



## Women Rise Up after Tragedy to Promote Peace

*Peace advocacy leader inspires seven-fold increase in women community volunteers*



*Pateemah Poh-itaeda-oh, founder of the Women for Peace Association in southern Thailand, empowers young local women volunteers to gain communication and leadership skills. Photo: Johannes Go/USAID Sapan Program*

Pateemah Poh-itaeda-oh had a particularly rocky start down her career path. A teacher by trade, she left that profession at the young age of 23, just about the time her brother -- the first of four family members -- was killed during years of unrest in Thailand's turbulent south.

Her 14 nieces and nephews are now orphans. While trying to cope with this personal tragedy 10 years ago, she marshalled her strength to form a local advocacy group called Women for Peace (We Peace). Based in Yala, the group provides financial and psychological support for women and youth who are victims of conflict.

However, working in a region plagued by violence and where men traditionally recognize men as leaders proved daunting to Pateemah, a young woman with limited work experience. Despite her efforts to expand her organizational skills mainly through self-study, she did not see much progress in her work and soon became discouraged.

Pateemah's situation started to improve in 2010 when We Peace joined the Empowering and Engaging Women in Governance Initiative under USAID's Sapan Program in Thailand. Through training, national meetings and exchange visits, Pateemah gradually acquired skills and knowledge and regained her confidence. Of all activities, a USAID-supported training

called CoOPERACY, which focuses on enhancing leadership, communication and facilitation skills, had a profound effect on her.

“I felt like a whole new person after joining the USAID-supported training,” said Pateemah. “It totally changed my way of thinking and work approach and the results have been really positive.”

Pateemah gained a new perspective on her work by motivating her volunteers and members of the local communities to look into their own backyards for skills and resources. Instead of dwelling on what they lost and instead of waiting for outside help, they concentrate on what they still have and how they can contribute more.

The approach is attracting large numbers of new, like-minded volunteers. As community members shared knowledge, experience, emotional, social and practical help with each other, the number of We Peace volunteers surged from a stagnant 116 to 871 over the past four years. Their work has now gone beyond social support for victims to advocate boldly for women’s empowerment, human rights and local governance.

“Regardless of our prior life experiences, women like us have the strength within and capacity that can be enhanced,” Pateemah said. “For example in governance and administration, once we are given opportunity to learn and take part, we can help deliver services in a more delicate way.”

We Peace is widely recognized by local authorities for its role, and is invited to engage in policy decision making processes. Under the ongoing USAID women in governance program, the group is now leading other local women’s groups to actively monitor, report on and advocate for effective management of the provincial Women’s Development Fund. Empowered through training, a women’s group in Koto Tuera Sub-District learned how to draft a funding proposal for business communication and language training to help them expand across Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. As a result, the group is now exporting their handmade hijab (headscarves) to Malaysia and Indonesia and are training women in Krong Pinang District to export bread to Malaysia and Brunei. They also act as interpreters for other women’s groups as they negotiate business deals.

Her leadership has not gone unnoticed. Pateemah, now only 33, has in the past few years received many awards for her work. In 2013, she was the youngest among 77 people from every province across Thailand to receive the ‘Than Khun Phan Din’ (Paying Gratitude to the Nation) National Award. The judging committee chaired by Kasem Wattanachai, Privy Councilor, praised her for “being courageous and standing firm to commit good deeds to her own province.”

“I no longer feel hopeless,” said Pateemah. “Now I know that women can take greater roles in our society and contribute endlessly when we are empowered.”