



## **Amara Soonthorndhada**

The Public Health Watch researcher from Thailand, Dr. Amara Soonthorndhada, is a well-respected scholar in reproductive health and gender studies. Soonthorndhada has a Ph.D. from the School of Development Studies in University of East Anglia, England and two masters degrees: one in Sociology from the Banaras Hindu University in India and another in Applied Population Research from the University of Exeter in England.

She has been an associate professor at the Mahidol University in Thailand for 32 years and is currently the deputy director of the University's Institute for Population and Social Research.

While most of her research has centered around adolescent sexuality, gender roles in health development, and women's empowerment, Soonthorndhada began to focus on TB five years ago, with funding from the British Consulate and Department for International Development (DFID) and most recently, from Public Health Watch.

In Thailand, "the general perception among political leaders as well as in Thai society is that TB has been completely eradicated," Soonthorndhada says. In actuality, while TB incidence had fallen by 50 percent from 1985 to 1991, the number of new TB case rose again in the 1990s with the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Thailand. Today Thailand has an incidence rate of 142 cases per 100,000 people, and is 18th on the World Health Organization's list of high-burden countries.

"One of the problems to eradicate TB in Thailand is that ... the policymakers, [including] the people working in the Ministry of Health, think there are more important diseases they have to deal with such as bird flu or dengue fever," she explains.

Soonthorndhada believes in addition to the lack of political commitment to eradicate TB, stigmatization of people living with TB and TB/HIV, and of women in particular, is an issue of concern. In Thailand, TB is perceived as a "male" disease, associated with a high-risk lifestyle and behaviors such as drinking, smoking, and an active nightlife. Thus, women infected with TB are seen as being at odds with social norms and expectations of female behavior, intensifying the level of stigmatization they experience. As a result, Soonthorndhada fears that women are more prone to "self-medicate" and to delay seeking treatment from medical clinics. She stresses that more research is needed on gender and TB.