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SUBHEADLINE: The Body Shop is joining the campaign to stop violence against women, urging its customers to help out _ and be aware

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Their beauty products pamper, sooth and lavish attention upon women _ which is all the more reason they should speak out against the ill treatment and abuse of such customers.

The Body Shop's recent leap to the defence of women's rights seems indeed an obvious extension of the company's policy. A leading brand for skin and hair care for both men and women, The Body Shop has always made a name for itself supporting the humane treatment of animals and fighting for human rights.

Its foundation, which began operating in 1990, provides financial and gift-in-kind support to innovative, grassroots organisations working to achieve sustainable progress in the areas of human and civil rights, as well as environmental and animal protection.

Violence against women and, in general, gender-based violence in various forms is recognised as a major public health concern and a serious violation of basic human rights.

Thus the British-born company's latest campaign _ ``Stop Violence Against Women" _ however welcome, shouldn't come as any surprise.

The Body Shop's Thailand branch has now aligned itself with an international campaign launched in 1995, symbolised by a half-daisy. Reminiscent of the game of ``he loves me, he loves me not", the daisy with half its petals missing was meant to symbolise the 51 percent of women in Canada who had experienced violence.

In Thailand, the numbers might be somewhat different _ and the daisy perhaps even more plucked.

Looking at statistics _ especially those from the National Police Office concerning the number of cases reported to the police in 2000 _ violence against women in Thailand is a frightening reality: every hour, one woman is physically abused; every two hours, one woman is raped; and 60 percent of the cases reported involved domestic violence.

The Body Shop has even more alarming figures. From a survey on women's safety conducted by the company among 1,927 women in Bangkok this past February, 97 percent of women declared they were worried about potential crime or violence against them, while 51.8 percent said they had experienced or witnessed crime against women.

In this same survey, only 20 percent said they knew about their rights and about the laws which protect them; 33.5 percent believe women themselves _ because of the way they dress or the places they choose to be in _ are responsible for bringing such crimes upon themselves.

``Since this issue is very serious and profound in Thailand, The Body Shop Thailand would like to run this `Stop Violence Against Women' campaign as a long term effort, and, each year, to emphasise different aspects in order to educate the public further about the issue and hopefully to create a change in attitude. We hope to make it a public issue," explained Naowarat Kirtikasemsuk, The Body Shop's social activities coordinator, during a press luncheon.

The campaign is scheduled to be launched in the middle of June.

Aiming at first to create awareness of the issue, the campaign will start by raising funds to help support women's groups, such as the Friends of Women Foundation and the Emergency Homes for women and children run by the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Soamsawali.

The prominent NGO has three Emergency Homes in Bangkok to provide temporary shelter, food, medical care, vocational training, job placement and moral support for disadvantaged women and children who have been victims of domestic violence, rape, abandonment, forced prostitution, and so on.

“One of the difficulties of dealing with this problem is that it mostly occurs in private, where women have a role to play and are willing to try and confront the situation, rather than running away from it. It is an area which we cannot easily access,” added Methinee Phongwech, director of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women.

Narit Karinchai, from the Hotline Center Foundation, said only a very small number of cases are actually reported _ not more than one in 10. This was linked to the lack of an effective response system on behalf of the authorities.

Supensri Puengkhoeksong from the Friends of Women Foundation, stressed that “more than 65 percent of violence was perpetrated by a family member” and that in Thailand the youngest girl to have suffered sexual abuse was two, while the oldest was 102.

The upcoming fund-raising programme, which has a target of 300,000 baht, will take place in stores via donation boxes and merchandise sales, along with fund-raising activities held at the launch and the donation of 10 percent of sales of the company's Moisture White product during the period June 14 to August 31.

A number of other items from carry bags to brochures and staff uniforms, will also help to raise customer awareness with the goal of “zero tolerance of violence in the community”.

The campaign would not have been complete without a final touch: The Body Shop's staff education programme. This programme aims to try and make sure the company's staff is safe from violence and neither “complacent” nor “lost in ignorance” and able “to communicate to customers in order to work for the community”. They will also engage in outside activities, from an educational seminar campus tour to newsletters to the company customers.

“This is a real social issue and we should all help each other in order to try and solve it,” Naowarat said.

* For more information, contact The Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women on 929-2222; Friends of Women Foundation on 270-0928; or the Hotline Centre Foundation on 277-8811.