



Some lawyers may want to win a case for their clients for money or for fame. Not Siriwan Vongkietpaisan, a human rights lawyer, who sets out to make sure that every victory for her clients makes society a better place to live in.

Her recent battle, which she won for her client, was the case of a 14-year-old housemaid who was kept in slave-like conditions where she was brutally beaten by her employer - a well-to-do Bangkok housewife - and suffered severe injuries.

In 2007 the Criminal Court sentenced the employer - Vipaporn Songmeesap - to 12-and-a-half years of imprisonment. Vipaporn appealed, however, the Court of Appeal upheld the ruling. Now the employer will fight her case in the Supreme Court, which will take at least another few years before a final verdict is made.

If the Supreme Court upholds the previous verdicts, the sentencing will set a legal precedent and hopefully become the standard for future anti-slavery cases in Thailand.

The provision of the anti-slavery law, which was incorporated into the Criminal Code since 1954, has never been used before. When Siriwan filed the anti-slavery case with the police, she was told straight to her face that slavery no longer exists. "We have no slavery in Thailand. It was abolished by King Rama V over a century ago," she quoted as one police officer saying.

It is a standard practise for the court to rely on previous verdicts for their cases, she pointed out. Since the anti-slavery law has never been invoked, it makes the police and the public believe the problem no longer exists.

And Siriwan wants to change that.

"The development of law enforcement is the outcome of the lawyers' ability to use all legal provisions possible to present their cases," she said, adding that any good law is useless if it is not used.

"No matter how modern our legal system may be, justice is still illusive without proper enforcement," said Siriwan.

Even before taking this case and representing the underage housemaid, Siriwan had already been in charge of several well-known legal cases in Thailand, including the notorious land grabbing in Surat Thani province, the Thai berry-pickers who were exploited in Sweden, the GMO papaya scandal, and the coal-fired power plants in Bo Nok, Prachuap Khiri Khan province. All of which dealt with the infringement of the rights of the poor and the needy.

With her less common legal pursuits that depart from her peers' in the mainstream law practising world, many might think that Siriwa's iron goodwill comes from an unusual background. Although Siriwan insisted that she had a very simple childhood.

A native of Buri Ram province, Siriwan earned her bachelor's degree in law from Ramkhamhaeng University and worked in the legal department of several corporations for a few years before she decided to quit. It is common for law graduates to work in the commercial sector to ensure financial security, or to continue their studies to become judges, a more secure and prestigious career path.

But one day Siriwan decided to follow her heart and use her knowledge and skills to help the less fortunate. So she quit her high-paying job and thus a new legal life was born.

After taking part in some legal cases for social causes, which got her connected with a whole new network of socially engaged lawyers, she co-founded a law office in 1997 to help those suffering from legal injustices. But Siriwan fully understands what is practical in terms of work. Her mission will not last long if all her legal services are free. Therefore, Siriwan divides her

legal work into two parts: straight-forward business and pro bono legal work.

Siriwan kicked off her new career as a lawyer with a good cause by becoming a legal representative for several social organisations including the Foundation for Women, the Foundation for Child Development, and the Lawyers Council of Thailand. Soon after she offered legal consultation to Greenpeace, the Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit Northern Thailand (Trafcord) and the Fight Against Child Exploitation (Face) as well. In 2005, she founded the SR Law office, which has a solid positioning to create concrete and fair law enforcement.

Her work philosophy: never become desk-bound in an office. All lawyers, she believes, should work and sweat on a case by visiting the actual sites and examine the local residents' problems in their local areas to gather the best information on the ground, as this process is critical in winning any case, she said.

In her representation in the case of the GMO Papaya for Greenpeace, for example, Siriwan did not only visit the real testing fields but she also talked to all sides of the stakeholders involved. In addition, she studied the related laws and educated herself in plant quarantine and scientific studies.

Her devotion and thoroughness in her work often surprises the court when she brings in specialists in from a wide variety of fields, such as economic and environmental experts, to give their highly credible testimonies in court.

"We worked together as a team and we believe that in-depth information will help our case in court," she said.

And that may perhaps explain why she wins almost every case she handles, and has cemented her career reputation as a top professional collaborator and information manager.

"My work brings me closer to collaborate with different fields of expertise. Meeting different people has also helped widen my perspectives in so many ways. I have met many good people

while working as a lawyer and my life has been super worthy ever since I chose this path."

Another notable lawsuit Siriwan was involved in was the commercial palm plantations and land rights case in Surat Thani province. Again, she won the case, thanks to her thorough research on the land conflicts in the area coupled with her masterful knowledge on property laws.

"At that time the local villagers did not know how to fight against outside capitalists who were taking over their agricultural land. Winning or losing in court for these exploited people was very much dependant on the performance of their representative, including the lawyer."

Challenging the powerful and almighty has its risks, though. Facing harassment from her clients' opposition is part of her work, she said.

But how does she balance her goodwill social injustice life mission with her regular business? And does that put any financial strain on her business success? According to Siriwan, there are many organisations who need her legal services to help the disadvantaged. Though the money she makes from these legal practices may not be much, the satisfaction she gets for conquering wrongful crimes is reward enough. Besides, she didn't work alone to win a many number of her landmark cases.

In 2006, Ashoka, a global association that supports social entrepreneurs internationally, selected SR Law to be one of its fellows in recognition of its efforts in tackling human trafficking.

Siriwan's main personal challenge, she said, is to nurture young lawyers so that they might one day follow the same path as her.

For the future law students, she urged them to take part in extra-curricular activities that address social problems and inequality. And the happiness achieved from being able to help others will encourage them to pursue the same path in the future, she said.

With cooperation from both development and law organisations, Siriwan also conducts legal training classes for young lawyers who want to work for the good of the public.

"But attending classes and working on a few case studies alone isn't enough to build up the necessary skills needed for socially-engaged lawyers and carry out their work successfully. So I also organise a three-month training programme that requires the students to participate in field trips in conflict areas," she said.

She smiled when asked what it is like to devote 100 percent of her life to work. "When you love what you are doing, it is not work," she said. "Doing the kind of work I do requires a good heart first and foremost. I am happy with what I am doing because I get to work with all my heart."

From: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/feature/people/39172/human-rights-heroine>