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THEN AND NOW SERIES

Women in science

featuring **Tavitiya Sudjaritruk**,
IAS Member

The proportion of female scientists has increased across the world since the 1990s. However, less than 30% of the world's researchers are women. We asked five women at different stages of their career paths and from various countries and backgrounds to share their experiences and insights into being a female scientist. This is Tavitiya's story...

(Thailand) **Tavitiya Sudjaritruk** is an IAS CIPHER Grantee and a paediatric infectious diseases specialist who teaches in the Department of Paediatrics, Faculty of Medicine, at the Chiang Mai University in Thailand. Tavitiya was born in Chiang Mai in 1981. Her current research focuses on a study of long-term non-infectious complications among HIV-infected children and adolescents.

My inspiration to work in this field came when I was a medical student. I remember witnessing a little boy who had contracted HIV from his mum, and was suffering from AIDS and many opportunistic infections. At that time, there were many children like him in our hospital. Back then, dissimilar to these days, the national ART programme had not yet been well scaled up in Thailand; that's why the physicians could not promptly treat or rescue these children.

“MORE THAN HALF OF MY CHILDREN IN THE PAEDIATRIC WARD WERE SUFFERING FROM INFECTIOUS DISEASES.”

After graduating, I continued with my paediatric residency programme. More than half of my children in the paediatric ward were suffering from infectious diseases. And I saw that these diseases, such as HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, measles and meningitis could be treated and prevented. That is the reason why I decided to pursue training in paediatric infectious diseases fellowship programme at the Chiang Mai University, and the doctoral programme in epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins University.



Today, we have dramatically changed the face of HIV and AIDS from a disease with high mortality to a chronic disease. HIV-infected infants now can grow up to be children, adolescents and young adults, but I found that these individuals experience long-term non-infectious complications and co-morbidities, which can affect their quality of life. This is my current research focus.

Young girls and women who would like to become scientists should ask themselves what they would love to do and what that they are really interested in. When they choose this career path, they will be very, very busy, but if they work in the field they love, they will never feel tired or exhausted.

I have been very fortunate during my career path. Thailand has changed, in my opinion, into a kind of gender-equal country and I have never really encountered any social or cultural issues. However, a young scientist needs to have the drive to learn new things all the time. The experience of a young scientist in the field is short, and you should soak it up to learn as much as possible. We shouldn't fear failure, but rather learn from it in order to improve ourselves and avoid making the same mistakes.

I have many role models. I think the very best female scientist is Professor Virat Sirisanthana. She is a paediatric infectious disease specialist, like me, and she devoted a lot of time and resources to do both clinical service and research. Her work and contribution has inspired and motivated me to be a good paediatrician and researcher. During her era, the HIV infection rate in Thailand was very high, especially among women, and the mother-to-child HIV transmission rate was very, very high. It was extremely challenging dealing with the HIV and AIDS epidemics at that time. A good mentor will not only provide young scientists with professional knowledge, guidance and feedback. They will also motivate and support opportunities to do new things and provide opportunities to work independently.



We must attract more young girls and women to become scientists. I think the government or the community should provide more opportunities for young women to learn or practice in their field of interest and provide mentorship programmes for early-career scientists.

Editor's note: This above text is a series of excerpts from a phone interview and has been edited for length.