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**Bangkok Post**



# MUSE

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TEXT BY MELALIN MAHAVONGTRAKUL

Since 1997, more than 2,000 female scientists and researchers from 110 countries around the globe have been offered fellowships for "For Women In Science", a collaborative effort between L'Oréal Group and the Secretariat of the National Commission for Unesco. In Thailand, the programme has been running for 13 consecutive years to support our female researchers. This year, there were six recipients in three categories — life science, material science and chemistry — who received a grant worth 250,000 baht each to further support their respective research projects.

Muse talked to three of the six recipients of the For Women In Science 2015 accolades to find out more about the lives of female scientists, both inside and outside of laboratories.

## THE SCIENCE IN LIVING

**Assoc Prof Dr Sirilux Poompradub**  
Department of Chemical Technology,  
Faculty of Science, Chulalongkorn University  
Grant recipient from material science category

"People often think most research projects end up on a pedestal, with no application to real life," said Sirilux. "But, really, it can be done."

Sirilux hopes to develop and improve the properties of products from natural rubber, which has been Thailand's long-time economic plant, through her research. The fellowship from L'Oréal Thailand, according to Sirilux, has become a platform of networks that connects everyone together, as well as giving opportunities to students working in laboratories — to show that their efforts are being recognised and valued.

"Now, people know that — somewhere in the world — there's someone researching this topic," she said. To her, researching has its own charm. Whether it ends in success or failure, everyone can always learn a thing or two from it.

"With science, you get to explore new territories all the time. Things keep moving forward and changing. Sometimes, it's exciting. At times, it can be frightening. I want to keep learning and searching with it."

Getting to this point in her career, Sirilux finds her professors to be her primary role models for teaching her methods for ideal conduct and thinking processes.

"They don't tell us outright how to think scientifically," she said. "I like that they allow us to find out the answer by ourselves, instilling the knowledge bit by bit in us with which we slowly absorb."

Sirilux also applies this same principle and approach that she's learnt from her educators to her own two children. As a mother of two, she now lets her kids study for exams by themselves.

"If I continue to tutor them, then they'll never learn how to do that themselves. Let them try solving the problems first, so they can learn to think and make decisions on their own. They need to be able to do that to live in society."

Sirilux said she often hears of younger generations in general dreaming of becoming doctors, engineers and pilots, repeatedly. A career as a researcher usually is quite an undervalued path to many.

"One day, I hope research will become a dream career for Thai children," said Sirilux.



Assoc Prof Dr Sirilux Poompradub

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COVER STORY

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Darunee, Srilux and Siwaporn.

**ENDLESS INSPIRATION**

**Assoc Prof Dr Siwaporn Meejoo Smith**

The Centre of Sustainable Energy and Green Materials, Department of Chemistry, Faculty of Science, Mahidol University  
Grant recipient from material science category



Assoc Prof Dr Siwaporn Meejoo Smith.

Ever since her first year as a university student, Siwaporn recalled how she has always been taught by many award-winning scientists. She always holds her teachers in high esteem, saying she owes all her knowledge to them. They have remained her source of inspiration throughout her life.

But Siwaporn doesn't just find role models within her own mentors. Now, as an educator herself, she said inspiration can also be drawn from her colleagues and even more so, her students.

"Everyone who comes into our life is important for moulding us into who we are today," she said.

Work in science is not repetitive, which makes things enjoyable. She may teach one subject over and over, but the faces in her room are always changing. Thus, no lesson is ever the same.

Siwaporn said she has always liked teaching, though she didn't expect to climb this high up the academic ladder. She now learns to find enjoyment in all the different things she gets to do each day. Her latest delight involves research that seeks to develop the properties of technological materials to aid environmental remediation.

"Some people would think: That's won't be able to do it, but we can and we will show them."

As a woman of science, Siwaporn doesn't see her gender as a barrier that thwarts her from achieving her goals. She feels quite fortunate that Thai people are accepting of female scientists.

"In the end, it takes both men and women together to get the job done," said Siwaporn who also has complete faith that scientists — both male and female — can be one of the key drivers of our country's progress.

"To achieve sustainable development, we need to be able to come up with our own technology and innovation. I believe we'll see more of it in the future. Scientists will be the ones who create jobs for the country," she said.

When asked which achievement she's most proud of, Siwaporn said all her works have equal importance to her. Achievements, like experience, carry on building and are continuously collected over time.

"Being a scientist, our achievements are endless."

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Asst Prof Dr Daranee Soorukram.



**A MIND FULL OF ADVENTURE**

**Asst Prof Dr Daranee Soorukram**  
 Department of Chemistry,  
 Faculty of Science, Mahidol University  
 Grant recipient from chemistry category

Despite being a scientist and a researcher, Daranee wouldn't say she loves science in general. She is passionate about organic chemistry and likes studying chemical reactions. However, she dislikes maths and physics. Her research now deals with synthesising bio-active molecules from Thai medical plants.

Life — both inside and outside the laboratory — can be very adventurous, according to Daranee. As she works with different chemicals all the time, minor lab accidents do happen, despite her utmost care.

Daranee recounted one experiment where a tiny droplet of oxidant caused an ear-shattering explosion that rang through the whole floor. The noise has made her afraid of balloons ever since.

"The incident happened when I was doing my Ph.D. I remember running to my supervisor saying, 'It exploded! I'm not gonna do this any more,'" she laughed.

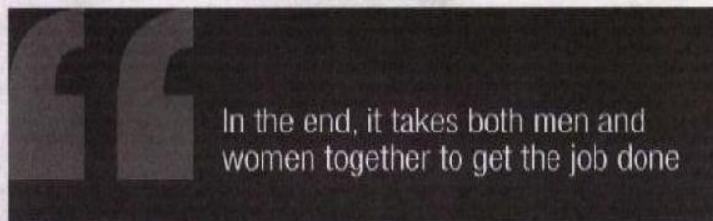
Outside the research facility, Daranee often trades her lab coats and goggles for hiking shoes. Travelling is one of her favourite hobbies. She recently took a trip to Phu Kradueng — a national park in Loei province which is famous for its gruesome hike up the mountain — with her students.

"I even walked faster than the kids," she boasted. Putting the body through physical hardship is one way to escape from work, both physically and mentally. And sometimes, turning the mind off can open up space for new, exciting ideas to shine through.

"If I just go for relaxation, my brain would keep thinking about work. But, when you climb a mountain, you only focus on what's in front of you. You keep thinking, 'How come it's so tiring? Where am I going to take a shower today?, and then you tend to forget all the other problems."

Concerning pay rate and social status, her career path is not such a popular choice to the public, admitted Daranee, especially when compared to the careers of doctors or medical practitioners. She feels it's the job of those higher up to give their support in this field of science to attract more students and maximise the potential of researching minds in this country.

"Please continue to support scientists and researchers. Increasing such support would be even better. Don't cut off our budget!"



This year's six recipients of L'Oreal Thailand's For Women in Science fellowship programme.