.75	1.95	Early pandemic shock to employment

Period / reference point	Population aged 15+ (million)	Total labour force (million)	Employed persons (million)	Unemployed persons (million)	Unemployment rate (%)	Interpretive significance
						and unemployment
2021 Q3 (peak strain)	57.13	38.64	37.71	0.87	2.25	Highest unemployment rate in the observed series
2022 Q4 (recovery consolidation)	58.73	40.14	39.59	0.46	1.20	Recovery phase becomes more evident
2023 Q4 (post- pandemic normalization)	59.02	40.67	40.25	0.33	0.80	Stronger labour-market normalization
2025 Q4 (latest observation)	59.55	40.12	39.75	0.28	0.70	Most recent post-reform labour-market context

Note: This table summarizes the major turning points in the quarterly labour-force series used in the study. Values are compiled from official NSO labour-force sources used throughout the manuscript.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Econometric and Index-Based Evidence of Rights Realization

The baseline quantitative results suggest that Thailand's equality-related legal reforms were associated with positive but uneven movement across workplace-related indicators. The clearest early gains appeared in outcomes tied to administrative recognition and organizational procedure, particularly benefit-related access following the equal-marriage reform effective in 2025. By contrast,

deeper labour-market outcomes, especially wage-related indicators, changed more slowly and less consistently. This asymmetry is substantively plausible because partner recognition, leave eligibility, and benefit access can be adjusted through HR records, documentation systems, and internal rules, whereas wage structures are more deeply embedded in organizational hierarchy, occupational segmentation, and broader labour-market conditions.

For the 2015 reform window, the results indicate modest narrowing in wage-gap-related outcomes in more exposed contexts. This should be interpreted cautiously: the evidence points to partial improvement rather than rapid convergence. For the 2025 reform window, short-run effects are more visible in benefit-related indicators than in wage outcomes. This suggests that the early institutional effects of marriage equality are strongest where rights depend on administrative recognition and procedural eligibility rather than on broader redistribution. Event-study trajectories further support this interpretation by showing gradual post-reform adjustment rather than immediate or uniform compliance.

The Rights Realization Index (RRI) provides a broader, integrative picture of this uneven progress. As shown in Table 8, the weighted RRI increased from 0.47 in the 2015 opening baseline to 0.63 in the early 2025 marriage-equality implementation period. This represents a 0.16-point increase, or approximately a 34.0% relative improvement from the 2015 baseline. However, the trajectory was not linear. The slight decline from 0.51 in 2019 to 0.50 in 2021 suggests that pandemic-period strain affected the practical realization of rights, particularly through administrative accessibility, implementation capacity, and outcome equality. The subsequent increase to 0.55 in 2023 and 0.63 in 2025 indicates renewed progress during recovery and early post-reform implementation.

Table 8 Rights Realization Index (RRI) scores across reform phases, 2015–2025

Period / Reference Year	L (0.20)	A (0.25)	I (0.25)	O (0.20)	F (0.10)	Weighted RRI
2015 opening baseline	0.55	0.45	0.42	0.50	0.43	0.47
2019 pre-pandemic / pre-equal marriage	0.61	0.50	0.47	0.52	0.45	0.51
2021 pandemic strain	0.61	0.49	0.45	0.50	0.44	0.50
2023 recovery and normalization	0.65	0.55	0.50	0.53	0.47	0.55

Period / Reference Year	L (0.20)	A (0.25)	I (0.25)	O (0.20)	F (0.10)	Weighted RRI
2025 early marriage equality implementation	0.82	0.64	0.56	0.57	0.52	0.63

Note: $RRI = 0.20L + 0.25A + 0.25I + 0.20O + 0.10F$. The 2025 value of 0.63 represents a 0.16-point increase from the 2015 baseline of 0.47, equivalent to a 34.0% relative increase. Scores are standardized on a 0–1 scale; higher values indicate stronger alignment between formal legal recognition and realized workplace equality.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Table 9 summarizes the main baseline quantitative findings. Overall, the evidence supports the central argument of the article: legal reform matters, but its practical effect depends on whether organizations and administrative institutions can convert formal legal recognition into operational routines. The strongest short-run gains appear in administratively mediated domains, while deeper employment structures change more slowly.

Table 9 Summary of baseline quantitative findings

Outcome/indicator	Reform window	Main reported pattern	Substantive interpretation
Wage-gap-related outcome	Post-2015	Modest narrowing in more exposed contexts	Indicates partial progress, not full convergence
Wage-gap-related outcome	Post-2025	Weak short-run movement	Wage structures adjust more slowly than administrative outcomes
Benefit-related access/uptake	Post-2025	Stronger positive movement in more exposed contexts	Early effects are clearest where spouse/partner recognition changes eligibility and procedure
Turnover/retention-related differential	Post-2025	Modest improvement in exposed contexts	Suggests limited improvement in retention-related equality
Event-study dynamics	2015 and 2025 windows	Weak pre-trends; gradual post-reform effects	Supports phased adjustment rather than immediate compliance

Outcome/indicator	Reform window	Main reported pattern	Substantive interpretation
Rights Realization Index (RRI)	Full study period	Upward but uneven movement across sectors and places	Indicates moderate but incomplete institutional realization

Note: This table summarizes the main quantitative patterns in the draft results. Full coefficient tables may be reported in an appendix or supplementary file.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Sectoral, Spatial, and Integrative Interpretation

The results further suggest that rights realization varies across sectors and territories rather than advancing uniformly across the economy. Sectorally, stronger end-period RRI performance appears in Finance and ICT. These sectors are likely to benefit from stronger documentation systems, more formalized compliance routines, and greater administrative modernization. Manufacturing, services, tourism, and public administration also show improvement, but with more uneven depth. This pattern points to differentiated institutional readiness. Sectors with clearer HR systems and stronger compliance infrastructure appear better able to translate formal equality into routine practice, while sectors with more complex legacy procedures or weaker implementation depth adapt more slowly.

Spatially, Bangkok and several major urban provinces occupy the upper end of the observed RRI distribution, while several provinces in other regions remain in the middle or lower ranges. This does not mean that formal legal rights differ by province. Rather, it indicates that the institutional conditions required for realization differ territorially. Provinces with stronger administrative modernization, denser organizational capacity, and more developed enforcement environments appear better positioned to convert legal commitments into workable workplace practices. Table 10 summarizes these sectoral and spatial patterns.

Table 10 Sectoral and spatial interpretation of RRI patterns

Domain	Observed pattern	Interpretation
Finance and ICT	Higher end-period RRI	Administrative modernization and formal compliance likely support faster realization
Manufacturing	Moderate but uneven improvement	Adaptation appears partial and operationally variable
Services and tourism	Upward movement with uneven depth	Gains are visible, but procedural normalization remains inconsistent
Public administration	Clearer formal procedures but slower system adjustment	Formal recognition may outpace routine administrative change
Bangkok and major urban provinces	Higher RRI range	Stronger institutional capacity and enforcement support more consistent realization
Other provinces	Middle or lower RRI range	Suggests weaker administrative reach, uneven expertise, or lower implementation capacity

Note: This table provides a diagnostic, not deterministic, interpretation of sectoral and spatial RRI variation.

The differences reflect implementation depth rather than formal legal entitlement.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

These quantitative patterns become clearer when read alongside the qualitative evidence. Four mechanisms recur across the integrated findings: administrative friction, symbolic compliance, inclusive policy design, and uneven enforcement capacity. Administrative friction explains why formal rights may remain difficult to exercise when HR, payroll, and documentation systems are not adapted to gender-diverse records or partner recognition. Symbolic compliance explains why equality language in policy documents does not always translate into practical implementation. Inclusive policy design explains why clearer rules and procedures are associated with stronger benefit access and fewer disputes. Uneven enforcement capacity explains why similar legal obligations are realized more consistently in some organizations and territories than in others. Table 11 presents this integrated interpretation.

Table 11 Integrated mechanisms linking quantitative and qualitative evidence

Mechanism	Quantitative signal	Qualitative explanation	Interpretation
Administrative friction	Lower gains where administrative adaptation is weak	Interviewees report document mismatch, manual processing, and uncertainty in partner/spousal registration	Formal rights are harder to exercise when systems cannot operationalize them efficiently
Symbolic compliance	Equality language does not always align with stronger implementation	Respondents describe policy statements unsupported by training, grievance systems, or clear routines	Formal commitment may outpace practical realization
Inclusive policy design	Higher-RRI settings show stronger benefit outcomes and more consistent implementation	Interviewees link clearer rules and procedures to fewer disputes and better usability	Inclusive design supports both access and realization
Uneven enforcement capacity	Stronger enforcement environments correspond to higher RRI performance	Inspectors and civil-society actors report uneven expertise and complaint support across places	Rights realization remains territorially uneven under a common legal framework

Note: This table integrates econometric patterns with interview-based mechanism tracing. Full qualitative coding detail may be reported in an appendix or supplementary methods file.

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Integrated Mechanisms and Empirical Conclusions

The mixed-method integration suggests that Thailand’s equality reforms are best understood through a layered institutional-realization model rather than a simple before-and-after legal narrative. Four mechanisms are especially important. First, administrative friction arises where HR and payroll systems remain poorly adapted to gender-diverse records or partner recognition, making formal rights difficult to exercise in practice. Second, symbolic compliance appears where

organizations adopt inclusive language without corresponding investment in training, grievance systems, or implementation procedures. Third, inclusive policy design functions as a practical enabler of realization because clearer rules and more predictable procedures reduce ambiguity and improve usability. Fourth, uneven enforcement capacity explains why similar legal obligations are realized more consistently in some provinces and organizations than in others.

Taken together, the evidence supports three main conclusions. First, Thailand's equality-related reforms are associated with meaningful but uneven improvement in workplace-related outcomes. Second, the strongest short-run gains appear in administratively mediated domains, particularly benefit recognition, partner eligibility, documentation, and internal procedures, rather than in deeper labour-market structures such as wages. Third, the main barrier to fuller realization is no longer only the absence of legal recognition, but the uneven institutional translation of that recognition into everyday workplace practice. Thailand emerges as a case of progressive legal reform combined with partial institutional realization. The following discussion section builds on these findings by locating them within Thailand's broader labour-rights landscape of differentiated vulnerability, precarious work, and uneven institutional protection.

Discussion

From legal reform to realized workplace equality

The findings show that Thailand's equality-related reforms matter, but not in a simple or self-executing way. Across the quantitative and qualitative evidence, progress is visible in selected workplace indicators, especially those tied to administrative recognition and benefit-related access. Even so, gains remain uneven across sectors, firms, and places. Thailand is therefore best understood not as a failed reform case, nor as a completed success story, but as a case of partial institutional realization in which formal legal equality creates the basis for change without guaranteeing uniform implementation in everyday labour practice.

This interpretation also fits Thailand's wider labour landscape. The four mechanisms identified in this study-administrative friction, symbolic compliance, inclusive policy design, and uneven enforcement capacity-are unlikely to be confined to formal white-collar workplaces alone. They resonate with broader Thai labour research showing that vulnerability intensifies where precarious work, weak institutional protection, and stigma overlap. Studies of transgender sex

workers and unacceptable forms of work in Thailand's sex and entertainment sector similarly show that labour insecurity is structured not only by identity, but by occupational setting, institutional neglect, and exposure to harm (Davis et al., 2019; Villar, 2019). In this sense, the present findings reflect a wider pattern of uneven rights realization across the Thai labour market.

Administrative mediation and differentiated labour vulnerability

One of the clearest contributions of this study is its demonstration that equality reform first becomes visible through administrative mediation rather than through immediate transformation of deeper labour-market structures. The quantitative results indicate that benefit-related access and recognition respond more quickly to reform than wage structures, while the qualitative evidence shows that workers' ability to exercise rights depends heavily on documentation systems, payroll architecture, partner-recognition rules, and complaint procedures. Rights realization should therefore be understood as a problem of institutional usability, not solely of legal entitlement.

This point is reinforced by Thai research on labour populations exposed to embodied and material vulnerability. Studies of gay men and transgender women sex workers during the COVID-19 period in Phuket show that poverty, psychological distress, and labour insecurity deepen when protection remains weak (Yasami et al., 2023). Related work argues that effective protection requires not rhetorical concern, but institutional arrangements capable of responding to real vulnerability (Janyam et al., 2020). Research on occupational health and safety among sex workers reaches a similar conclusion: rights deficits often emerge through weak protection, normalized harm, and poor institutional reach rather than through formal legal exclusion alone (Chevasutho & Jiamjarasrangsri, 2022). Together, these studies strengthen the article's central claim that rights become meaningful only when institutions can make them usable under real-world labour conditions.

Migration, informal work, and uneven institutional reach

The findings also resonate with broader Thai scholarship on migration, informality, and gendered labour inequality. Research on Myanmar migrant workers shows that labour vulnerability is often shaped by documentary status, legal visibility, and limited access to formal protection (Chan, 2018). More recent work on migrant labour policy under the Pheu Thai administration similarly suggests that even progressive reform remains contingent on implementation capacity rather than

guaranteeing integration automatically (Htwe, 2025). This closely parallels the present article's core finding: formal change matters, but its effects depend on institutional translation.

A similar pattern appears in the literature on women workers and informal labour. Women homeworkers in Thailand's digital economy occupy positions marked by invisibility and structural insecurity, while women factory workers continue to face durable labour inequalities that cannot be explained by legal form alone (Intaratat, 2016; Anamwathana, 2024). Read together, these studies suggest that labour-rights realization in Thailand is socially stratified and institutionally uneven across multiple groups, not only among LGBTQ+ workers. Equality law thus enters a labour market already marked by layered precarity, uneven enforcement, and variable organizational readiness.

New labour forms, conclusions, and limits

The findings also raise questions about the future frontier of rights realization as work itself changes. Emerging research on platformized and visibility-based labour suggests that some workers appear more autonomous while remaining subject to new forms of self-governance and insecurity. Research on trans women influencers in Thailand, for example, shows that platformized creative work can be both self-directed and disciplinarian (Kirdnark, 2025). This suggests that the challenge of realization is not limited to conventional employment contracts or legacy HR systems. Even in newer labour forms, inclusion may remain conditional on recognition systems, visibility, and weakly regulated institutional arrangements.

Taken together, the findings support three conclusions. First, Thailand's equality reforms are associated with positive yet uneven progress in the realization of workplace rights. Second, the earliest gains are strongest in administratively mediated domains-such as benefit recognition, partner eligibility, documentation, and internal procedures-rather than in deeper labour-market structures like wages. Third, the principal barrier to fuller realization is no longer only the absence of formal legal recognition, but the uneven institutional conversion of that recognition into everyday practice. The four recurrent mechanisms-administrative friction, symbolic compliance, inclusive policy design, and uneven enforcement capacity-show that equality reform is mediated through institutions rather than produced automatically by law alone.

The Thai case contributes to labour-rights and governance scholarship by showing how a middle-income country can advance in formal legal equality while still experiencing uneven realization across workplaces and territories. Thailand is best understood as a case of partial but

advancing institutional realization. At the same time, the study has limits. Public labour-force data do not directly identify sexual orientation or gender identity for subgroup-specific national estimation, and the 2025 equal-marriage reform remains an early implementation episode rather than a mature long-run treatment window. Even with these constraints, the broader implication is clear: on-paper parity matters, but realized equality depends on whether institutions can make rights usable, enforceable, and durable in practice.

Conclusion

This study examined whether Thailand's equality-related legal reforms have translated into meaningful labour-rights realization for men, women, and LGBTQ+ workers. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, it combined labour-market and firm-level quantitative evidence with qualitative interviews and interpreted the findings through a five-dimensional Rights Realization Index (RRI). The results show that Thailand's reforms are associated with positive but uneven progress. Improvement is most visible in administratively mediated domains, particularly benefit-related access, partner recognition, and internal procedural adjustment, while deeper labour-market outcomes such as wages appear to change more slowly and less uniformly.

Three conclusions follow. First, legal reform matters, but it does not produce automatic equality in practice. Second, the earliest effects of reform emerge where rights can be operationalized through documentation systems, HR procedures, and benefit structures. Third, the main barrier to fuller realization is no longer only the absence of formal recognition, but the uneven institutional translation of legal rights into everyday workplace practice. Across the integrated evidence, four mechanisms recur consistently: administrative friction, symbolic compliance, inclusive policy design, and uneven enforcement capacity.

The Thai case therefore illustrates a pattern of partial but advancing institutional realization. Thailand has moved further toward formal equality, yet realized workplace equality remains conditioned by organizational readiness, administrative usability, and enforcement strength. The broader implication is clear: the future of labour-rights equality in Thailand will depend less on whether reform exists in law than on whether institutions can make those rights accessible, usable, and enforceable across diverse labour settings.

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Declaration on the Use of AI

The authors used a generative AI tool only for limited language assistance, such as grammar checking and wording refinement. The tool was not used to generate the study design, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions. All content was reviewed, revised, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript.

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Appendix A. Data Source Links and Key Variables

Data Source / Access Link	Coverage / unit	Key variables or indicators	RRI dimension or analytical use
National Statistical Office (NSO): Labour Force Survey (LFS) survey page https://www.nso.go.th/nsoweb/nso/survey_detail/9u?set_lang=en	Province-industry-year / quarterly labour-market series, 2015-2025	Working-age population, labour force, employed persons, unemployed persons, unemployment rate, sex, education, province, industry, labour-force status	Baseline labour-market outcomes, wage/employment context, Outcome Equality (O), and province-industry controls.
Bank of Thailand (BOT): Labour Force Survey (New Series), sourced from NSO https://app.bot.or.th/BTWS_STAT/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?language=eng&reportID=729	Secondary official access route for LFS time-series verification	Labour force, employment, unemployment, industry classification, regional/provincial labour indicators	Cross-checking of labour-market series and quarterly labour indicators.
Securities and Exchange Commission, Thailand (SEC): Form 56-1 One Report portal https://www.sec.or.th/onereport	Firm-year disclosures of listed companies	Human-rights or non-discrimination policy, employee welfare, anti-harassment/grievance channels, diversity and ESG reporting, policy revisions	Firm-level organizational adaptation; supports Legal Provision (L), Implementation and Enforcement (I), and Feedback (F).

Data Source / Access Link	Coverage / unit	Key variables or indicators	RRI dimension or analytical use
The Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET): report and information submission requirements https://www.set.or.th/en/listing/listed-company/simplified-regulations/disclosure/report-information-submission	Listed-company disclosure system and report submission route	Annual/quarterly financial statements and Form 56-1 One Report submission evidence	Traceability of firm disclosures and ESG-related workplace policy evidence.
Royal Thai Government Gazette: Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 and Civil and Commercial Code Amendment Act (No. 24) B.E. 2567	National legal framework	Legal recognition of equality, non-discrimination, and marriage equality effective 23 January 2025	Legal Provision (L) and reform-window definition.
Ministry of Labour / Department of Labour Protection and Welfare materials	Administrative and enforcement context	Complaint channels, inspection information, implementation guidance, enforcement material	Implementation and Enforcement (I).

Appendix B. Full Difference-in-Differences Tables and Interpretation

Model	Outcome	Post-2015 x exposure	Post-2025 x exposure	Firm capacity x post	Enforcement x post	Fixed effects	Cluster	R2
M1	Wage gap (log difference)	-0.028*	-0.017	-0.011	-0.022**	Province- industry; year	Province- industry	0.41
M2	Benefit uptake index	+0.019*	+0.035**	+0.018**	+0.023***	Province- industry; year	Province- industry	0.46

Model	Outcome	Post-2015 x exposure	Post-2025 x exposure	Firm capacity x post	Enforcement x post	Fixed effects	Cluster	R2
M3	Turnover differential index	-0.017	-0.021**	-0.009	-0.015*	Province- industry; year	Province- industry	0.39

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The table reports the coefficient summary used to support the main-text DiD interpretation.

Appendix C. Source of Abstract RRI Values

Appendix C. Source of Abstract RRI Values

RRI dimension	Weight	2015 score	2015 weighted value	2025 score	2025 weighted value
Legal Provision (L)	0.20	0.55	0.1100	0.82	0.1640
Administrative Accessibility (A)	0.25	0.45	0.1125	0.64	0.1600
Implementation and Enforcement (I)	0.25	0.42	0.1050	0.56	0.1400
Outcome Equality (O)	0.20	0.50	0.1000	0.57	0.1140
Feedback and Institutional Learning (F)	0.10	0.43	0.0430	0.52	0.0520
Weighted RRI	-	-	0.4705 -> 0.47	-	0.6300 -> 0.63
Change	-	-	-	-	+0.1595 -> +0.16 points; 34.0% relative increase

Appendix D. Sectoral Difference Table Retained from First-Submission Analysis

Sector	2015 RRI	2025 RRI	Delta RRI	Implementation interpretation
Finance and ICT	0.55	0.71	+0.16	Highest end-period realization; early HR digitization and formal compliance routines.
Manufacturing	0.46	0.60	+0.14	Lower end-period realization; slower payroll and documentation-system alignment.
Services and tourism	0.49	0.63	+0.14	Improvement visible, but symbolic compliance and weak monitoring remain.
Public administration	0.53	0.64	+0.11	Formal procedures clearer, but system adaptation remains gradual.

Appendix E. Qualitative Sample Clarification

Stage	Number	Purpose	Use in revised manuscript
Preliminary qualitative evidence pool	72	Map potential contacts, cases, documents, and stakeholder perspectives.	Screening/contextualization pool only; not reported as final interviews.
Formal key-informant sample retained	15	Provide in-depth evidence across HR/compliance, worker experience, and external oversight.	Final qualitative sample used for coding, mechanism tracing, and joint displays.

Stage	Number	Purpose	Use in revised manuscript
Reason for conservative reporting	-	Avoid overstating formal analyzable interviews and reduce confidentiality risk.	Only directly coded and anonymizable interviews are reported.

This clarification distinguishes the preliminary qualitative evidence pool from the final formal key-informant sample used for coding and mechanism tracing.