

STAMPING OUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

To mark International Women's Day today, two activists discuss how they are tackling sexual harassment and the policies Thailand should implement to protect victims

STORY: **SUWITCHA CHAIYONG**

As a spokesperson for the Thammasat University Student Union, Siwakorn Thatsanasorn is sociable and likes to help people out. One day, when she was in her neighbourhood, she noticed a girl who had a head injury and was crying. Out of concern, Siwakorn visited the girl's house and talked to her parents.

"The girl had to drop out of university because she was pregnant. Her boyfriend didn't want to be responsible for their unborn child and beat her. When I met her, she had low self-esteem as she let her boyfriend do whatever he wanted. I asked her what I could do to help. I also encouraged her to have confidence and love herself and that she could stand on her own feet and support the child herself," said Siwakorn.

Siwakorn is the ambassador of "TeamPueak", a campaign launched in 2018 by Safe Cities For Women Thailand in collaboration with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth), the Women Wellbeing Programme, and ActionAid Thailand. The word *pueak* means to "butt in" or to keep an eye out for one another. The campaign originally had a goal to encourage people in the community to be on the lookout for sexual harassment on public transport but later the programme expanded to cover all public spaces in general.

In 2019, the campaign, "Pak Mud Chud Pueak (Drop The Pin To Butt In)", was launched and marked high-risk locations on maps in the Line application in order to protect women from sexual harassment on the streets. Last year, the "Team Pueak Neighborhood" campaign was created amid lockdown. As part of the project, volunteers kept their eyes on unusual posts such as depressed messages on social media and tried to reach out to the authors of the posts to help them. The objective of the campaign was to help women and anyone else facing domestic violence.

Siwakorn is one of the effective volunteers at TeamPueak since she knows how to approach people and make them open up. She has helped many people but there have been cases where her assistance has failed.

"Many female victims have been raped by their family members and one victim was abused until she died. Some victims do not want to talk about their experiences but I still reported their case to the authorities. Even though it did not help, I wanted the offender to

be aware that other people knew what he had done," said Siwakorn.

Domestic violence is another significant issue which impacts the health and well-being of victims. Last year, the Women and Men Progressive Movement Foundation monitored and collected data from 10 newspapers between January and June and found 350 news articles involving domestic violence cases. Of the total articles collected, 57.4% of the cases were related to murder; 14.6% injuries; 10.9% suicide; 8.9% sexual violence by a family member; and 2.9% unintended pregnancies.

To help women and other vulnerable people in the countryside suffering from domestic violence, TeamPueak's strategy — to watch out for one another — was used in three other provinces in addition to Bangkok. However, the project there has a different title.

Varaporn Chamsanit, manager of the Women's Wellbeing and Gender Justice Program explained that since 2018, the "Project On The Development Of Multi-sectoral Responses To Violence Against Children, Women, And Family Members In Pilot Provinces" has been running in three areas in the countryside — the Takhli municipality of Nakhon Sawan province, the Huai Sam Phat Sub District Administration Organisation (SAO) of Udon Thani province, and Muang district of Trat province.

"These communities were chosen to run the pilot project after we evaluated that there were a significant number of domestic violence cases there and the fact that local authorities were willing to support the project. Since it is a pilot project, we studied how to build a team in the community who would watch out for other people. When it comes to domestic violence, if a victim has to wait for authorities to help her/him, it may be too late," said Varaporn.

In the beginning, Varaporn noticed that many people were not aware of domestic abuse and those who saw it take place did not know how to deal with the problem. The community consists of volunteers and local authorities such as the village headman, the sub-district chief, the community leader, the community committee, the municipality officer and the SAO officer. These people were trained to understand and identify domestic violence.

"They were shown how to identify abnormal aggressive behaviour. Some people did not realise that verbal abuse



Siwakorn Thatsanasorn, an ambassador of 'TeamPueak'.



Varaporn Chamsanit, manager of the Women's Wellbeing and Gender Justice Program.

is a form of violence since they were so used to it while others thought domestic abuse was family business and that they should not get involved. They thought parents had the right to beat up their children. In such cases when the volunteers did not know whom to contact, we provided contact informa-



Team Pueak Neighborhood launched during lockdown last year.

discontinue treatment and become violent and attack family members or people in the community. Domestic violence tends to involve a patriarchal attitude where men believe they can abuse their wives or children and the victims simply have to tolerate it, Varaporn said.

Even though people in the community still experience domestic violence, they are satisfied with the project.

“People in the community gave us feedback that the project has helped them feel more at ease and that they were happy that there were solutions for violent cases. They no longer have to face problems alone as they can contact local authorities and request help. Volunteers also feel that they can do something to help victims and make their communities safer than before,” she said.

This pilot project will end its current phase in May. Varaporn hopes to continue the project in order to support the community until the local team becomes strong and independent. As the manager of Women’s Wellbeing and Gender Justice Program, Varaporn discussed her plans for the future with other organisations.

She has already talked to officers at the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security about launching another campaign to prevent sexual harassment in public spaces. Moreover, a discussion with the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center may lead to the development of an app where people can report sexual harassment incidents.

“
IN THAILAND,
WE DO NOT FOCUS ON
PROTECTING VICTIMS
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

tion of police officers and the Dam-rongtham Center (a centre for maintaining justice) to them, so they could seek assistance from the authorities,” explained Varaporn.

Two years after the project began, 120 volunteers have been trained and the awareness and understanding of domestic violence has increased. Unfortunately, the numbers of violent cases has not decreased.

“Domestic violence has become more complicated. Many cases now involve drug users and mentally-ill patients. After drug addicts undergo therapy and return to the same living environment, they might relapse and use drugs again. As a result, both drug addicts and mental patients require continuous treatment, however, many

"The Women's Wellbeing and Gender Justice Program is a non-government organisation. We do not have enough manpower to solve cases, so we cooperate with government organisations which have manpower nationwide. In the future, I hope that we can launch a national policy that aims to prevent domestic violence and violence against women. In Thailand, we do not focus on protecting a victim when it comes to domestic violence. Therefore, in most cases, the victim is left to tolerate the situation and must continue to live with her/his abuser. However, what the victim needs is urgent protection. If there was a national policy, local officers would be able to respond to case and violence would decrease," Varaporn said.