

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS



4.1 LIFE IN MAE LA CAMP

The overall picture of empowerment of women through humanitarian assistance in Mae La camp comes not only through the five case studies explored in chapter 3 but also from many other interviews conducted both inside and outside the camp, experiences and observations of the researcher while living and visiting the camp, as well as numerous pieces of literature reviewed in chapter 2. Life in the camp is difficult for many reasons but it is not often that you will hear the Karen people complaining about it. The Karen people have been living in refugee camps in Thailand for over two decades and being extremely resilient people they have adapted to their new surrounding and circumstances. Witnessing life in the refugee camps is unlike anything you will see other places in Thailand or in the world. The unique circumstances of camp life create an exceptional environment socially, economically and politically. Many issues in the camp resemble those of normal societies, but many difficulties are intensely exacerbated because of the distinct characteristics of the camp. In an interview with Saw Aung Win, a staff member on the SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) project as well as the DARE (Drugs and Alcohol Rehabilitation Education) project he explained the difficulties of life in the camp,

“we have many problems in this camp not only because we are refugees but also because we have no freedom. There are so many reasons that contribute to violence and other social problems. Some of these reasons are poverty, drug and alcohol problems, lack of self-confidence because of the reality of our lives and low levels of education. These are just some of the problems that contribute to social ills in our camp, the entire list is too long to tell you the whole thing”

One of the main difficulties of living in the camp is a lack of activity. The only jobs available to the refugees are teaching, working with organizations or running small shops in the market. Even though some people do work, the vast majority of people living in the camps spend their time sitting around, watching the

days pass by. The refugees feel as if their life is suspended, as they cannot enter into Thailand to seek work and find a new beginning and at the same time they cannot return to Burma because of the unsafe conditions under the SPDC. Some people give up on the situation here and are looking towards relocation to other countries, knowing that they will face completely alien cultures, climates and lifestyles. The older generation in the camp often tell stories of life in Karen state and along the border before they were forced into the camp, many of them knowing that they will never return to their homes. Some of the younger generation were born in the camp, life behind barbed wire being all that they know. Many people in the camp still dream of a better future but the stagnant situation in which they live wears on them and people's dreams often fade.

Women's role in Karen culture is that of a caretaker, often staying in the home to take care of the family and the household responsibilities while men traditionally leave home to work in order to support the family financially. Although women's roles are generally in the home, the females often play a very strong role in the community and contribute strongly to the structure and backbone of the society. Karen women often are leaders in their communities and have dominant roles in social structures. These gender roles are still present in the camp yet things are altered by the uniqueness of the refugee situation. In most circumstances the option of working to support the family has vanished and a dependency on humanitarian assistance for food and shelter inevitably has developed. Women have, on the most part, maintained the role of taking care of the house and family. Many women in the camp have been widowed or left alone because of their husband's involvement with conflict within Burma. Men are often taken at a young age to join the KNU and unite in the fight against the SPDC. Women who are left alone are often forced to flee to Thailand without the support of their husbands, while having children and the elderly to take care of. Once arriving in the camp women are vulnerable due to a lack of community support, if they choose to work to gain some extra money for their families they deal with the double burden of breadwinning and household responsibilities.

Women's issues of empowerment are present for many reasons, some of them due to the refugee situation and some of them because of the normal gender

challenges of culture and society. The data analysis will explore the data collected in terms of the objectives of the study as well as the indicators of empowerment chosen for the research.

4.2 ANALYSIS IN TERMS OF OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

4.2.1 CONDITIONS IN REFUGEE WOMEN'S LIVES

The first objective of the research aims to identify conditions in refugee women's lives, particularly in gender relations that create vulnerability and makes empowerment and specific humanitarian assistance to them necessary. The literature review outlines experiences of Burmese women under the SPDC. This literature gives background on experiences of rape and sexual assault that many Karen women had while living in Burma. As the report states,

“This report documents 125 cases of rape and other human rights violations which Karen women have experienced in Burma. These women's stories recount attacks which are deeply disturbing in their horror and brutality. Years after the rapes have occurred the stories of the women tell of the ongoing pain and anger at the brutality of these shattering attacks. Many women of courage have come forward to tell their stories for this report and yet their experiences represent only a small proportion of the many hundreds of other Karen women inside Burma who have experienced rape by Burmese military soldiers” (KWO, 2004: 7)

Due to the limited time of the research, questions of rape and sexual abuse were not explored in depth by the researcher; publications discussed in the literature review therefore are supplementary to this area of the data collection. In support of this, the report *Shattering Silences* requests that those who research on the topic of Karen women should use the stories in the report, rather than asking the women to re-tell their painful experiences (KWO, 2004: 11).

Rape and sexual assault aside, the research found many examples of women in disempowered and vulnerable positions due to their experiences within Burma or while living in the camp. Ler Gow Myint's (case report #3) story exemplified conditions in the camp which resulted in her being in an unsafe and vulnerable position, leading to decreased security and protection, then leading to rape. Since her

father was abusive to her mother and her mother was not able to seek support from the community she left the camp and left Ler Gow Myint without the financial and emotional support that she was giving while she was still in Mae La.

“When my mom left I could not go to school because she used to pay for it. She used to pay by making bread and selling it so that all the kids could go to school. When my dad came back I said that I wanted to go to school and play the keyboard as well. He told me that I should sell myself to get the money and then he beat me up. The people in my community looked badly upon me because of my problems.”

Ler Gow Myint then had to leave her home because of the abusive situation there and was not able to find a safe place to go, due to the lack of law reinforcement and community support within the camp. It was only after she had been raped and was forced to move homes numerous times that her case was brought to the attention of the KWO and they then were able to bring her case to the authorities. Even after doing so, at the time of interview, Ler Gow Myint and the women who were helping her were having a very hard time having the story be taken seriously by the authorities.

Many women in the camp become vulnerable due to the effect that the conflict has on their family support and structure. Many women interviewed have been left alone since their husbands had been killed while fighting with the KNU or were continuing to fight along the border and within Karen state. Traditionally Karen women's roles are in the home taking care of the children and the household, while men provide the financial supporters. With the conflict situation drawing the men out to fight, the women are left in a position in which they are then forced to be responsible for making money to support the family with no training of skills or knowledge to do so. Often husbands, if not fighting in Karen state, leave to Bangkok in search of better opportunities. In the case of May Aye(case report #4), she was forced to come to Thailand since there was no way she could feed her children any longer in Burma. Her husband left for Bangkok hoping to find money to support the family but he never returned and she fears that he was dead. Even now, living in the safe house in Mae La camp she still has very little to feed her and her children. Since she has no skills she is unable to work to support her family she is trying her best to do what she can,

“Even the safe house can not give enough food for my children and I. The safe house can only give us rice. Sometimes I wash other people’s clothes to make some money but there isn’t always someone who needs me to do it. I don’t have education so I cannot have a job to make money. We missed the registration this year so we can’t get the food rations without our refugee status.”

Naw Aung (case report #5) had been married three times. Her husband left from Burma to Bangkok and never returned. Her second husband was a KNU soldier and since he was unable to stay in Karen state they had to flee the border, he was killed in Thailand and she then married a pastor in Mae La camp. Now Naw Aung is responsible for taking care of her third husband’s family as well and is learning to weave to support the entire family.

There are many orphans living in Mae La camp, many of them having lost their parents in the conflict in Karen state. Some of the orphans are brought across the border with other families while some travel on their own. The large orphan population in Mae La camp shows the inability of the community to take care of others in need. These children end up living in cramped conditions in houses which are sponsored by humanitarian or religious organizations. Families experiences in Mae La are already so obviously strained that they are unable to take on the responsibility of helping out the orphan population.

The unstable conditions of life within conflict under the SPDC and then in the refugee camps shows that many conditions in refugee women’s lives make humanitarian assistance specific to them necessary. Women, because of these experiences, need to be empowered in order to assist them to deal with the challenging conditions of their lives.

4.2.2 EMPOWERMENT SCHEME OF THE PROGRAM

The research aimed to find out what the empowerment scheme of the assistance programs are. The KWO strives to empower women many different ways and has numerous tools to do so. The international organizations are able to support

and empower women through training and financial support to the KWO who then implements the programs and works with the women inside of the camps.

The KWO structure divides its work into three sections: social, health education and organizing. Within the social section, the focus is on care of vulnerable people such as orphans, widows, elderly, people in trouble and people living the safe house. Also under this section the focus is on conflict resolution and vocational training for women. Under health education, the program strives to teach people in the camps about issues such as sexual and gender based violence, human rights, women's rights and gender awareness and empowerment. The KWO also organizes many cultural affairs and ceremonies, as well as communications and co-operations with the authorities, UNHCR and NGOs.

The objectives of the KWO are as follows:

- To assist women in the endeavor to be free from all forms of oppression
- To promote and empower women in all spheres of life, including education and general living standards
- To develop women's knowledge, ability and skills, including political and organizational skills.

4.2.3 DEALING WITH CONDITIONS OF CONFLICT AND CAMP

The research shows that international humanitarian assistance programs such as UNHCR and international donors, in collaboration with local organizations (such as the KWO) are working to empower women and help them to deal with the conditions they have lived with in Karen state and in the refugee camp.

Naw Aung was learning how to weave, and was able to learn a skill which would then make it possible for her to have an income. The KWO provides numerous training for women so that they are able to go on and make money to support themselves and their families. At the weaving center she was able to come together with other women where they were able to share their experiences together.

“I will use my money from weaving to take care of my children and to send them to school.”

Ler Gow Myint was able to have support from the KWO. After her experience of rape she was able to live in a safe house provided by the KWO. Further to this, she was able to be given the option to do something about what had happened to her. With the assistance of the KWO her case was being taken to the camp committee and camp leader, when this proved to be ineffective they then planned to take it to the KRC and UNHCR. The women's programs are able to give women a choice to speak up about what has happened to them, and to work towards justice against the people who have harmed them.

By learning about human rights and gender issues, many women are more able to speak up and demand their rights. Many programs provided by the KWO and supported by larger IOs were able to give this training. Toe Poe explained how the human rights training were helping women become empowered in the camps,

“Empowerment is when women learn and are taught to gain knowledge which then upgrades their life standards. They are able to upgrade their life standards and also are able to change their way of life. Before women were very shy and now they can dare to speak out. Most people in the camp don't know about human rights and democracy so it is important that the people learn about it.”

On an individual basis, women were being empowered to deal with the conditions they were living with because of the conflict in Burma as well as the structure of the refugee camp.

4.3 ANALYSIS IN TERMS OF INDICATORS OF EMPOWERMENT

In the literature review, indicators of empowerment were drawn from various sources, namely: UNHCR, Joachim Theis and Mariless Karl's works. The data collected will now be analyzed in terms of these indicators.

4.3.1 ACCESS

The research shows that goods and services within the camp are mostly made available equally to men and women. Organizations are working to implement structures within the camp that can respond to cases of gender based violence and rape due to this being an ongoing weak point, exemplified in case #2.

The Karen refugee situation has been present for over 20 years and the IOs working within the area do make conscious efforts towards gender equality in their programs. UNHCR recently finished another round of registration in all 7 Karen camps. Each person was registered individually as well as with their family and food rations are given out based on family size. Both men and women receive the same amount of rations and children under five years old are allocated a smaller ration. The goal of the TBBC in terms of gender policy is to “increase understanding and practice of gender equality within TBBC’s organization and relief programme, in partnership with refugee communities (TBBC, 2004: 72).

Education is made available by ZOA for all people living in the camps; both men and women are in attendance at the schools and welcome to go to school regardless of their gender. One hindrance to women accessing goods and services comes out of their responsibilities in the home. Some women who may be interested in becoming involved in activities and programs provided by IOs and CBOs within the camp but may not be able to do so because of the large load of their responsibilities within the household. Traditional gender roles on the most part still rest the responsibilities of the home and family with the women. It is obvious in the camp that men are able to spend more leisure time with each other while women are responsible for cooking, collecting water, taking care of the house and minding the children. These roles definitely will play hindrance to women being able to have enough time to go to school and be a part of other social programs.

Case report # 2 exemplifies the weakness in the camp’s systems to respond to women’s needs in protection against sexual and gender based violence. The failure of the community to respond quickly and effectively to the rape case of Ler Gow Myint shows that women do not have sufficient protection. KWO staff members have been

fighting to have this case heard while continually no justice is being served. The fact that the perpetrator's jail term was excused at a price of 3000Baht shows the inefficient nature of the camp's administration. This case is most likely not the only one of it's kind within the refugee camps. If a case such as this one is not taken seriously at the camp level it shows the inability of the system to protect women's rights and an inequality of their access to good and services.

The SGBV project which is supported by UNHCR is in the process of implementing a response system for women who are victims of sexual violence and rape. A UNHCR staff member reported that,

“We are creating a response mechanism in the camp for instances of SGBV. Women will be able to go to a focal point within the zone that they live and the focal point will then aid them in taking action. Women will be given the choice whether they want to use Thai law or Karen law to charge their perpetrator. We are working closely with both the medical NGOs and the camp committee. The medical NGOs are responsible for physical checks of them women after the incident. There is a big hurdle working with the camp committee, it is hard to get them involved in our project and to take these issues seriously. Since the committee is mostly men they are resistant to dealing with these issues, they feel that bringing attention to these things will make their community look bad”

Projects such as the SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) project are striving to educate both men and women about equal rights and gender roles. With the education of gender roles and awareness, this imbalance of responsibility is changing and is freeing women to have more time to attend activities which they are interested in within the camp. There is some resistance to this change from men which causes difficulties for the women. When the researcher asked Saw Aung Win, a SGBV staff member, how the community was reacting to the trainings he explained,

“Things do change but this happens slowly over time, this is why we include men in the trainings, so they can learn the importance of equal rights. Some men are happy about the training and respond well, but some do not. Some men are not happy because they feel that they are losing authority in their home. We have seen instances where situations have become violent after the training so we need to work hard to stop these things from happening”

With more training and education on gender and equal rights women will have more chances to have equal access to good and services and their voices will hopefully be heard when it is needed the most.

4.3.2 CONCIENTIZATION

Conscientization is the process of becoming aware that gender roles and unequal relations are not part of a natural order, nor determined by biology. Both men and women in the camp are being educated on issues such as gender. An example of these trainings are the UNHCR supported SGBV program. The KWO provides gender training to young women who then return to the camps and teach in post secondary schools.

Kuku¹, a Karen girl involved in a human rights training explained her understanding of gender and the gender roles which are present within the camp and Karen culture.

“Karen women are living within a cultural box which makes it so women have to stay at home and cook, be with the children, and do the washing. Men and women both go out and do the farming together but when they return home the men take a rest and women have to do the housework. Girls have to respect and behave around their older brothers. These are the gender roles in our lives.”

Kuku’s story shows that she has an understanding of the social constructs of gender and the inequalities around her. When asked where she gained this understanding she explained that it was in a gender workshop provided by the KWO, and when asked if gender can be changed she said “Yes”. Both men and women are become more and more aware of gender and are then able to begin to change them. Kuku, among other women interviewed, were conscious of the concept of gender.

Gender awareness is being taught on a large scale within the camps, mainly through the SGBV project. This project formed in 2002 is sponsored by UNHCR financially and through the training of staff members within the camp. An interview

¹ This name is given as an alternate to the participants real name

with Saw Aung Win explored what the program has done so far in terms of gender education within the camp.

“In the beginning UNHCR came and gave us training about women’s rights and gender. We work towards no discrimination between men and women. Also, we work towards having 50% of women in the camp management. Our project gives training once a month about gender based violence. We give training to all people in the camp; camp leaders, zone leaders, security people and Karen people. Approximately 1/3 of the camp has gone through this training.”

These examples show that both the humanitarian assistance programs as well as the CBOs have made progress in educating both men and women in the camp on gender. By doing so empowerment is possible since empowerment entails the recognition by men and women that the subordination of women is imposed by a system of discrimination which is socially constructed, and can be altered.

4.3.3 MOBILIZATION

As the KWO is one of the strongest groups within the camp, it shows that women are able to come together into groups and have been able to mobilize into forming women’s networks. The KWO is active in all 7 Karen camps along the border area and has offices in both Mae Sot and Mae Sariang. In an interview with Ler Bway Way, head of health education programs in Mae La camp, the researcher asked how easy it was for women to come and participate in the programs, she replied

“The women can keep children at the nursery when they are here for their trainings and also sometimes the men in their houses can help. Sometimes they cannot come though. If they are not educated and they want to go to school sometimes their husbands may not let them go, if this happens women often sneak out anyways. In the past in Karen culture it has been the men that go out of the house and it is their responsibility to make money for the family, this is changing since women now are able to learn a skill and make money as well”

Due to the strength and popularity of the KWO in Mae La camp, it was quite accepted for women to be involved in and part of the programs. In an interview with Ler Kow Guyaw, a 70-year-old KWO chairperson in Mae La camp, she explained the

process in which women become involved in KWO programs. She has been working for the KWO since she was a young girl, in years past the KWO would have to go through the camps and find women who needed help and to find women to be involved in the programs, now that the KWO is so strong and so well known the women know where they can go for help and for trainings and often seek them out themselves.

Some women however are expected to stay in their homes in order to take care of the children, elderly and household responsibilities. These gender roles are a part of Karen culture but are recognized and many people are working to change them. Saw Aung Win, who works for the SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) program explains the reaction of the community to his program's training,

“In our trainings we exchange about how women's duties were traditionally in the house but how it is possible for these duties to change, and that men and women can share in household responsibilities. After the training people go home and follow the lessons that have learnt. Things cannot change immediately because there is sometimes resistance from husbands, but things can change slowly over time. This is the reason that we send men to the training, so they can learn about gender roles”

4.3.4 CONTROL

UNHCR defines control as a balance of power between women and men, so that neither is in a position of dominance. It means that women have power alongside men to influence their destiny and that of their society.

The research found that this was the area in which the least amount of progress has been made and in which women are the least empowered. Participation in decision-making power in the home, community and society is limited for Karen women living in Mae La camp. Although women are empowered individually and within their own women's groups in areas noted above in and relating to access, mobilization and conscientization, women's issues are yet to be an important issue at the committee and decision-making levels within the camp. Findings of numerous

interviews showed that this is one of the main challenges for leaders and committee members in the KWO.

One of the main reasons for this is that women are not represented at decision-making levels in order to provide a voice for the female population in the camps. The committee is elected but it is rare for women to run for positions and when they do they most often are not elected. In an interview with Annabelle, a Zone C KWO staff person she stated,

“There are women who are on the selection committee, but when the election takes place no one actually elects the women. The men say that women are weak and say that we are not capable of being leaders. Sometimes our voices are not heard, but when I sit in a committee meeting and I think of something I speak up and say it, because of this some people don’t like me since women are expected to keep quiet.”

When Eh Paw Htoo the KWO chairperson for Mae La camp and a camp committee member was asked if women and men have the same rights in the camp she said “never”, her explanation was this,

“In our culture men want to oppress the women. KWO is very active in the camp but women still don’t have rights. We ask for things but only sometimes we get help and get our requests taken care of. We also get help from people outside the camp; other organizations and donors, for a long time we were not getting any funds, but now we do.”

When asked her opinion if women in the camp were empowered by humanitarian assistance programs and CBOs she replied,

“Women are empowered only among women, not within the larger group that includes the men. Men rule the management of this camp and so they are making all of the decisions. Whether we can change this is or not depends on our activities and how we try to change things. In order to get rights for women in the camps we need people from outside speaking up for us. UNHCR is at the top and KRC is the next one down from them. If KRC said that women have to be better represented on the committee then this would happen, but they have to put the pressure on. In the camp election, KRC didn’t make it mandatory for women and men to have equal rights so there are less women on this committee than men, we need the KRC to push these issues”

Women have less control than men in the camp due to the vast majority of the decision making power in the control of men. Many women who were interviewed who are at high levels and attend camp meetings are aware of this problem, while women not involved in the camp structure expressed feelings of feeling individual empowerment.

It is not solely women who are aware of this problem and advocating for change. Some men in the camp also feel strongly that women's representation is lacking at decision-making levels. Saw Aung Win works on the SGBV program, he feels that by educating the community on issues such as gender and gender based violence, gender roles can be changed. He also stresses the importance of women being represented in the camp administration. He explained,

“Having women's voices heard in the community is very important and this can be accomplished through them being elected onto the camp committee. In preparation for the next election we are preparing and encouraging women to run. Some women may have an education but lack the confidence. We are working to build women's self confidence so that they will be able to be leaders for their people.