

Thailand: 'Thaiconsent' Breaks The Silence With Untold Stories

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When a woman recently accused a famous gynecologist of raping her during an exam, many more came forward to say they'd entrusted his sterling reputation only to be assaulted at his clinic.

Almost as quickly, others emerged to challenge the women's accusations. With police saying [they couldn't charge the doctor](#) without physical evidence, it was a lawyer, Decha Kittivittayanan, who said, "Is it really possible that this doctor has raped or grabbed the breasts of 20 to 30 women, and no one ever filed charges before? Is it possible? It has been months and years."

Another lawyer, Atchariya Reungrattanapong, asked why the victims didn't cry for help or fight off the doctor, concluding it could mean the alleged rapes were "consented" to by both sides.

Regardless of how the case turns out, it once again opened the court of public opinion to familiar arguments blaming women for leading men on, not doing enough to fight them off, not covering their bodies, not coming forward quickly enough. All reinforce the code of silence that discourages them from sharing their stories by a society lacking an ingrained sense of consensual sex.

In fact the concept of mutual consent is still unheard of by most Thai people, according to a media professor and women's rights activist.

"Thai society doesn't understand consent at all," Chanettee Tinnam said. "A woman's leverage in sexual matters, knowing when they can reject it, is still problematic. Men think women agree to it because they don't say anything, and women are also constrained from [being direct about sex]."

One activist has made it her mission to change that by creating a platform for victims to share their stories in order to educate others. Similar to how women in the West gave scale to the problem with a hashtag, it's an effort that began with the realization that many victims never had the courage to talk about it.

When Silence Means Consent

Since launching 15 months ago, [Thaiconsent](#) has racked up more than 42,000 followers with the intent of putting into circulation knowledge that's overlooked in public discourse, a neglect seen lying at the root of the problem. Without a prevailing notion that sex is subject to equal consent, many abusers seem unable to understand they did anything wrong.

"I created the page because I was angry," 26-year-old artist and activist Wipaphan Wongsawang said. "I wanted to destroy whatever is causing this problem."

"It focuses on educating people what is consent, so that they won't violate others," she continued. "People who are violated will also know that it wasn't their fault."

Wipaphan said she herself only came to understand the notion of consent a few years ago when she was helping a college classmate bring charges against a close friend who not just attempted to rape her but also filmed her showering naked.

“She kept it to herself for a week before coming to me for advice,” she said. “I took her to the police and tried to get them to bring him in for questioning. It was a solid case because we had evidence, but we were met with a very fucked up process along the way.”

Neither the university nor her friend’s family supported the woman, and the law did not deem what transpired as assault or harassment, Wipaphan said.

And like in [so many cases](#), her friend said her attacker acted like nothing was wrong.

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That experience led her to think that this pattern of abuse and indifference could run much wider, combined with her own close call with attempted rape years earlier in university.

“At that time, I didn’t know what it was. I was drunk and my friend took me to my room, took my clothes off and tried to have sex with me,” she said. “I didn’t know if this could be called rape or not.”

Although she has worked on Thaiconsent and advocated for women’s rights for over a year, Wipaphan, who graduated in decorative arts from Silpakorn University, only recently went public with her own story. She detailed her conflicted feelings after being attacked by someone she considered a rare, close friend in a recent interview.

“When we woke up in the morning, he acted like nothing happened,” she said. “It was confusing. I wasn’t angry, but I wanted to know if he would talk to me about it, which he didn’t.”

Wipaphan was motivated enough to do something after she stumbled upon the concept of sexual consent while researching how to defend her friend. And when the case went public, other women approached her after learning how she’d helped.

And it was shocking for her to learn how many fell silent after similar traumatizing experiences.

“A lot of female friends told me that they went through the same thing,” she said. “They were the same stories with different people, but nobody talked about it with anyone.”

Doubts about why women would not talk about their abuse - and their credibility when outing it later - don’t seem to go away, anywhere. The United States was plunged into rancor just two months ago when a woman accused a Supreme Court nominee of abusing her three decades ago. The same arguments used to defend the Nakhon Sawan gynecologist were aired in the US Senate.

For Wipaphan, her quest started with a blog where she posted translated academic articles on sexual consent she thought should be read in Thailand.

It was after graduating last year that she changed the platform to Facebook and turned it over to her audience. The response from those who’d been suffering silently nearly overwhelmed her.

“The articles were too academic. I thought that a lot of people must have experienced this, so I

opened a way for them to send stories," she said. "And so many people sent them in, like 200 to 300 stories in just a month."

"It started with a few people that had gone through the same situation sharing them with each other and opening up to listen to others. It turned out that a tremendous number of people experienced the same thing but never talked about it. It's something that already exists, but no one had ever touched before," she continued.

And having been victimized, Wiphapan understands other reasons many choose to remain quiet.

"I didn't want to tell people that I'm a survivor because I was afraid of what would come after. I don't want people to snoop around and dig up other stuff I don't want them to know," she said. "People prying can hurt the victims much more than what they've experienced."

She also doesn't want to be defined by her experience as a victim.

"I have other aspects to my life. I used to be something else before, but will this overshadow all of it? I wouldn't be known as an artist but only a survivor. I didn't want that."

'A Hole in My Heart'

Soon her page was a channel for people, mostly women, to give voice to their stories while remaining anonymous.

A woman wants to hold onto her chastity. She has a boyfriend she respects and trusts. In return, he says he respects her decision.

"He asked to meet me at a hotel. I understand that some people might have already judged me by this point, because no decent woman would go see a man in a hotel room. I have to say that meeting someone in a room, being in a room alone with him, doesn't mean that I have 'desires' or will be 'okay' with everything. My answer to his request to have sex with me remained 'no,' and I trusted him. I believed the promise he gave me, and I learned that I was wrong, wrong to trust him," the story reads.

Its author laid out her feelings in one of the many anonymous posts published by Thaiconsent. Although there are no names or faces attached to their narratives, they provide fresh perspectives about sex that are rarely discussed openly in Thailand.

"You can say that I was stupid, but it wasn't easy like you think; that when it happened I could just fight it off," the woman [**recounted of her state of mind**](#) when attacked by someone she fully trusted. "In that situation, my mind went blank. I couldn't think of anything. When I realized what was going on, it was too late. It left just a hole in my heart, a black hole that slowly expanded and ate me up from the inside, leaving just a shell of my old self."

These wrenching chronicles, some accompanied by Wiphapan's illustrations, contain a message she wants to spread - that how people feel during sex should never be disregarded. She believes that if enough people learn about them, it could eventually turn the tide and prevent such episodes from repeating.

"Thai people actually talk about sex a lot, but they always talk about the performance aspects," she said. "They never talk about what it means to them, or what kind of memory about yourself it leaves."

Women aren't the only victims. The stories Wipaphan has received came from many types of people, and she wants to represent them all.

"Some argue that this concept overly favors women. I try to explain that consent applies to everyone, every gender," she said. "I think it's something that can happen to anyone ... men, LGBT people. It's still a concept very new to Thais."

Among the impactful stories she shared was one of a man who didn't know he could also say no.

"He didn't know how to reject his girlfriend when he didn't feel like it. He didn't know he could, so he forced himself into it. It gradually diminished his sex drive until it was gone completely for over 10 years," she said. "He didn't feel any pleasure from it, until he met a girlfriend who's a foreigner, and she made him understand that a man can also choose."

Talking to Each Other

While sex education in Thai schools is considered poor due to its social taboo, the concept of consent is even less discussed, especially for the half of the population that's generally discouraged from openly talking about sex.

"Society teaches women to be silent and inexpressive about sex, and also doesn't teach men to ask," said Chulalongkorn University's Chanettee.

Mainstream media normalization, most notably the excessive rape scenes romanticized as acts of love in Thai *lakorn*, has made the attitudes even more pernicious and deeply ingrained in the public psyche.

"It's the perspective of men seeing women as sex toys. It's okay to rape them. Women like it. They'll feel better after awhile," Chanettee said, adding that men are led to believe women will find even unwanted sex so pleasurable that they will grant "consent" afterward.

That, Wipaphan thinks, is a major contributing factor to the issue; abusers don't actually realize that their actions are thought of as assault.

"There's this mindset that they don't know what they did was wrong. They don't really get it, and it causes problems for both sides," she said.

Wipaphan said she encounters that mentality as she advocates for her cause, something that has sometimes led her to despair.

"They think consent can't be proved," she said "It drove me crazy for a while. I felt hopeless, depressed, like, why can't you understand something so easy? Just whether this person wants to have sex with you or not?"

The Women and Men Progressive Movement Foundation, which advocates women's rights, said last year that over half of all victims were assaulted by someone they knew.

It's still difficult to pin down rape rates in Thailand as the same social stigmas and reticence keep many from ever being reported. The Justice Affairs Office estimated 87 percent of victims last year did not go to the police and extrapolates the number of real victims annually could be as high as 30,000.

Many sexual assault cases also end up labeled something else.

Wipaphan said her friend's attacker was only fined 500 baht for being a nuisance as the attempted rape could not be proven physically and she had already made him delete the clip of her showering. Other obscene behaviors, such as lewd acts on public transport, are often chalked up as "indecent" resulting in small fines.

A recent UN study found 68 percent of sexual assault victims in Thailand don't have any visible injuries or traces left on their bodies.

'Until the Day I Die'

Although it has been an exhausting journey that has left her depressed from reading hundreds of harrowing stories every month, Wipaphan said she feels her efforts have made a difference by getting people to listen, open their minds and reconsider their beliefs.

"I feel good when a lot of media asked to interview me. I think everyone sees it as something new, especially when there are many men there. All will be so shocked because they've never thought about sex in this way before," she said.

Though the media has helped amplify the message, Wipaphan says it's her contributors the page has helped come to terms with and improve their situations.

"When people have stories and know how they should be defined, it will make them feel less confused," she said. "When they understand what happened, they will know how they feel about themselves."

She added that she only felt grounded enough to confront her own attacker after beginning work on Thaiconsent. Even coming five years later, she said she felt relieved to finally have an apology.

The majority of comments left on the page are from people commending her efforts to educate Thai society about various aspects of sex, saying it has been extremely informative and opened their minds to the fact sex shouldn't be a shameful topic.

And Wipaphan has bigger plans to reach even more people. They include launching a website with donor support and participating in more public discussions of women's rights and sexual violence.

Next month Thaiconsent will launch an art exhibition in which 20 selected artists from various backgrounds will show works adapted from stories it has received. It's funded by international feminist organization Frida.

"The work will come from people who've been abused, those who haven't, and those who have no idea about sex at all," she said. "I'm quite excited to see how they will turn out. I'm curious to know what [the artists'] attitudes will be after reading the stories."

She had dipped a toe into turning principle into policy by joining the Future Forward Party but [quit the party](#) this past Wednesday, saying she would instead focus on pushing the agenda forward as an activist.

Asked how long she expects to keep fighting, Wipaphan said it's not about fighting but rather educating society to solve the problem at its roots. She has accepted it won't happen overnight.

"I've already made up my mind that it will be a lifelong mission. Look at the West, they've fought for hundreds of years and they're still not done," she said. "But I hope that it will be faster now. ... I hope that if we support each other, it will make it easier for the next generation taking over."

“I didn’t start the page to fight, to win, to help every case, because I know I won’t be able to make everybody win until the day I die if the root of the problem still persists,” she said. “I don’t want anyone to go to jail. It won’t make me feel better seeing someone get punished, because I know that so many people still have to go through something like this. I want to destroy the root of it all.”

Jintamas Saksornchai

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