

There is also evidence that physical violence is used to force girls and women into prostitution and to prevent their escape.¹⁵¹ In 1991 Anti-Slavery International reported that 'Beatings by sticks, burning with lighted cigarettes and the immersion of women's heads in water' were commonly used.¹⁵² Conditions in Thai brothels are abhorrent and those who try to escape are subject to beatings and death threats. In 1991 at least 15 Burmese prostitutes working in Ranong were killed while trying to escape.¹⁵³

Young girls are particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment, as many Thai men believe that having sex with a virgin increases virility.¹⁵⁴ Other men want to have sex with younger women because they fear older prostitutes may be HIV positive. As a result the average age of Burmese prostitutes in Thailand is around 17 years. The majority of women in Thai brothels are from ethnic minority groups. They are usually the daughters of peasant farmers or farm labourers, and come from families living in absolute poverty. Of 30 girls interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 1995, only four had ever been to school.¹⁵⁵

Refugees

At least 1 million people have fled Burma's military regime over the past 15 years, many seeking refuge in neighbouring Thailand, India and Bangladesh. Most live in camps along the Thai/Burma and Burma/Bangladesh borders. In 1991-92 alone, 250,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh from Burma's north western Arakan State. They reported killings, rape, forced labour, forced portering and religious persecution at the hands of the Burmese army.¹⁵⁶ In 1996 alone 10,000 refugees arrived and in the following year a further 10-15,000.¹⁵⁷

In April 1999 the Burma Border Consortium¹⁵⁸ estimated that there were 99,000 refugees in the camps on the Thai border, and a further 18,000 displaced persons near the border.¹⁵⁹ In 1997 Human Rights Watch reported that there were 1 million illegal migrant workers from Burma in Thailand.¹⁶⁰ Many are women working in the sex industry. Refugees report that life in the border states is worsening as the *Tatmadaw* steps up forced relocation. As there is little improvement in the situation inside Burma, large refugee flows are likely to continue.



Ruins of a refugee camp, attacked and burned by SLORC troops on 28 April 1995. More than 700 homes were destroyed, making several thousand refugees homeless just before the onset of the rainy season. People can be seen wandering through the wreckage looking for any remaining belongings or usable items.

Karen Human Rights Group

As in other refugee crises,¹⁶¹ the majority of refugees fleeing Burma are women and children. The UNHCR recognises that female refugees are in need of special protection:

In addition to basic needs shared with all refugees, refugee women and girls have special protection needs that reflect their gender: they need, for example, protection from manipulation, sexual and physical abuse and exploitation, and protection against sexual discrimination in the delivery of goods and services.¹⁶²

Many women have fled to escape violence, but often experience further abuse: 'In host countries, local residents and even police, military and immigration officials often view refugee women as targets for assault'.¹⁶³ It is universally acknowledged that women are more vulnerable than men at every stage of their flight. Many Burmese women have reported being raped, beaten and even shot at while fleeing from Burma. Many have witnessed the deaths of their immediate family members.¹⁶⁴

Life in refugee camps is precarious. Food, sanitation, basic health care and education are all limited. Safety is also an issue. Both Human Rights Watch and Images Asia have evidence that Thai and Bangladeshi security forces abuse refugees. In Bangladesh Human Rights Watch has documented a 'systematic pattern of abuse and torture' of refugees, including the widespread rape of women.¹⁶⁵ Female refugees in Thailand say that rape by Thai security personnel is rare but that other forms of sexual assault are common.¹⁶⁶ One Karen woman commented that: 'the refugee women in the camp live with fear not only of being attacked physically and violently but also of being harassed sexually and culturally insulted'.¹⁶⁷ Some refugees have reported being beaten and shot by Thai security guards.¹⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch has also documented verbal, physical and sexual abuse of refugees in Bangladesh camps at the hands of military and paramilitary forces.¹⁶⁹

Since 1991 the Burmese army has attacked across the Thai border many times. Images Asia estimates 152 such incursions occurred between 1995 and 1998. During these attacks 79 refugees were killed, 139 injured and a further 414 abducted.¹⁷⁰ The failure of Thai security forces to provide adequate protection is recognised by many refugees as an unwillingness to protect them.

Burmese refugees from both Thailand and Bangladesh have been repatriated *en masse* and in small groups against their will. Such action directly contravenes internationally accepted standards, which provide that

'no refugee should be returned to any country where he or she is likely to face persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group'.¹⁷¹ A number of students repatriated to Burma in 1991 were arrested on arrival and received long prison sentences. Understandably, many refugees fear repatriation. Human Rights Watch has frequently called on the UNHCR to put pressure on the Thai government to ensure that refugees are given protection from violence and forced repatriation.¹⁷²

Many Burmese women in Thailand live outside refugee camps. They are at risk of imprisonment for illegal entry.¹⁷³ Once they have left the border region, they are classified as 'migrant workers' and are no longer considered to be refugees.¹⁷⁴ As a result they are 'far more likely to face arrest, detention and deportation than the ethnic minority population in the camps'.¹⁷⁵ Conditions in Thai jails and detention centres are appalling: abuse is common, food is inadequate and conditions so cramped that detainees have to sleep in shifts. Women are often detained in cells with men and commonly report sexual abuse.¹⁷⁶

In early November 1999 the Thai authorities began forcibly repatriating Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, with allegations that women and children were being targeted first. The situation has become increasingly dangerous as immigration authorities have begun forcibly to evict thousands of illegal workers and refugees in a drive to expel some 700,000 Burmese workers. Abuse, including rape and robbery at the hands of soldiers and police, has been reported on both sides of the border. The safety of this already vulnerable group is being seriously compromised. There have been reports that some Burmese soldiers are refusing to allow the deportees to return to Burma.

In a separate development, Thailand's policy towards Burmese refugees appeared to shift after October 1999, when five members of a group called the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors briefly seized the Burmese embassy in Bangkok. The Thai government was praised for its effective handling of the situation but Thailand subsequently tightened security measures against Burmese refugees. This primarily took the form of arrests, but there was also a drive to resettle some 3,000 students registered with the UNHCR. Those who had not yet registered with the UN body were given a deadline until 21 November 1999 to do so. After that date they would be considered illegal immigrants, subject to arrest and deportation. The Burmese in Thailand appear to be under fire from both sides.

Forced relocation

Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence.¹⁷⁷

Forced relocation in Burma has been documented by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UN organisations and the ILO. Most forced relocation occurs during counter-insurgency campaigns, but it is sometimes a component of urban development programmes.¹⁷⁸ In October 1998 Human Rights Watch estimated that there were at least 300,000 internally displaced people in Burma.¹⁷⁹ Other sources put the figure at around 1 million.¹⁸⁰

Forced relocation was initially a counter-insurgency weapon in the government's 'Four Cuts' campaign.¹⁸¹ The strategy was to cut links between civilians and ethnic armies by forcing entire communities to relocate to fenced-in areas (often the villagers are forced to build the fences themselves) controlled by the *Tatmadaw*. Villagers must seek permission to leave these areas.¹⁸² Once relocation is completed, soldiers often burn villages to prevent the villagers from returning. Many women have chosen to flee Burma rather than remain in the resettlement camps which are, in effect, little better than prisons.

Women are particularly vulnerable during forced relocation. Principle 4/2 of the UN's *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* states:

Certain internally displaced persons, such as children, especially unaccompanied minors, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, female heads of household, persons with disabilities and elderly persons, shall be entitled to protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment that takes into account their special needs.¹⁸³

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have reported that grave human rights abuses are committed during forced relocations. People are ordered to leave at short notice and forced out at gunpoint.¹⁸⁴ Women are easy targets for rape and other abuses. A common practice used by the *Tatmadaw* is to evict villagers from their land at gunpoint and then either confiscate the land or demand that villagers cultivate crops on the same land for the military.¹⁸⁵ Villagers also report that the soldiers often steal all their personal belongings.

Evidence suggests that forced relocations in war zones are sometimes accompanied by killings, rape and torture and

frequently by forced labour.¹⁸⁶ At least 300,000 Shan villagers have been forcibly relocated and at least 80,000 have fled to Thailand. Between mid-June and mid-July 1997 alone, approximately 300 people were killed by the Burmese armed forces in a 'series of massacres'.¹⁸⁷ This account from a pregnant Mon woman illustrates the brutality of the military:

On December 13, 1993 a group of soldiers [...] arrived in our village and [...] without any warning they started to burn it down. We had no time to collect our belongings. Since I was pregnant at the time I could not take anything with me. The whole village was set alight, including the primary school and the Buddhist monastery. I ran into the rice fields [...] the captain shouted: 'this is your punishment for those who did not listen to our order'.¹⁸⁸

Forced relocation has serious social implications: families are broken up and children left with no one to care for them.¹⁸⁹ Previously self-sufficient farmers become homeless and unemployed (and a convenient pool of forced labour).

Urban relocation has similarly devastating consequences. Human Rights Watch reports that by 1990 some 500,000 people had been forcibly relocated, including 150,000-200,000 in Rangoon alone.¹⁹⁰ The new settlements are often on the edge of cities, isolated from jobs, schools and basic amenities. The SLORC/SPDC says that compulsory resettlement is needed to clean up the cities and provide housing with better access to basic amenities such as sanitation and clean water. In fact it has led to an increase in poverty and unemployment, health problems and a rise in social conflict. The new towns are often little more than muddy fields with no housing, water or infrastructure.¹⁹¹ For many women, sex-work represents the only means of survival. A 1992 UNICEF report sums up the situation:

The forced displacement of an already vulnerable group of low-income population, who have suffered from chronic poverty, to an area with extremely poor sanitation and living conditions with little or no job opportunities gives rise to a sequence of socio-economic problems, such as unemployment, abandoned wives and children, induced abortion, increased exposure to STDs/AIDS and malnutrition, which need to be addressed promptly.¹⁹²

The government has ignored international condemnation of forced relocation and increased the practice, particularly in ethnic minority areas. It has been particularly common in the Kayah (Karenni), Karen,

Shan, Mon, Kachin and Arakan States and Tenasserim Division.¹⁹³ One ethnic Shan woman recently said that forced relocation had made Burma 'a land of ghost villages'.¹⁹⁴

Portering and forced labour

Because the state's requirements for labor contributions have been specified in terms of persons per household, households have tended to contribute their least valuable labor; gangs seen working on roads have frequently consisted disproportionately of old women and young girls.¹⁹⁵

Forced labour already affects the whole of Burmese society. No one is exempt — not even the wives of government soldiers. By ratifying the ILO Forced Labour Convention of 1930 (No. 29) in 1955, Burma undertook to 'suppress the use of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms within the shortest possible period'. Far from doing so, the SLORC/SPDC has deliberately used a policy of forced labour for both political and military ends. The ILO has identified a number of different types of forced labour including forced portering for the military, the construction, maintenance and servicing of military camps, as well as work on agriculture, logging and other production projects for the military. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have also been forced to work on the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and railways. The ILO reports that failure to comply with a demand for forced labour brings reprisals ranging from 'money demands to physical abuse, beatings, torture, rape and murder'.¹⁹⁶

Pregnant women, nursing mothers, the elderly and the infirm are all forced to work.¹⁹⁷ Conditions are arduous and thousands of people have died as a result. 'It is in the course of forced labour duties that many of the worst human rights violations against women, including rape and threats to life, have been committed'.¹⁹⁸ Forced labour has a particular impact on pregnant women and women who are nursing infants. In 1996 Human Rights Watch reported the case of a young woman who had taken her baby with her to the forced labour site (the Pakokku-Kalemmyo railway line in Chin State). After she stopped work twice to feed her young baby, a soldier cut off her breast. She bled to death.¹⁹⁹

Amnesty International reported a similar incident: a pregnant woman unable to carry heavy loads because of labour pains was beaten with a stick and the flat side of a knife. She was also kicked and forced to carry a soldier's rucksack for two hours before she gave birth.²⁰⁰

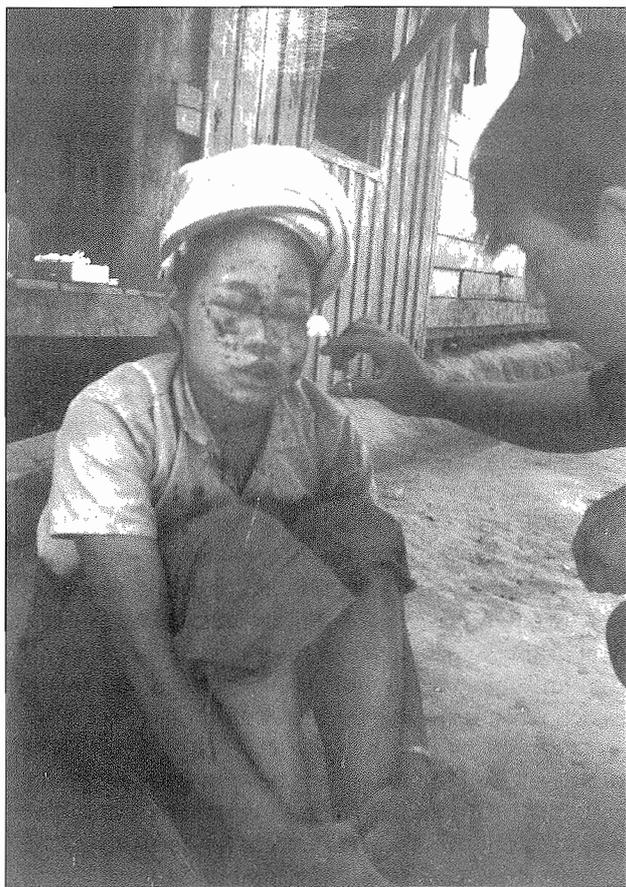
Women are extremely vulnerable to forced portering in war-affected regions as men often flee to avoid arrest or conscription: 'When the men run away they take the women'.²⁰¹ In 1995 the Burmese Women's Union compiled a dossier of examples of women being punished when there are no males to work as porters. In one incident 30 women were forced to stand in the heat of the sun all day because there were no men left in their village.²⁰²

Porters are forced to carry extremely heavy loads of ammunition, including mortar shells. Although women and children are generally given lighter loads (20-30 kg against 30-40 kg for men),²⁰³ the weight is still great and many stumble and fall. Soldiers beat and kick those who cannot carry their loads. There are reports of people being beaten and left to die on the roadside because they cannot carry their loads.²⁰⁴ Porters are also forced to act as human shields for the soldiers and to walk ahead of them through minefields.²⁰⁵ Fatalities are high and the families of porters who are killed are rarely notified.²⁰⁶ The 1999 *Landmine Monitor Report* noted that 'there have been more and more cases of women and children being rounded up and marched in front of the troops for the sole purpose of detonating landmines'.²⁰⁷ The SLORC/SPDC voted in favour of the 1996 UN resolution calling on governments to pursue an international agreement banning landmines, but it did not sign the Mine Ban Treaty in December 1997. The problem of mines in Burma is intensified by the failure of both the *Tatmadaw* and some armed ethnic groups to keep maps of minefields. One alarming claim is that 'certain border areas have been mined specifically to stem refugee flight or border violations'.²⁰⁸

Women porters are vulnerable to gender-specific abuses, including rape. Many are forced to work in the day and are then subject to rape, on occasion gang rape, at night.²⁰⁹ Women have died from the internal injuries sustained during rape. HIV/AIDS is a great risk, as at least 2.7 per cent of soldiers are reported to be infected with the virus.²¹⁰ In addition to the trauma of rape, unmarried women subsequently find it difficult to marry, particularly in ethnic minority regions.²¹¹ There are reports of military commanders forcing women to marry the soldiers who have raped them.²¹²

The scale of forced labour in Burma is staggering. In 1997 the *US Foreign Economic Trends Report* estimated that the government had forced some 40 per cent of the entire population to provide labour for rural development projects. In 1998 the ILO held a Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labour in Burma, only the tenth such inquiry in the organisation's 80-year history. It concluded that the Forced Labour Convention is violated 'in a

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A 16-year-old girl from Papun district injured by a landmine on her way home from being a forced porter in the SLORC's Salween offensive. She is now blind.

widespread and systematic manner, with total disregard for the human dignity, safety and health and basic needs of the people of Myanmar'.²¹³ Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the SLORC/SPDC maintains that there is no forced labour in Burma, insisting that it is traditional for Burmese citizens to provide voluntary labour for community projects.

On 21 May 1999 the Director General of the ILO submitted a report to the UNGA which provided further substantive evidence of the continued and pervasive use of forced labour in Burma. At its 87th session in June 1999 the International Labour Conference issued one of the strongest resolutions on a member state to date. Having concluded that the Burmese government, the State Peace and Development Council, had not taken steps to cease the practice of forced labour or to amend the relevant legislation to reflect the Forced Labour Convention, the Conference resolved that the government of Burma should 'cease to benefit from any technical cooperation or assistance from the ILO, except for the purpose of direct assistance to implement

immediately the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry, until such time as it has implemented the said recommendations'. It also resolved that the government of Burma should 'henceforth not receive any invitation to attend meetings, symposia and seminars organised by the ILO, except such meetings that have the full compliance with the said recommendations, until such time as it has implemented the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry'.

Recent testimonies from soldiers indicate that the wives of government soldiers, who are living in the army camps, are also subjected to forced labour. Officers' wives are usually exempt. One soldier told how his wife was forced to work while she was pregnant, causing her to lose the baby; he was afraid to complain.²¹⁴

Forced labour also has social and economic implications, particularly for the poorest sectors of society. Those in rural areas, some 75 per cent of the population, face great difficulties surviving when unable to work on their land for profit or engage in day labour. The resulting food shortages affect the whole community: when men are taken for forced labour, the burden of agriculture falls on women; when women are taken, the burden falls on children and the very old.

Part 4

Women in politics

Since Daw Aung San Suu Kyi first stepped onto the political stage in 1988, she has become widely recognised as the leader of Burma's democracy movement. Her struggle is both public and personal. The world has watched her defend her people, receive the Nobel Peace Prize and mourn the death of her husband. Yet, despite the prominence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the presence of women in the opposition movement, the world of Burmese politics remains male-dominated. As with other countries in the region, women who are politically successful invariably come from families already involved in politics. Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Corazon Aquino in the Philippines and Sonia Gandhi in India all come from 'political' dynasties. Burmese women were active in the nationalist movement and several women held positions of authority during the democratic years. But women have never been actively encouraged to assume leadership roles. As one Burmese woman explained:

Society is already programmed. Women just don't cross the boundary into politics. It's fine for women to be active in health and education but not where the real power lies, not in the political realm. Politics and power have always been seen as the concern of men.²¹⁵

Burma Campaign



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, General Secretary of the NLD, who was released from six years' house arrest but still faces severe restrictions on her movements and political activities.

Three decades of military rule have reinforced social barriers to women's involvement in politics. The military is both traditionally and culturally male-dominated and there are few women at senior levels.

Burma is one of only a few countries in the world without a single woman in government.²¹⁶ This denial of women's political rights directly contravenes the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, to which Burma is a party.

A history of women's involvement in politics

Under the 1974 constitution women are granted the right to elect and be elected to the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (the People's Assembly) and to the different administrative levels of the People's Councils. During the anti-colonialist movement and the subsequent period of democratic rule, women were free to express their political views and had some opportunity to participate in the political process. But since the imposition of military rule, the freedom to exercise these rights has been eroded.

During the anti-colonialist movement women were political activists and social critics in their own right. In the 1920s the print media promoted female participation in the political arena and in the fight against colonialism.²¹⁷ A number of independent women's organisations were formed including the Konmari, the Burmese Women's Association, the Burmese Women's National Council and the Burmese Women's Movement. Originally non-political, they developed into semi-political organisations calling for Burma's independence.²¹⁸

The leading female figures of this period were often highly educated and articulate. Daw Mya Sein, an Oxford-educated scholar, represented Burmese women at a special Burma Round Table Conference organised by the British government in 1931 to negotiate a new constitution for Burma. Several years later she led a delegation to China. Other prominent women were Daw Ank, Chairperson of the first Women's Assembly in 1939, and Daw Hla May and Daw Khin Myo Chit, leading figures in the Burma Independence Women's Organisation. These women were the exception rather than the rule:

When the men threw themselves into the country's fight for nationalism they threw away their chance of being good providers; it was their women [...] mothers, wives or sisters, who ran the family business, trade or farm or home industry. This they did with good grace and willingness, this was their share in the building of an independent state.²¹⁹

The period of women's greatest influence in politics was between 1948, when Burma gained independence, and 1962, when military rule was imposed. Burma's first and only female cabinet minister, Mrs Ba Maung Chein, was minister for Karen State from 1952 to 1953.

Another outstanding female politician of the time was Daw Khin Kyi, mother of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. A member of parliament from 1947 to 1948, she became Burma's first female ambassador in 1960. She held this position for seven years, first in India and then in Nepal. The other prominent female political figure during this period was Daw Sein Pu who was elected to the central committee of U Nu's party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, in 1958.

After 1962, women virtually disappeared from government and the ruling party. Out of 100 BSPP central committee members, only one was female. Only nine women were elected to the 449-member People's Assembly in 1974, and 13 in 1978.

A number of women were arrested for their political activities between 1974 and 1988, among them:

- Ma Suu Mar, a prominent activist, who was imprisoned for four years;
- Naykyi Ba Swe and Nayye Ba Swe (daughters of U Ba Swe, a Burmese prime minister in the 1950s). Each received a five-year prison term with hard labour;
- Nan Khin Htwe Myint (daughter of Saw Hla Tun, a Karen member of parliament), jailed for three years;
- Ma Hla Myaing, detained for nine years for her association with a paper criticising the government's education system.²²⁰

Undeterred, many of these women stood as candidates in the 1990 national elections.

Women remained excluded from official politics after 1988, when the SLORC replaced the BSPP. That said, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity awakened Burma to the idea of a female leader. Her courage and political astuteness inspired many young women. The SLORC, concerned by her popularity, began restricting her freedom of movement and in 1989 placed her under house arrest. Both the SLORC and subsequently the SPDC have refused to talk to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, insisting that negotiations are conducted by senior male NLD figures such as U Tin Oo.

Of 2,296 candidates who stood at the 1990 elections, only 84 were women. Fourteen women gained seats, in a parliament of 485 members. This suggests that women are poorly represented even within the democratic

movement. Policies encouraging and promoting the participation of women in politics will be essential even when Burma becomes a democratic nation. The change may be under way: one woman commented that more women are becoming politically active in response to the abuse they see around them. She called this 'social politics' that comes from the heart.²²¹

Throughout Burma's political history, men and women opposing military ideology have been abused and discriminated against. In 1994 the independent Burma Information Group published a report giving details of 95 women who had been imprisoned since 1988.²²² At least 100 female political prisoners were still behind bars in 1999. They often suffer cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and receive poor medical care.²²³ Conditions include inadequate food, overcrowding and bad sanitation. Some prisoners have been detained in tiny cells originally built for military dogs.²²⁴ The 1996 student-led demonstrations resulted in the arrest of at least five female students²²⁵ and 65 women were arrested during the mass arrests of NLD members in December 1998.²²⁶ One of those detained was the elected MP from Karen State, Nan Khin Htwe Myint.²²⁷

Constraints on civil society

Independent women's organisations are effectively banned by laws prohibiting political organising. This has not prevented women from playing an active role in social welfare and education, but it has forced them to adopt creative approaches. In Christian communities, for example, church-affiliated women's groups play an active role in establishing local health and literacy initiatives. International non-governmental organisations and, to a lesser extent, government-organised NGOs (GONGO's), also participate in community projects.

GONGOs (so called because they are effectively controlled by the government) are increasingly addressing women's issues. These organisations include the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), the Myanmar Medical Association (MMA) and the Myanmar Red Cross Society, which have been described as having a military-style structure:²²⁸ 'All women's organisations, including the MWEA, are headed by the wives of top junta members, and their leadership is largely a mirror of the junta's military and political chain of command'.²²⁹ Daw Khin Win Shwe, Vice-Chairperson of the MMCWA, is the wife of Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, the powerful Secretary-1 (third in command) of the SPDC.²³⁰

It is difficult to assess what impact these organisations have on the lives of ordinary Burmese women.

Established in 1991, the MMCWA claims to have 100,000 'volunteers', 307 township associations and 1,997 branch associations.²³¹ The organisation describes itself as 'a non-governmental, voluntary organization' which aims to improve the health and well-being of mothers and children. The organisation's 1997 report outlines projects on: reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention, the promotion of school attendance, literacy, non-formal vocational education for girls and housewives, a credit and loan scheme, day-care and income-generation. In 1998 the World Health Organisation presented the MMCWA with an award for 'primary health care development' but the move aroused controversy in the aid community. One aid worker commented: 'To call it [the MMCWA] an NGO is a farce'.²³² However, some Burmese health workers believe that as the organisation is active at a township level, it can respond to local need.²³³ But others point out that the chairwoman of local MMCWA groups is 'always the wife of the township or village Peace and Development Council chairman'.²³⁴

Of real concern is the allegation that membership of the MMCWA and similar organisations is conditional on membership of the government's mass political organisation, the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA). The USDA is registered as a social organisation under the Ministry of Home Affairs, but it is universally acknowledged to be a political vehicle for the military. The USDA now claims a membership of some 7.5 million people and has significant economic interests. Burma specialist Professor David Steinberg believes that 'the USDA is clearly a means to extend and perpetuate the influence of the *Tatmadaw* [...] for the outside world to regard the USDA as divorced from state authority and autonomous would be a major error'.²³⁵ The *New Light of Myanmar* reports the presence of MMCWA executive members at USDA membership application ceremonies.²³⁶

Since the early 1990s, a number of international NGOs have established projects in Burma. Working in areas such as health education, family planning, curative health, income generation, child welfare and community development,²³⁷ they include: World Vision, Action Contre la Faim, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, CARE Australia, Médecins Sans Frontières, Save the Children (UK) and (USA) and World Concern. All international NGOs in Burma are required to sign either a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the SLORC/SPDC²³⁸ or to work through the UN agencies. International NGOs are closely monitored by the government and their autonomy is severely restricted.²³⁹ Their presence in Burma has been criticised for lending

the SLORC/SPDC an air of legitimacy. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi opposes international NGOs operating in Burma, because their cooperation with the SLORC/SPDC makes it unclear who they are really helping.²⁴⁰ International NGOs claim that, despite constraints, they are still able to provide assistance to communities in need. Among their local staff, women appear to be playing a significant role. It has been reported that in some international NGOs, women occupy the largest number of positions including some at the most senior levels.²⁴¹

In summary, government-organised NGOs and other government initiatives have given women's affairs a high profile, but major obstacles to women's participation in civil society remain — even in 'non-political' areas such as health and welfare. At present it appears that the Burmese government is more interested in the political capital to be gained from promoting women's issues than it is in improving women's lives.

Women in government under the SLORC/SPDC

There are no women in the current government. The 19-member State Peace and Development Council is composed entirely of men, as is the 22-member Cabinet. The majority are high-ranking military officials.

Since assuming power in November 1997 the SPDC has worked to entrench the dominant role of the army in politics. This has, in turn, marginalised women. The exclusion of women from Burmese politics is nowhere more obvious than in the proposed constitution currently being drafted by the National Convention. The Convention has suggested that all future presidents must have military experience (which automatically excludes women), that they must have been resident in Burma for 20 years and must not be married to a foreigner.²⁴² These clauses are clearly designed to exclude Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from power.

There is little information available on the role of women in the Burmese armed forces, but they do not seem to play a major role. A resolution to recruit women into the defence services was passed in 1953 but a lack of funding brought this initiative to an end in 1960.²⁴³ A number of Burmese historians have mentioned the role of women in the Communist Party armies and the ethnic armies but very little reference is made to women in the *Tatmadaw*.

Women in opposition: Ensuring women's place within a democratic Burma

Burma's democracy movement has provided an important platform from which women can assert their right to political participation and representation. The authoritarian nature of the SLORC/SPDC means that there is very little room for women (or men) to initiate political activities on any significant scale, but people try to make use of any space available. The UN special rapporteur noted in 1998 that the NLD Central Women's Working Committee had held meetings at the home of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi between 11 and 17 December 1997. He saw this as an indication that 'women are active in the political field, at least in opposition'.²⁴⁴ Since the mass arrests of NLD members in 1998, the activities of the organisation have been even more closely monitored. At least three NLD Women's Divisional Organisers have been arrested since September 1998.²⁴⁵ One Burmese exile said: 'I am sure that they are very active in spirit but in reality they can't do very much at all. The military control is too tight.'²⁴⁶ Social and church groups provide the only forums in which women can attempt to change their environment and society. But even 'social' work is sometimes attacked by the government. The NLD women's committee has some freedom to engage in work of a social but not a political nature. However, its baby health clinics face arbitrary closure and restrictions on the distribution of medicines.²⁴⁷

In April 1996 the NLD Women's Division sought permission from the authorities to celebrate the Burmese Buddhist New Year (a festival known as Thingyan). The government refused on the grounds that the NLD was using a traditional festival for political purposes.²⁴⁸ On another occasion, the government prohibited a fish-releasing ceremony organised by the NLD Women's Division. As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said: 'How fragile must be the law and order that can be seriously threatened by a procession of women taking part in a religious ceremony.'²⁴⁹

Burmese women exiles continue to advocate the protection of women's rights at a grassroots and an international level.²⁵⁰ These women have made formal interventions at the UNCHR, and raised the issue of women's rights at many different international fora. Many women's organisations are based on the Thai/Burma border and in India. These organisations focus on education, health and skills training for refugees. Some are also working towards increasing women's self-reliance and political participation:

Encouraging women to form co-ops for weaving and other handicrafts is good but it may serve them much better in the long run to teach management, community organisation, economics and political policy. This is not to negate efforts like gardening, weaving or other projects which may facilitate day to day survival but these also should be approached in ways that emphasise development rather than sustenance.²⁵¹

Many women's organisations now hold training courses on women's rights and empowerment. A recent workshop in Mon State, for example, examined and discussed CEDAW and related the convention to the situation of Mon women.²⁵² The Burmese Women's Union plans to introduce support groups for women subjected to domestic violence.

The main Burmese women's organisations are:

- the **Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)** — formed in 1985, it has close links with the Karen revolutionary movement. Its professed aims include: freedom of Karen women from all forms of oppression; the raising of their living standards; raising the political and revolutionary consciousness of Karen women; promotion of equal rights.
- the **Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)** — formed in March 1999 by Shan women living in Thailand and along the Thai border with Shan State. Its objectives include: the promotion of women's and children's rights; the empowerment of women; opposing exploitation of women and children; working towards a peaceful society and raising awareness of environmental issues.
- the **Mon Women's Organisation (MWO)** — runs classes on weaving, dress-making, literacy and a nursery school in Mon rural communities.
- the **Burmese Women's Union (BWU)** — formed in January 1995. Its objectives include: the promotion of Burmese women in politics; encouraging women to assert their rights; encouraging women to participate in building a democratic society; educating women about international human rights and women's rights conventions.
- the **Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB)** — formed in 1995 and based in Delhi, India. It promotes women's involvement in politics, economics and society.
- the **Tavoy Women's Union** — formed in 1936, it has established rural-based women's unions in 17 villages. It works towards democracy and national unity, and equal rights with men. It has also set up social welfare programmes in Tavoy and co-operates with other

women's groups and organisations resisting military oppression.

Others are:

the **Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO)**; the **Kachin Women's Association (KWA)**; the **Chin Women's Organisation (CWO)**; the **Lahu Women's Organisation**.

There have been disagreements between these different groups, but most recognise the importance of cooperation:

For the moment it is hard for all Burmese women to speak with one voice. Unless we women can learn to work together, democracy is not going to happen. To have peace we have to work together.²⁵³

In November 1998 a Burmese women's forum was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, involving women from 16 different organisations. Among the issues discussed were the need to increase women's participation in national decision-making bodies and promote women in education, health and social welfare.²⁵⁴ Burmese women's groups also work together each year to promote Women of Burma Day on June 19, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday. Since 1997 this day has been dedicated to acknowledging the 'essential role of women in Burma in the promotion of social justice, peace, human rights and democracy'.²⁵⁵

Although groups based outside the country do not face the restrictions on freedom of expression and association endured by groups in Burma, they are constrained by inadequate finance and resources and restricted access to communication. Those in Thailand have the added problem of illegal status of their members. Some groups are also concerned about their status within the democratic movement:

The men in the opposition know that they need women but there is still this idea of 'us and them'. So we have to be careful not to be seen as a token — we want to be equally participating and contributing.²⁵⁶

Others are concerned that women are still seen as peripheral to the democratic movement: 'Men are seen to do the "real" politics while women's groups are seen as subordinate.'²⁵⁷ Some women believe that men's attitude towards women has changed favourably since 1988, but the majority feel that discrimination persists and that women's role in the democracy movement is not always acknowledged. Senior positions within the movement continue to be dominated by men.²⁵⁸ Further, many

women point out that the draft constitution of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) does not address the rights of women. There were no women involved in the drafting process; their participation in future drafting processes is essential.

Many women activists also face discrimination at home. 'Even among pro-democracy activists, many husbands do not want their wives to be active in political activities, [preferring them] to be at home doing household work only.'²⁵⁹

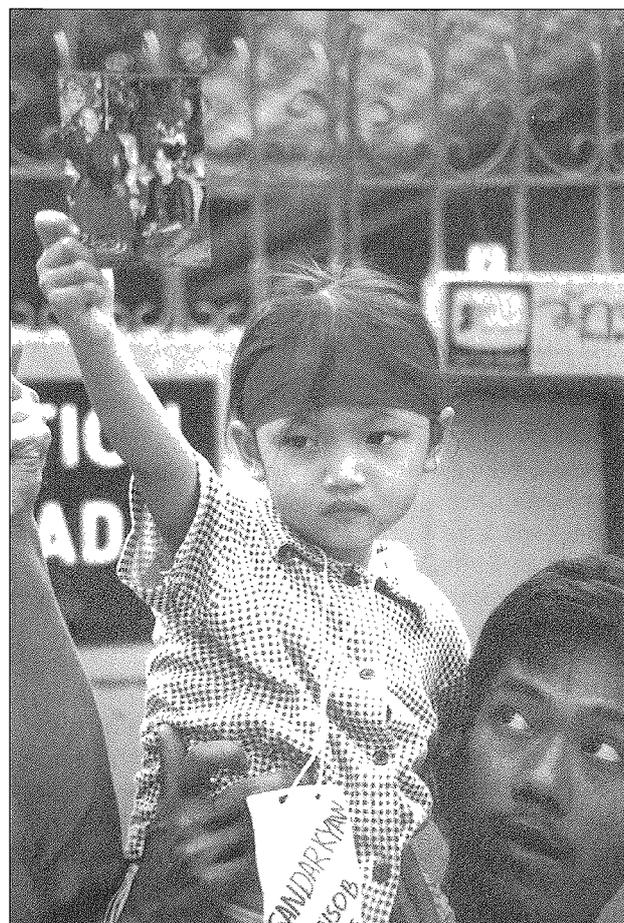
Domestic violence is also a problem facing many women. In her 1995 address to the Beijing NGO Forum on women Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said: 'There are countless women who are subjected to severe cruelty within the heart of the family which should be their haven.'²⁶⁰ This was the first public acknowledgement that domestic violence was an issue in Burma. Women in refugee camps are slowly beginning to speak out about domestic violence but many women feel that the issue 'is still generally ignored because it is political'.²⁶¹ The rise in domestic violence within refugee camps has been attributed to the general feeling of powerlessness among men in the camps, who have lost their traditional role of breadwinner.²⁶²

Despite the obstacles they face, women in Burma's opposition recognise that the empowerment of women is central to ensuring the protection of women's rights within a future democratic Burma. A number of issues have been identified as central to this process:

- **Education** — Opportunities for and access to formal education, including access to literacy programmes must be a priority. Equally, women should be informed about their rights under national and international law. One Burmese woman said: 'We need to offer classes that allow women to think about themselves [...]. Many women are progressive but they also block themselves by perpetuating the accepted way of thinking.'
- **Legal protection of women's rights** — The protection and promotion of women's rights in domestic legislation is essential, as is the rule of law. Women must also be involved in the drafting of future constitutions. Several women have also mentioned the need for government transparency about existing laws. At present information about the law is limited, and people have been convicted of breaking laws they had never heard of.
- **Challenging discriminatory practices** — Many young Burmese women are challenging traditional cultural and social practices that discriminate against women. Women must be actively encouraged to

participate in public life and to take on leadership roles.

- **Addressing the psychological trauma of women in war-affected areas** — Many women in war-affected areas are physically or psychologically traumatised. Strategies are needed to address this issue. The civil war has had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities, and many women activists have also been victims of torture or imprisonment. Burmese women's organisations in Thailand have stressed the need to ensure that the wives of government soldiers killed in the civil war are not neglected in this process.
- **Addressing ethnic inequality and building trust among women's NGOs** — the way this issue is approached and negotiated will undoubtedly significantly affect the success of future peace processes.
- **Participation in future peace processes** — Women's involvement in any future peace processes is essential if the peace deal is to reflect the needs and rights of women. In 1985 the Nairobi Women's Conference recognised the importance of involving women in peace research and strategy development. From a grassroots to a national level, women should be encouraged to participate in efforts to establish and maintain peace.²⁶³
- **Widows** — The number of war widows in Burma is high, although difficult to determine exactly. There is no social welfare provision, and many widows are forced to work outside the home to survive. This presents special difficulties for Rohingya Muslim women, who sometimes face social stigma if they cannot observe purdah. Support networks for widows are very important.
- **NGOs** — Across the world NGOs have given oppressed women a voice. In Burma the development of an independent, effective NGO network is essential to the realisation of women's rights. In a democratic Burma it is likely that NGOs will be at the forefront of developing strategies to empower women at grassroots, national and international levels.



A Burmese girl demonstrates against the Burmese government in Bangkok, Thailand.

Part 5

Conclusion

The cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of Burma is associated with considerable disparities in the lives of Burmese women. But under the military regime, all women (except a small elite closely connected to the military leadership) are deprived of their social, economic, civil and political rights. Military rule has suppressed civil society, and independent women's organisations are prohibited. Thus there are virtually no channels through which women can develop or influence state policies and strategies affecting their welfare. The development of the SLORC/SPDC's national strategy to address the welfare of women, the Myanmar National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women, could be a positive step; but it is unclear what impact, if any, the strategy will have. Many women continue to suffer under the military's brutal rule. The government's lack of transparency has made it very difficult to obtain accurate and up-to-date data. Better monitoring of conditions affecting Burmese women's lives is needed.

The opposition movement in Burma has provided an important space for women's organisations to try to promote women's rights. Despite the repression they face, Burmese women continue to work towards democracy and peace. Prevented from contributing to the development of government policy, many have turned to international NGOs and local church organisations to try to improve their lives. In many countries, indigenous NGOs lobby government and bring women's issues on to the political agenda, but in Burma this is not possible. NGOs are tightly controlled by the military and although there is some space for women to participate in community groups, even this is limited.

Burmese women's organisations outside Burma have some influence in the international arena, and initiate health, education and skills training projects. Their work in drawing international attention to the plight of Burmese women is particularly important as the SLORC/SPDC seeks to convince the world of its commitment to women's rights.

The international community's encouragement and active support of Burmese women are vital if women are to realise their basic rights. International support could enable Burmese women to play a role in shaping a peaceful and democratic society. Time and again, the women of Burma have demonstrated their willingness to be involved in the political development of their country. These women are determined and united in the face of great obstacles. In the words of a Burmese political activist: 'The voice of women in Burma can no longer be ignored.'

Appendix: Interviews with Burmese womenⁱ

Interview with an activist member of a Burmese women's organisation based on the Thai-Burmese border

Q: How would you describe gender relations in Burma? Do women face discrimination?

A: Women are always seen as the preservers of culture and tradition. Their main role is still seen as looking after the children or caring for the family. Women in Burma don't see that men are controlling them. They feel that their duty is to support their husbands and that by doing this they are getting their rights. Many older women really believe in and perpetuate the idea of the 'ideal Burmese woman'. Women are supposed to look after their men, and even the way men present themselves in public has an impact on how women are viewed.

Religion and tradition perpetuate the role of women as 'mothers'. This gives women an automatic respect but religion is also responsible for holding women back. It is really a Burman thing — the idea of *hpon*. It is hard to change many of these unwritten rules. Many of the women in poverty are more independent and given more trust than middle-class women. Within Buddhism there is still this idea that women are so inferior to men and so impure.

Women's role needs to be promoted first within the family because if we can't promote our role within the family we can't promote our role within society.

Q: Are women encouraged to participate in the democracy movement or opposition politics?

A: The attitude of men in the democracy movement has definitely changed since 1988. They see the important role that women can play in politics but they do still look at us within the Burmese cultural tradition. Men's work is still given priority. Within the refugee camps there are sometimes one or two women in the camp committee, and women have the right to vote, but not many come forward to run for election. Again their traditional role gets in the way.

There is still a divide between men and women. Men are seen to do the 'real' politics while women's groups are still seen as subordinate. There have been two women on the central committee of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). They had a direct say in policy-making. In the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) there

are no women because its members were all people elected in the 1990 elections and no elected women MPs left Burma.ⁱⁱ Other opposition organisations don't have women in decision-making roles. Maybe this has something to do with the military character of many organisations.

Women are not neglected intentionally. Men are open but they are still products of their socialisation. They won't accept or admit women publicly.

Q: How do you think women's rights can be protected and promoted within a democratic Burma?

A: We women first have to raise our voices. We have to realise and understand what our rights are and how we can contribute to our country. We also need to change our way of thinking. We need to make sure that women are empowered. Our organisation is addressing the issue of empowerment and will be giving appropriate training courses. But training is not enough. There also need to be opportunities for women to practise. We also need the men to co-operate — to attend the training courses so that they understand the need for women's empowerment.

Women are now beginning to be more aware that they have not had the same chances as men. But it will still be difficult to get this basic understanding of human rights.

Q: Do you think women's rights are sufficiently protected within the legal framework?

A: It is important that there is a quota system to ensure that women are proportionately represented in parliament.

The 1996 National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) constitution does not address women's rights at all. It is vital that women are involved in drafting the constitution. They could do this through a series of small workshops that bring women together, particularly female lawyers.

Q: What are the specific problems facing women?

A: One big problem facing women is domestic violence. It is still generally ignored because it is political. But the CEDAW convention has raised this idea and some women are starting to talk about it. Few women will talk about their own situation but they will sometimes talk about their 'friend' whose husband beats her. In the refugee camps domestic violence is increasing and

I think this is because the traditional role of the male is gone. In the camp the male is no longer the provider or earner because the relief agencies fulfil that role and so men feel powerless. Even men who are involved in politics can feel powerless because their position is insecure.

The other problem in the camps is that Thai security officials harass many women but the camp committees don't usually feel that their position is strong enough to raise it with the Thai authorities. Our organisation is aiming to set up support groups for women who suffer domestic violence.

Another problem facing women is the lack of trust among the different women's organisations. At the moment it is difficult for all Burmese women to speak with one voice. We are all trying to become more progressive and the different women's groups are still trying to work closely together. Women are still far behind men in terms of political awareness. Unless we women learn to work together and build trust, democracy is not going to happen. To achieve peace we have to work together.

Interview with a refugee in India

Q: How would you describe gender relations in Burma? Do women face discrimination?

A: When I lived in Burma I didn't think about women's rights. My eldest sister couldn't go to school because she had to help care for her younger brothers and sister. But at the time I didn't really think about it. Now I think that she lost her right to education. Many girls have less chance for education than boys do.

Q: Are women encouraged to participate in the democracy movement or opposition politics?

A: Some men don't want women to be involved in politics and want them to stay at home and look after the children but there are not too many men who think like this.

There are hundreds of women refugees along the Burma/India border mainly from the ethnic Chin and Kuki groups. In India we get a lot of support from Indian women who are very well organised. In India our situation is different from that of Burmese refugees in Thailand. We are able to strike freely and we have permission to work. But money is a big problem and we find this very difficult.

Domestic violence is also quite a big problem and some women even go back to Burma because of this.

Our organisation runs a school and a health care centre. We also run political awareness training courses.

Q: Do you think women's rights are sufficiently protected within the legal framework?

A: It is very important to have special laws to prosecute men who rape women because so many women have suffered rape. Women's and children's rights should also be better protected generally.

Interview with a Shan woman living in Thailand

Q: How would you describe gender relations in Burma? Do women face discrimination?

A: There is strong discrimination against girls in Burma. The idea that boys and men are superior affects our everyday lives. For example, even where I am staying now in Thailand with Shan people, I cannot iron my clothes because the iron is used for the men's clothes and so it shouldn't touch a woman's clothes. Most girls believe in tradition and are still taught to clean and cook and sew. Even if girls don't want to do these things they must.

In Shan state, because of the poverty and the civil war, the boundaries have been blurred and you do not see gender discrimination as clearly. Everyone has to work hard. Girls have to work hard like their mothers and boys have to work hard like their fathers. But if there is a chance for one child to go to school it is always the boy.

It is difficult for women sometimes because they have to work on the farm all day and then come home and cook.

Women whose husbands are killed in the civil war sometimes marry again very quickly. No one really has time to help the widows because everyone is trying to survive.

Q: Are women encouraged to participate in the democracy movement or opposition politics?

A: In Shan State many girls and women want to be active but they think the best way to do this is to join

the army and fight the Burmese military. In the democracy movement there is not enough attention paid to women's issues or to ethnic issues. Many ethnic women do not fully trust all the women's organisations. There is an underlying mistrust and we need to work on building trust. If we have women's forums they must be independent, where everyone has a chance to participate equally. No one group should dominate.

The problem of trust is related to the 50 years of civil war. For example the Shan people trust Daw Aung San Suu Kyi but do not trust the NLD as much. They don't know if the NLD will really do anything for the ethnic people.

Q: What are the specific problems facing women?

A: Most young girls in Shan state go to Thailand to work. They think it must be better in Thailand than in Burma. Many parents think their daughters would be safer and better off in Thailand and encourage them to go. Most girls expect to get jobs as waitresses or domestic workers but some families ask their daughters to go and work as prostitutes to earn money for their family. Most of them will go.

I work with young girls who have been prostitutes in Thailand. Their average age is 17. Many girls told me that the agent came to their village and promised them work as domestic workers or in restaurants. Some of the girls were unsure, so the agents made them feel guilty and said things like: 'Don't you want to help your family? Look at everything your family has done to help you.' Many girls went because they felt guilty. Most girls I have talked to come from very poor families and most have had no education at all. Many of the families have big debt problems because they have to sell so much of their rice to the military at low prices. Then they cannot make any money and cannot survive properly. So the agents come to these families and say: 'Here is the money you need. Now we will take your daughter to work for us for a few months.'

Many girls work in massage parlours. Even though some of them chose to come and work in Thailand, they had no idea what they would face. They all wanted to leave. Some of them were arrested and had to go to court. The owners never get prosecuted but the girls sometimes go to jail. In the massage parlours the girls have to buy their own contraception. They also worry that if they go back to Shan state they won't have enough money and might have to come back and work again.

Q: How do you think women's rights can be protected and promoted within a democratic Burma?

A: The government should make laws that protect women's rights. There must be more women in government. Many women in the democracy movement are already involved and will be ready to work in national politics. We should learn from the Thai system where there is a law that three in 10 parliamentarians must be women.

Ethnic issues must be a priority. When many exiled girls and women go back to Burma they will go to the cities but most ethnic women will go back to the border areas. Ethnic women will need more attention than women in urban areas will. This issue is not yet being discussed. Ethnic people have to fight for two things — ethnic equality and democracy. We have to push ourselves forward because our people do not have enough confidence yet. The Burmese (Burman) people also need to change their view of ethnic groups. We don't want them to solve our problems — we can solve our own problems. The Shan men and women work side by side to achieve ethnic equality.

Interview with a Karen woman

Q: How would you describe gender relations in Burma? Do women face discrimination?

A: Most men view women as being incapable. They want to protect women and don't realise that this attitude blocks women's progress and participation in public life. Men are generally quite open but they don't realise how far women can go, how much they can achieve.

I don't think men are really opposed to women in leadership roles — they may be shocked at first but I think they would accept it.

Within Karen culture there is traditionally less discrimination than in Burman culture. Burman culture is very oppressive to women and because of the Burmanisation process this has had an effect on Karen gender relations. But there are still differences. For example, in Karen culture a village head is just as likely to be a woman as a man and she will gain as much respect — the head of the village is the head of the village. But in Burmese culture women would receive less respect than a man would.

There are no sayings in Karen culture about women (as there are in Burmese culture) about having to respect your husband as God, for example.

Q: How do you think women's rights can be protected and promoted within a democratic Burma?

A: The most important thing is to change mentality. Men need to realise that women can look after themselves. Women need to challenge the 'traditional' role of women. We need to ask questions. Who says this is our culture? It is carried over from the male-dominated Burmese monarchy — a patriarchal system.

Women's participation in public life needs to be encouraged and not just in economic life. It's true that women have been active in the economy but when you look at the poor state of the economy, this is why. Women have never been seen as a threat because the economy is so weak that no one does very well — women or men.

Society is already programmed. Women just don't cross the boundary into politics. It's fine for women to be active in health and education but not where the real power lies, that is, in the political realm. Politics and power have always been seen as the concern of men. Education could play an important role in changing ideas and accepted ways of thinking. Lack of knowledge is a problem. Many women want to be active but they still see women's issues as taking care of the family and domestic life. You often hear women say things like 'we don't know politics'. Many women are interested in politics but they just can't find the open door that leads in. Or perhaps the door is deadlocked.

We need to offer classes that allow women to think about themselves. We women are always complaining about the status quo but we continue to try to live within it.

There are many other issues that will need to be addressed. We will need to address women in armed conflict on both sides. As well as caring for the ethnic women who have suffered, we also have to care for the wives of the SPDC soldiers. There are already many war widows. If we care about women then we should not leave these women just because they are wives of the SPDC soldiers.

Q: Do you think women's rights are sufficiently protected within the legal framework?

A: There are many laws that discriminate against women. For example, the marriage laws. If a man marries a foreign woman then their children will be Burmese citizens with full citizenship rights. If a

Burmese woman marries a foreign man then her children will not be Burmese citizens.

Within our opposition movement women need to be full and active participants in the constitution drafting process. It is important for women to participate as only they can talk on behalf of women — men can only talk about women. The current NCUB constitution is fundamentally flawed because women's issues and rights are not even addressed. We need to ensure the inclusion of an Optional Protocol based on CEDAW which will allow women to bring charges against the government in an international context — outside national jurisdiction. I think the international community should push for this.

It's great if governments sign international treaties and then respect them but the Burmese government only abides by its own laws.

Q: Are women encouraged to participate in the democracy movement or opposition politics?

A: Within the democratic movement women still have to fight. The men in the opposition know that they need women but there is still this idea of 'us' and 'them'. So we have to be careful not to be seen as a token — we want to be participating and contributing equally. There is room for women in the democracy movement but this room is created and built by men. So men 'allow' us to participate. It's as though women's issues are addressed only because men allow it. They say: 'We will help you to grow.' We say: 'No! Let us grow ourselves.'

Q: Are women inside Burma able to be active in opposition politics?

A: Women inside are very active in spirit but in reality they can't do very much at all. The military control is too tight. The women's organisations formed by the SPDC don't address the real problems facing women. SPDC claims to work for women.

Interview with an NGO workerⁱⁱⁱ

The many problems facing Rohingya women in Burma and Bangladesh include a high incidence of domestic violence, low education levels and lack of citizenship.

Rohingyas living in Burma have been issued with an identity card that allows them temporary residence in their town. If they want to travel outside their town they have to bribe the local Burmese military and pay bribes the whole way on their journey. One woman explained

how she had to travel to Sittwe for a medical operation. While she was just able to afford her medical costs she had to borrow heavily to pay the bribes along the way which amounted to almost 10 times the cost of her travel and medical expenses.

The UNHCR has opened some medical clinics and offices in various towns. Currently these are on a small scale and monitoring is a problem. The UNDP will take over these clinics.

Rohingya women are not called for forced labour but are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse once their men have been taken for forced labour. There are countless incidents where women have been raped, beaten and killed by SPDC soldiers. Women whose husbands have been doing forced labour for long periods often consider themselves as widows. In towns where there is a UNHCR presence the demand for forced labour has been less.

While purdah is strong in Rohingya culture, women who become widows have to go out in order to survive. Widows often go directly to live with their husband's family. If the husband's family cannot support their daughter-in-law, or reject her, she will have no choice but to go to Bangladesh to seek work or to beg. Women who do get work often find it in a fishing factory or as a domestic worker and earn approximately US\$2 a month.

In Bangladesh women's lives are increasingly difficult. They have absolutely no security. The Rohingyas also suffer discrimination as many Bengali people resent the Rohingyas for two main reasons: they are seen to be taking jobs from an already impoverished people; and they are considered by some to be used and manipulated by the Jamad Islami movement

There is a high incidence of abortion in the camps. Bangladeshi doctors have estimated that there are at least 20 abortions a month, although the true figure may be higher as there are many women who do not seek medical treatment.

Polygamy is common and many men take up to four wives, even in the refugee camps. As purdah is still enforced in the camps this leads to many problems as up to four women can be living in one tiny room. As a result divorce initiated by women is common and is recognised by the community.

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- i Interviews conducted by the author unless otherwise stated.
 - ii The shadow government is made up of elected representatives who have fled Burma.
 - iii Based on interviews conducted by Chris Lewa with Rohingya women in Bangladesh 1998/99.

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