

Gender and Migration

Hidden Stories: Cost of Burmese militarization on women and children
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It is a tremendous honour to be speaking here. First I would like to pay my respects to the Aboriginal elders and the land of Ngunnawal on which I have been welcomed. As a refugee and a migrant, I know what it means to be given a second chance. I thank the Australian government and Australians as I know how policies and practices can influence even the life and death of an individual. Burma has changed since 1988, before 1988, Burma was little known to the world apart from Kipling's 'On the road to Mandalay' or Orwell's 'Burmese Days'. Since 1988 Burma became world famous, mostly for negative reasons. These include, for instance, instances of human rights violations, an increase in Burmese refugees and migrants, the trafficking of Burmese, the conscripting of children as soldiers, forced labour and forced relocation, and drug issues. Moreover, this negative image was also exacerbated by military opposition to the winner of the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been imprisoned for many years.

For me, the 'Burma situation'—in terms of its contemporary political situation and its 'negative image' internationally—raises certain questions:

How has Burma changed since the military took over power?

How does militarization impact on civilians and to what extent on different gender?

How do local and global institutions, policies, definitions and actions impact on Burmese?

These questions are not just of academic interest; at least, not for me, since I am both a political exile from my home country and have been deeply involved with other Burmese whose situation is grim indeed. Over the last ten years I have been working in Thailand in an attempt to help trafficked children.

One of these children was a girl I met in the World Trade Centre Beer Garden in Patunam, Bangkok. She was only eight years old at the time. She, and twelve others, had been trafficked into Thailand from Burma by a broker when she was six. They were put into a truck under vegetables for six hours without food or drink. When they arrived in Bangkok, they were put in a house and were forced to sleep crowded together at night. During the day they were made to sell flowers, or tissues, or simply forced to beg, particularly from the Western tourists. They had to earn at least five hundred Baht (\$20) a day, and if they could not, they were beaten, burnt or starved by the trafficker. She showed me her scars and told me, 'I often get beaten because I am naughty. I often watch the children in school uniforms and like to be with them. I hated this place where I sell flowers and so many people are drunk I am afraid [of] them. So I am not good at making money'. 'What do you want to do?' I asked her, to which she simply replied: 'I want to run away but where to? I don't know where my mother is.' I guessed the route that she took, she is likely to have come from one of the Refugee camps, or even from inside Burma itself. Sadly, her story is not unique. She is one of many, although she particularly sticks in my mind. Why? It is not just because her story represents a common experience for trafficked persons, statelessness and illegal migrant child. What does her future hold? What are her real options for life in Thailand without legal rights and protection?

Burma after 1988

Since 1988 Burma has become an authoritarian state ruled by guns and fear. Moreover, the military has increased its troops from 170,000 in 1988 to half a million in 2003. As a result two million Burmese were forced to provide work for national infrastructure works (HRW 1998), and another two million Burmese have been forcibly relocated throughout Burma (Smith 1996). This has resulted in 1.5 to 2 million internally displaced persons (Norwegian Refugee Council 1999). Many Burmese also fell into unemployment, landlessness, food shortage and poverty. Two million people are also living in refugee camps or refugee like conditions in neighboring countries. In addition, an estimated two to

three thousand Burmese enter Thailand every month (Refugees International Report April 2003).

In this situation it seems appropriate to think about how local and global definitions of refugee status, as well as how state policies and practices around refugee issues, influence the individual lives of people. Let me start, then, with the United Nations Convention. Here a refugee is defined as a person who, owing "to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country " [Convention of 1951, Article 1A (2)]. Unfortunately, Thailand is not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol. In distinction to the U.N. convention, Thai policy defines a refugee as a "person fleeing active fighting". Thus, the Thai government concludes that as there is no conflict in Burma, there can be no such thing as a Burmese refugee. Accordingly, refugee issues are restricted under Thai policy, and many refugees can survive only working as migrants in Thailand. For example, during 1996 and 1997, the entire population of the Shan State in Burma, which includes 1400 villages and 300,000 homes, was forced to relocate. It is estimated that 300,000 to 400,000 Shan crossed the border in 1998-2001. I will discuss how Shan who flee from Burma because they are victims of human rights violations suffer the most because (1) they are not recognized as a refugee under different definitions and (2) even when they work as a migrant their rights are also not recognized. The problem, of course, is that Thai definitions of 'refugee status' are so narrow that Burmese who come to Thailand as refugees, or because of poverty, (a direct result of an oppressive regime) are then subject to similar forms of exploitation.

Militarisation and Women

Amongst the most disadvantaged in this situation are women and children. Throughout militarized zones, women and children face increasing gender violence: domestic, cultural gender inequality and institutional violence such as

rape by the military. It is worth mentioning in this regard, that militarization and sexual violence are closely related. For example, rape during periods of war (Rwanda, Kosovo, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Kashmir, Liberia, Somalia, Indonesia, Bangladesh) and even in post war regions with peace keeping forces (Cambodia and East Timor) is well documented (Charlesworth)¹. Moreover, positions of power in refugee camps, within law enforcement agencies, governmental positions, positions of responsibility in NGOs, as well as within UN hierarchies, all tend to be held by men. As a consequence, it is not unusual for a refugee woman to be forced to exchange her body for food from men who not only hold these positions, but also all the power. Women forced to flee Burma as a result of militarization are subject to the same kinds of sexual and physical assaults as those who flee war zones. For example, 625 women and girls testified in the document 'Licence to Rape' that during the relocation, rapes were regularly committed by government troops. As a result of increased militarization, and the types of persecution this gives rise to, Burma has become the producer of the largest refugee population in SE Asia.

Burmese migrants in Thailand

Currently, Burma is the largest source of migrants in the Mekong region. 10% of Burmese are living outside Burma compared to the average of 3% of the world population living outside their country of origin. Many Burmese are also fleeing from 'food insecurity' which applies to 15% of the population. More than one million Burmese illegal migrants in Thailand make up 92% of the total migrants in Thailand. Burmese work '3D' jobs- dirty, difficult and dangerous and experience low pay, working in isolation without access to legal rights and health care access. Nor is there job security, and without the protection or adequate policies of their own or 'host' government they continuously face exploitation. As I have indicated, women migrants face different experiences from their male

¹ Professor Hilary Charlesworth, ANU Centre for International Justice and Governance, has researched systematic rape in war in which she analysed 60 wars that have occurred since 1970.

counterparts. Most of the jobs available to migrant women are considered by tradition to be women's work: such as domestic labour, 'service sector' employment, or within the sex industry. For instance, 89% of all domestic workers in Thailand are Burmese. These jobs are stigmatized (inferior, unskilled and low status) and accrue gender based discrimination and vulnerability (sexual, physical and emotional abuse). Behind closed doors they are more exploited because of the nature of the job and illegal status. Most of these domestic workers are young and single, suffering sexual and physical abuse particularly from their employers. They have to work longer hours and earn the lowest pay (500 to 1500 Baht about 16 \$A to 51 \$A per month) compared to other migrant workers. Thai people have a strong preference for Burmese girls as domestic workers. In a survey of Thai employers 82% believe Burmese girls are hard working, 87% think they are cheap and 74% think they are obedient. There also seems to be a notion that domestic labourers are seen to have sold not only their labour but also their bodies

Their biological nature has become a punishment for these women. Their productive work is welcome but their reproductive rights are forbidden or punished. In 1999, for example, a Thai Cabinet resolution prohibits the extension of a work permit if a woman becomes pregnant. Consequently abortion is the greatest health problem (60%) among Burmese women migrants. In order to avoid deportation, and because of their lack of sex education and poverty (a condom costs a half day of their salary), they often fail to protect themselves. If they become pregnant, they try to force an abortion by crude means such as using wooden sticks to expel the fetus or getting friends to jump on their stomach.

Trafficking of Burmese women

Discussions about trafficking have largely focused on the Thai and Filipino situations, even though Burmese are one of the major victims of trafficking in Southeast Asia. Indeed Burmese women are sold as far 'south' as Australia, where they are passed off as Thai nationals. This is a direct result of the

vulnerability of these women produced by the politics and policies of Burma and the international community. Moreover, trafficking and corruption are closely linked. It often occurs that Burmese are trafficked across as many as three or four international borders in massive numbers. The question then arises, how could such large numbers of Burmese be moved across international borders without the collusion of those in positions of authority? In particular, Thai officials' involvement in trafficking of Burmese women is well recorded. Trafficking in Burmese girls for domestic labourers is recent but increasing in demand for newly industrialised Thai. For example, in 2004, a trafficking network to traffic Burmese women to wealthy households to work as maids flourished in Tak province. The operation was reported to be worth over one million Baht per month. Two hundred Burmese girls and women between the ages of 13 and 30 were reportedly trafficked each month at a cost of 5,000 Baht per person to Thai employers, with costs of up to 8,000 for satisfying specific requests, such as language requirements or looks. Most of the clients 'are senior police or military officers and high-ranking government officials whose mansions require more than one maid.' (Source: Punnee Amornviputpanich, 'Illegal Workers: Confessions of A Burma-maid Smuggler,' *The Nation*, 7 June 2004)

Trafficking of Burmese women for sex work is also rampant. Southeast Asia is the world's number one sex tourist destination, Thailand being an origin, transit and transport contributor. According to the Thai Special Branch Police Bureau, of the 300,000 foreign victims a year passing through Thailand en route to the third country, the largest number came from Burma (ALTSEAN 1999: 16).

Thais have acceptance of going to a brothel to be with a prostitute as 80% of males and 74% of females responded that it was natural that men pursued sex at every opportunity. 75% of Thai men have had sex with a prostitute and 54% of Thai men have their first sexual encounter with a prostitute (Deemar Corporation 1990). Because of such an attitude of 'normalcy' and 'appropriateness' many Thai men continue to demand prostitutes even if they are in a happy marriage because

of the cultural assumption of this being part of a real manhood. Every year 4.6 million Thai men go to brothels as part of male social activities.

Many Western men also pursue sexual experiences in Asia. These Western men convince themselves that going to a prostitute is merit making, and they are 'a benevolent provider of employment for a needy girl and her family' as they give money to the girls to support 'their poor families' (Jackson A. Peter & Cook M Nerida, 1999: p. 195). Japanese and Chinese (including men from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong) also demand 'virgins' which increases the need for young prostitutes.

Both high demand by sex tourists and locals contribute to a sustainable sex industry that is closely associated with corruption and the involvement of Thai politicians, police and military. This lucrative business is always requiring supply of new prostitutes. Thailand hosts more than three million prostitutes yet prostitution in Thailand is illegal. Tourism in Thailand generates some US\$4 billion annually. Prostitution contributed 100 billion Bahts to the Thai illegal economy in 1993-95, and human trafficking was worth 5-7 billion Bahts (Phongpaichit et al, 1998). Thailand is consequently known as "the brothel of Asia".

The abduction and seduction of young girls from Burma /Myanmar is 'widespread across the region' (Images Asia 1997, Pyne 1992, Asia Watch 1993, Caouette et al.2000). A government official working on immigrant labor estimated in 1995 the proportion of prostitutes among Burmese immigrants, as 5% and that 21% of prostitutes in Thailand were Burmese. If this ratio is still true, there were 50,000 Burmese women working or forced to work as prostitutes in Thailand in 1995 and the figure would have increased with the massive Shan migration of 1997 (Phonpaichit 1998:176). Recently, according to Empower, the number of prostitutes who work in the Chaing Mai area had doubled in the last five years (Brown 2000).

Burmese trafficked prostitutes who work in the so called 'down-market' are the most exploited women among many exploited women in Thailand, forced to work in conditions which amount to nothing short of slavery. Most of them are confined to their rooms, barbed wire and an electrified fence making escape virtually impossible.

There is an increasing demand for younger girls in Thailand. Burmese girls aged 12 to 18 years old are in most demand in the sex industry in Thailand and 60% of Burmese prostitutes are under age (Bangkok Post newspaper, 24 November 1997). Many children, particularly young girls, are working in Thailand as prostitutes because of three demands (1) paedophiles, (2) children are assumed to be free of HIV and (3) children make a better profit as they can be traded for a higher price.

The current trend of HIV infection is alarming as the number of infected women has increased in the last three to four years, particularly in the eastern state near the Thai-Burma border (International Crisis Group 2002).

'Myanmar has one of the most serious epidemics in the region' and according to UNAIDS, 360,000 to 610,000 Burmese are infected with HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2006). According to UNAIDS (2006) and WHO (2006) report the rate of infection is 0.6 % to 2.2 % but some areas has higher for example in Hpa-an has 7.5% rate while in Pyay 5%. This trend is only likely to increase as the Global Fund organization which is the major funding for HIV/AIDS in Burma has recently pulled out of because of the restriction from the government to their access to HIV/AIDS effected people.

Burmese prostitutes are forced to work in the cheapest brothels with the lowest class of men, they have a lack of sex education and have the highest HIV infection rates. According to a survey by Thammasat University, 54% of Burmese prostitutes cannot identify a condom and four out of five prostitutes in the Chiang Mai area were HIV-positive (Red Cross 1992). Among rescued girls from

Burma in Thailand, 50 to 70% were HIV/AIDS positive (CATW- Asia Pacific, trafficking in Women and Prostitution in the Asia Pacific). UNAIDS also confirm in 2006 that 70% of returnee from Thailand are HIV positive (2006)

The Thai regional sex industry is a key element of the Thai economy and is too firmly entrenched to be seriously challenged. Rescuing victims from brothels and educating them would not work in eliminating trafficking of Burmese. For example, the United States-funded anti-trafficking program to rescue Burmese trafficked victims has questioned such women. Shan women who were being rescued explained the problem was that they didn't feel like they were being rescued, indeed they had to start all over again because they lost their income. They felt like they were trapped, Hseng Nong, one of the founder of SWAN organization explained 'being forced to work physically is one thing,' but they 'were forced to work by their situation.' Among the Shan refugees, women from Shan state who survived working as migrants are exploited in Thailand as they have no legal rights and no place to return.

As a migrant in Thailand I experienced myself that often employers refused to pay my wage but I believed I would only be safe if I stay quiet. But more importantly, I never thought I had a right to complain. The authorities are the ones I most feared and they are the last people I would go and ask help from. When I was in Thailand I was working at an international school in Sukhiumvit area, the school principal did not pay me my three months salary, telling me that 'her money is gone with her holiday'.

Now I would like to show you an example of how a migrant or trafficked victim speaks for herself of her life in the following video.

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