

# Turning an enemy into an ally

## *SWING internships engage police cadets in HIV prevention among sex workers*

### **Background**

Thailand has wrestled for years with tensions between law enforcement efforts to eradicate sex work and public health efforts to prevent HIV among sex workers.

Passed in 1996, the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act spurred renewed efforts by local law enforcement to crack down on sex work. Freelance sex workers have been particularly vulnerable, due to their public visibility and lack of employer protection.

When freelance sex workers are arrested, police often cite possession of condoms as evidence of sex work. That practice has understandably discouraged condom use among a group that is exposed to elevated risk of contracting HIV and STIs, counteracting HIV and STI prevention efforts by community organizations and public health agencies.

Following talks between the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Public Health in 2006, the Thai government issued a directive against using condom possession as evidence of sex work. Unfortunately the practice has persisted at the local police department level, particularly in the treatment of male sex workers, who face high levels of stigma and discrimination from a largely male police force.

### **SWING's response**

Service Workers in Group (SWING) is a local NGO that promotes the wellbeing of sex workers in Bangkok and Pattaya. Faced with the issue of male sex workers being arrested almost every day, SWING developed an innovative strategy for solving the problem.

Sex worker organizations in Thailand had previously taken a largely confrontational approach in their dealings with law enforcement, which only served to aggravate tensions. SWING decided instead to work together with law enforcement to change police attitudes and opinions towards sex workers, as a means of bringing about a sustainable change in practices and behaviors.



SWING staff educating transgender sex workers in the Nana neighborhood of Bangkok

SWING chose to target cadets at the police academy, hypothesizing that the younger generation would be more open to awareness raising efforts and more likely to change the culture of the police force over time. In 2005, SWING joined the Police Cadet Community Involvement Program, an internship program that gives third-year police cadets the opportunity to work directly with various community-based organizations. The objective of the program is to increase the cadets' understanding of different social issues and grassroots efforts to address them.

Every year since then, in August or September, SWING has hosted six to nine cadets for three-week internships. Twenty-four cadets have interned with SWING to date. SWING has become the most popular host organization, as newer cadets hear about SWING from more senior cadets, such that the number of applicants always exceeds the number of available slots.

During the internship, cadets work side by side with SWING staff, promoting condom use among male sex workers in hotspot areas, teaching English and Thai lessons at SWING's drop-in center, and helping to lead games and energizers at workshops and outreach events. When the internship ends, the cadets are required to deliver a presentation on their experience to all 1,200 students in the police academy.

SWING's director, Surang Janyam, explains that "SWING puts in a lot of effort during the time that the cadets are interning with us, to make sure they really understand our work and the complicated issues faced by sex workers. We assign one staff member per cadet, give the cadets a thorough orientation, and have a debriefing session with them every evening so that they can reflect on what they are learning day by day. We do this because we believe that the young generation will help change the situation in the future. It is not the police officers' fault that they have only received biased information in the past. By working with them, we are helping to change their perspective."

### **The cadets' perspective**

Paeh, Sorn, and Dome, currently fourth-year cadets, interned with SWING in September 2007. Prior to the internship, all three reported having negative attitudes towards male sex workers (MSW) and men who have sex with men (MSM). "On my first day with SWING, I felt uncomfortable working with the MSM staff and was quite shocked to go into MSW hotspot areas. It was a community that I didn't even think existed," Paeh recalls.

Sorn, who used to walk away from MSM/MSW when he saw them, says his stigma and discrimination disappeared after working closely with them and understanding their situation. "Now I feel MSWs are ordinary people living in the same society as we do." Paeh remembers the satisfaction of helping SWING organize a camping trip for a group of sex workers. "I was simply happy when I saw them happy. For some, it was the first camping trip in their life."

Having felt uncomfortable around SWING staff on their first day, all three cadets say they have since developed good friendships at SWING, which they regard as one of the most important outcomes of the internship. "SWING taught us how to be open-minded and to make friends," says Dome. "I felt like I could discuss my problems and issues with the staff. To me SWING is not an organization, but a home full of friendly and supportive brothers and sisters."



(From left) Paeh, Sorn, and Dome, fourth-year police cadets and 2007 SWING interns, visiting SWING on September 12, 2008.

### **Results**

Through the internship program, SWING has gained recognition and respect not just among the cadet interns but throughout the police academy. In 2007, after hearing about cadets' positive experiences, the police academy invited SWING to begin providing training for all cadets on HIV prevention. SWING has developed a four-hour curriculum specifically for the cadets, and plans to present it at least once a year so that all newly graduated police officers have heard it at least once, if not multiple times.

Even before any of the interns had graduated, the influence of the program had extended beyond the police academy and into the police force. When cadets begin their SWING internship, the academy informs precincts in the areas where SWING works and asks them to take care of the cadets. As a result, precincts in Bangkok and Pattaya are now familiar with SWING and respect it as an organization that works with the police academy.

Graduating cadets who have interned at SWING are further extending the impact of the program. Since the program began, SWING has experienced improved communication and cooperation with police and fewer arrests and incidents of harassment. When a problem does arise, SWING has observed that the police treat its staff more respectfully and are more willing to listen.

SWING's director notes that SWING staff have also grown and changed as a result of the program, as the cadet interns have challenged some of SWING's own biases and stereotypes about police officers. "They are kind individuals, but they have duties to perform. When a sex worker is arrested, instead of jumping to conclusions, we carefully investigate first whether or not he really committed a crime, based on facts. The wall between us and the police has become lower. Both sides now engage in more constructive dialogue and see each other as friends."