

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY



3.1 MAE LA CAMP

Mae La camp is located on road number 105 that runs from Mae Sot to Mae Sariang. The camp is located between kilometers 57-60 along the highway and has an area of about 1,148 Rai (1acre:4 Rai). The camp is on hilly ground and previous to being a refugee camp it was a private teak concession. The Huay Oak Ru stream flows through the camp from the east to the west down to the Moie River and is an important water source for some living in the camp. Another stream called Huay Chi Maw Ku runs through the middle and meets the Pa Ru stream on the northern side.

Mae La has 48,910 inhabitants that are split into three different Zones within the camp. Zone A is split into five housing groups A1-A5. Zone B is also split into five housing groups B1-B5. Zone C has seven housing groups C1A, C1B, C2, C3A, C3B, C4, and C5. There are many committees in the camp that are responsible for co-ordination of social affairs. There is a central committee of the entire area, section committees, as well as the house group committees. There are 15 positions on the central committee which are: chairman, vice chairman, secretary, assistant secretary, administrator, accountant, security guard, food stuff master, food stuff assistant, health care master, law and human rights master, law and human rights assistant, education master, youth organization master and women organization mistress. This central committee is the highest power in the camp and is elected via voting. The committee collaborates with UNHCR and the KRC and acts as a liaison between people living in the camp and the outside world. Within each zone the zone leaders act as a liaison between the people that they are responsible for and the camp committee, zone leaders are also elected by the people living in their zone. If an issue is too big to be dealt with within the zone it will be brought to the camp committee's attention via the zone leader.

There are three predominant religions in the camp. Approximately 50% of the camps inhabitants are Christians divided further into three sub-types. The Baptists have 15 churches and attend church on Sundays; the S.D.A. have 6 churches which they attend on Saturdays; the Anglicans attend church on Sunday and have 2 churches in the camp. Approximately 35% of the camps population is Buddhist and there are 4 temples. Islam makes up for the remaining 15% of the camp and there are 5 Muslim mosques.

There are two main hospitals in the camp, one in Zone B and another in Zone C. Food distribution is done twice per month; the break down of food rations is as follows:

Chart 1. Food Distribution -Mae La Refugee Camp

	Adults (over 5 yrs)	Children (under 5 years)
Rice	16 kilos/person/month	8 kilos/person/month
Yellow		
Bean	1 kilo/person/month	0.5 kilos/person/month
Fish Paste	1 kilo/person/month	0.5 kilos/person/month
Chili	0.5 kilos/person/month	0.25 kilos/person/month
Oil	1 kilo/person/month	0.25 kilos/person/month
Salt	1 kilo/person/month	0.5 kilos/person/month
Charcoal	10 kilos/person/month	0 kilos/person/month
	2 people/1	
Blanket	blanket/year	
Mosquito Net	3 people/1 net/year	
Clothes	1 person/1 set/year	

Source: Mae La camp committee 2005

People in the camps have the option of going to school and also can get involved in community activities. Opportunities past 12th standard in school are few and far between for the refugees. If someone does actually finish school they often have no chance to continue their studies. There are many problems that the Karen people face from living inside the refugee camp. Space is very limited and families must live in very close contact with each other, this can lead to conflict within the communities. Mae La camp continues to grow in numbers as more and more people flee Burma but the size of the camp remains the same. Due to lack of space, agriculture is not an option for the majority of families living in the camp; this

increases the dependency on humanitarian organizations to supply all food products. The refugees often reported feeling like prisoners, they are not allowed to leave the barbed wire perimeter of the camp and cannot safely return back to Burma. One of the main problems in the camp is that people do not have anything to occupy their time with; a lot of their time is spent sitting idle watching the days go by. This is harmful psychologically, emotionally and physically.

Mae La camp receives assistance from many NGOs and IOs. UNHCR is responsible for interviewing and registering new refugees who arrive from Burma and collaborates with the Thai authorities on these matters. UNHCR also supports the Thai government and the NGOs in the camp with their assistance programs and takes care of human rights issues within the camp. If and when the situation in Burma becomes safe again, the UN will be responsible for returning the refugees home.

The TBBC is responsible for housing construction and food supplies. COERR takes responsibility for educating the refugees about the environment. There are many health care organizations in Mae La camp. MSF has recently handed over most of the medical work to AMI. Handicap International is in the camp helping handicapped people in the camps, mostly soldiers who have been injured in battle or by landmines. SMRU (Shoklo Malaria Research Unit) works with Mahidol University in Bangkok and researches malaria risks in the area. Many organizations work on the education system in the camps, namely: ZOA, Consortium Thailand, TOPS, ICS, ADRA and DEP.

3.2 HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN MAE LA CAMP

As noted above, there are numerous organizations providing humanitarian assistance in Mae La camp. Due to the relatively short time spent in the field and the large number of programs present, an in-depth exploration of certain key programs was conducted. An overview of a few of those main humanitarian programs will be outlined in this chapter.

UNHCR is responsible for refugee registration and protection, and supports numerous projects within the camp. UNHCR's primary purpose is to safeguard the

rights and well-being of refugees (UNHCR, 2004: 1). While carrying out research in Mae La camp, UNHCR was preparing to do registration of all the refugees living there. This process entails each refugee giving their name, having their fingerprints taken as well as an individual photo, a photo with their immediate family and a photo with their extended family. UNHCR also coordinates refugee resettlement in which refugees are sent to another country to live. The process for this includes collaboration between UNHCR, Thailand's MOI as well as host governments. This is currently a large program as a number of western governments are sending representatives in order to commence the process of accepting Burmese refugees into host countries.

One specific program of UNHCR in the camp is the Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) program. This program works to provide protection and assistance to refugees who are survivors of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). UNHCR can provide the following things to a survivor of SGBV: ensure immediate protection; ensure proper medical treatment, ensure community and social support; provide information to the survivor on their rights and social services available; provide a lawyer to provide legal counseling and legal representation; work with the survivor in the traditional justice system if they wish (UNHCR, 2004: 2-3). The SGBV is run primarily by refugees themselves in the camps, they are giving the resources and the training from UNHCR in order to be able to conduct training and set up response mechanisms in the camp.

The main organization which provides education working in the Karen camps is ZOA refugee care. ZOA is a organization based in the Netherlands and works in many countries around the world. Its mission is to

“support refugees, internally displaced, returnees and other affected by conflict or natural disaster in their transition from instability and lack of basic needs towards a situation in which conditions enabling a process of structural development have been (re-)established” (ZOA, 2003: 4).

In Thailand, ZOA works specifically on education systems in the camps. ZOA is implementing the Karen Education Project which aims to enhance the

education offered to more than 25,000 refugee children. Starting in 2003 ZOA expanded its program to include vocational training to 1,700 students. The areas of study in the vocational training programs are: agriculture, sewing and weaving, business administration, cooking, and engineering.

ZOA also supports the community based organization KED (Karen Education Department). ZOA advises the KED in areas such as: planning, coordination, evaluation and staff training. ZOA also sits on the board of the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC) (ZOA, 2003: 9).

Medicins Sans Frontieres was responsible for medical care in the refugee camps for many years. Recently (July 2005) they have withdrawn their services and Aide Medicale Internationale (AMI) has taken over responsibility of all medical services in the camp. AMI runs the hospitals in each camp which are able to deal with the majority of medical problems, those that are too serious are referred to Dr. Cynthia's clinic or Mae Sot hospital. The medical organizations in the camp also work closely with other NGOs on issues that may overlap. An example of this is in cases of sexual and gender based violence doctors and nurses provide medical care for the survivors and give information to UNHCR so that it may be used as a proof for legal procedures.

3.3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IOS AND CBOS

The research question of the study asks how refugee women are empowered through humanitarian assistance programs. Throughout the duration of the field visit it became clear that the humanitarian assistance programs in the area are not solely and directly responsible for ground work in the camps, rather a cooperation between the IOs and CBOs is present which then leads to the carrying out of projects within the camps. Although each organization working within the camp strives towards gender equality and gender mainstreaming in all of their work, issues specific to women's needs are almost always directed towards the KWO. Both the network within the CBOs and between the CBOs and the IOs is very much intertwined. The KWO group is very strong in Mae La camp and is seen by some almost as a sub-

committee of the larger camp committee. Having said this, they do not have any official decision making power like the camp committee does.

There are numerous CBOs present in the refugee camps, some have been developed within the camp while some were founded within Karen state before the Karen people fled to Thailand. The KWO is one of the strongest CBOs and was founded in Karen state and then brought to the camps. The SGBV project, although founded and supported by UNHCR is mainly run by refugees themselves in the camp and is managed within the camp. There are other CBOs that cover different areas in the camp.

DARE (Drug and Alcohol Recovery Education) is a community based organization in Mae La camp. It was founded with the help of a Canadian women by the name of Pam Rogers, in 2002. When she came to Thailand she was working for NHEC (National Health Education Committee) and she helped the reufgees made a newsletter about drugs, alcohol and their effects. One of the Karen leaders then took the responsibility to take on the project and they decided on a three-year duration. The first training was given in Mae Sariang. In the first year the CEWT (Community Education Worker Training) was carried out for 3 months and the AWT (Addiction Worker Training) was carried out for 9 months. These trained persons now work in 16 different places in the camps along the Thai Burma border and now work in Mae La camp. Treatment is given to drug and alcohol users, the main drugs used in the camp are opium and yaba.

The Muslim Women's League of Burma also has a group in Mae La camp. There are 11 people on the committee of this organization. The MWLB works closely with the KWO and has similar project for Muslim women living in Mae La camp, 15% of the population in Mae La camp is Muslim. They deal with social and religious and also have sewing training programs like the KWO. The MWLB started in 2002, there were many Muslim women participating in the KWO programs and they decided to found their own organization.

Many interviews were carried out to gain an understanding of the relationship between the CBOs and IOs. At the KWO office in Mae Sot, an explanation was given

of many examples of their various donors and where their funding gets allocated. Some examples of IOs donating to KWO projects are:

- Canadian Embassy-donates to an income generation program for women to learn how to bake and sell bread and cake
- UNICEF-gives materials for new born babies in a project called “Baby Kids”, this project is in all 7 Karen camps
- Consortium-donates financial aid and supplies for literacy program
- TOPS-provides funds for KWO safe house
- BRC Japan-KWO emergency fund, has been used for things such as paying the rent for the Mae Sot office, emergency funds are allocated when other funds do not sufficiently cover costs.
- PARTNER-supports an orphanage in 3 camps

Therefore, when evaluating the relationship between humanitarian assistance programs and women’s empowerment it must be understood that the majority of the groundwork being done within the camps is by the CBOs which means the refugees are the implementers inside the camp. This method is effective in creating the most promising chance for sustainable programs. Many IOs provide not only financial aid but also support in the capacity of training programs and workshops. Examples of this are: ZOA’s education training programs (RTT-resident teacher training), UNCHR projects such as SGBV (Sexual Gender Based Violence) and Women at Risk project, TOPS Inclusive Learning Friendly Environment program. The working relationship between the IOs and CBOs is crucial to the well-being of the refugee population. Although the refugees have the skills and motivation to create social programs for their people, they cannot do so without resources provided by IOs.

Many interview participants explained that issues to do solely with women and women’s programs were all handled by the KWO within the camps. When the researcher asked the KWO chairwoman for Mae La camp if there were other NGOs or CBOs, which dealt with women’s issues in particular, she answered,

“There are so many NGOs that work in the camp, they work in all different areas, for example in health or education. If women problems arise within these organizations, the issues are brought to the KWO to be dealt with”

As the KWO is very strong and prevalent in Mae La camp, it is automatic that issues regarding women are brought directly to them to be dealt with. This was the

answer that was given by all the NGOs and CBOs that were interviewed. Since the organizations are so intertwined women's empowerment is a focus of all organizations in the camp. For example, the medical organizations support women who are survivors of rape and violence and cooperate with other organization on proof for the legal system. UNHCR has many programs which focus on women's issues such as their SGBV program and Women At Risk program. Both of these programs are run by local people in the camp and UNHCR uses the KWO as a focal point to implement the programs while providing resources and training. TBBC is supporting the drive to increase women's representation on the camp committee and have a long term goal to have 50% of the people on the committee women. They support organization such as the KWO in the camp that can work towards this goal.

3.4 KWO STRUCTURE

The KWO is active in all 7 Karen camps along the border area. They have offices both inside and outside of the camps. According to the organization, the structure of the KWO is as follows,

There are three zones in Mae La camp; in each zone there are 15 KWO committee members. Both zone A and zone B are broken down into five sections a piece, zone C being the largest zone is broken down into seven. In each section there are 7 members, which makes 35 members in zone A and B and 49 in zone C.

Work responsibilities are broken up in to three categories which are social¹, health education and organizing.

The 'social' category (outlined by the KWO) contains three subcategories which are, vulnerable persons and care (ex: orphans, widows, elderly), conflict resolution (ex: domestic, sexual abuse and human rights abuse) and vocational training (weaving, sewing, candle making).

The 'health education' section contains four sub sections which are, adult literacy, nurseries, SGBV training, and trainings and workshops. Examples of these

trainings and workshops are, human rights, women and children's rights, gender awareness, women's empowerment and health education.

The final category named 'organizing' contains the following: organizing trips, cultural affairs, ceremonies, festivals, women's knowledge and information exchange, sports and athletics, and communication and co-operation with authorities, UNHCR, NGOs and other organizations.

3.5 CASE STUDIES

Five women were chosen for in depth case studies in order to meet the objectives of the research and answer the research question. All women were given a different name in order to ensure confidentiality.

3.5.1 CASE REPORT 1- EH PAW HTOO¹

Eh Paw Htoo is 50 years old and is the KWO chairperson for Mae La camp and sits on the camp committee. Immediately upon meeting with her you can tell that she is a very strong woman in spirit and is very passionate about her work. Her house is directly across from the KWO office, the two only a few steps away from each other and it is obvious that she does not wish separate her work from her private life very much, something that would be difficult to do in the refugee camp anyways. Beneath her house are many traditional Karen clothes, hanging on a piece of bamboo, that have been woven by women working in the KWO programs. She was very welcoming to me when my translator explained my research and reasons for being in the camp, even though I knew that she could somewhat understand me when I was speaking English to my translator. She immediately told me that I was welcome to come to stay in her house over night and when I explained that my camp pass was only for the day time she quickly told me not to worry; she would make sure the authorities would not see me, it wouldn't be a problem. Unlike many people living in the camp, Eh Paw Htoo keeps very busy and has many responsibilities. I saw her

¹ This interview was conducted on Tuesday July 5th at the KWO main office in Zone C, Mae La camp.

many times in the camp conducting meetings, in sewing workshops and busy in the community before I actually sat down and formally interviewed her on July 5th.

Eh Paw Htoo was very knowledgeable on the history of the KWO and explained that it started inside Karen state in Burma. Due to the conflict the KWO had to cease its work for a while but in 1985 it was able to start again. Every year the KNU used to celebrate their reforms in Manerplaw, Burma in the beginning of April and the KWO also started to do the same. She became involved in the KWO when it was reformed on April 9th 1996. She attended a workshop at Dr. Cynthia's clinic² which trained people in proposal writing; at that point they were able to get 10 sewing machines and funding for the weaving project from the government of New Zealand.

When asked to explain why it is important to have a women's organization in the camp, Eh Paw Htoo answered that she could talk about the answer to this question forever as there are so many reasons, I asked her to try to explain to me as we had all day to talk about it if she wished. She explained,

“In societies like Canada and Australia there are women's organizations that enable women to stand up for themselves, and therefore, these women have dignity. Karen women have been oppressed by the Burmese soldiers. Women have to do the same physical labor as men, and when they cannot keep up since they have less strength they are beaten by the soldiers. Women have endured so many things by the Burmese soldiers; rape, death during pregnancy and labor among many other things. Because of all these things, I want women to stand up and know their rights and to be able to learn about their rights. I saw it once with my own eyes in Karen state in 1990, a woman whose hands were tied and she was forced to carry a very large load. When the woman could not carry it anymore she was beaten by the Burmese soldiers. Also since there were less women than men they were often forced to sleep with the soldiers, they are raped by the soldiers, many women also died in pregnancy because they don't have the right health care.

When I asked Eh Paw Htoo if men and women have the same rights in the camp she said “Never”. Eh Paw Htoo explained that women and men do not have the same rights in the camp since men wished to oppress women. She expressed that

² Mae Tao clinic is in Mae Sot and run by Dr. Cynthia, a Burmese doctor. This clinic treats over 100,000 patients per year who usually are escaping from Burma in need of medical help which they cannot access inside the country

since there are only 2 women on the committee out of 15 people total, women's issues such as violence against women and rape cases, are not taken care of properly. Even though she herself is on the committee, she said that most of the time she must listen and obey, her voice is not often heard. The KWO is very active in the camp but women don't have rights, they have to ask permission to do everything and they often are not given any money for their programs. For a long time the KWO did not receive any money but now they are getting help from donors. Since the KWO is so prevalent in the camp when visitors from Bangkok or from other countries come to visit they see all the things that the KWO is doing, this makes it so the camp committee is unable to stop the momentum of the fight for women's rights. Since violence against women is usually only dealt with among women, she feels that this shows that men have more power than women in the camps. She felt that women might be empowered among women, but not within the larger community which includes men. Sometimes when they have a problem with violence against women they are not able to take it to the camp committee because they don't listen, they can only take these issues to the section leaders. The camp leaders do not care about these issues and do not want to bring more attention to the issues. When she thinks about the amount of work that men do in the camp compared to what women do she sees that men have to do much less, the women are always so busy with so many responsibilities.

Although the situation is difficult it is getting better, women are learning about their rights and starting to stand up for recognition of their rights in the camp. I asked her if there are any NGOs or IOs that work specifically with women, she answered this

“There are so many NGOs working in the camp, they work in many different things: health, education etc. If there are specific women's problems they send these issues to us at the KWO. We have a lot of co-operation with NGOs, we do exchanges and trainings together”

When asked if it will always be this way, that men have more rights than women, she explained that this would depend on the activities of people and how they try to change how things are now. In the past, three Australian women came to Mae La and gave training on refugee women and the specific vulnerabilities that they face.

If things like this keep happening she feels there can be change and women can have more power. She emphasized the importance of pressure from the outside, from foreigners and from UNHCR and the KRC. She said that she often has to pressure UNHCR and at KRC and make them do something about women's rights in the camp. If KRC said that women have to be better represented on the committee then it would have to happen, but they don't put this pressure on. I asked her why KRC does not put the pressure on and she felt that this was because most of the people working in KRC are men.

She concluded by saying,

“I am not fighting only for my rights, or rights of women in this camp, but rights of women around the world. Women in my generation living in the camps do not have much education, I want the next generation of women to be educated and to become equal with men. I will fight for women's rights until I die, and will be satisfied only when men accept women to work with them and be equal to them.”

Eh Paw Htoo's family and immediate community appeared to be very strong. Her daughter is now the secretary of the KWO in Mae La camp and I learnt from her that Eh Paw Htoo's husband died many years ago. Eh Paw Htoo was so passionate about her work and was not scared to point out all the difficulties that she sees in the camp and with the camp management. She painted a very clear picture of what problems women are facing in the camps.

3.5.2 CASE REPORT 2- LER GOW MYINT

This interview came about as Ler Gow Myint showed interest in telling her story to me when I was in her community and conducting interviews in her area of the camp. I ran into her initially on the road one day as I was walking with my translator. We were looking for a woman named Annabelle who worked for the KWO and is responsible for the cross border projects. Ler Gow Myint was very helpful in us finding this woman and she immediately latched on to us. Her English was quite limited but I was able to communicate with her slightly. She seemed quite distraught and it was clear that she had been through a lot of difficult experiences. I saw her around very often when I was staying in the camp and it was clear that she didn't have anything to occupy her time with, she wasn't attending school and didn't seem to have any sort of social network. One thing that is very obvious about the young

people in the camp is that they are very close with each other and spend close to all of their time together, mostly just sitting and talking, playing music or working on their studies. Ler Gow Myint didn't seem to be a part of any of these networks of youngsters. As one of the main problems in the camp is a lack of activities to keep one occupied, Ler Gow Myint seemed to be suffering further since she did not have any friends to pass the time with. She seemed happy to spend the time telling us her story.

Ler Gow Myint is 17 years old, when her parents got married they fought a lot, her mother wanted a divorce but then thought possibly if she had children the marriage would get better. Ler Gow Myint parents ended up having four children and she is the oldest. During Ler Gow Myint's life her father would get drunk and beat up her mother a lot, finally her mother left to Bangkok in 2003 and never came back. When her mother left, Ler Gow Myint could not go to school since her mother used to pay for it by making bread and selling it in the camp. Her father told her that if she wanted to go to school she should sell herself in order to get the money; he used to beat up Ler Gow Myint very frequently, she explained that this was because she was the eldest, she always got punished the most. When the KWO got word of her situation they invited her to come and stay in a dormitory for women who suffer from these kinds of problems called a safehouse, Ler Gow Myint felt looked down upon in her community because of her problems. She stayed at the KWO dormitory for one year but felt strange since most of the people living there were Buddhist and she is Christian. Ler Gow Myint went to the church to get baptized. There a CE (Christian Education) leader said that she could stay with him if she wanted to, but his wife then protested this since she was suspicious of his intentions and so the offer was taken away. For a few days Ler Gow Myint stayed with a friend but they fought a lot and so she had to leave. She then had nowhere to go so she tried to return home but the same problems happened with her father, he was beating her again and chased her away, so she was forced to leave once more.

The CE leader asked her again if she wanted to stay with him. He gave her some money and some food and told her that he loves her as a child. She ended up going to stay with the CE leader and his family and stayed there for three or four months. She then explained what happened while staying there,

“People were looking down at me for staying in his house, they were suspicious of what was happening. I wanted to go and study in school but I could not and I felt so sad and so lonely. The CE leader requested that I be with him in a sexual way but I said no. The community was really looking down on me, I could tell that people were talking. This was also the reason that the CE leader's wife didn't like me, she knew her husband's intentions. One evening the CE leader came into my room while I was reading my bible and he tried to force himself on me. I fought with him but was so shocked that I became unconscious. When I woke up I knew that I had been raped and I ran to the toilet because I was so scared. I knew that I had to leave and I ran to a friend's house.”

While Ler Gow Myint was staying at her friend's house her mother's relatives that were still in Karen state invited her to come and stay with them but she did not want to go. She very much wanted to go and study at the bible school but she felt that everyone there knew her story and so there would be many problems if she went there. She went to see the pastor for advice and there she met Annabelle from the KWO. Annabelle heard her story and became determined to make this story heard and bring justice to her father and the man that raped her. The KWO has now taken the initiative to take care of Ler Gow Myint's case. They first took the problem to the Zone C committee. The committee called the CE leader and his wife to come in for questioning. The first day that they came he denied that this had happened, the second day he denied it again, the third day he admitted he had had sex with her but he claimed that it was consensual. The health committee did a check up on her and confirmed that it had been rape. The committee decided that the CE leader had to go to jail for three years close to the border. In the end, they excused him from his jail term and told him that he could pay 1000 Baht per year instead. At this point in her story Ler Gow Myint expressed that,

“When I heard this price that they told him he could pay to get out of his jail time I cried and cried, I couldn't believe that my worth was only 3000 Baht. They were trying to cover up the problem saying that I had been interested in the CE leader, they took my situation very lightly.”

After this she still did not want to give up so KWO continued to press to have her case taken care of, at the time of writing they were still working on this. Since the camp committee was not effective in getting something done they then were taking the case to the camp leader and the KRC. The last interview conducted revealed that

they were still waiting for an answer from the KRC; if this proved to be ineffective they would take it to UNHCR.

Ler Gow Myint was very obviously psychologically damaged by all of the horrible things that had happened to her. She seemed lost and felt that she had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. The KWO, since responsible for women's issues in the camp, was working hard to help her but it seemed that that it was very difficult to make progress as to persuading the camp committee to take action. I followed up many times with Ler Gow Myint and Annabelle and asked them if anything was being done or anything new had happened but they were still failing to make any progress. She always was extremely excited to see me, as if I would be able to do something to help her, and I felt horrible that I couldn't. It was clear that she had no support network of friends or family to help her out. The camp justice system was failing to deal with her case efficiently and effectively. At that point she was living in the KWO dormitory again but told me that she didn't feel comfortable there since she felt that everyone in the community looked down on her because of what happened to her. This was a very sad case to hear, and it seemed that not much was going to be done to help her.

3.5.3 CASE REPORT 3- TOE POE

Toe Poe is 22 years old, lives in Mae La camp as was in Mae Sot to participate in a two month long training called Human Rights and Democracy Education Project (HRDEP). This case was somewhat limited, as she did not have a long amount of time to spend in the interview, and the agenda of the training course was quite busy. Also, research was done out of the participants normal setting and I was not able to see her home environment. Toe Poe's case is important to include however, since she is from Mae La camp and a part of a women's training course. There were 14 women participating in the training, 12 from different refugee camps and 2 IDPs from inside Burma. The girls seemed extremely excited to be at the training as this is a great opportunity for them and a chance to get out of the camps for a while. It was quite difficult to get the women to Mae Sot, but with some negotiation with the Thai authorities all the women registered were able to come. The KWO office is just off of the highway that runs towards the Burmese border, it is situated on a small street

where a few other Karen people have their houses. All of the participants live inside the KWO office while they are doing the training course since it would be risky for them to walk around Mae Sot town. If they run into the authorities there is a good chance they may have problems due to their lack of papers and may be sent back into the camps or be deported to Burma. After this program is complete the women go back to teach human rights and democracy inside the camps in post secondary education schools.

Toe Poe has been in Mae La camp for nine years and lives there with one brother and her parents, her mother and father had already entered the refugee camps before she was born so she never experienced life under the SPDC and has never been inside Karen state or elsewhere in Burma. They lived in another refugee camp when she was small and then moved to Mae La camp nine years ago. She attended the 'Karen Young Women Leadership School' in Mae Ra Ma Luang camp and there was approached to be a participant in the HRDEP training in Mae Sot. When asked to explain how this program helps the Karen people, Toe Poe explained,

“Most people in the camps don't know about human rights and democracy so it is important that people learn about it. This program focuses on teaching youth, which is very important, when the youth learn about human rights and democracy they are able to teach the rest of the community and set an example.”

Toe Poe explained that even though men still are the majority of the representatives on the camp committee and that they make the majority of the decisions, this seems to be changing. When she lived in Mae Ra Ma Luang camp she saw that the number of women on the camp committee there is increasing. There are now 3 women that have been elected to be on the committee out of a total of 9.

I asked if it is only women that are involved in the KWO programs and she said that even though mostly yes, it is only women who are in the programs, the whole family benefits from the KWO training. She explained that the KWO also has programs to help both male and female handicapped people, women that have too many children, single parents, orphans and IDPs.

When asked to give her definition of empowerment Toe Poe gave this definition,

“Empowerment is when women learn and are taught things that let them 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 but now they can dare to speak out for themselves.”

Toe Poe explained that from what she has seen, people are benefiting from women learning about their rights. Men sometimes say that this affects women, and they start to do less housework and sometimes they complain about women’s roles changing. Bit by bit things are improving in the community. Toe Poe expressed that men and women play different roles in the refugee situation, especially when fleeing conflict. Men are the protectors, when there is a problem they have to protect everybody. Women’s roles are to take care of the children and this is very difficult for people who are running from the SPDC. Children don’t understand they have to be quiet and can’t cry so it is hard for the women who have to try to explain this to them. She explained that the difference between men and women’s experience from the SPDC is that even though both men and women face the threat of torture, forced labor and death, women also face the threat of rape from the SPDC. Since the soldiers don’t feed the porters they often get too weak to work after three or four days, when they stop working, the soldiers kill them.

When asked what she wished for the most, Toe Poe said she wanted democracy and peace in Karen state, and to be able to go home with her family. She was very excited to be involved in this human rights and democracy training and she thinks it is very important for women in the community to learn about their rights, and for men and women to be educated about human rights. She thinks that this will be able to make change in her community.

3.5.4 CASE REPORT 4- MAY AYE³

May Aye has been in Thailand for just over one month and is now living at the Zone C safe house⁴ in Mae La camp, she is 42 years old. She left Burma with her two

³ This interview was conducted at the KWO safe house in Zone C, Mae La camp on Sunday July 3rd.

children since there was nothing for them to eat and it was very expensive for the children to go to school there. The conditions at the safe house were very basic and quite depressing; a lot of the women that were there were obviously very mentally damaged from some of the experiences they have been through. One woman who was around us when we were doing our interview had clearly lost her mind, I was told that she went to Bangkok to try to make some money and was beaten up and raped by the people that she stayed with. The safe house is tucked away around the corner from a nursery school and quite close to the KWO office. May Aye seemed very surprised that anyone would be interested in hearing about her life and her story but she was happy to talk to me. We had to use two translators as she spoke Po Karen, a different dialect to most of the people in the camp and one that my translator was not totally familiar with. While we conducted the interview she was feeding her children. I could tell that they had been without sufficient food for a while before getting to the camp since both her and her children looked very skinny and malnourished. On their journey from Burma they had no money and so were not able to buy food, now that they were in the camp they were given rice and some vegetables from the safe house where they were staying. The two children seemed to be quite sick with horrible coughs and not much energy. She was feeding them plain rice with a few vegetables on top; they were sharing one bowl of food between the three of them. We sat on the bamboo floor in the front of the house, a hallway went down the middle and I could see a few rooms with mats on the floor. She explained that they had to live on the porch like floor at the front of the house since all the other rooms were full.

A few years previously, while she was still living in Burma, May Aye's husband left to Bangkok and never returned, she thinks that he might be dead but she is not sure. Her and her children were starving and her children were very sick, she knew that they needed to go somewhere to get help. At that point she wanted to flee to Thailand where she heard there was food and refuge but she had no money to travel with. She used 50 kyat, a small portion of her money, to gamble in hopes of winning enough to leave Burma. She was very lucky and won 40 000 kyat (approx 200 Baht).

⁴ The safe house is a house in Mae La camp that is run by the KWO and is sponsored by TOPS. This is a house where women can go to live if they are homeless or having problems at home with domestic violence and abuse. There is food provided there. There are 4 safe houses in Mae La camp

With this money she decided to go to Thailand with her children to try to get medical attention and food. They took the bus to Myawaddy, when they arrived the border was closed and they crossed through the river. The Thai soldiers hurried them along and helped them come out of the river. They went to Dr. Cynthia's clinic in Mae Sot. They stayed at the clinic for a while since her son was sick. They got medicine for him and stayed there for ten days. While at the clinic one of the KWO staff members in Mae Sot found her and talked to her, this staff member contacted the KWO women in the camp and arranged for Na Win Myint to go and live at the safe house in Mae La camp where she stays now with her two children. May Aye explained her situation in the safe house,

“Even in the safe house I don't have enough food. Since we missed the refugee registration we cannot get food rations inside the camp. The safe house can only provide us with rice. Sometimes I wash other people's clothes to get money, but often there is no work. Even though the situation is hard, now my kids can eat and go to school. In Burma it was too expensive to send them.”

The day that I visited her she could not find any work, there was no one who wanted her to wash clothes. She did manage to get a job looking after somebody's child for the day, a responsibility that would pay 5 Baht for the whole day. She explained that now that they are in the camp her children can go to school. She is having problems with her daughter since she gets very homesick while she is at school and often the teacher sends her home. One of the main problems is that they arrived after the UNHCR registration so they are not registered as refugees and they are not able to get food rations for the three of them. Many unregistered persons stay in the camp as the MOI is not able to monitor each and every person that walks through the gate, however, if you are not registered by UNHCR there is no way to obtain food rations for you and your family. They have to rely on the safe house for food and housing and she has no money to get uniforms for the children to go to school.

May Aye planned to start in a KWO training program for sewing or weaving at some point in the near future, she felt that this would be a good way for her to earn income to feed her children and have money for her family.

After the interview I asked my translator if she thought it would be a good idea to buy some food for May Aye and her two children. We consulted with my translator's aunt, who works closely with the safe house. She agreed that this would be a good thing to do so we went to the market together. I bought a few cans of sardines, some vegetables and washing soap. It was very cheap, much less than half of what this would cost in Bangkok. We brought it back to her and gave her the gifts. She was so happy and shocked to receive it, wondering why this stranger had chosen to buy food for her family. I then asked if we could take a photo of her and her children. She was so proud of them and fixed up their clothes, told them to stand up straight for the photo. This was an amazing thing to see. She thanked us so many times in Karen, Thai and English and they sat on the porch which is now their home and waved goodbye. Her reaction to our visit showed the difficulty of her life thus far, and her not being accustomed to people helping her.

In August I revisited with May Aye, she was very emotional to see my translator and I arrive. We spoke about how life is going for her in Mae La camp. The KWO wished to move her to another safe house in Zone A but she explained that she would not let them. In the two months that she had been there she had made some friends and felt more comfortable in her surrounding. The thought of moving her family once again terrified her. She spoke of her husband and the fact that since she is now gone from her home in Burma she thinks she will never see him again. She was very emotional talking about this and had difficulty getting the words out because she was crying so hard. She had been able to move into one of the rooms in the safe house and she was able to have some privacy for her and her children. She spoke a lot of her life in Karen state, close to Paan, where they had no food and were in constant fear of the military. She said that life in the camp is still hard, but so much better than it was inside Burma.

3.5.5 CASE REPORT 5- NAW AUNG⁵

Naw Aung is 42 years old and is a participant in the KWO weaving program where women learn to weave, are given the opportunity to sell what they weave and

⁵ The interview with Naw Aung was conducted in Mae La camp at my translator's aunt's house on Monday July 4th.

have some income to support them and their families. She is from Paan district and has been living in Mae La camp for four years. She seemed happy to meet with me but a bit confused as to why I would want to hear her story. She was very small but looked very strong as if she had been doing hard work her whole life. She was living in Burma with her three children and her first husband, at some point he left for Bangkok he never came back and she heard that he might be dead. She then married her second husband and because he was a Karen soldier they could not stay in their village in Karen state. They left for Thailand together and she had to leave two of her children behind since it would be too hard to take them on the journey. Her one son who came with her on the journey to Thailand died along on the way and she was unable to find out the reason, they had to keep moving and she could not investigate the medical cause of his death. She had to give up five gold necklaces in order for her husband to be released from his post at the KNU. Once he was finally released after much negotiation they were not able to return to their village since the DKBA were there and they would not dare to return. When they arrived in Thailand they went to a Thai village first where both her and her husband could find work. After some time her husband was shot dead in that village, this was over a cockfight gambling debt. After his death she had no family or community; so she came to live in Mae La camp. Before her husband died she begged him to let her go back to Burma to see her children but he did not let her go, now that he is dead she has no means to go back and get them. Shortly after arriving in Mae La camp she met a pastor and married him. In the first few years that she lived in the camp she used to travel outside the camp to work in the fields planting corn; she had to stop this job since it was so hard on her body. She said that this job hurt her body so much and she was always having headaches.

Naw Aung started to learn how to weave one month before I met her in one of the KWO training programs in Mae La camp. She can make men's sarongs which are easiest to weave but hopes to learn how to make clothes and women's sarongs as well. She says that it is not difficult to learn but she is not very good at it. Really talented and experienced weavers can make up to 10 or 20 a day but since she is just starting she is not that fast. After the three months of training she can start to get paid for her work and then can pay for things around the house and can support her new family. If she is not able to make money from weaving she will have to go back to the

cornfields to work and make money but she hopes that she will not have to do this since she dislikes it very much.

If Naw Aung is able to start making money from weaving she will be the only breadwinner in the household since her husband does not get paid for his work and now is too sick to go to his job. Her husband was getting paid for his work before when he was working as a missionary but now since he is sick he is not working and they have no income. She explained that some people in the camp don't have enough money and they don't have enough food to eat from the food rations they are given. Her husband's son and his wife have now moved into their house and so the food rations are not enough to feed everyone living in her home.

Naw Aung has been able to meet friends through the weaving project and likes this job more than working in the fields since it is easier on her body. When she was young she had to take care of her families cows so she was not able to get an education, what she wants the most is to be able to become educated. Since she has no trade and no education she felt there was no job for her and that is why she came to learn how to weave. After she finishes her day of weaving she goes home and has to start on the housework. She had to carry the water and prepare the food. On the weekends she is able to grow some food in a very small garden outside of their house. She used to be Buddhist but since she married the pastor she had become Christian. Naw Aung seemed to continue to get married to try to have some sort of security in her life.

Naw Aung was heartbroken that she had to leave her two children in Burma and that she was not able to go back to see them, she expressed this over and over and was close to tears each time that she talked about it. She didn't think that she would be able to ever get back to see them since the journey across the border is so rough and dangerous.

She then brought us to the weaving room where she is learning to weave. She shares her station with another woman who was there working when we arrived. Naw Aung seemed embarrassed to weave in front of us since she felt that she was not very good at it. There were other pairs of women working in the room, a large bamboo

building. The light was very dim where they were weaving and I was thinking how hard it would be to work under the conditions all day for six or seven days a week, the amount of days that these women would normally work. To weave the women have to sit on a very hard wooden bench. We stayed for a while and she showed us how to weave, after this we let her get back to her work.

3.6 HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Interviews were conducted with numerous international and community based organizations, the main points of some of these meetings are as follows:

UNHCR

At UNHCR, an interview was conducted one of the field staff member. They explained that the gender programs being conducted in the camps strive to educate both men and women what gender and gender based violence is. In the camps a protocol response is being created. The protocol will be used when a case of sexual gender based violence arises in the camp, and will give the survivor a clear plan of action of how to deal with the situation. UNHCR has spent the past two years interviewing people in all three camps in Tak province to find out the best way to create the protocol. UNHCR is working to make sure that survivors of SGBV are given the option to take action through Karen traditional law or through Thai law. If Thai law is chosen, a lawyer is arranged by UNHCR.

They explained that a large hurdle has to do with the camp committee. It is hard to get the committee involved and to have women's issues taken seriously since the committee is mostly male. Enforcing that women must be half of the committee may not be the best answer; this can possibly put a double burden on the women since they still carry the large responsibility of the workload in the home. Just because women are on the committee does not guarantee they are a part of the decision-making power. The best route is through education of everyone in the camp on issues such as: gender, gender-based violence and women's issues.

ZOA

At ZOA an interview with one of the field office staff was conducted on Monday July 11th. The relationship between the IOs and the CBOs along the border area was discussed. They explained that for the most part the IOs are supporting and collaborating with the CBOs to implement programs within the camp and along the border area. In 1997 ZOA started the Karen Education Project and in 2003 the vocational training project. ZOA engages in capacity building within the camps and helps the local organizations with strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation and planning and reporting. ZOA conducts teacher training in camps and engages in curriculum development. Almost all the schools in the camps are supported by the KED except for some of the religious school which have private donors. ZOA maintains gender mainstreaming and equality as an important part of all projects but does not have any initiatives especially for women.

TOPS

A staff member at TOPS was interviewed on Monday July 11th at the TOPS office in Mae Sot. TOPS is currently working on three projects in the area: ECD (Early Childhood Development), SSP (Social Service Programme), and TCD (Thai Community Development Programme). TOPS provides a salary to 200 nursery schoolteachers in the camps and funding too feed 4000 children in the schools. TOPS provides training workshops to Thai villages and within the camps. Within the camps they conducted a training for nursery school teachers called ILFE (Inclusive Learning Friendly Environment). TOPS gains the majority of its funds through proposal writing to larger organizations such as UNDP and ZOA.

TOPS is the financial supporter of the KWO safe house in the refugee camps which gives a home to women who are widows, survivors of abuse and/or violence, or unable to support themselves and their families on their own. TOPS also helps to find families who can take these women in helps to find them homes outside of the safe house.

SGBV STAFF MEMBER

One of the male staff members was interviewed. He is 38 years old and works with the SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) project in Mae La camp. He was interviewed at the KWO main office, Zone C, Mae La camp on Wednesday July 6th. The SGBV project was formed by UNHCR in 2002; it deals with gender discrimination and has 18 committee members. UNHCR initiated this project and gave training to people in the camp about women's rights and gender issues. He explained that they work towards no discrimination between men and women and also work towards 50% of women in management positions. The project gives training once a month about gender based violence, including all three types: physical, emotional, and psychological. Training is given to all kinds of people in the camp and at the trainings they strive to have half women and half men. There are 20 people per training and the training is a 2-day duration. He predicts that up to 1/3 of the camp (15 000 people) have been through this training. He explained that the effects of the training are both positive and negative. Many people take home and implement what they have learnt in the training, but some instances have shown that men are not happy to be losing their authority in the household, therefore sometimes the situation leads to an increase in violence. The SGBV staff are volunteer and do not get paid. He explained his job in the following way,

“I can see that there are problems in our communities, between men and women and between ethnic groups. In a family, if there is violence, I have to help to solve this problem. If we begin by solving the problems in the home, then we can solve problems in the community, and then in the world. This is how we can start to build peace in the world.”

He feels that there are a number of conditions in the camp that contribute to the violence problem, namely: poverty, unequal rights for women, drug and alcohol problems, low education levels and low self confidence due to low education levels. In preparation for the next election he is encouraging women to run for positions. Some women have education but not a lot of confidence, so his staff are building the confidence of the women so they are able be leaders for their people.