

Seeking Safety Meeting Violence

Migrant and refugee women's journey from Burma

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Do migrant and refugee women experience more or less violence than local women? It is a question impossible to answer, as silence is not racist, it is sexist. Women are silenced everywhere but despite all the restrictions on women to speak out against abuse, Thai women can find organisations which provide legal counselling, safe refuge and assistance. Thai women's NGOs try to sensitise the media and to raise awareness of the general public to the violence. What became apparent at meetings of migrant and refugee women was the deafening silence they faced; they felt there was no organisation to represent them, they felt the law did not see or hear them as victims of crimes but only as criminals. Women from Burma have suffered violence in their home country, on route to Thailand and then again in Thailand. Violence is not only a source of suffering in itself but it also increases women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS because of the loss of control over our lives and bodies, the erosion of our self-esteem and self-worth.

Migrant and refugee women hold monthly meetings called Women Exchange where they share experiences and knowledge; and where they discuss a wide variety of issues e.g. women and education; racism; environmental issues; reproductive health. As women from different ethnic and occupational backgrounds spent time together, their mutual understanding and trust increased and women started to share experiences of violence. Recognising that the experience of violence was common to all women; they felt it was their duty to learn more about the local law, about international conventions, which were designed to protect their rights and make them visible. Two-day workshops were organised entitled "Know Your Rights, Know the Law", the workshops explored local laws about rape, violence, domestic violence and conventions covering sexual and gender-based violence.

Each of the workshops was attended by 15 - 25 women in five different locations along the Thai-Burma border. Women of different ethnic backgrounds, including Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Lahu, Mon, Pa-O, Shan and Tavoy attended each workshop. The age range was between 16yrs to 50yrs; with the majority of women being in their twenties..

In addition to these workshops, one-day discussion groups were held in the same locations on Emotional and Social Well-being and another one-day discussion group was held on HIV and Women.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN BURMA:

Asked to summarise aspects of violence in their lives in Burma which they felt had repercussions on their social and emotional well-being, the women outlined the following points:

- Being in the middle of a conflict out of our control
- so many power holders- the majority are men "women have little power here"
- system of corruption with severe and harsh demands
- forced to work as porters by day and sleep with the military by night
- forced labour of women and children
- forced to move at short notice from our family home to a settlement
- money problems and poverty

- forced to sell our farm animals at half price
- no freedom of movement
- isolated after rape, because the community stigmatises and blames women who have been raped
- forced marriage to rapist
- lack of reproductive health care - unsafe abortions and lack of after care
- frustration in inability to fulfill role as mother due to restrictions on freedom and lack of resources
- domestic violence
- mental health problems often treated by spiritual healers by methods such as beating which are very painful

Women leave Burma because of any combination of these factors, they do not have the choice to stay. They have to leave. Whole villages flee onslaughts from the military; families pack up and leave when their land is taken away; families leave when there is nothing left to keep the family alive, some individuals leave in the hope of saving money to support their family. The journey for some is thus made in great haste and in great danger, for others it is made in less haste but danger is still present. For both refugee and migrant women, the journey was hazardous:

- Always put in situations where you are forced to lie - about who you are, where you are going, who your family is, never-ending lies to keep safe
- feeling of being stalked (by SPDC, by police, immigration)
- women have to face direct conflict as they walk through a war zone or fighting zone
- there is often confusion when the army changes its strategies
- "exercising your rights and seeking your needs you will be punished"
- checkpoint demands are always stressful "You never know when you will meet another checkpoint and this leaves you feeling powerless"
- SPDC soldiers stole our money and our property
- the military stop women for a few days to pay the price of escape through sex
- having to give up autonomy and ID
- language difficulties often put women in danger as they don't understand the demands of soldiers who speak Burmese or Thai
- women are forced to use brokers or agents to get to Thailand, and so some end up in debt bonded labour
- women get sick because of lack of food and medicines, pregnant women may give birth in the jungle

Inherent in the situation of refugees or forced migrants is the experience of loss. Loss of loved ones, loss of home, loss of community, loss of work and material possessions. There are also psychological losses, such as loss of status, loss of belief in oneself, loss of trust in others, loss of future hopes, loss of personal invulnerability, and loss of power.

Refugee and migrant women have to adjust to completely new lives. The struggle for survival when they first move is both physical (food, clothing, good health and safety) and psychological (of overcoming the traumatic experience and restoring basic human dignity). Their fight for survival is burdened by the fact that there is still danger of being arrested, abused and deported or repatriated. There is an overriding sense of powerlessness, because they do not have the power to make changes in the receiving country.

There are 120,000 refugees from Burma housed in eleven camps along the border. In addition there are over 400,000 migrant workers from Burma registered under the new migrant labour policy and possibly an equal number of migrant workers who did not register for lack of money, information, or contacts. Previous to this policy only a very small number of migrants could register to work legally, the rest lived and worked illegally and their illegal status exacerbated their vulnerability to violence. These are the factors the women talked about prior to the new registration policy:

Factors rendering Migrant Women Vulnerable to Violence and HIV/AIDS

- Restricted freedom of movement
- Continual threats of being deported or repatriated
- Sexual harassment and rape in the work-place and in the community
- Lack of support in the community for women who had been abused
- Rape and abuse by authorities, particularly during deportations
- Fear of repercussions from the rapist
- Fear of being deported during or after a rape case has gone through court
- Overcrowded living conditions
- Domestic Violence
- Lack of access to information about health and particularly contraceptive methods
- Fear of being arrested on the way to the hospital
- Not being able to communicate with doctors or authorities (and thus lose control and autonomy in medical examinations)
- Lack of power and rights to negotiate safe sex
- Depression and feeling of helplessness
- Racism and discrimination
- Unable to find work through legal means and therefore vulnerable to brokers and traffickers
- Continual pressure to prove right to exist

Migrant women's vulnerability to violence is multi-faceted. There are factors which render them vulnerable in their own community, in their own culture and there are factors which render them vulnerable as women in a foreign culture; as migrant women; as undocumented women.

Migrant women are placed in a particularly vulnerable position during deportation. Each registration period has been followed by round-ups of migrants and deportations to Burma.

The migrants are often herded onto overcrowded trucks and taken to the border; there have been accidents where these trucks have crashed, killing the migrants on-board. Once the migrants reach the border, there are more perils ahead. Having left Burma illegally they cannot enter legally; they are subject to arrest on return to their own country; hence they sneak across the border in boats, avoiding the watchful eyes of the military. In some cases, men and women have been separated during deportations and as non-persons in a no-man's land, the fate of the women is completely dependent on the particular officers in charge. Women report the following abuses during deportation:

- Abuses by the police during arrest

Mae Sot April 2001 Migrant women reported that when they were arrested by the police before deportation, their hair was cut by the police. Their cultural identity was violated deliberately to distinguish between new arrivals and returning migrants.

- No place to sleep or stay safe from arrest or abuse. Women end up sleeping in fields.

- Rape during deportation

On July 12th 1999, a group of 50 illegal migrant workers from Burma were being deported near Ban Lan village, west of Fang. The migrants were put under the care of the Thai Army Rangers at Ban Lan. The officer in charge separated out eleven women from the group, and then ordered his men to take the rest of the migrants to the Nong Tao border point nearby. He took the women one by one into his room and physically molested each of them, then he raped two of the women. One of the other women, hearing the screams ran to tell the deputy headman of the village. On July 13th the local deputy headman reported the rape incident to the police in Fang. Although one of the women wanted to press charges, she was threatened by the officer and forced to accept a small amount of money in compensation of being raped. Women's groups in Thailand took up the case and called for justice to be done. On January 14th 2000 the Defence Ministry reported that an army disciplinary committee had found the officer guilty of rape. He had been put on probation and transferred. Following further complaints, further punishment was meted on the officer: he was to lose his benefits for one year.

- Panic during escape:

Caoa Sod Newspaper 25th May

A 15yr old girl died while hiding from the police during a raid on factories in Mahachai district. She had been hidden in the industrial refrigerator and froze to death.

- Overwhelming fear of deportation

Chiang Mai News March 23rd 2001

Two young Burmese women killed themselves in a police cell in Chiang Dao. Their friends said they were too afraid to be deported to Burma.

Despite all these barriers to women's safety, migrant and refugee women are eager to tackle the issues by themselves and with the support of government and non-government

agencies. Women made suggestions of activities and interventions which could reduce their vulnerability at these different levels:

Immediate commitments by migrant and refugee women

Providing Support for Migrant Victims Of Violence:

- Encourage Women
- Provide a Quiet and safe space where women can and would like to go
- Medical Care
- Nutritious food
- Help to find work
- Don't tease women or ostracize women
- Be kind and gentle
- Help refer them to extra help if they need it
- Someone to talk to
- Help with everyday duties

They suggested the following activities within their communities:

To reduce violence in migrant communities

- Awareness-raising for the community through in-depth methods, i.e. workshops, discussions with the aim of addressing attitudes which continually blame women and ensure their silence
- Assertive training workshops for migrant women
- Using a human rights framework to change cultural and traditional customs that discriminate against women.

Challenges:

Migrant and refugee women felt they faced particular difficulties when trying to change attitudes. Since they live in a situation where their cultural identity is threatened; it is difficult to challenge attitudes and behaviours, which are seen as "part of the culture". Hanging on to all aspects of culture and tradition and being unified take precedence over rights of women. Migrant women experience a type of nationalist blackmail if she is assertive. She is blamed for being too influenced by the receiving country and therefore betraying her culture. If she transgresses the cultural norms of being a passive, quiet woman men feel justified in abusing her.

Interventions with the support of other agencies to create an enabling environment:

- Training and employment of peer counsellors
- Workshops for migrant and refugee women on stress management techniques
- Trainings by UN or NGOs to sensitise authorities
- Provision of translators at hospitals and police stations
- Training of medical staff to recognise symptoms of victims of VAW
- Awareness-raising workshops on gender, racial and class discrimination
- Witness protection for all victims of violence
- Provision of temporary stay to allow time for physical and psychological recovery

- (not just trafficking victims)
- Legal inclusion of migrant victims of violence in Thai emergency houses with peer counsellors
- Improving financial security (minimum wage, possibility of opening bank accounts)

One of the major barriers to successfully implementing these interventions has been the illegal status of 90% of migrant workers in Thailand. The new policy of registration of migrant workers will help to break down this barrier. For women from Burma who have fled human rights abuses including rape by the military, forced relocations and forced portering; who have tried to escape the food shortages and the lack of education and work opportunities; this one year reprieve offers a breathing space for women to recover from their past traumas and not be faced with harassment and continual threats of deportations in their present situation. It offers a space for interventions to be implemented to reduce violence, to improve access to medical and legal assistance and to offer services to migrant victims of violence. It is therefore hoped that there may be some positive changes in the situation regarding violence against migrant women as they gain legal status and can more freely exercise their rights. There are of course other barriers which cannot be addressed purely by government policy, barriers which are more deeply embedded in global attitudes towards women and towards migrants which continue to work to render women vulnerable to violence and to HIV. But the migrant women of the Women Exchange Project certainly hope that Thailand's new policy to register the migrant workers and issue temporary legal status, will break down one of the barriers.
