

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1 DISCUSSION

In terms of the objectives of the study, the research found the following results. Karen refugee women living in Mae La camp do have conditions in their lives that make them vulnerable and make humanitarian assistance specific to them necessary. There are numerous examples of these conditions that were found in the case studies, such as: human rights abuses including rape during the conflict inside Karen state, breakdown of family structure, lack of financial support without adequate skills to make a living, and decreased protection in the community leading to increased threat of abuse and rape. Life in the refugee camp is very difficult physically, emotionally and psychologically. Resources are scarce as growing rice and vegetables and maintaining livestock is not possible under the crowded conditions, the refugees rely on humanitarian aid for food which many of them say is not enough. Most people in the camp report feeling imprisoned and fear that their future holds only decades of living within the barbed wire camp. Opportunities to leave the camp in pursuit of a normal life are scarce, after two decades of living as prisoners they have little hope that this will change in the near future.

The second objective was met by showing that women are being assisted by CBOs and IOs in order to deal with the conditions experienced within the conflict zone and while living in the camp. Women have been assisted through vocational training programs such as weaving and sewing, education on human rights and women's rights, emotional and psychological support through the KWO and the safe house as well as legal support to bring issues such as abuse and rape to the authorities. Camp life presents women with many difficulties as their support networks often dissipate and the ability for them and their partners to provide for their families no longer exists. Humanitarian assistance programs are sensitive to hardships that women face and have programs to assist them and better their experiences within the community. Examples of ways in which women given power to change their lives are

the following: education, education of both men and women on gender and human rights, income generation projects, and support in order to increase women's role in the camp's decision making processes.

The third objective of the study is met by understanding the empowerment scheme of the social programs both outside and within the camp. Most IOs and CBOs have gender elements to all of their projects but the KWO is the organization that deals with women's issues directly.

Empowerment of the women was examined through 4 main indicators provided by a UNHCR report: access, concientization, mobilization and control.

The research found that in some areas women were able to enjoy equal access to good and services within the camp. Women were reached equally in terms of food, shelter and medical care. One area in which women's access to good and services proved to be negative was in cases of community responses to sexual and gender based violence. Case report #2 shows a woman who is unable have a case of rape be taken seriously by the authorities proving that women are lacking access to crucial social services and assistance in the camp.

Both women and men are becoming more conscious of the concept of gender and issues such as gender-based violence through numerous trainings such as the SGBV program facilitated by UNHCR. Many women interviewed showed an increase in their knowledge of human rights and gender issues which lead to their individual empowerment.

Women in the camp are able to mobilize and come together to form women's groups which have led to the strengthening of women's networks in the camp such as the KWO. These networks have been successful in public lobbying for women's rights which contributes to women's empowerment. Cultural reasons are seen to obstruct women accessing some services such as social programs and women's groups. In this case gender roles have led to women having too much responsibility to be able to leave the home.

Women were least empowered in terms of control on a community level. Men dominate the majority of decision-making positions in the camp which has led to women's rights and issues not being taken seriously. Many women involved in the committee as well as staff members of many IOs and CBOs expressed this to be the main challenge of women's empowerment.

5.2 CONCLUSION

The research question of '*How are Karen refugee women in Thailand empowered through humanitarian assistance programs?*' is answered in the following way. Based on five in depth case studies, along with other interviews of key informants, observation and participation, the researcher was able to come to the following conclusions. Life in Mae La camp is difficult for both men and women for numerous reasons. Conditions in the refugee camp such as crowding, poverty, and lack of freedom lead to many social problems such as violence, depression, and drug and alcohol abuse. Women face specific problems and conditions both inside Karen state and inside the refugee camp because of their gender. Many women in Karen state were the victims of forced labor, forced relocations, breaking down of family and community, and sexual abuse and rape by the Burmese soldiers. Many women were forced to cross to Thailand on their own, taking responsibility for children and elders while the men stayed in the border area to fight. Women in the refugee camp have a large responsibility to take care of the family and the community under very harsh conditions. Feeding the family properly alone is difficult based on the food rations allocated by IOs. Women's rights are not a priority in the community as there are many other issues to deal with and since the camp management is predominately male these issues are not taken seriously. Due to the breakdown of the community structure women are at an increased threat of sexual abuse and rape.

Women however are being individually empowered by learning about human rights and democracy due to many efforts to raise awareness of human rights and sexual and gender based violence among both men and women in the camp community. Women are also able to learn skills in order generate income for their family, contributing to their individual empowerment. This progress in women's empowerment does have its limits as the male dominated camp management does not

prioritize women's issues and often does not bring attention to cases of violence against women and sexual abuse. The research concludes that Karen women in Mae La camp are being individually empowered by income generation, education, and increased knowledge of gender human rights and democracy. Many of these things are facilitated through community based organizations working in the camps which are supported by international organizations. The community based organizations, such as the KWO, are supported by international organizations predominantly through funding, resources and training. Women's empowerment however is limited on a community level due to cultural reasons such as traditional gender roles as well as male dominance in decision-making levels. Since women are unable to be in position of power within the camp management it has led to women's issues such as women's rights not being taken seriously or held in an important regard. This is the main obstruction of women's full empowerment within the camp. This however is recognized, and many are working to change this and striving towards more and increase in women's representation at management levels.

The hypothesis that humanitarian assistance programs can make progress towards women's empowerment is supported by the research finding in the sense that women in the camp are individually empowered. However, the empowerment is limited on the community level due, therefore the data findings does not support the hypothesis in it's entirety.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings suggest a number of implications for both IOs and CBOs working within the field of refugees and refugee women.

- 1) Progress of women's individual empowerment in Mae La is a key aspect of this study. Programs such as income generation and human rights and democracy training should be increasingly supported by humanitarian organizations through funding, resources and training.

- 2) Since women's empowerment faces limits due to misrepresentation of women in decision making roles at administrative levels, this study emphasizes the

importance of IOs working closely with the camp committee and authorities in order to support an increase in women's representation in decision-making levels within the camp. Focus on this issue in conjunction with education on gender roles may decrease the double burden of women working both in the household and the community.

3) This study recognizes within the camps that refugee women are facing certain vulnerabilities which must be responded to. Therefore, refugee camp structures which include support systems and response mechanisms to refugee women's needs are important. Most importantly, women must have access to social support when faced with an issue of violence or rape and must be able to efficiently have their case taken seriously with immediate legal action.

4) The research emphasizes the importance of all persons in the refugee population having education on subjects such as sexual and gender based violence, gender, and women's rights. By doing so, equal protection can be given to both men and women and the safety and well-being of refugee women can be best taken care of.

5) The research identifies the importance of humanitarian assistance to refugee women focusing on empowering women at the individual level as well and the community level. Through education of both men and women in the refugee population on gender issues, this goal may be more easily accomplished.