

# “Children’s boxing” carries the weight of burdens and fight against poverty

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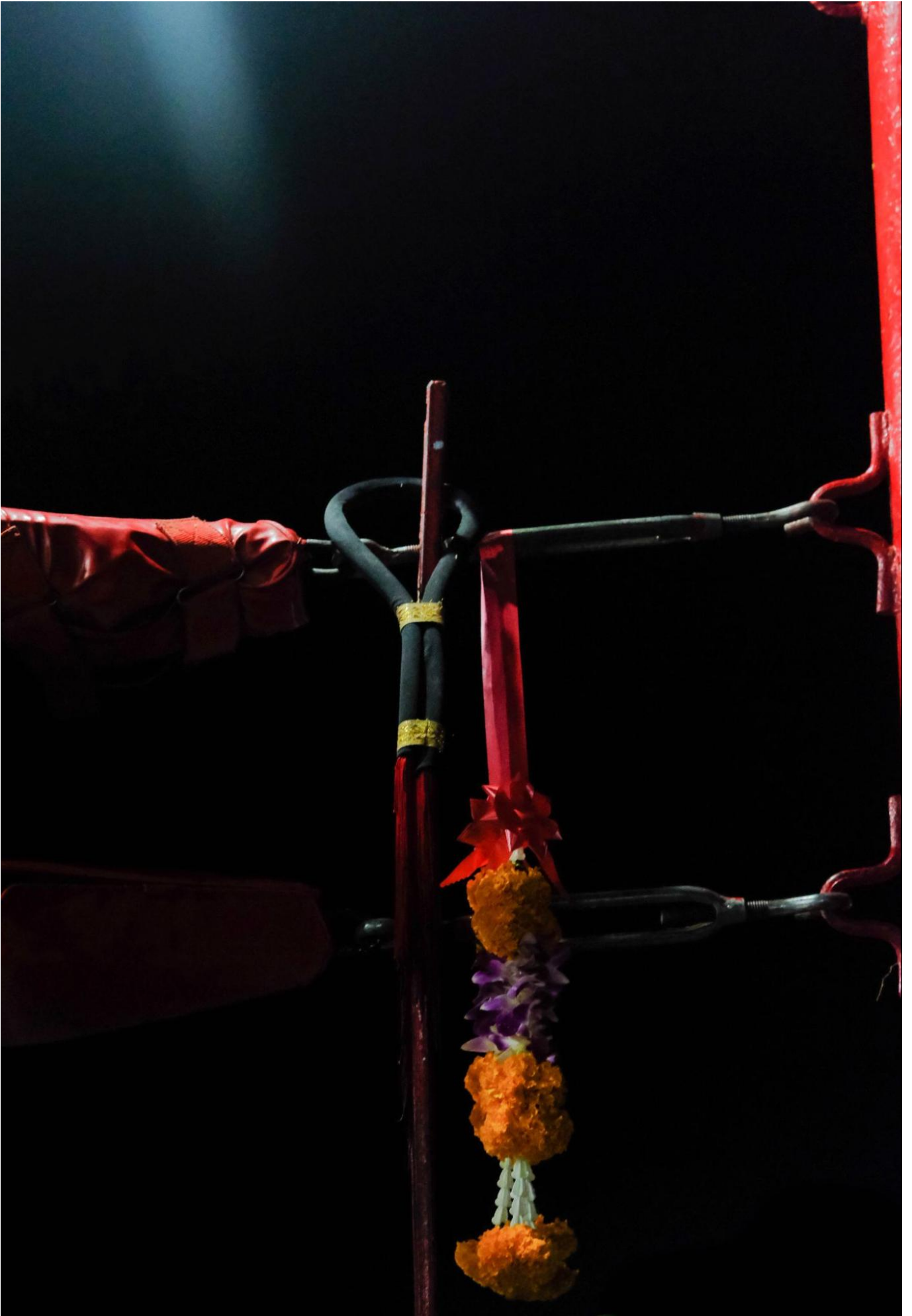
“I want to box to earn money for the electricity bill at home.” That is the dream of an 11-year-old boxer from a camp in Khon Kaen province who has to provide for his family. His mind set on succeeding, he trains hard in the hope of going professional. Though he may get injured, and the income from competitions might be minimal, it’s still better than nothing at all.

The boy in boxing shorts kicks and punches targets and bags with his peers at a boxing camp in Khon Kaen province. The young boy has been training regularly and, despite being only 11, has stepped into the ring for sparring sessions. Kampun’s life is unlike that of other children. While others his age enjoy their childhood studying and playing, he has taken on the role of breadwinner, supporting his mother and two jobless uncles. It’s for this reason that Kampun made the decision to take up boxing.

“At first, I was playing football with my friends, then I saw one of the older boys training in boxing, So I asked him if he could ask his coach to teach me,” he said.

The school and the boxing camp share a common fence, allowing Kampun to catch glimpses of his would-be future. He comes to train every day, showing great perseverance for his age, determined to prove his commitment to the coach.

“Muay Thai teaches me resilience and provides an income,” he added. “I want to box to earn money for the electricity bill at home.”



## **The boxing camp became Kampun's lifeline.**

Unable to afford the electricity bill, his home fell into darkness when the power was cut. They resorted to candlelight and oil lamps to survive, unable to use their electric appliances. Asked about his father, Kampun evaded the question. But to an inquiry about his mother, he responded:

"My mother is unwell and doesn't wish to speak to anyone."

Responding to the absence of light at home, Kampun took on the role of guiding beacon as he attempted to brighten his family's prospects with hope and strength.

### **Building dreams, one punch at a time**

Kampun's impoverished family was struggling to make ends meet.

However, through the collective compassion of numerous supporters, a boxing camp was established where children could receive care, engage in physical exercise, and learn the art of Thai boxing to defend themselves. Some children joined out of genuine interest in the martial art, while others faced limited options in life.

Kampun's 39-year-old boxing coach has been teaching boxing to children in the community at KhonKaen.

"This spot here was a community space, a ruin, and the villagers saw I was an ex-boxer, so they supported the idea of opening a boxing camp," he said. "Furthermore, my son also loves boxing, so it has transformed into a boxing camp today."

Once the camp was established, local residents showed immense support, he added. Some provided punching bags and gloves, while others offered meals to the children. They witnessed the interest of at least 10 children eager to join the training sessions.

The coach, who says he boxed from 10 to 25, trains the children using the same methods he learned. When school lets out, they start by running 30 laps around the field. After that, they drill by kicking sandbags and hitting targets before learning various boxing techniques.

Sessions run three-to-four hours, and they all have dinner together before heading home.

"I have to say, I can't do it alone; I have a lot of support from others," the coach said.



It's more than a boxing camp.

"When a child in the neighborhood faces difficulties, we take care of them. Like Kampun, his family is in need, so we help them find food and provide support."

Not all will go on to the muay thai circuit. But the opportunity is there.

"If they train well, they can develop into professional boxers and support their families," said the coach, who also plays the role of mentor and caretaker.

Apart from training the children, the coach also arranges for them to join competitions. They have traveled throughout the northeastern region and even ventured to fight in the arenas of Bangkok.

"Before sending a child to compete, we assess their readiness in terms of skills and physical preparedness. If a child's weight or skill level is not yet suitable, we won't allow them to participate," he said.

Additionally, the coach mentioned that prior to each fight, they make sure it's what the child boxers really want. Some children only want to train and learn self-defense techniques rather than compete.

But entering the ring brings benefits.

"For each fight, there are supporters who contribute varying amounts, some offering 300 or 500 baht per match, while upon returning to the camp, some adults will offer 100 to 200 baht as a treat for the children to enjoy at home," the coach added.

## Punching up

Kampun's entry to boxing was helped by his perseverance as well as the fact the camp is next to his school.

"Off" is a 10-year-old campmate who trained alongside Kampun and attended the same school. Despite being in different grades and rarely crossing paths at school, they met at the boxing camp almost every day after the bell rang.

"When we're at the camp, he's always full of energy and determination," Off said. "He trains seriously. He even won a boxing match at a temple fair."

In Off's eyes, Kampun was someone who took training seriously. He witnessed Kampun run laps around the field, kick sandbags and hit targets. He even saw him step into the ring and emerge victorious at one of the temple fairs. Kampun's unwavering dedication was tangible and inspired those around him. Off therefore encouraged his older peers to hold onto their hopes and aspirations.

"I want Kampun to become a champion," Off said earnestly.

### **'He shouldn't neglect his education.'**

In the teacher's eyes, the boy had a greater fondness for the boxing camp than the school's classrooms.

"Phol", the classroom teacher, said that he discovered Kampun enjoyed sports. He excelled in activities such as football and skipping rope, even winning a jump rope competition organized by the Health Department.

During that time, Phol helped with the training and recorded video clips to send to competitions. The results showed that Kampun achieved third place in the country. In terms of academics, Kampun's performance was average, and there were times when the boy missed school, worrying his teacher.

"Kampun is a child with energy and enthusiasm for activities, but he often misses school, sometimes absent for 2-3 days per week. When I visit his home, I see the living conditions. Their house is a single-level structure with four family members. Currently, his aunt and mother are the breadwinners, but they face financial difficulties," Phol said.

Another issue that the teacher discovered, aside from the intense boxing training that affected Kampun's ability to concentrate in class, was that he lacked enough dry school uniforms for the morning. This was somewhat alleviated when people donated school uniforms, ensuring that he could have clean attire every day.

Phol knew that Kampun had a genuine interest in pursuing boxing as a profession and wanted to excel in it. However, in his role as a teacher, he felt the need to caution Kampun not to neglect his studies.

"I understand him and have advised him that what he is doing now is good, but he shouldn't neglect his education. I always tell him that academics should be a top priority, while sports can be secondary. When it's time to study, he should fully focus on it, and afterward, he can engage in what he enjoys," Phol said.

"At this stage, he still needs to develop himself further to become a professional boxer. But what

he's doing is molding him into a future professional fighter."



**Kampun sips water at a match. Photo: Naticha Nasee**

## **'Fight on.'**

Under intense training, Kampun's boxing skills visibly improved, to the extent that the boxing coach selected him for another opportunity in the ring.

At a community exercise field in Khon Kaen City, Kampun's presence was like a focal point. While not a major competition, he was excited about the bright lights and traditional Thai music ensemble preparing beside the ring. Community members filed in to secure their spots to watch the young boxers, creating a warm and supportive atmosphere.

"If it were a big stage, I would be nervous, but this stage isn't too big. Before coming, my mother encouraged me to fight on," Kampun told us before the match. His bout was fifth on the card.

At around 4pm, Kampun stood in the red corner. His opponent, similar in age and physique, was positioned in the blue corner. The boxing coach chanted incantations and performed rituals according to the boxing manual. The tempo of the music ensemble escalated, and Kampun stepped out from his corner toward the center of the ring, where the ringmaster announced the rules. The referee raised his hands to signal the fight's start, and the young fighters began.

Blows were exchanged—kicks, knees, elbows—a trade-off of pain and resilience from blue to red and red to blue. Each strike brought forth cheers from the spectators, resonating sharply, magnifying the boxers' skills.

Round after round, from the first lift to the fifth. As the final gong echoed, the hand raised in victory

did not belong to him. In the midst of defeat, Kampun shed tears, a sight unfamiliar to those familiar with him.

## **Child boxing and the law**

Outside the ring, there are legal implications concerning the lives of child boxers like Kampun.

Section 22 of the Child Protection Act of 2003 states that any action taken toward a child must consider the child's utmost benefit as the primary concern. It is important to avoid any discriminatory practices and ensure fairness. Any action taken for the maximum benefit of the child or any action taken without prejudice to the child should be considered based on the guidelines specified in the ministerial regulations.

Section 23 emphasizes that parents or guardians must provide care, nurture, education, and development to children under their care in a manner consistent with local customs, traditions, and culture. However, these practices should not fall below the minimum standards set by ministerial regulations and must ensure the physical and mental well-being of the child.

Furthermore, Section 26 prohibits committing any act of violence against the child's body or mind, employing or compelling a child to perform work or engage in activities that may pose a physical or mental danger, and coercing or exploiting a child to participate in sports or activities for commercial purposes. The Child Protection Act provides protection for children under 18. Violation of these provisions can result in imprisonment and fines.

Boxers cannot go pro until they reach the age of 15, according to Wiparat Nityam Thai, a legal expert from the Lawyers Council who wrote about the matter on the Vuttisapha website. Wiparat noted that Section 29 of the Boxing Act of 1999 requires officially registered boxers to hold written consent from a legal representative and be at least 15 years old. Once registered, young boxers can enter into legal agreements related to boxing without requiring further consent from their legal representatives.

While those under 15 cannot register as professional boxers, they are still allowed to participate in competitions if they have safety equipment to ensure their well-being.

The term "safety equipment" is not specifically defined in the law, however. Based on legal principles, it generally refers to tools used to prevent or protect boxers from potential harm during competitions, such as headguards and mouthguards.

Five years after the tragic 2018 death of 13-year-old Phechmongkol Pinyopum, aka Nonglek, in a boxing ring sparked numerous debates on child welfare, traditional culture, and the law, 11-year-old Kampun did not wear a headguard at his competition. To this day, there is no clear consensus regarding a viable solution to ensuring child safety.