



Building bridges for
non-violent change: Women
as insider mediators in Thailand's
2020–2022 pro-democracy movements

Bencharat Sae Chua and
Duanghathai Buranajaroenkij

About this paper

This case study report is part of a project conducted by the Berghof Foundation, in consultation with UN Women in an advisory and coordination capacity, and funded by Global Affairs Canada and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Since April 2023, it has supported women insider mediators actively involved in peaceful protest movements around the world. The project helped to increase their conflict resolution skills and capacities, allowing them to leverage their knowledge and expertise more effectively in peace processes. It also allows them to potentially take on more formal roles in conflict transformation processes, in line with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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Preface

The past decade has seen a global proliferation of mass movements demanding societal, constitutional and institutional change. These pro-democratic, peaceful protest movements (PPMs) have arisen in response to various factors including economic distress, systemic violence, political repression, or restrictions placed on civil society. PPMs can become vectors of societal conflict, and experience direct and often spontaneous confrontations between citizens and their governments that may erupt into violence. As these clashes have grown increasingly prevalent, peacebuilding scholars and practitioners began expanding their understanding of peace mediation, from high-level formal processes aimed at resolving armed conflicts, to encompass informal practices that frequently originate in grassroots movements. Often initiated by individual 'insider mediators', these activities bridge gaps in state-society relations, thereby further facilitating socio-political change.

Insider mediation in socio-political conflicts is conducted by locally-rooted individuals who build bridges and facilitate dialogue between belligerent parties, enhancing trust, preventing violence, advancing peaceful change, and contributing to sustaining peace. They derive their legitimacy, credibility and influence from their closeness to the conflict parties, thanks to personal and kinship relations, or socio-cultural proximity.

While the peacebuilding community has grown increasingly aware of the important mediation role played by societal actors such as religious or traditional leaders, no attention has yet been paid to the informal (and often invisible) spaces of mediation occurring during peaceful protests. Nevertheless, social movement activists engage in processes of informal and situated mediation - which occur during or between cycles of protests - either between different factions within a movement, or between activists on one hand and community members, government actors, security forces, or even armed groups on the other. In particular, women often play prominent leadership roles in protest movements, but may also take on less visible insider mediator roles; they build bridges between various sets of actors, either to protect activists and mitigate violence or to advance conflict transformation.

This report is part of a series of case studies uncovering the roles of women insider mediators within peaceful protest movements. They examine their various roles and attributes, and the gender norms which may facilitate or inhibit such roles, among other limiting and supportive factors. They also reflect on strategies to sustain and leverage these mediation roles, especially during formal dialogue and mediation processes. Finally, they list key capacity-building and support needs faced by these women to sustain and deepen their mediation engagements, thereby expanding the potential for achieving peaceful change and conflict transformation.

Each report draws on data collected through qualitative interviews with relevant movement actors, activists, observers, as well as civil society organisations and state authority representatives. The women interviewed and featured in the studies may not necessarily self-identify as mediators, but are depicted as such by other activists and observers due to their positions of trust and access to conflict protagonists, as well as the positive outcomes of their interventions. In the spirit of participatory research, the reports are authored by local scholars who had trusted access to the respective movements, either as activists themselves or as close allies and sympathetic observers.

These studies will hopefully appeal to a broad readership. Readers who are experts or interested in mediation and conflict resolution will find inspiration on ways to engage with protest movements through internal and societal bridge-builders. Similarly, activists and experts in the field of social movements and civil resistance will gain new insights into the relevance of dialogue, negotiation and mediation in advancing peaceful change.

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Free Arts activists protest in Bangkok, Thailand – 14 Nov. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / ZUMAPRESS.com | Peerapon Boonyakiat



Acronyms and abbreviations

AI	Amnesty International
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
EnLAW	ENLAWTHAI Foundation
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
NVC	Nonviolent communication
RTG	Royal Thai Government
TPBS	Thai Public Broadcast Services
TLHR	Thai Lawyers for Human Rights

1 Introduction

The rise of the youth-led pro-democracy protest movements in Thailand during 2020-2022 marked a significant development in Thai political history. For at least two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, young people continuously engaged in peaceful protest movements on a scale and with a level of creativity never experienced before, despite facing state repression. Apart from calls for a return to democracy, the movements' demands included issues that had rarely been addressed or discussed widely in public, including the role of the monarchy in Thai politics, the hierarchical power relationships in Thai culture, gender and LGBTQI rights. Many of these issues challenged the status quo in Thai society and thus put the protesters at odds with the public at large.

While the protests were largely peaceful, there were occasional confrontations with the authorities, as well as violent crackdowns on some of the demonstrations. Many key leaders of the movements and protesters have been prosecuted while some are still in detention. There are also reports of confrontations between the protesters and the counter-movements, mainly from the conservative or royalist groups. Despite such confrontations and state repression, the movements did not escalate into violent conflicts and had faded out by early 2023 when the country had a general election that changed the government.

Notably, women played significant roles at the forefront of these protests, holding a variety of positions which are the focus of this research. Women exhibited remarkable resilience and leadership within these movements, from organising and leading demonstrations to supporting and advocating for change. This research investigates the roles of women insider mediators in the context of conflicts between protesters and

the state, between the protesters and the general public, and between different factions of the movements. Apart from the youth-led democracy movements, this research also explores mediative roles in the context of other protest movements that challenged the regime in 2020-2022. In particular, it looks into the grass-roots social movements that staged demonstrations and were in contention with the state. The research aims to identify gender dynamics affecting the mediations led by women who intervened to ensure nonviolent interactions between actors related to the protest movements.

To gather information on the roles of women in insider mediators, the researchers mapped out individuals and organisations involved in or supportive of the movements who had played mediator roles during the protests or had created dialogues between the protesters and the state or the public. To a lesser degree, the researchers also looked at the dynamics of negotiations between different factions of the movements on strategies or tactics that may potentially ignite violence. It is important to note that the term ‘insider mediator’ or even simply the term ‘mediator’ is not commonly used among the protesters. When asked to think about mediation roles, most informants would think of the movement leaders who negotiate with the authorities during a protest. The research recognises that these roles of mediator and negotiator tend to overlap, especially in the efforts to address specific blockages around protest events.

In total, the research interviewed 16 key informants from the movements, the organisations working with the movements, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRC), and individuals (media and academics) who created dialogue between movements and other actors. The informants were selected using a purposive sampling method, identifying individuals based on their prominent roles in leading protests or facilitating communication channels between the protesters and authorities. Some informants were publicly known figures, while others were identified through a snowball sampling approach, leveraging existing connections within the network of activists and stakeholders involved in the protests.

The next section provides background and an overview of the protest movements, examining the political context and the cyclical nature of protests. In particular, the section maps out the movements and investigates the diverse roles of women within them. Section 3 focuses on women's roles in conflict intervention and on the efforts of various organisations in dealing constructively with the conflicts. Section 4 delves into the gendered dynamics that shape mediation roles within the protest movement, shedding light on the intersectional factors influencing women's involvement. Section 5 analyses the factors hindering or supporting women's mediative practices, identifying key challenges and opportunities. Section 6 outlines strategies for women to sustain their roles, emphasising the importance of continued engagement and empowerment. Section 7 addresses capacity-building and support needs, offering recommendations for enhancing women's effectiveness as mediators. Finally, in Section 8, we draw brief conclusions based on our findings, summarising key insights.

2 Background and overview of the protest movements

2.1 Political background and protest cycle

The political landscape in Thailand has undergone significant upheaval in recent years, marked by key highlights and challenges that have spurred the emergence of movements, particularly with heightened youth engagement. The prolonged term of office of the administration following the coup d'état in 2014 has been a focal point of contention, characterised by concerns over democratic governance, human rights and political freedoms. Moreover, the legacy of political conflict and polarisation stemming from the long-standing feud between the Yellow Shirts (royalist camp) and the Red Shirts (pro-democracy camp) continues to influence the dynamics of Thai politics. The recent general election in 2023 further amplified these tensions, raising questions about electoral integrity and representation. Understanding these political dynamics is essential for contextualising the motivations and aspirations driving the ongoing movements for reform and social change in Thailand.

In March 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people in Thailand came out on the streets to show their discontent at the Constitutional Court's decision to dissolve the Future Forward Party.¹ Many of these first-time voters voted for this new political party in the 2019 general election, the first to be held after the 2014 coup. What initially seemed like an expression of anger by young people who were upset that their political voices were rejected

soon evolved into nationwide movements against the military regime. Also active at the same time was the movement of high school students who questioned the education system, abuse of power within schools and school regulations not in line with human rights. The students organised flash mobs and other creative protests, both online and in person, inside and outside schools, and also joined the larger pro-democracy demonstrations.

The size and demands of the movements caught many people by surprise. Most of the early protests took place within university compounds as universities were exempted from the enforcement of the 2015 Public Assembly Act, which would have required them to notify the authorities before organising a protest. After a brief disruption by lockdowns during the pandemic, the movements resumed in August 2020 with more protest activities in Bangkok and other provinces. By that time, the movements had evolved to include demands for reform of the monarchy, the most highly revered institution in Thai society. In effect, young people are not simply demanding regime change; they are also addressing social and cultural structures that sustain inequality and authoritarian power in Thai society. This puts them in direct confrontation with the state and many members of the Thai public.

As a result of their challenge to the establishment, these peaceful protest movements faced severe repression, both physical and legal, at the hands of the government. Many of the movements' leaders and protesters, including youths under 18 years of age, were arrested and charged for violation

¹ The decision of the Constitutional Court to dissolve the Future Forward Party in February 2020 was based on allegations of financial impropriety, particularly regarding loans made by the party's leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, to the party during the 2019 general election campaign. Critics argue that the decision was politically motivated, aiming to silence a rising opposition force with a progressive platform and appeal to young voters. The dissolution sparked widespread protests, both domestically and internationally, exacerbating tensions in Thai politics.



Protesters rally against 'Lèse Majeste law' on 'Constitution Day' in Thailand. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AA | Stringer

of public assembly-related laws, violation of the national state of emergency, and for *lèse-majesté*.² Some demonstrations were dispersed by force, including the use of water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets. High school students were often subjected to harassment and punishment by school authorities if they engaged in symbolic acts in schools. A three-finger salute that was adopted as a symbol of resistance is seen as an offence. There are also reports of schools allowing police officers to monitor and photograph their students' activities inside the school.

Despite the ups and downs of the movements, especially during 2021 when many of their leaders were detained or got caught up in protracted court

proceedings, and when COVID-19 was at its peak, their activities continued on different scales and platforms. From early 2021, when the protesters voiced even stronger and more direct criticisms against the monarchy, rubber bullets were used in almost all the major protests, despite the fact that the protests were peaceful. In August and September 2021, when the clashes between some groups of protesters and the authorities happened on an almost daily basis in Bangkok's Din Daeng intersection, there was excessive and arbitrary use of force, including deployment of tear gas and rubber bullets. Later, the protesters in that area were often referred to as 'Talugaz' (talug means piercing, and 'gaz' derives from tear gas), an allusion to the use of tear gas against them by the authorities. Talugaz

² *Lèse-majesté* or crime of insulting the King is a serious offence in Thailand. The provision is laid down in Article 112 of the Thai Penal Code. It has been interpreted widely to include any critical view of the monarchy and has been politicised as a weapon against those criticising the government, which claim to defend the throne. Conviction on *lèse-majesté* charges can result in up to 30 years' imprisonment. See more at www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29628191.

protest marked a departure from the conventional protest format prevalent before its emergence. Unlike previous demonstrations where organisers, speakers or leaders were readily identifiable, the Talugaz protests stood out for the absence of named official organisers and the lack of clear demands or messages to the government. They maintained a consistent protest location and utilised a unique form of engagement without significant alterations over time (The Matter 2022).

Talugaz's use of Molotov cocktails and bonfires to defend themselves or to fight back against the authorities upset some local people in the neighbourhood and also led to the loss of public support. In August 2021 alone, Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (2021) reported that at least 225 protesters had been arrested in connection with the protests in the Din Daeng district. Among them, 63 were between 15 and 18 years old, and five were children under 15. They were charged with violation of the Public Emergency Orders, gathering more than ten people to create unrest (Section 215 of the Criminal Code), and they were usually briefly detained at the special detention centres before being sent for trial (cited in iLaw 2021).

By 2022, large-scale demonstrations such as those seen in 2020 and 2021 were rare occurrences, partly due to the fact that most of the protest leaders were tied up in legal prosecutions against them. As noted by Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, during the state of emergency (26 March 2020 to 30 September 2022), at least 1,468 people were prosecuted for violation of the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations. They included at least 241 minors younger than 18 years old (Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2022). As of March 2024, 1,293 cases had been prosecuted involving 1,954 individuals, including 1,421 males, 450 females, 68 LGBTIQ+ and 15 persons of unidentified gender. This includes 748 cases that are still pending in the judicial system (Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2024).

2.2 Mapping the movements and the roles of women

The pro-democracy movement that has evolved since early 2020 consists of diverse groups and loose networks with no formal organisational structure. Among the key groups that have organised large protests in Bangkok are the **Free People** (ประชาชนปลดแอก), which was later transformed into **Rassadorn** (The Peoples or กลุ่มราษฎร³) as a network of several different pro-democracy groups; the **Free Youth**, which in February 2021 formed a coalition with other groups under the name **REDEM** (Restarting Democracy); the **United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration** (led by student activists at Thammasat University), which was among the first to make public the demand for reform of the monarchy; and **Thalufah** (Piercing the Sky), which was formed in 2020, mainly by student activists working with communities affected by development projects. Later, local groups outside of Bangkok adopted the prefix '**Free**' (ปลดแอก) or '**Peoples** [of]' (ราษฎร) to connote ideological links with the groups based in Bangkok. '**Bad Students**' or '*Nak Rien Laew*', (นักเรียนแนว) is the largest high school student group that organised protests in Bangkok. The members and leaders of these groups sometimes overlap, and there is no fixed membership base.

From late 2022 onwards, major protests were largely replaced with symbolic actions led by small groups of activists, at times with only two or three protesters, such as displaying protest placards on the street or in the Bangkok public train (BTS) system. During this period, '*Taluwang*' or Piercing the Palace (ทะลุวัง) was the most prominent; its activists usually raised critical questions about the monarchy, which resulted in many *lèse-majesté* cases against them.

3 'Peoples' or ราษฎร also connotes the emphasis on the relationship between the state and the people, in contrast to the common connotation of the Thai people as 'subjects' of the monarchy. The 'People Party' is also the name of the group that staged the revolution to change the country from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932.



Pro-democracy protesters waiting for the outcome of negotiations on government and monarchy reforms.
Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / ZUMAPRESS.com | Andre Malerba

Compared to previous mass movements in Thailand, the youth-led protest movements of 2020-2022 were marked by significant participation and leadership of women and LGBTQI persons. For example, among the ten key activists who announced the formation of The People, four were women (two of whom were interviewed for this research). All but one of the key members of the **'Taluan'** (Piercing the Palace) group are women. This development was not observed across all the movement groups, however. Based on the researchers' observations, some groups may have almost equal number of female members to men, but the leadership roles are mainly limited to a few men.⁴ Apart from the relatively higher numbers of women/LGBTQIs in leadership roles in the movements, a feminist group called **'Free Feminist'** or เฟมินิสต์ปลดแอก (formerly 'Free Women' or ผู้หญิงปลดแอก) was also formed in November 2020 to advocate for gender equality and, in particular, LGBTQI rights. Some protest activities were specifically organised by the Free Feminist group, with some of these protests

addressing specific issues like same-sex marriage. Free Feminist also has local groups in the southern and northeastern regions of Thailand.

The Din Daeng protesters, the **Talugaz** group, do not identify themselves with any of the groups mentioned above. Nor do they make any specific demands apart from expressing frustration with the ways in which the government has handled economic issues that have arisen due to COVID-19 and the methods used by the authorities to suppress the pro-democracy movement. Anusorn Unno (2021) found that the participants in 'Talugaz' were upset with the violent crackdown on the pro-democracy protesters in 2020 and 2021. Those engaged in almost daily clashes between Talugaz and the security forces were mainly from lower-class families. Young people joined Talugaz protests mainly due to perceived injustice, as they believed the government had unfairly used its power and laws against protesters. They connect the injustice faced by protesters to

4 For example, the Talufah group and the university student activists from the Muslim-dominated southernmost provinces.

the government's undemocratic ascent to power. Another significant reason for their participation is the government's mishandling of COVID-19. Rising cases, deaths, delays and corruption in the vaccine rollout, coupled with economic lockdown, disproportionately affected the poor. Many joined the protests due to personal hardships caused by these issues, such as unemployment and losing family members to COVID-19 (Unno 2021). Their frustrations were turned into direct action against the state.

Apart from the youth-led groups and organisations, the period 2020–2022 also witnessed protest movements led by grass-roots communities affected by the government's development or environmental policies. Examples are the protests led by **P-move**, a network of movements on land rights and environmental rights, the demonstrations by communities affected by Chana Industrial Complex in Songkhla province and the coal-fired power plant in Krabi province, and the demonstrations by the Bangkloy community, the Karen ethnic minority evicted from Kaeng Krachan National Park. Members of the youth-led pro-democracy movements often lend a hand to these protest movements, sometimes as security guards or by joining cultural activities. Some of these grass-roots groups that are members of P-move are mainly led by women; examples are the Slum Network and the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand groups. The majority, however, are led by men.

In the southernmost provinces which have witnessed insurgent activities for at least two decades, individual youths advocating for independence from the Thai state have actively participated in the youth-led pro-democracy movement, often joining rallies in Bangkok. However, their involvement in political rallies in the southernmost regions, where violent conflicts have persisted since 2004, is constrained by stricter regulations. The imposition of martial law and emergency decrees in these areas has led to severe restrictions on public gatherings and demonstrations, limiting the ability of youth activists to mobilise and express their grievances.

Despite these challenges, their participation in the broader pro-democracy movement underscores their commitment to advocating for political reform and social change, even in the face of adversity and repression. Additionally, some Muslim male youth leaders have occasionally delivered speeches at protest sites, further highlighting the diverse voices within the movement and the collaborative efforts by young people from different backgrounds in advocating for democratic ideals and freedoms.

The protest movements have received support from human rights NGOs and like-minded academics. Among the key organisations are **Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR)**, which provides legal representation for the prosecuted activists, and **iLaw**, which works on documenting violations of freedom of expression and Internet freedom. iLaw also coordinates the **'Mob Data'** platform which allows the public to contribute to the documentation of violations of the rights to peaceful assembly. After the protesters faced a violent crackdown by the state, a group of volunteers coordinated by Amnesty International Thailand formed the **'Child in Mob'** group to create a safe space at the protest sites by providing support and a contact point for reporting violations during the protests (Amnesty International Thailand 2021). The protesters are also supported by the **Thai Academic Network for Civil Rights**, which is the network of pro-democracy academics who, apart from their advocacy for democracy, help to bail out the activists or provide court testimony in support of the right to protest. Apart from Child in Mob, most of whose members are female, other groups have more or less equal representation of men and women.

As the movements' demands target the monarchy, they are in direct contention with the Thai public. The conservatives and royalists mobilised and engaged in naming, bullying and even attacking the pro-democracy protesters. Some key leaders and supporters of movements (for example, academics and politicians who used their positions to bail out the activists) are cyber-attacked or receive threats from unknown senders. Some activists receive harassment messages on their social media. Some

royalists have pressed *lèse-majesté* charges against protesters.⁵

2.3 Visible spaces of dialogue and mediation

With diverse groups in the network, as discussed in the previous sub-section, the movements are sometimes called ‘organic mobs’, signifying that they lack a rigid structure or organisation. This is both the result of the spontaneous reactions to state violence and a deliberate move by the activists who believe in structure-less movements. During some of the protests, especially those called by REDEM or Free Youth, there were no clear leaders, nor even a person who addressed the public during the protests. The protesters communicated through social media channels such as Telegram or simply joined whatever activities might be initiated by any protesters during the events. Talugaz’s daily confrontation with the authorities is another example of this ‘leaderless’ movement.

With this kind of protest, there was usually no designated person to negotiate with the authorities who were in charge at each protest event. This is in contrast to the more organised demonstrations where there is a division of labour, with certain key persons responsible for negotiating the protesters’ demands with the authorities, and others whose task is to negotiate on issues relating to their daily activities. For the youth-led pro-democracy movements, this is not always standard practice and someone may or may not be assigned to communicate with the authorities during the protest events. There may, however, be spontaneous efforts at negotiation and mediation in order to address the problems at hand.

In a leaderless protest like those initiated by Free Youth or Talugaz, no such channel of communication was arranged. Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, an academic who researches the youth protests and Talugaz, recounted that she was

approached by some authorities who wanted to get to know Talugaz better. The authorities do not have direct contact with Talugaz members and were thus unable to negotiate both the demands and the daily protest activities with Talugaz. Some supporters of the movements initiated some interventions aiming at mediating or creating dialogue space between the Talugaz and the authorities. The research also documents an instance of mediation initiated by journalists who played the role of insider mediators and worked with a public media channel to organise a dialogue between Talugaz and communities affected by their activism (see below).

The human rights NGOs or organisations working on freedom of expression and rights to peaceful assembly sometimes serve as negotiators or mediators between the protesters and the authorities, especially during situations of intense confrontation. As documented below, there is no formal dialogue space or mediation mechanism in place. Through their shared concerns for democracy and human rights, these NGOs and other supporters sometimes issue public statements or engage in dialogue to urge the state to adhere to human rights principles. Examples are public seminars or closed-door meetings to discuss the situation. Many negotiations/mediations happened on the spot (when there was a physical confrontation during a protest) or at the request of either party (when the authorities attempted to reach out to protesters or vice versa).

5 In Thailand, anyone can file a *lèse-majesté* case against another person.

3 Women's roles in conflict interventions

With no formal space or mechanism for mediation, the research found that mediation efforts were often initiated by individuals, mainly women. Individual women actively engaged in efforts to prevent violence and defuse confrontations between the authorities and protesters. Despite lacking the intent or initial preparation to intervene as third parties, these women purposefully took a stand to safeguard the protesters during moments of tension. Notably, their primary goal was not necessarily conflict resolution; instead, they focused on mitigating potential violence and ensuring a protective environment for those involved in the protests. Some organisations with mandates to protect human rights, such as the NHRC and international human rights organisations, also play similar roles through their work in human rights monitoring and advocacy.

The mediation episodes discussed in this section encompass a broader concept of interventions, representing efforts to prevent violent conflicts and encourage stakeholders to adhere to human rights principles. The discussion therefore focuses on the diverse roles played by individual women and women-led organisations in negotiation, mediation, facilitation, observation and coordination within the protest movement. In this discussion, the conflicting parties are mainly identified as the protesters and the authorities. The research, nevertheless, also includes an analysis of the mediation efforts to address the conflict between the protesters and the public at large or the communities affected by the protests. As discussed in the previous section, those who engage the movements, the state and the public in some kind of dialogue to find common solutions are mainly those sympathetic to the movements. They either share political inclinations or at least have shared human rights values related to the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. Mediation in

this sense may not always be explicit but it is vital to the dynamics of the relationship between the state and the protesters.

This section discusses these roles; the first part focuses on the mediation roles played or initiated by individual women – both activists and sympathisers of the movements – and the second part deals with relevant institutions with a more formal mediative role.

3.1 Individual women's roles in conflict intervention

The research identifies three overlapping roles played by women to prevent or mitigate violence, namely the negotiator, the mediator and the facilitator, based on how they intervene and their relationship with the conflicting parties. It is important to note that the lines between the three roles are not always clear and may have been interpreted differently by the conflicting parties.

≡ Negotiator

A negotiator is someone who represents the interests of a conflict party and who engages in communication with another party to assert their own claims. Negotiations during the protests happen at two levels: at the policy level, where the protest movements push for their goals, and at the protest event level, where negotiation is more about the tactical level of protest activities.

In the course of this study, most informants consistently refer to Chonthicha Jangrew, also known as Lookkate, when asked about mediators or negotiators involved in the political protests



Chonthicha Jangrew. Photo © Kan Sangtong

in Bangkok. Chonthicha is a prominent political activist. In various instances, she played a key role as a lead negotiator for the Free People Movement during rallies against the hybrid government led by General Prayuth Chan-Ocha. She established a vital communication channel between the protesters and the authorities, sharing and receiving information and negotiating with the police about rally plans, routes and activities to ensure peaceful demonstrations. Given that these rallies often resulted in traffic disruptions, Chonthicha also ensured that there was coordination with the traffic police to manage these situations.

Chonthicha recounted challenges faced in managing the protests, especially those that were organic, spontaneous and lacked formal organisation. For instance, on one occasion, an initial plan for a rally's location was changed abruptly and announced at short notice on the movement's social media. This made it difficult

to ensure the safety of the protesters who might encounter the security forces deployed in the area. Chonthicha's primary objective was to safeguard the well-being of the protesters and prevent violent confrontation. As a negotiator, she took on the responsibility of bargaining with the authorities, seeking their cooperation to allow the rally to proceed to a new location. Simultaneously, she made concerted efforts to pacify both the protesters and the volunteer guards, urging them not to use force or attack the police barricade.

Through her experiences participating in numerous demonstrations and attending courses on nonviolent action and conflict transformation, Chonthicha became highly skilled in negotiation. She gained the trust of high-ranking police officers who sometimes shared crucial information with her when the crowd control police contemplated dispersing the protests by force, utilising measures such as deployment of water cannons, physical

confrontation, rubber bullets and arrests. The tip-off allowed the protesters to make arrangements that would enable them to avoid violent confrontation. Her approach involved striking a delicate balance between addressing the legitimate needs and concerns of the protesters and recognising the responsibilities of the police in maintaining public order. Chonthicha's role as a negotiator encompassed navigating these tensions, aiming to facilitate peaceful expressions of dissent while ensuring that the rally did not escalate to a point that might legitimise the authorities' use of violence against the protesters.

As discussed earlier, this kind of negotiator's role mainly exists in the relatively organised protests. During protests without figures such as Chonthicha or in leaderless movements, the task of engaging in spontaneous negotiations may fall on individuals who take up the role of security guards during the protests. It should also be noted that the position of some of the groups in the early youth-led protest movements in 2020 was that they would not negotiate or communicate with the police.⁶

During a protest that is organised with a clear division of labour among the participants, there is usually someone assigned to negotiate with the authorities during the protest events. This role involves liaising between the protesters and the authorities to ensure that the protesters can get most of what they aim for but within the limits permitted by the authorities. According to Supaporn Malailoy, who manages an NGO working on environmental rights that helped coordinate a number of protests by communities affected by environmental problems or policies, the organisers of these protests usually have a well-laid-out plan. The movements would assign someone to negotiate with the authorities on how and where they were going to demonstrate or what kind of activities they were going to carry out. These negotiators would be engaged in constant negotiations with the authorities while they tried to maximise their claims and pressure on the state.⁷ For example, they might negotiate the extent to which the protesters

could get close to a government building, the location where the protesters could stay overnight, or the route the protesters could use. A similar arrangement also applied to the youth movements. In preparation for a protest, Patsaravalee, one of the leaders of the youth movements who always spoke on stage during the protest events and therefore could not negotiate with the authorities at the front line, reflected:

"We have to trust our team. We have already assigned the division of labour to the [protest] management team. We cannot know what is going to happen in such a situation. But we always prepare for the worst-case scenario and think of the worst situation that we are willing to accept. Then we plan our activities based on this assessment, on the basis of commonly acceptable situations. Our protests might look too provocative, but they are based on what we all designed and agreed together."

However, negotiation is not always possible, even if the protesters are prepared to negotiate and communicate. As the pro-democracy movements intensified their critiques of the monarchy, the authorities closed the negotiation channels with the protesters. Moreover, some areas like a palace or a royal compound, which were seen by the protesters as symbolic strategic locations, were treated as non-negotiable by the authorities. Most movement activists interviewed for this research took note of this change from late 2020 onwards and claimed that they could no longer negotiate with the authorities. The authorities tended to use barricades, including containers, to block the road entirely and increasingly relied on non-lethal weapons to disperse the protesters without prior attempts to negotiate with them. All this led to more tension between the protesters and the authorities. From early 2021 onwards, violent crackdowns became normal practice after the protesters often went to the residence of General Prayuth, the then Prime Minister, in a military base designated as a royal compound.

6 Patsaravalee, interview on 15 November 2023

7 Supaporn, interview on 1 November 2023.

≡ Mediator within protest movements

In this study, mediation refers to the process of facilitating dialogue and resolution between conflicting parties, the aim being to mitigate tensions, foster understanding and achieve mutually acceptable outcomes. This research identified mediation roles in two areas. One is the mediation between factions inside the movements, which may have different approaches to peaceful protest actions. Another area is the mediation between the state and the protesters, a role which is often performed by individuals from supporting organisations who position themselves as allies to the protest movements or as defenders of the right to peaceful protest. Many of these occurrences happened at the protest sites on an ad hoc basis as the situation arose.

Within the movements, there were debates on what would be the best strategy and tactics for their campaign. Among the pro-democracy movements, the debates centred around how demands for reform of the monarchy should be framed to avoid attacks by the royalist public and the state and around the scope of peaceful protests. The activists interviewed for this research did not mention interventions from a mediator on this matter, although they referred to dialogues among themselves. Eventually, each group chose to address the issue of the monarchy at different levels based on their strategies; some called for a reform of the monarchy, some demanded the repeal of the *lèse-majesté* law, while some merely demanded the amendment of the law. Some groups chose to focus on getting rid of the military regime and leave the issue of monarchy untouched.

More mediative roles are identified when movement members have different views about how to respond to state violence or whether they should engage in pragmatic nonviolent actions. To mediate these different views, some insider mediators invite the protesters to analyse the pros and cons of different strategies, prioritising the ones which would prevent violence and, at the same time, maximise the movement's goal.

Supaporn Malailoy, the manager of the ENLAWTHAI Foundation (EnLAW), an NGO providing legal aid to communities fighting on environmental issues, often played the mediator support role when she provided consultancy to the protest movement. Supaporn is often assigned to notify the police about a protest related to environmental and livelihood rights as required by the Public Assembly Act. In preparation for a demonstration, she and her organisation often share with the demonstrators the legal frameworks governing peaceful assembly. She sees her role as equipping protesters with relevant legal knowledge, ensuring they are prepared to engage in negotiations. When conflicting views about movement tactics arise, Supaporn offers insights into potential consequences if protesters do not adhere to the laws, supporting them to evaluate the proposals from the authorities and empowering them to make informed decisions about their next steps during negotiations.⁸

In one instance, Supaporn assumed the role of mediator in a conflict among movement leaders. The conflict arose as protesters against a development project in Songkhla province had occupied a bridge near Government House in Bangkok, leading the police to request the clearing of the route and the withdrawal of the protesters. Varying opinions emerged among the protesters on whether to comply with the police request or to insist on occupying the bridge. Some hesitated, concerned that acquiescence could weaken their bargaining power. In contrast, another faction argued that rejecting the authority's request might jeopardise future opportunities for dialogue with the authorities.

Seeing herself (and her organisation) as the supporter of the movement, not the direct stakeholder who would be affected by the development project they were protesting, Supaporn refrained from making the decision on this strategic move. Instead, she mediated between two groups of protesters with differing viewpoints, particularly as the authorities justified their request based on

8 Supaporn, interview on 1 November 2023.

the legal framework relating to public assembly.⁹ At the protest site, she facilitated a dialogue encompassing the entire spectrum of opinions within the protester community. Recognising the diverse opinions among movement leaders, Supaporn aimed to involve as many perspectives as possible, ensuring that decision-making power was not solely concentrated in the hands of a few leaders. Providing legal and factual information, including clarifying and simplifying the legal framework and its consequences, Supaporn invited participants to discuss and evaluate various alternatives. She then assisted the movement to formulate an alternative proposal and strategy for negotiations with the authorities. Ultimately, an agreement was reached between the protesters and authorities: half of the pathway would be opened for commuting while allowing the protest to continue occupying public space to draw attention to the government's actions.

≡ Mediator between state actors and protesters

The mediation within the movement overlaps with mediation between the movement and the authorities. Typically, protesters have an adversarial attitude toward the authorities, regarding them as contributors to the problem and a source of their grievances. This negative attitude may derail discussions and, ultimately, impede the problem-solving process. Some factions within the movements may even consider violent actions against the authorities. Reflecting on this situation, Supaporn recognises the need to differentiate between the state apparatus in direct conflict with the movement's aims and objectives and the state officials handling the protest (mainly the police and the crowd control officers). She feels that this would help to tone down the adversarial mood at the protest sites and thus mitigate the potential violence.

Such an understanding of different government agencies' views proved to be helpful in preventing conflict escalation. In 2020, the Bad Students organised a series of demonstrations advocating for education reform and the eradication of authoritarianism in schools. During a student protest observation, Saksinee, an independent activist, witnessed a confrontation between an authority figure and a group of schoolchildren participating in the protest. The official took photos of the child protesters, causing them considerable upset. When they tried to stop him in a harsh manner, Saksinee intervened. Engaging in a conversation with the official, she discovered that he genuinely believed he was carrying out his duty of child protection without violating anyone's rights, showing a copy of the Child Protection Act B.E.2546 (2003) to support his claim. Saksinee took the opportunity to discuss child rights with him, presenting a copy of the Child Rights Convention (CRC) to emphasise the children's right to refuse having their photos taken. The official understood and left with a copy of the CRC provided by Saksinee. She acknowledged that the official may not have fully understood the human rights framework and simply followed the outdated laws that are not based on human rights principles. In situations where challenges arise, especially with assertive youths, the authorities may feel entitled to act, and Saksinee believes that stepping in with an empathetic approach can be beneficial.¹⁰

Another space for mediation exists outside of the protest sites when individuals gain the trust of the conflicting parties and then have opportunities to communicate to help them understand each other. Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, a lecturer from the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University, has been publishing academic research on the youth protesters since the movements emerged in 2020. She recognises that large sections of the Thai public did not understand the aims and intentions of the movements and perceived the youth protesters as aggressive troublemakers. Her research therefore aimed to explain the situations

⁹ Article 8 of the Public Assembly Act prohibits an assembly that disrupts or blocks the entrance to a government office.

¹⁰ Saksinee, interview on 21 November 2023.

that drove the youth protesters. Given the limited number of such studies, her works became well-known and enabled her to win the trust of both the protesters and the authorities.

After her research gained widespread attention, state and governmental agencies approached her as they sought to understand the youth movements but could not engage in direct communication with the young people. Kanokrat shared that in her long research career, there had never been such a significant influx of enquiries from various entities. Kanokrat emphasised that the authorities perceived her as having a neutral political stance since she did not align herself with any political faction. She was invited to many meetings with representatives of the authorities, mainly those in security functions who have to deal with the protesters, but sometimes also including key figures with close ties to the establishment. In these closed-door meetings, Kanokrat attempted to help the authorities understand the youth protesters. She reflected:

*"I think it is my duty to enable the authorities to access the information they need to understand that the youth are not what they think they are. I understand that the security organisations have their own ways of handling protesters, but they have never had to deal with protesters who are middle-class youths similar to their own children before. While some of the younger generation of government officers may understand this phenomenon, those higher up in the ranks do not. My research findings then serve as the materials they can use in formulating the solutions to the conflict. ... I see my role as a mediator who provides information [to solve the problem]."*¹¹

Kanokrat recognises, however, that in the context of centralised administration, the officials who she talked to who may understand the youths do not have the final decision-making power. There are also non-negotiables: for example, a protest near a royal compound is out of the question. Kanokrat also gained the trust of movement leaders and had

discussions with some of them. She shared with them the views and perspectives of the authorities, including the limitations of the lower-ranking officials, that she learned about from her meetings. The cases outlined above underscore the importance of employing diverse skills when engaging with conflicting parties and key stakeholders in violent conflict and crisis situations. Individuals bring a range of expertise that can be utilised to address the various actors' perspectives and requirements. Considering their proficiency and experiences, it is worth acknowledging that these women made significant contributions beyond those described in this study. The authors have chosen to focus on one of their roles relevant to our enquiries.

≡ Dialogue facilitator between protest movements and affected communities

A distinct mediation initiative could be found in the attempt to facilitate a dialogue between the Talugaz protesters and the communities that were caught in the crossfire of daily violent confrontations with the authorities. In this case, the intervenor did not mediate directly between the conflicting parties but organised and facilitated a dialogue that included various stakeholders, extending beyond the conflicting parties to involve governmental and non-governmental organisations. Through the dialogue, the conflicting parties – Talugaz, the community members from the neighbourhood near the protest site, and the state – had the opportunity to hear each other's demands and concerns and to find solutions together.

During much of late 2021, Talugaz protesters gathered at the Din Daeng intersection in Bangkok every evening. They used small explosives, slingshots and glass marbles to voice their grievances and demand that the government address their concerns. In response, the police used tear gas and rubber bullets to prevent the protesters from encroaching on certain areas. They set up checkpoints at the Din Daeng apartment complex and nearby thoroughfares, which were commonly

11 Kanokrat, interview on 2 November 2023.

used by the crowd to evade arrest, and entered the Din Daeng apartment complex to apprehend protesters who had dispersed and sought refuge within the buildings. The police operation and the protests caused disturbances and insecurity for residents in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, this prolonged demonstration resulted in numerous injuries, and tragically, one youth, 15-year-old Warit Somnoi, lost his life when he was shot with live ammunition by the police in October 2021 (The Matter 2022).

Thitinob, who was a journalist at Thai Public Broadcasting Station (Thai PBS) at the time, had followed the protests at the Din Daeng intersection attentively. She wanted to understand what had triggered the emergence of the Talugaz group and what they aimed to achieve. She delved into personal stories, exploring who they were, their needs and demands, and the circumstances surrounding their involvement.

In her efforts to comprehend the situation, Thitinob entered the Din Daeng apartment complex and talked to the local communities to understand their concerns. She encountered three distinct community responses: those supporting the protests, those disagreeing due to fear of violence – these residents felt unsafe commuting and could not sleep at night – and community leaders struggling to find a resolution. The situation put the Talugaz protesters in direct conflict with local communities while further legitimising the state's use of force to control the protests. Thitinob takes the view that the promotion of the right to protest (political rights) alone, which is often the approach adopted by human rights activists, further ignites the conflicts as other rights, particularly the right to peace, are neglected. In conflict situations, it is crucial for all parties to be mindful of the diverse rights that different groups of people are concerned about, she argues.

In response, Thitinob convinced her Thai PBS team to collaborate with NGOs and the National Human

Rights Commissioners to intervene in the situation. Together, they facilitated a dialogue session that allowed the residents to voice their concerns and enabled the members of Talugaz to speak out about their aims and objectives. Prior to the dialogue, Thitinob and the team conducted preparatory meetings, gathered data, and secured prospective and informed consent from all participants involved in the session. The dialogue session itself was attended by the communities, the Talugaz youths, representatives of Child in Mob (see below), human rights organisations and non-violence experts. It was broadcast nationwide. The dialogue allowed the protesters and the affected communities to listen to each other for the first time. The Din Daeng community reiterated the proposals they had submitted to the authorities earlier to reduce or restrain the use of non-lethal weapons like tear gas and rubber bullets against the protesters, as these measures also posed risks to the safety of the residents. The Talugaz youths shared their stories and explained the reason behind their actions. The dialogue also focused on alternative ways of protesting – through art projects, for example – and urged the authorities to listen to the people's concerns.¹² After the dialogue, the state changed some of its approaches. Instead of focusing on arresting and prosecuting the youth protesters, social workers from the Department of Children and Youth, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, were enlisted to provide personalised assistance to the arrested youths on a case-by-case basis.

3.2 Organisational roles in conflict intervention

This study identifies two organisational roles, mostly led by women, in mediating between conflicting parties and in defending the rights to assembly. The first initiative was led by Amnesty International Thailand, which tried to create a safe zone for children/youths at protest sites and liaised

12 See reports from the dialogue at <https://theactive.net/read/din-daeng-junction-talk-their-way-out-of-violence/> <https://theactive.net/data/mobdindaeng-opinion-solution-of-violence/>.



A young protester making the three finger salute. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / ZUMAPRESS.com | Phobthum Yingpaiboonsuk

with organisations dedicated to child welfare. The second centres around human rights monitoring, mainly by international human rights organisations and the National Human Rights Commission.

☰ Institutional mediator for safe zones for children in protests

In most of the pro-democracy protests of 2020-2022, young people made up a majority of demonstrators. On many occasions, children followed their parents to attend the protests. Many street vendors sold food and goods at the protests and also had to bring their children along. In the beginning, no children's organisations, governmental or non-governmental, were concerned about this issue. With the escalation of the use of force by the state, especially after schoolchildren were exposed to tear gas during a protest near the Parliament, Amnesty International

initiated the 'Child in Mob' project. The project began by distributing armbands to identify protesters and individuals aged 15-18 in the protest area.

It was an unprecedented situation where the majority of demonstrators were youths. Children's rights were not considered in the context of crowd control. Consequently, the director of Amnesty International Thailand conducted negotiations with the crowd control police to agree on creating a safe zone for children, emphasising that, during confrontations, children should be directed to the safe zone. Additionally, the project sought volunteers for 'Child in Mob' and provided information on caring for and responding to various incidents involving children within the protest area.¹³ Their involvement included providing armbands to the children, ensuring they were informed of safety guidelines during confrontations, and responding to various incidents that might arise within the protest area.

13 Piyanute, interview on 5 September 2023.

Thanks to successful negotiations with the authorities and liaison with NGOs specialising in children and youth issues, approximately 20 volunteers got involved, the majority of them men; however, the director of Amnesty International observed that the women volunteers demonstrated more active participation. The active engagement of women volunteers played a crucial role in the effective implementation of the 'Child in Mob' project, contributing to the safety and protection of children during the protests.

≡ **Protest movements observer as 'unseen mediator'**

Protest observation was used as a tool to monitor the human rights situation before and during the protests. Apart from contributing to human rights monitoring, observation during the protests also helps prevent violence from both the state and the protester sides. However, protest observation has not been institutionalised. Both the NHRC and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights assigned a number of their staff to monitor and observe protest activities. However, they did not allow their staff to identify themselves during the protests due to concerns for their safety and the need to maintain perceived neutrality. Several informants consider that such an approach may not contribute to the role of mediator or help to prevent violence/abuse because the government authorities and the protesters alike would not be aware that their actions were being observed. Nor could the observers intervene to mediate when needed.

Although observation may not inherently constitute mediation, the following examples illustrate how active observation can effectively serve mediation purposes. Human rights organisations, both at the national and international levels, were actively involved in protecting the vibrant protests in Bangkok. The NHRC and the United Nations (UN)

diligently observed the situation and collaborated with stakeholders to ensure that the gatherings were peaceful.

One interviewed UN informant recognised her lack of authority and attended the protest as a translator for her foreign supervisor. Responding to concerns about the well-being of arrested protesters, whose whereabouts were unknown, she engaged in negotiations with relevant authorities. Trained by the UN in protest observation and experienced and skilled in conflict transformation from her previous organisation, she identified a particularly valuable strategy which involved approaching and speaking to high-ranking authorities. Initially, she demanded the unconditional release of protest leaders by the police, but realising the impracticality of this approach, she adjusted it. Instead, she sought information on the location where the protesters would be detained and requested contact details for a responsible authority that could serve as a liaison for the arrested individuals. She reports that family members of the arrested protesters were satisfied with the information provided, acknowledging that they did not expect unconditional release. Subsequently, the police began announcing the locations of arrested protesters during interrogation and sentencing as part of their routine practice.¹⁴

UN agencies further supported the NHRC's mission by providing its staff with skills in protest observation. In collaboration with other local and international NGOs, they shared information and lessons learned to enhance their practices. However, actual collaboration or joint operations did not occur at the protest sites. Staff at the NHRC office explained that they had developed a protest monitoring form to document what had happened and which government agencies were present. The documentation is produced both on paper and through photographs and audio recordings. It is expected that the documentation could be used to verify alleged human rights violations in the future.¹⁵

14 UN staff member, interview on 14 November 2023.

15 NHRC Office staff member, interview on 31 August 2023.

The NHRC engaged in negotiations with both activists and authorities, exemplified by a notable incident during the activists' hunger strike outside the court in February 2023, where they were demanding the release of political prisoners (Kaewjinda 2023). Concerned about the activists' well-being and the potential risk to their lives during the prolonged strike, the NHRC attempted to negotiate with critically ill activists to agree their admission to hospital, but these efforts were unsuccessful. In another instance, negotiations were conducted with crowd control authorities to secure mobile toilets at protest sites.¹⁶ Additionally, the NHRC sent a letter to the crowd control authorities, urging them to adhere to human rights principles.¹⁷

In this study, the informants expect that the NHRC could broaden its role so that in addition to being an observer and coordinator, it also serves as a mediator and facilitator of dialogue. This expectation stemmed from the NHRC's access to resources and its authority to engage with officials and government agencies. Furthermore, the NHRC has garnered and strengthened trust among stakeholders in recent times.

The roles of the individuals and institutions in intervening in conflict situations shed light on the significance of the intersectionality of women's status and power dynamics. Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorisations, such as race, class and gender, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or advantage. The statuses of women, coupled with institutional support and recognition, play a pivotal role in empowering individual women to take on mediative roles within protest movements. For instance, Kanokrat, a professor from a prestigious university in Bangkok, leverages her position to amplify her voice. Similarly, Thitinob utilised the facilities and recognition of TPBS to organise dialogues.

However, women lacking recognition from the state or institutional status, such as Chonthicha and Supaporn, can only intervene when the protesters agree. Consequently, they cannot always leverage their capacity to prevent violent conflict and negotiate agreements in conflict situations. Those working in an institutional capacity, such as the national human rights institution, would have more leverage in negotiating with diverse actors. This highlights how interconnected factors such as social status, institutional support and recognition intersect with gender to shape women's roles in conflict intervention in protest movements.

¹⁶ NHRC Office staff member, interview on 31 August 2023.

¹⁷ NHRC, interview on 8 September 2023.

4 Gendered dynamics that shape mediation roles in the protest movement

4.1 Women's attributes can serve as a nonviolent force

The state primarily relied on crowd control strategies in response to mass rallies, bolstering police forces and utilising a legal framework that granted them impunity and the right to deploy special measures (Bangkok Post 2023). This legal framework opened the way for the excessive use of power, leading to frequent violent confrontations between protesters and police crowd control forces. The imbalance of power often resulted in injuries and arrests, particularly among male protesters at the front line, as they tended to trigger more aggression and violence. In contrast, women protesters demonstrated a more careful approach in negotiating with crowd control police, with some observers noting that women at the front line exhibited less aggression in interactions with the authorities and fellow protesters.¹⁸ This is echoed by women leaders; for instance, one states, "I did not employ forceful tones or offensive language, but neither did I adopt an excessively soft approach. Some male protesters would shout and berate the crowd control forces."¹⁹ Another mentions, "The way I dressed and my interaction with the authorities seemed harmless."²⁰ According to a local UN staff member, she emphasised that "the security authorities also uphold a commitment to organisational integrity, assuring that they will not insult or use derogatory language against women."²¹

Muzz, a staff member from a local NGO, noted that her appearance as a woman allowed her to intervene and prevent a group of young protesters from engaging in violent actions against a soldier. During a confrontation between the Talugaz group and crowd control, an incident unfolded where a soldier attempted to video approximately ten teenagers who were obstructing a CCTV camera. Upon realising they were being recorded, the youths aggressively pursued the soldier, prompting some nearby journalists to document the escalating situation. Despite attempts to capture the incident, the youths continued their pursuit. Amid the chaos, the soldier, finding himself beside Muzz, sought her assistance to escape from the violent situation. She decided to stand with him, effectively dissuading a youth armed with a metal stick from attacking the soldier. Eventually, a crowd in the area assisted in safely removing the soldier. Muzz emphasises that the youth chose not to resort to violence against a woman, allowing her to protect the soldier in that situation.

'Mind' or Patsaravalee Tanakitvibulpon, a youth protest leader, observes that the authorities treat her differently from male leaders. She acknowledges that her appearance as an attractive woman and her gender have naturally served as a personal shield against threats from various political factions and the police, including the crowd control forces. Mind recognises that employing a feminine demeanour is helpful and a pleasant smile goes a long way to defuse tension.

18 Piyanut, interview on 5 September 2023.

19 Chonthicha, interview on 16 August 2023.

20 Saksinee, interview on 21 November 2023.

21 UN staff member, interview on 14 November 2023.



A pro-democracy protester gives the three finger salute during anti-government demonstration.
Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / ZUMAPRESS.com | Geem Drake

The experiences shared by Muzz and Mind underscore the nonviolent potential associated with femininity during protests. Muzz's ability to intervene and prevent violence demonstrates the impact of a woman's presence in de-escalating confrontations. Meanwhile, Mind's role as a female leader suggests that women may be less targeted by authorities during protests, providing them with a unique protective shield. Together, these accounts highlight the role of femininity in fostering nonviolent outcomes and ensuring personal safety during political conflict.

4.2 Female officials and staff involved in the promotion of human rights principles

The office of the NHRC and Amnesty International (AI) Thailand had a majority of female staff involved in their missions to observe the authorities' and demonstrators' human rights practices. Although they did not intend to recruit more women to join

the task force, they found that female staff were extremely dedicated. They were not reluctant to present their identity as NHRC staff at the demonstration and were skilful in monitoring and assessing the situation, including connecting and referring cases and issues to the responsible agencies or organisations. According to NHRC and AI, gender is not a barrier to intervening and working in conflict situations.

However, the organisation's reputation and stakeholders' perceptions can significantly impact female staff members' mental well-being and safety. The director of AI Thailand shared the challenges faced by her and her colleagues due to their proactive reporting on human rights violations. AI was accused of being manipulated by western countries to undermine Thai politics and society. Some individuals even publicly shared the organisation's address and protested in front of the AI office. These incidents created stress and fear among the female staff in particular. They felt unsafe commuting at night and were worried about gender-based violence, since the youth protests

were typically held in the evening. At a time when she faced intense attacks, both on-site and online, from those who disagreed with the demonstrators, those closest to her urged her to exercise more caution, reminding her of her role as a mother with a toddler to consider. In addition to the challenging protest environment, concerns about the safety of her staff and the worries expressed by her immediate circle heightened her stress.²² In contrast, staff at the NHRC offices noted that protesters and authorities appeared more receptive to the NHRC compared to the previous commission, as the current commission is perceived as more neutral.²³ However, in certain instances, NHRC personnel wearing clothing or items with their organisational logo could face potential attacks from protesters, who accused the NHRC of lacking neutrality.

This study identified several women within human rights advocacy organisations whose roles primarily centred on monitoring and observing protest situations. However, these women possess untapped potential as valuable assets for violence prevention, capable of transforming them into skilled and professional mediators and negotiators. Moreover, both a human rights defender and a female protest leader expressed a positive outlook on the involvement of female crowd control police. Their presence was associated with lower levels of aggression and reduced tension, especially when female protesters were arrested.²⁴ Exploring and harnessing the negotiating function of female police officers could be instrumental in mitigating violent confrontations.²⁵

4.3 Female activists experienced threats and violations of human rights

Protest leaders, including journalists, were on the authorities' watchlist (International Federation of Journalists, 2022). The police would follow them, take their photos or pay them regular visits. These tactics instilled a climate of fear. In one instance, the police chose to closely monitor some protest leaders, including a woman, for almost a week instead of presenting the arrest warrant and arresting them. This caused stress and a sense of intimidation, adversely affecting her mental well-being, as Muzz²⁶ observed. Another female leader mentioned that the police visited her parents at home, and since her father had lost a leg and was therefore vulnerable, he did not wish to interact with the police when she was not at home. However, the police now visit her home less frequently after she reported this issue to a higher-ranking police officer during legal proceedings. Consequently, the tension eased and the atmosphere improved, even though the visits continued.²⁷ This ability to assert their rights and engage with the authorities can be seen as a mediating factor that allows women to play crucial roles in navigating and influencing the dynamics of protest situations.

22 Piyanut, interview on 5 September 2023.

23 NHRC Office staff member, interview on 31 August 2023.

24 UN staff member, interview on 14 November 2023; Patsaravalee, interview on 15 November 2023.

25 Patsaravalee, interview on 15 November 2023.

26 Muzz, interview on 17 November 2023.

27 Patsaravalee, interview on 15 November 2023.

5 Factors hindering or supporting women's mediative practices

In addition to gendered aspects, this section examines various other relevant factors that hinder or support women's mediative practices within protest movements.

5.1 Hindering factors

- ≡ **Lack of Institutional Support and Recognition:** The majority of women voluntarily assumed mediating roles to prevent violent confrontations. However, their efforts often lacked institutional support and recognition, making it challenging for them to effectively carry out their roles.
- ≡ **Dependency on Backchannel Communication:** Owing to the absence of recognised and formal institutional mediation channels, the effectiveness of women's interventions relied on backchannel communication with authorities. The absence of established formal communication channels between protest organisers, leaders, responsible authorities and crowd control forces hindered efficient coordination.
- ≡ **Vulnerability to Human Rights Violations:** Women engaging in political activism faced various threats, including death threats and sexual harassment, from opposing groups. This vulnerability to human rights violations underscored the risks associated with their mediating roles.
- ≡ **Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP):** Many protest leaders faced criminal charges such as sedition and lawsuits related to social order, discouraging new individuals from joining the movement and taking on front line negotiator roles.

- ≡ **Organic Nature of Mobilisation and Communication Challenges:** The organic and leaderless nature of protest mobilisation, characterised by its spontaneous and adaptive development according to the current situation, resulted in participants having a strong sense of ownership. While this fostered a deep connection, it also posed communication challenges. In certain confrontations, the protesters refused to retreat, conflicting with agreements made by leaders and authorities. This dynamic made effective communication difficult at times.

5.2 Supporting factors

- ≡ **Inclusive Leadership Practices:** Despite the absence of an explicitly stated agenda or specific measures like gender quotas to promote women's leadership, the movement has received praise for its commitment to equality. This commitment has enabled women and LGBTQI+ individuals to actively participate in various roles within the movement. The emphasis on human rights and democratic values has created an inclusive space where women can confidently assume leadership roles, which becomes an opportunity to increase the number of mediators/negotiators, as the leader gains trust from the masses and is able to communicate effectively with them. Additionally, authorities often communicate through these leaders. This contrasts significantly with previous political movements, where opportunities for women's leadership were far more restricted.

≡ **Support Systems:** Some organisations played a crucial role by providing human rights protection and legal assistance to individuals facing Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) and various threats. This support system has been instrumental in safeguarding activists and maintaining the momentum of the movement.

≡ **Skills and Experiences:** Women's confidence in handling conflict situations has been strengthened through the development of vital skills such as effective communication, public speaking, and engagement with high-ranking authorities.²⁸ These acquired skills and experiences empower women leaders to play a crucial role in mediating conflicts and preventing violent confrontations, making significant contributions to the movement.

6 Opportunities for women to sustain their mediation experience in formal negotiation and transition processes

Women activists have employed various strategic approaches to sustain their political activism, momentum and influence. From informal to formal platforms, these women have demonstrated resilience and ingenuity in navigating challenges and advancing their causes.

≡ **Establish Connections with Human Rights**

Organisations: Developing connections with human rights organisations at national and international levels can be advantageous for women negotiators. The recognition and endorsement from reputable human rights organisations such as NHRC and the UN further enhances the credibility and credentials of women leaders. This network not only strengthens their position in negotiations but also validates their commitment to human rights principles on a global scale.

≡ **Assertiveness and Adherence to Human Rights**

Principles: Women negotiators were assertive in their roles and adhered to human rights principles. This positions them to effectively communicate with high-level authorities, emphasising the importance of human rights in the crowd control operation. This also enables them to negotiate or mediate in a way which does not compromise the movements' aims and objectives.

≡ **Embody Positive Attributes:**

Women negotiators and leaders emphasised positive attributes such as trustworthiness, maturity, open-mindedness and a willingness to listen to different opinions. These qualities contributed to building credibility, and the knowledge of legal frameworks further strengthened their position when engaging with authorities.

28 Women informants interviewed in this study; for example, Supaporn, interview on 1 November 2023, UN staff member, interview on 14 November 2023 and Saksinee, interview on 21 November 2023.

- ☰ **Transition from Protesters to Politicians:** The evolution from protesters to active politicians engaged in parliamentary committees offers women a strategic avenue to advocate for their concerns within formal political arenas. This transition empowers them to shape legislative processes and contribute significantly to policy development. A notable ongoing effort is focused on amending the 2015 Public Assembly Act B.E. 2558 (amended B.E. 2563) with the aim of promoting the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. This dual role as a politician and advocate allows women to bridge the gap between the movement and legislative action, fostering a more comprehensive and impactful approach to societal change.
- ☰ **Utilise social media:** Harnessing the power of social media by creating and sharing content through platforms like YouTube and Facebook emerges as a potent strategy. In one instance, a female leader used Facebook Live when she was arrested by the police to garner media attention and awaited her lawyer's arrival. Some female leaders have established their own YouTube and Facebook channels, strategically utilising these platforms during periods of no protests to advocate for social change.
- ☰ **Master Nonviolent Communication (NVC):** The skill of nonviolent communication (NVC) is crucial for women in political activism. By applying NVC techniques, women can navigate challenging situations during protests, ease tensions, foster constructive dialogue and prevent violent confrontations.

7 Capacity-building and support needs

This section, based on findings and authors' observations, aims to highlight the forms of capacity-building and support that are needed for future project programming within the context of the protest movements.

- ☰ **Capacity-building on facilitation, mediation and negotiation skills:** There were a few individuals who could take these roles. Their roles focused mainly on negotiations with the authorities. However, there was a lack of capacity to manage conflict between different groups within the movement.
- ☰ **Skills and practice in nonviolent communication (NVC):** NVC training would equip the women/negotiators and mediators to communicate with actors from different positions.
- ☰ **Peer learning and sharing on nonviolent action and human rights:** The pro-democracy movements have been largely peaceful. The movements have engaged in creative movement repertoires to advance their campaign. They also want to adhere to nonviolent principles while at the same time performing subversive acts to challenge authority. However, the issue of where the borderline between nonviolent and violent action lies has become contentious. Capacity-building on nonviolent action design and operation would help the movements to advance their aims and objectives in peaceful ways.
- ☰ **Capacity-building on human rights principles and relevant legal knowledge:** The protesters' negotiation and mediation skills should be strengthened in accordance with human rights principles. This would provide a strong, firm and principled basis on which to negotiate.

≡ **Well-being support, including mental health and physical protection:** Activists' well-being is severely impacted by the repressive measures adopted by the state. Key actions here include establishing comprehensive support systems for activists' well-being, including mental health services and physical protection. In the face of state repression, it is imperative to allocate human and financial resources to address activists' well-being and safeguard their health and physical integrity as they continue to advocate for change.

8 Conclusion

This study highlights the often-overlooked efforts of numerous women who mediate in conflicts and prevent violence during protests – efforts that frequently escape the attention of the mainstream media, the public and even the individual mediators themselves. The focus on violent confrontations perpetuates a skewed narrative, overshadowing the significant work undertaken by peacemakers.

The study finds that women played bridge-building roles both individually and as part of an institution, by mediating between protest movements and the state, between movements and the public, and between different actors within the movements. The overlapping roles of the negotiator, the mediator, and the facilitator they play help mitigate or prevent violence related to the protest movements. As the pro-democracy movements of the early 2020s tend to be horizontal in structure and comprise diverse groups, they do not always have official negotiators to deal with the authorities. Often, women members of the movements step up to play such roles, either because their personalities are more welcomed by different parties or because they acquire skills or knowledge that are useful to negotiate for the interests of the movements.

Women outsiders who are sympathetic to the movements, including from academia, the media or NGOs, play more of a mediating or facilitating role. They communicate with different actors in society so that they understand the movements' demands, motivation and actions and are more open towards the movements. This helps reduce tensions between the movements and the public, especially among the communities affected by the protests.

Finally, women from human rights organisations take initiatives to prevent violence during the protest movements. While they may not see themselves as mediators, these institutions have mediated safe zones for children who join the protests and made their presence known to different parties during the protests so they may refrain from the use of violence. The mediation roles of women tend to be informal and spontaneous. Interviews conducted for this study unanimously stress the need for a formal mediation role during clashes between crowd control forces and protesters. Women, in particular, have shown capability and eagerness for such roles, emphasising the importance of recognising and supporting their contributions. The gendered dynamics within protest movements highlight how women's nonviolent approaches and feminine

attributes play pivotal roles in mediating conflicts. Women protesters often adopt less aggressive tactics, which can de-escalate tensions and reduce violence during confrontations. Their presence in human rights advocacy organisations further underscores their potential as skilled mediators and negotiators, particularly in environments prone to aggression. Additionally, the involvement of female crowd control officers has been associated with lower levels of tension, especially during arrests of female protesters. Despite facing threats and human rights violations, women activists continue to navigate and influence protest dynamics, promoting peaceful outcomes.

In our analysis of factors hindering and supporting women activists' mediation, we identify barriers such as human rights violations and harassment that inhibit leadership roles. Conversely, support for human rights and democratic values, combined with women's agency and communication skills, empowers them to assume leadership. To support women activists, it is crucial to provide training in mediation, negotiation and facilitation, along with psychological support and an international network for empowerment and sustainability in their vital mediator roles.


Future opportunities to sustain and transform women's roles in the post-protest stage and formal negotiations include institutionalising their participation as mediators and negotiators. By formally recognising the de-escalatory potential of women's nonviolent approaches, they can be integrated into peacebuilding frameworks, ensuring their involvement in decision-making processes. Training programs to enhance women's mediation skills, particularly within human rights organisations, could further professionalise their roles. Additionally, leveraging their presence in law enforcement, such as female crowd control officers, could foster trust and reduce tension during transitions. These strategies could create a more inclusive and peaceful environment in post-conflict settings.

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Appendix: List of informants


Roles	Number
Activist leaders of the movements	5 (4 females and 1 male)
NGO workers who provide support to the protest movements	5 (females)
National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (2 Human Rights Commissioners with a background in civil society and 1 staff member from the Human Rights Protection Division)	3 (females)
Staff of the international human rights organisation who monitor human rights situations related to the movements	1 (female)
Academic who studies the movements and has communicated with the authorities on their demands	1 (female)
Media personnel who covered the protest movements and created dialogue between the protesters and the communities affected by the protest movements	1 (female)





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