

Safe Work and Adequate Income for Refugee Women in Thailand

--Basic Human Rights Subadhra Rai (Thailand)

Secure income and work is a fundamental human right. However, this basic right remains unfulfilled in many parts of the world because of political and social upheavals. While all suffer from the implications of lack of income and work, in most instances, women and children bear the brunt of this unfulfilled human right. In this report, I want to highlight the economic situation of ethnic women from Burma (1) who live along the Thai-Burma border in refugee camps. I also want to look at one local non-governmental organization (NGO) WEAVE (Women Education for Advancement and Empowerment) work with various ethnic women organizations to address this situation through capacity development, vocational training and income generation.

(1) The military junta changed the name of Burma to Myanmar in 1995. However, many Burmese citizens in Thailand and elsewhere continue to use Burma in protest against the military regime and its oppression and human rights abuses. I will use the name Burma in solidarity with the people and the women of Burma.

Refugee Women in Thailand

Since 1984(2), some women of various ethnicities live in nine refugee camps. They and their families fled to Thailand because of the political instability and human rights abuses carried out by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in Burma. They are forced to work as porters to carry weapons for the SPDC. If they resist, they are beaten, killed or raped. Refugees suffer from various physical and mental ailments because of their trauma and camps life. Women suffer from domestic violence, malnutrition, physical ailments and mental stress because of displacement and uncertain futures(3). These symptoms are exacerbated by the lack of secure income and meaningful work.

(2) **Refugees:** They are in nine refugee camps in four provinces along the Thai-Burma border (Chiang Rai, Kanchanaburi/Ratchaburi, Mae Hong Son and Tak) and approximately 140,000 registered refugees, some of them for more than 10 years, live in these camps. **Migrants:** In three provinces (Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Tak). There are about 1.2 million registered migrants of whom 905,881 are of Burmese descent. However, there are many who remain unregistered because they fear repatriation. **Internally Displaced People (IDP)** reside in four ethnic states (Karen, Karenni, Shan

and Mon) and two divisions (Eastern Pegu and Tenasserim). Because of the constant risk of violence and instability, they lack food security and suffer severe malnutrition. For more information please refer: *Images Asia, 1997; Migrating with Hope: Burmese Women Working in Thailand and the Sex Industry. Chiang Mai: Images Asia; Thailand Burma Border Consortium, TBBC, 2004. Internal Displacement and Vulnerability in Eastern Burma, Bangkok, TBBC; Thanaka Team, ed, 2000. Burma-More Women's Voices. Bangkok, Altsean, Thanaka Team (ed.), 2003. Burma-Women's Voices Together, Bangkok, Altsean; Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment, Chiang Mai, WEAVE, 2005.*

(3) There is a possibility of repatriation in the next three to five years either to a third country or to Burma if the political situation improves.

The Right to Work: WEAVE's Income Generation and Capacity Development

There are informal economic niches in some of the refugee camps. These include small businesses, such as, provision shops, food stalls, tailoring, and handicraft shops operated by the refugees. In addition, international NGOs carry out health and rehabilitation work in the camps, creating another form of artificial economy. Refugees are employed as health care workers, sanitation workers, teachers and translators. Because of the uncertainty, there is an underlying fear among the refugees that once the NGOs pull out of the camps, they will lose their income and work. Refugees, who usually work as seasonal workers in agriculture, are not allowed to work outside the camps. They are usually underpaid for their work compared to local Thai. In this context, WEAVE tries to address the lack of income and meaningful work for women.

WEAVE, a local women's organization of diverse ethnic background, is committed to working in partnership with marginalized ethnic women from Burma. WEAVE, established in 1990, focuses on the development of health educational materials for women and children in various ethnic languages to support organizations working on both sides of the Thai-Burma border. Over the years, WEAVE has evolved, encompassing not only the development of health educational materials in various ethnic languages but also capacity development, early child education and income generation. Thus WEAVE's work is multispectral based on the belief that developing the status of refugee women benefits the whole community.

WEAVE supports ethnic women through vocational training in sewing, weaving and

embroidery work. WEAVE encourages women to create and weave designs as well as sew clothes that reflect their indigenous culture. WEAVE also tries to identify and source markets for some of the products in partnership with the various ethnic women organizations inside and outside of Thailand. Thus WEAVE's goal is to provide refugee women with safe employment and income. The income enables women to supplement their diet with vegetables, fruits and meat. The ability to earn an income empowers women to deal with gender-based violence in the home. These women gain confidence to take on leadership roles in their ethnic organizations and communities.

WEAVE's capacity development is an important component of income generation because it attempts to build women's abilities. Specifically, WEAVE does this through project management and providing women with opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills on microfinance, marketing and product line management. In addition, WEAVE provides women's groups with small funds to support their income generation work. Through its income generation and capacity development initiatives, WEAVE has tried to address women's human rights and will continue to engage ethnic women and their organizations.