



BACK TO HER OLD SELF

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Jade Marrisa Sirisompan shows how to deliver a palm heel strike to an attacker's face. Photos: Tibor Krausz

A fighting chance

Concerns over sexual harassment and assault have led some women in Thailand to seek out self-defence classes to give them an edge in the constant battle against predators

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The first time Pannarat Rattanasinchai was molested by a stranger, she felt ashamed and powerless. The mother-of-three was standing on a crowded bus in Bangkok when a man pressed up against her from behind in a sexually suggestive manner. "I felt disgusted and humiliated, but I didn't know what to do," Pannarat recalls. She edged away, but he persisted. Eventually, Pannarat stopped the man from pressing his crotch against her by placing her handbag in the way, and he then began targeting another woman. Passengers alerted the driver, who stopped by a police station so the harasser could be arrested. "Many women in Thailand have similar experiences," says Pannarat, a small, soft-spoken woman. "There are incidents every day."

According to a survey last year by YouGov, a British market research company, a fifth of over 1,100 Thai respondents – of both sexes – reported having been sexually harassed. Sexual assault accounted for 44 per cent of cases, followed by flashing and persistent sexual advances. More than a quarter said they had been harassed on public transport, while a third of incidents occurred in other public places.

"I was harassed again on another bus," Pannarat says. This time she was better prepared to deal with it. A stranger sitting next to her laid a hand on her thigh, and when Pannarat removed the man's hand he placed it right back. She reached for a small knife she now carries and held it against his hand as a warning, and he stopped troubling her.

Pannarat learned to be assertive at self-defence classes. She has been taught how to take precautions, stay alert, evaluate threats and read assailants' intentions.

She has also learned hands-on techniques that let her "kick some ass", as one of her instructors puts it, at a self-defence studio inside a



A Thai woman shows how to twist an attacker's arm and knee him in the face during a self-defence demonstration in Bangkok.

condominium complex in northern Bangkok.

If it came to that, Pannarat could stun and temporarily incapacitate an assailant, using an element of surprise. She could deliver a quick blow, or a series of blows, using parts of her body as weapons.

"If I was attacked from behind, like on that bus, I could use my elbow," she explains, ready to demonstrate. As a male instructor stands behind her, holding her by

lower herself or lean forward slightly, then launch herself up, propelling the back of her head into her assailant's nose or chin. In both scenarios, as the attacker doubled up in pain, she would flee.

"The most important thing is your safety," Kittichet says. "Don't get into a fight, because you can get badly injured. Run away. If you can't run away, hurt the guy to get him off you, then run away."

Lithe, bespectacled and slightly camp, the trainer looks less like a battle-hardened master of hand-to-hand combat than a peaceable art teacher. Yet Kittichet is in his element in his gym, with its punching dummies shaped like burly bruisers and his assortment of deadly weapons.

Kittichet tips the contents of a cellophane bag onto the table and out tumble dozens of pens. They aren't the usual writing implements, but tactical pens that can double as weapons. Many of them are pricey designer items made of titanium, but his favourite is a thick black Pocket Shark, which resembles a Sharpie marker.

"This one can break a brick," he says, showing how to deliver a forceful strike with it. The pen can also break an attacker's collarbone. "I advise my students to carry a tactical pen or flashlight. You never know when you might need it," he says. "But you can also use your mobile phone to strike. It's better to break your phone than your hand."

A youthful 56, Kittichet has been learning and practising self-defence techniques for four decades. He works as a flight attendant but has had a parallel career as a trainer in hand-to-hand combat, providing instruction to elite soldiers, police officers and bodyguards working in VIP protection.

He has also taught some of his skills to women – thousands by his count – in private sessions and public workshops. "I started doing it because people kept asking me to teach their sisters or daughters," he says.

Concerns about women's safety are warranted in Thailand, where rape is common, with

regular media accounts of new cases. Most rapes, though, go unreported by victims out of fear or shame, experts say.

One of Kittichet's students, a female engineer, was nearly raped twice, both times by taxi drivers. She was let go by one man because she was having her period. The other time she managed to hold off her attacker and call for help, just as she had learned in Kittichet's class.

Self-defence training has long been popular with Thai men, but many Thai women, too, want to learn how to stop an aggressor with a knee to the groin or a strike to his nose with the heel of the palm (preferable to a punch, as knuckles and fingers can break easily). Around Bangkok, fitness centres, gyms and even yoga studios offer courses in self-defence.

"I've had men catcalling me and touching me inappropriately," says a consultant in her 20s. She has just started taking lessons in Krav Maga, a military-style self-defence system designed by the Israeli Defence Forces with moves adopted from various martial arts. "I don't always feel safe and I want to learn to protect myself," she adds.

The first lesson she learns is that the primary self-defence skill



You can also use your mobile phone to strike. It's better to break your phone than your hand

KITTICHET MAYAKARN, SELF-DEFENCE EXPERT

Pannarat Rattanasinchai (right) practises a self-defence technique with an instructor at a gym in Bangkok.

isn't physical but mental. Often the quickest and safest way to ward off an assailant, she is told, is to look ready to fight – then fight dirty, if need be.

"If you act like a victim, you'll become a victim," says Shuki Rosenzweig, a Bangkok-based former professional Thai boxing champion from Israel who works as a trainer and security guard.

Jade, 28, who is half-Thai, half-English, once had her drink spiked at a nightclub in the seaside town of Pattaya. She managed to leave with the help of friends as the drug was making her drowsy and confused. "There's a lot of rape and sexual harassment here," she says. "We should be on our guard in certain situations."

At her workshops, she teaches women how to think on their feet in case of trouble. She shows them how to get out of wristlocks or fend off attackers with palm-heel strikes, elbow strikes and push kicks. Occasionally she also acts as a guardian. "Most of my female friends are so fragile, with no athletic abilities," she says.

"When we go partying, I always keep an eye on them. If anything happens, I'll go and fight for them."

