

THAILAND

ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN THAILAND'S TROUBLED SOUTH



Empowering Women in the Conflict Zone

Women affected by violence in the south are acquiring the skills needed to seek legal recourse and to make their voices heard in the public arena.

Women call into the “Women & Peace” radio talk show for all sorts of the reasons. The radio program is the first and only show in Thailand catering to women in the conflict zone and has gained loyal listeners throughout the southernmost provinces. In addition to providing information on legal issues and women’s rights, the program offers a safe and anonymous forum for women to discuss topics they cannot talk about openly in their communities; widows share the day-to-day challenges of raising children without a father and callers seek help on taboo topics such as sexual abuse.

Thailand’s ongoing southern conflict takes a heavy toll on women. There are wives who have seen their husbands gunned down in broad daylight and others whose spouses passed away while in detention. The daily violence also seeps into households in the form of domestic violence and sexual abuse. In the tradition-bound communities of the south, women are often unable to get help; many are too afraid to speak out about what has happened to them and are unaware that they have a right to seek legal solutions.

To address these issues, The Asia Foundation works with local grassroots organizations to empower women in the predominately Muslim populations of the southernmost border provinces. The “Women & Peace” radio show is one such effort, produced by the Women Network on Stopping Violence and Promoting Peace (WePeace) in both Thai and Malay languages. The Foundation also supports WePeace to conduct specialized media trainings so that women can better communicate their social, cultural, and political concerns. Outputs include a website, newsletters, and short news clips aimed at ensuring that the voices of women in the south are being heard.

As part of its program to provide pro bono legal aid to victims of human rights abuses in the south, the Foundation places a particular emphasis on women. Through organizations such as WePeace and the Deep South Woman Network for Peace (Deep Peace), the Foundation runs legal workshops that provide women with a better understanding of basic human rights, the judicial process, and the martial law and emergency decree used in the three southernmost provinces. Through the workshops, women also acquire basic fact-finding and reporting techniques, and psycho-social counseling skills.

These workshops are helping to create a network for women victims of violence who can support each other as well as a pool of dedicated women able to serve their communities as paralegal volunteers. In an environment with limited legal knowledge and much distrust of the authorities, these paralegals encourage victims of violence to seek justice, helping them assemble evidence and facilitating claims for restitution. “I know now that I am a valuable person and I want to become a volunteer helping other disadvantaged women,” says one workshop participant.

The Foundation also assists women who want to take their legal skills further. Three female staff members from one of the Foundation’s local partners in the south, the Muslim Attorney Center (MAC), have been awarded scholarships to complete their law degrees. They will soon be qualified to administer gender-sensitive counseling and legal aid for female victims of violence.

All these activities are part of a broader swathe of programs designed by the Foundation to mitigate Thailand’s southern conflict. While the causes of the conflict are complex, the Foundation recognizes that identity, education,



“There are not many groups like ours that are working for the people in the conflict area. If we give in to fear and step back, no one else would dare help us—this is what inspires me to keep going. As long as we continue to lose lives we cannot stop our work.”

—Patimoh Poh-etae-dao, director of WePeace, has lost four members of her family to violence in the conflict-ridden southernmost provinces of Thailand (pictured above right on the Foundation-supported talkshow, *Let’s Talk Rights*)

economic opportunity, participation in local decisionmaking, and access to justice are the basis from which peaceful development will emerge.

KAOSAR’S STORY

Kaosar Alimama’s neighborhood, in the southern Thai province of Yala, is considered a “red zone” – an area on constant high security alert where bombs and drive-by shootings are common. In 2009, this 27-year-old teacher at a religious school for young children joined the Southern Paralegal Advocacy Network (SPAN), a network supported by The Asia Foundation. Having attended a series of training workshops, Kaosar is able to assist lawyers by conducting basic fact-finding at crime scenes, compiling case details, and preparing witnesses for court.



Though Kaosar didn’t graduate in legal studies, she’s learning fast on the job and is proud to be able to help people in her community seek legal and peaceful solutions to their problems. “I now have an understanding of law, especially martial law and the emergency decree,” she says. “The knowledge I have gained enables me to help villagers realize their basic rights and make use of the judicial process.”

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress.

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