

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION



### 1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The conflict in Burma<sup>1</sup> and its harsh military rule, which has caused mass amounts of displacement for over two decades, remains relatively unnoticed by the international community. Many have been affected by this conflict and because of it there are over 150,000 Burmese refugees living in refugee camps in Thailand along the Thai-Burma border. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees grants “person of concern” status in Thailand to those who can prove their case to meet the definition of a refugee. At the end of 2004 the entire refugee caseload in Thailand was at 154,149 (TBBC, 2005: 5), without counting those not registered as refugees, as well as illegal and legal migrants fleeing from the same conflict. The majority of these refugees live in seven camps along Thailand’s western border and are from Karen State in Burma. As conflict affects men and women differently, this is also very true for those fleeing the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), the military dictatorship in Burma. Women in conflict situations and refugee women have problems specific to them because of their gender. This research aims to find out what is being done to help the Karen women living along the Thai-Burma border and how their specific needs due to experiences in conflict and in the camp are being met. There are humanitarian programs working to empower women who have suffered from conditions in Burma or the situation in the camps, namely the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO). This research will explore if and how these women are

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<sup>1</sup> The official English-language name for the country was changed by the SLORC in 1989. ‘Myanmar’ is a transliteration of the official name of the country in Burmese language. Both names are used inside and outside the country. For many, the choice of which word to use carries a political meaning. Those that stick with Burma feel they are symbolically expressing their belief that the current regime is illegitimate. This paper will also use the name ‘Burma’ as the researcher shares the same belief of the illegitimacy of the current junta. This fact is explained in many works, this particular explanation comes from the following book, Taylor, Robert, H, (2001). *Burma, Political Economy under Military Rule*. London: C. Hurst & Co, 1.

empowered and in what ways they deal with how they have been affected as women living through experiences both in Burma and Thailand.

When exploring the definition of a refugee, UNHCR gives the following...

“A refugee, under international law, is defined as any person who, owing to 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, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence...is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to return to it”  
(HRW, 1998: 5).

Half a century ago, Burma was regarded as one of the most promising nations in South East Asia. A country extremely rich in resources, it was looked upon as a future leader and success story in the region (WLB, 2000P: 7). Since the military coup in 1962, the political, economic and human rights situation in Burma has drastically and continually declined. Because of these changes Burma is now regarded as one of the worlds “least developed countries” designated by the United Nations in 1987 (Awatsaya, 2004: 4). For these reasons, many Burmese people, especially the ethnic minorities who are specific targets of this persecution, have fled to Thailand and contributed to an ever-growing refugee population.

A now well-recognized phenomenon is that women and men are affected by conflict differently (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 150). This is also true for refugee situations; as people witness, fight, or flee a conflict, all will experience the repercussions in a different way. With war and conflict effecting civilians more, women who used to suffer mainly from the loss of loved ones are now in the midst of the conflict itself. Often times women in a conflict zone will be forced to migrate to a new place while some, habitually men, stay to fight. Women who flee many times have children and the elderly added to their responsibilities, while carrying as much as their personal belongings with them possible. Refugee women, while in the midst of dealing with the effects of being in the conflict zone as well as the journey to escape it, also have to deal with problems that the refugee situation gives them. Institutions such as the UN now recognize that women refugees have specific needs, and are

creating systems and guidelines to meet these needs. A paper from The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees analyses the five concerns facing refugee women today which are as follows: Safety and Security, Equal Access to Humanitarian Assistance and Essential Services, Registration and Documentation, Gender-Sensitive Application of Refugee Law and Procedures, and Trafficking in Women and Girls (UNHCR, 2002: 79).

The issue of refugee women's needs is well acknowledged and proven over time and in countless refugee situations around the world. This research will seek out if this is in fact the case for Karen women living in Mae La refugee camp in Thailand. An exploration of what is being done to help these women is an important and essential area to be studied.

Empowerment is a common theme of humanitarian assistance programs working with women in refugee camps. The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) strives to empower the women it works with through many different programs. This organization works in all seven Karen camps along the Thai-Burma border. The KWO strives to empower refugee women through, "training and informed education to build a skills base and increase the confidence of Karen women" (KWO, 2004: 2).

Women in post conflict situations face problems specific to them because of their gender and often carry a large part of the burden created by the conflict situation. The International Research Center on Women (IRCW) explains that, "as war changes the demographics of a country, women may become single heads of households, supporting children, parents or extended families. They may become uprooted, deprived of all assets and resettled in an unfamiliar community without their usual support networks" (IRCW, 1998: 1). Many publications point out that women's experiences in conflict and war are different to those of men, the literature review in chapter 2 explains these threats in further detail.

There are seven Karen refugee camps currently along the Thai Burma border as well as two Karenni camps and a number of Shan refugees living in Chiang Mai province without official camps to live in. The Karen camps are in four different provinces in Thailand: Mae Hong Song province, Tak province, Kanchanaburi

province and Ratchaburi province.<sup>2</sup> In Mae Hong Song province the two Karen camps are Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Ma Luang; in Tak province the three camps are Mae La, Umphiem and Nu Po; in Kanchanaburi province the only camp is Ban Dong Yang; and in Ratchaburi province there is Tham Hin camp.

Mae La camp was chosen as the research site for numerous reasons. The initial visit to the field was in December 2004 where the researcher was taken to both Mae La camp and Mae Ra Ma Luang camp by other parties who had already planned visits to these sites. During these visits some personal contacts were made in both camps which facilitated a return to one of these two camps to carry out field research. By having some contacts in the camps, a few arrangements could be made before returning to do data collection in July and August 2005. Mae La camp is most easily accessible from the town of Mae Sot, being approximately 60km away. Since the camp pass given by the MOI permitted the researcher to access the camps only by day, Mae La camp was the most logical choice for the research site.

Women make up approximately half of the refugee population along the border area. Out of 155,785 refugees, 76,197 are women therefore representing 48.9% of the total population. Inside Mae La camp, women make up 49.6% of the population, there are 24,688 women out of a total of 48,910 people living in the camp (TBBC, 2005: 3). Although this statistic shows there are almost an equal number of men and women in the camp, this research finds that a large portion of the women interviewed were left alone in the camp due to their husband's involvement in the conflict in Karen state. This shows an inconsistency between the statistic noted in the literature review and the research findings of this study.

The CCSDPT coordinates the humanitarian assistance provided in the camps under the guidance of Thailand's MOI. Considering the long history of the situation, the organizations working along the border cooperate very well with each other and have a clear system of coordination. Under the CCSDPT, their assistance is split into three categories, primary health and sanitation; education; and food, shelter and relief.

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<sup>2</sup> See map #3 on page 88 named Burmese Border Refugee Sites with Population Figures.

Different organizations work under these three categories and on the most part implement projects and provide assistance inside the camps while keeping offices outside in towns such as Mae Sot and Mae Hong Song.<sup>3</sup>

The literature and research already conducted on the Burmese refugee camps in Thailand cover a broad range of topics such as: power and NGO-Karen relations; human security issues on migration; refugee children; conflict in Tham Hin refugee camp; adaptation and identities of Karen refugees; and publications put out by the TBBC. This literature is explored in depth in the literature review in chapter 2. Based on an overview of the research already conducted and literature on this topic, combined with observations on the initial trips to the field; identifying if and how Karen women are empowered though humanitarian assistance program remains unanswered in the literature and already conducted research. The research problem lies in a gap in the knowledge on the subject area about how women are empowered through the humanitarian assistance programs currently present in the refugee camps. The question of the success of women's empowerment is currently left to be answered. This research will aim to fill this gap in the knowledge.

## **1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

Most refugee women have suffered an entirety of horrors by the time they arrive at the gates of a refugee camp, only to face a whole new set of challenges. Refugee women face specific challenges in their lives as refugees because of their gender. Empowerment of these women in order to make positive change in their lives is crucial. To understand what this empowerment gives to the women is significant in taking a holistic approach to refugee care. In this research, by gaining understanding of what empowerment gives to refugee women and the implications that it has, care for refugee women can possibly be recognized, implemented further, and improved in the future.

Research on refugee women is necessary in order to aid in giving them a voice. The body of knowledge already existing on refugee women covers many

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<sup>3</sup> The structure of relief assistance can be seen on page 85.

elements: the problems that they often face during conflict and after they flee, gender sensitivity in aid to refugee women, difficulties of meeting aims of UN policies at local levels, and many others. This specific research will explore if empowerment of refugee women in the Karen camps is present and on what levels. This is an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge on refugee women. Understanding the implications of the empowerment programs, this research will help in future refugee situations and will possibly help to improve empowerment programs in this particular situation and other refugee situations in the world. This contribution is useful in helping the lives of refugee women, present and future.

The main question of this research will be:

***How are Karen refugee women in Thailand empowered through humanitarian assistance programs?***

In order to answer the research question, the objectives of this study will be the following:

- 1) To identify conditions in Karen refugee women's lives, particularly in gender relations, that create vulnerability.*
- 2) To identify the empowerment scheme of the program and how it is meeting the women's needs.*
- 3) To examine women's empowerment as a result of humanitarian assistance programs in the camp.*

### **1.3 HYPOTHESIS**

Based on literature and already conducted studies on refugee women, this research hypothesizes that humanitarian assistance makes progress towards empowering Karen refugee women living in the camps along the Thai/Burma border.

In terms of the objectives of the study the research hypothesizes that there *are* conditions in Karen refugee women's lives that create vulnerability, that the empowerment scheme of the program *is* meeting the women's needs in certain ways and *is* able to empower women through these programs in the camp.

To support this hypothesis certain examples can be referred to. Refugee women themselves who have been able to speak out about their experiences and bring attention to the problems they have faced have produced publications such as *Shattering Silences* and *License to Rape*. This shows support that empowerment may be an attainable goal when working with refugee women and speaking up can help to improve their situations after having gone through conflict situations and certain experiences in the refugee camp. The Karen Women's Organization among numerous other organizations working in the camps such as UNHCR, ZOA, and AMI, now have Karen women working on their programs. This indicates that these women may have been empowered through the humanitarian assistance and now have the ability to have administrative roles in the programs. From holding a leadership role in the organizations women may have more influence in decision-making levels within their communities, and hence this may change women's lives and experiences in the camp. Further to this, possibly they may have the opportunity to work outside the camps, which is a large change in their living conditions. One main concern within the refugee camps is a lack of activity and lack of things for the refugees to do with their time. Involvement in the humanitarian assistance programs within the camp is a positive change for the women and may motivate them to go on to further projects or to improve their lives in other ways by initiating further objectives.

#### **1.4 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

To meet the objectives of the study this research, through qualitative interview, observation and participation the research must evaluate how Karen refugee women have been through experiences making them particularly vulnerable and thus making empowerment necessary for improving their lives and their well-being. Publications by UNHCR such as *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women* supports this broadly when exploring refugee women's needs in general and shows that they need protection against things such as manipulation, sexual abuse and

unequal access to good and services. UNHCR also points out that refugee women are often disempowered not only because of their displacement but also due to demands of them in their new communities, and threats of violence and rape (UNHCR, 2002a: 90). Specifically when looking at the case of Burmese women and their experiences due to the ongoing conflict in Burma as well as their experiences within the refugee camps in Thailand it can be understood why women become vulnerable due to experiences happening in these places. Publications such as *License to Rape* and *Shattering Silences* outline the unbearable experiences these women have been through which relate directly to their gender. *Shattering Silences* gives the overview of horrendous experiences that Karen women suffered and are continuing to suffer under SPDC rule in Burma. The publication points out that Karen women continue to be killed and raped by SPDC soldiers, forced to work as porters and forced from their homes. The report also explains that the rape of women is often committed in conjunction with other human rights violations such as beating, mutilation, torture, murder, forced labor, denial of rights to food, water and shelter, and denial of the right to legal redress (KWO 2004, p. 11). *Shattering Silences* points out that researchers who are interested in the Karen people, women in particular, should not ask the women to re-tell and re-live these horrible experiences, and instead should use the report as a testimonial to their experiences. This advice is taken into account during the data collection and analysis of this study.

Already existing gender relations in the camp may be present that may encourage a need for women's empowerment. These pre-existing gender relations may be due to cultural aspects of Karen culture and may also be due to the camp structure and dynamics. Through data collection, the researcher will be able to understand these conditions and explore the empowerment scheme of the humanitarian assistance programs and if they fit with the wants and demands of the Karen people. It will be important to have an understanding of how Karen women and the Karen culture understand and value empowerment. This may be different from the researchers definition or common understandings in western or humanitarian circles. Understanding the local/indigenous perception of empowerment will be very important.



Empowerment will be the final outcome to be examined. Empowerment will be measured both on an individual basis and a community basis. Women may be individually empowered and able to make personal progress in their lives and accomplishments due to humanitarian assistance programs. Women working together may also collectively be able to make progress in impacts on the community and things such as gender equality and women's representations in decision-making processes. If women are empowered and are able to be more influential in the community, women's interests and well being may be taken care of and paid attention to more.

UNHCR provides a definition of women's empowerment and disempowerment, and follows these definitions with five dimensions of women's empowerment. These five dimensions of women's empowerment were used to shape the indicators of women's empowerment in this study and helped to create the interview guide for case study participants and key informants. This information is as follows:

**Empowerment:** "A process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment" (UNHCR, 2001: 3).

**Disempowerment:** "Any action, policy development and/or relief program or process through which women's and men's priorities, needs and interests are further ignored, reducing their participation in decision-making and representing an obstacle to their economic, political and social improvement" (UNHCR, 2001: 3).

The five dimensions of women's empowerment outlined in this report and further discussed and defined in the literature review are as follows:

- **Access**-equal access to goods and services
- **Conscientization**-men and women's awareness of gender roles
- **Mobilization**-women's ability to meet together to form organizations and networks
- **Control**-balance of power between men and women

- **Gender Equality Mainstreaming**-different interests of displaced men, women and boys are taken into account in development projects

(UNHCR, 2001: 5)

Through the qualitative research conducted, understanding changes in women's lives due to being a part of the humanitarian assistance programs will provide further understanding towards, and will either support or contradict the hypothesis that Karen refugee women are empowered through humanitarian assistance programs.

## 1.5 LIMITATIONS

### LANGUAGE

Since the researcher did not speak Karen or Burmese, a limitation of the study was that the majority of the data collection relied on translation. Hearing people's answers and stories second hand undoubtedly made it difficult to understand the exact feeling and atmosphere of their answers. The translators used were often close with the subjects and could provide excellent interpretation of the subject's stories. The translator's interpretation of the answers would have unquestionably come into play.

### CULTURE

Karen culture was entirely new to the researcher when commencing data collection. Even though preparation for this cross-cultural study was carried out through books and literature, cultural differences still came into play when in the field. Being unsure as to how much can be requested of a participant or how much you are able to explore into their lives is something as a Canadian, the researcher was often unable to gauge. Cultural differences often came into play and may have had an effect on the researchers understanding of the data.

## **1.6 METHODOLOGY**

Through interview and observation the research is able to identify conditions in Karen refugee women's lives, particularly in gender relations, that create vulnerability and makes empowerment and specific humanitarian assistance to them necessary. By witnessing and understanding humanitarian assistance in the camps the researcher can evaluate if the programs are helping to empower the women. Further to this, after understanding the humanitarian programs alongside the women's experiences in the program, the third objective can be met to identify how the empowerment scheme of the program is meeting the women's needs. While meeting the objectives of the study and carrying out in-depth case studies, the research question of how Karen refugee women are empowered through humanitarian assistance programs can be answered and the hypothesis that Karen refugee women are empowered through humanitarian assistance programs can be tested. Empowerment will be measured by four main indicators which are defined in section 2.8 and are: access, conscientization, mobilization and control.

### **1.6.1 SITE SELECTION**

Of the Karen, Karenni and Shan sites along the border the Karen are most prevalent with 7 sites while the Karenni have two and the Shan have one. The Karen refugee camps are split up among three different borderline provinces in Thailand. Mae La Oon and Ma Ra Ma Luang are in Mae Hong Song province; Mae La, Umphiem Mai and Nu Po are in Tak province; Ban Dong Yang is in Kanchanaburi province; and Tham Him is in Ratchaburi province. The two Karenni camps are in Mae Hong Song province and the Shan site is in Chiangmai province. The camps greatly differ in size in terms of population figures with the Shan site comprising of only 463 people (this is a newly developed site) up to Mae La camp which holds 48,910 people. All of the camps differ for numerous reasons especially depending on how close they are situated to towns within Thailand. Some of the camps are tucked back far into the jungle and therefore do not share much connection with the outside world, while some others are situated right on the highway are influenced by their Thai surroundings.

Mae La refugee camp was chosen for the research site for this study. Mae La is situated in Tambon Mae La, Tak province, Thailand, between kilometer markers 57-60 on the highway, north of Mae Sot. The camp has an area of about 1, 148 Rai (1 acre: 4 Rai). This camp was chosen for data collection for numerous reasons. Firstly, Mae La is the closest camp to Mae Sot town, where the researcher was staying for the duration of the field visit. Since overnight stay in the camp was not possible, this camp was the only camp which could be accessed each day from town. With the restriction of a day visit only pass, other camps would not have been feasible to conduct research in. Also, Mae La camp was visited in December by the researcher and some contacts were established then, which were utilized for the second visit. KWO among other international and community based organizations are very active in Mae La, so accessibility to explore programs and meet participants was made easier for the researcher.

### **1.6.2 DATA COLLECTION**

Research for this study was done via a combination of documentary study and field research. Through documentary study, many concepts and answers to the research question have been reviewed. By reading about the lives of Karen refugee women and Karen culture, empowerment programs, gender issues, and all things related to the research topic some conclusions can be drawn as to how empowerment has succeeded in helping refugee women in other situations and why empowerment of Karen refugee women living in camps in Thailand is necessary. This element of the research is a secondary data review.

The field research was conducted in Mae Sot and in Mae La refugee camp, this was the primary data for the study. The field research used for this study was qualitative in nature. The reason for using qualitative data collection was so that the lives, outlooks and worldviews of the refugee women and others interviewed could be best understood by the researcher. Data was collected in Mae La camp between the dates of June 21<sup>st</sup> and July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005 as well as August 12<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Each day the researcher visited the camp to conduct observation and interviews. Two different translators were used inside Mae La camp depending on which zone the researcher was conducting interviews in. During the evening and some afternoons in Mae Sot,

the interviewer was able to collect data by meeting with various NGO workers and refugee women outside of the camp. The field research used both case studies of refugee women as well as interviews and focus groups.

### **CASE STUDIES**

Five in-depth case studies were used in order to reach the objectives of the study and to answer the research question. In-depth qualitative interviews were used to obtain data in order to understand the experiences and lives of the refugee women. By spending time with the women, talking to them and witnessing their experiences in the camp, the researcher was able to meet the objectives of the study and can answer the research question. The case studies were the primary research.

### **INTERVIEWS**

Interviews were carried out with many persons involved in the refugee situation in order to contribute to the knowledge gained via the case studies. Interviews were conducted with service providers, NGO workers, UN staff, KWO staff and chairpersons, males working on women's programs in the camp and journalists familiar with the situation. Participant observation was also used, as the researcher was able to watch and participate in many of the programs being carried out within and outside the camp.

### **FOCUS GROUP**

Even though five women were chosen for in-depth case studies, numerous interview sessions were carried out with other refugee women. At the KWO office in Mae Sot, a series of focus group discussions were carried out with women enrolled in the human rights and democracy training program. Through these focus group discussions the researcher was able to understand the empowerment scheme of the program as well as comprehend women's experiences in the program and the effect that it has.

### **1.6.3 SELECTION OF THE CASES**

The participants used in the case study were selected based on the criteria that they were female, were of Karen ethnicity, seeking refuge within Thailand, and living in Mae La camp. Participants selected for the case study were women who were either directly involved in international or community based organizations or had become involved due to their circumstances within Burma or within the camp. Women who participated in the study were selected on their availability and willingness to share their experiences about their lives, living in the camp and experience with women's programs, with the researcher. Some of these women were introduced through the translators in Mae La and some were found by coincidence while spending time in the camp. The five case study participants were selected due to their different demographics. Some of the participants are involved in organizations as staff members while others are involved as participants. Some of the women are older and remember very well life in Karen state, and how they suffered under the SPDC. Some of the case study participants are young and came across the border when they were small children, or perhaps were even born in the camps. These women do not have any recollection of life inside Karen state and rely on the stories of their elders to understand what it was like. By selecting case study participants with very different histories and demographics a more holistic view of women's experiences and empowerment is understood.

### **1.6.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The scope of this study shows the current situation of Karen women in the camp and evaluates the effects of the existing humanitarian programs in the camp. Empowerment is measured based on interviews with women in the camp on their current situation and past experiences in Karen state and in the refugee camps. Many of the women interviewed were involved in KWO programs due to the strength and success of KWO programs within Mae La camp. Because of this trend, the main humanitarian program focused on in the study is the KWO. The research does not cover a historical overview of humanitarian assistance programs in the camp, rather uses the existing state of the programs for the to answer the research question and meet the objectives of the study.

### 1.6.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Due to the limited time spent with each of the participants, some serious ethical considerations were taken when conducting interviews. Many refugee women experienced unbearable conditions inside Burma, hence their journey across the border to live in Mae La camp. Some topics, although useful for the study, were not broached in the interview period. Issues such as rape of the women were not discussed unless brought up by the participant, due to the sensitivity of this issue. Proof of the high incidence of rape of women living in the camps can be drawn from reports such as *Shattering Silences* and *License to Rape* discussed in the literature review. Each case study participant received an explanation of the purpose of the researcher and the study before commencing the interview process.