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VOICE UP

The newsletter focusing on current issues of empowerment, community participation, and advocacy for women and children from Burma.

Published by the **Woman and Child Rights Project (WCRP)**

Volume 3, July 2013

Feature

Beyond the male: The case for a gender analysis of illicit drugs in Burma

On June 26, Burma’s anti-narcotics task force marked the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking by destroying over 4.4 billion kyat worth of illegal drugs. This move, along with others aimed at rehabilitating drug users and developing alternative crops for poppy farmers, seems fitting in light of recent international recognition of the country’s drug problems. In the past year Burma has been named by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as the world’s second largest producer of opium and the “top source of illicit methamphetamine pills in East and Southeast Asia.”

However, a great deal remains to be addressed regarding illicit drugs in Burma. Last month, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) published *Bitter Pills: Breaking the Silence Surrounding Drug Problems in the Mon Community*, aiming to highlight large information gaps about the rates, demographics, and social impact of drug use and trade amongst the ethnic Mon population. WCRP echoes the call for greater action and investigation into the community’s drug problems, but also asserts that research should reflect and explore how this issue uniquely impacts women. Studies like the Paung Women’s Organisation’s 2006 report on drugs and women serve as an example of how a gender analysis can reframe the drug issue and highlight the similar social and economic challenges faced by ethnic women throughout the country.

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Child Education

Education reform remains elusive

In March 2011, President U Thein Sein gave a speech to parliament urging improvements to the national education system. He called for implementing a system of free, compulsory primary schooling, upgrading the country’s educational standards to international levels, and increasing enrollment in basic education. Changes have thereby been made in the last few years that ostensibly liberated students and their families to freely pursue educational goals.

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Mapping the intersection between women, drugs, and gender inequality

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that many of the world's social and humanitarian challenges, from poverty to food security to education, impact women and children in specific and unique ways. Upon analyzing how Mon women experience drug addiction and trade within their families and communities, it became clear that this issue is no exception.

The push and pull factors associated with illicit drugs are closely linked to issues that women already experience differently from their male counterparts: socio-economics, employment, education, health services, sexual and domestic violence, and access to justice.

For example, traditional Mon culture places the responsibility for income generation on men (though women are often major or primary contributors) while women serve as the head of family finances. The woman's role is to collect and store the income, budget the family expenses, save for the future, and dole out money as needed for purchases. A saying translated from Burmese states "if you have a mother, you have money." Despite the authority granted in this role, women are typically not allowed to prohibit men from taking money when they demand it. Since the woman is charged with safeguarding the family earnings, she becomes vulnerable to and shoulders blame for drug-related hazards like theft, increased medical costs, decreases in income, bribery or abuse stemming from law enforcement interaction, and physical or sexual violence aimed at intimidation or punishment.

In addition to the relationship between drugs and women's duties in the home, social issues that acutely impact women are intensified when they intersect with the drug trade. Drug problems in Burma have been widely linked to labor exploitation that demands 16 to 20 hour work days, local-level corruption, disillusioned youth facing joblessness or exclusion from higher education, and high unemployment and low wages that compel people to seek alternative means of income. These problems compound for women who are less likely to be paid a decent wage or encouraged to continue schooling and are at higher risk of abuse.

For these reasons, uniform anti-drug campaigns and rehabilitation services that disregard gender differences will fail to be effective at the family, community, and state level. The government must implement and enforce the obligations laid out in the 1993 Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Law and target society's most vulnerable people, who are often women and children. Local authorities and armed ethnic groups need to uproot corruption and develop community drug awareness programs that are sensitive to the unique needs and experiences of both men and women.

Domestic violence stalks women and children on the border

May 3, 2013

Many women and children living on the Thai-Burma border face serious risks as a result of domestic violence at the hands of a husband or other family member. The impact of domestic violence is profound,

affecting both its direct victims and the children of families plagued by the abuse. Where mothers are the victims, their children are frequently put in unsafe situations as a result of either living with an abusive family member or living with a mother who has left an abusive situation and is struggling to survive alone.



The case of Daw P, an alias, tells a story common to many women living in border villages. Daw P is from Japanese Well, a village near the Thai-Burma border. After her first marriage ended in divorce, she was left with two children to care for. She remarried and worked with her new husband producing and selling coal. With three more children born from this marriage, Daw P's husband told her that he could not afford to support the two children from her previous marriage, and forced her to take them to a nearby monastery to be cared for by nuns. Daw P's husband drank heavily and regularly beat her. Often he would drive her out of the house, convinced that she had another husband that she was keeping a secret from him.

Whilst she knew it would mean a struggle to support her children, Daw P finally decided to leave her husband. Speaking now, she says: "I am worried for my children, and I have tried to stay with [my husband] in the past, but even though I pitied my children I could not live with him anymore." Like many border villages, Japanese Well has a grassroots women's group that offers assistance to women in situations of difficulty. Daw P contacted the Japanese Well women's group and was offered a place to stay in the village's safe house. For a while, the safe house offered a stable and secure living situation for Daw P and her children. However, difficulties arose again after they left. Although Daw P worked hard to earn an income by taking on jobs such as washing, cooking and broom-making, this was often not enough to support herself and her children.

Daw P's children regularly ended up in unsafe and sometimes abusive situations. Due to Daw P's limited income they were unable to attend school and were often left alone during the day while Daw P was out working to earn money for her family. One of her twin girls later told Daw P that when her and her sister were left alone to play, other children from the village would take off her clothes and pretend to have sex with her. Daw P had the option of leaving her children with their father, but they were equally at risk in his care. He continued to drink heavily, and would often leave the children to sleep outside the house. Sometimes the children became victims of unwanted sexual advances committed by their father's inebriated guests.

Eventually, Daw P decided to borrow money and move to Bangkok with her five children. Although Daw P found employment, her children remain outside the education system because she is unable to afford the monthly 250 baht required to transport each child to school.

Daw P's story is just one of many similar cases reported in villages along the Thai-Burma border. Tha—, a 22 year old woman from Kyone Kwee, is another victim of severe domestic violence. Last year she married a man from the village of Kalodkhanee. He was already married, but kept this from Mi Tha—. After their marriage, Mi Tha— left the house she shared with her mother in Kyone Kwee and moved to Kalodkhanee to live with her husband.

Mi Tha— was beaten repeatedly by her husband. Eventually she ran away, seeking refuge with her mother in Kyone Kwee worried that her husband would come to take Mi Tha— back to Kalodkhanee, her mother moved with her to the Thai-Burma border township of Three Pagodas Pass. However, Mi Tha— returned to her husband shortly afterwards.

The violence intensified when Mi Tha—’s mother came to Kalodkhanee to ask her to come with her to the hospital. M Tha—’s husband refused to let her go. He abducted her and took her to the mountainside, where he beat and strangled her. Worried for her daughter, the mother alerted the village leader and, together with other village officials, they followed Mi Tha—’s husband. When they arrived, he fled the scene.

After this incident Mi Tha— divorced her husband. She returned with her mother to Kyone Kwee, where the village women’s group took her to the Japanese Well safe house to seek assistance. Mi Tha— was taken to the local hospital where medical tests confirmed that she was pregnant. Once she is discharged from the hospital she will be able to stay at the safe house, but beyond that she says her future is unclear.

These cases are typical of the severe domestic violence faced by women on the Thai-Burma border but also highlight the role of community women’s groups in helping victims escape abusive situations. A member of a women’s group near Three Pagodas Pass claims that assistance offered by women’s groups in the region has caused a decrease in instances of domestic violence. However, she added, “women and children continue to suffer from domestic violence. We are trying to save the lives of women and children. We want the violence in the family to end.”



Dengue season “came early” to Mon State

Unseasonably warm and wet weather this year triggered a surge in cases of dengue fever in Mon State and other areas of Burma. Health practitioners recently reported that children in particular are being brought to overcrowded medical clinics for treatment, and a June report by the Ministry of Health in Burma revealed that Mon State trails only the Ayeyarwady Region and Yangon for having the country’s highest number of dengue fever cases.

According to Dr. Min Soe Lin who runs the Ya Ta Nar Mon medical clinic in Moulmein, the capital of Mon State, dengue is primarily affecting children between 6 months and 12 years of age who are particularly susceptible to severe forms of the illness.

“Dengue came early this year. Now, there are about 15 dengue patients per day coming for treatment in my clinic, and not only children but also adults. There is [not enough] space for patients, even in the hospital.”

He added that dengue is spreading more rapidly in urban Moulmein than in surrounding villages in Thanbyuzayat and Mudon townships, but residents from more rural areas claim their local hospitals are running low on bed space and medicine as well.

“My son got dengue and was treated at the hospital in Thanbyuzayat Township. There was no medicine for dengue at the hospital and the patients had to buy it from outside shops,” said Thanbyuzayat resident Daw Tin Tin Nyo.



A number of interviews demonstrated how shortages of medicine and skilled health workers in the rural clinics were directly linked to the overcrowded urban hospitals. “Patients don’t want to get treated in local hospitals that are not stocked with supplies,” said a doctor in Thanbyuzayat Township. “Instead they go to the hospital in Moulmein.”

According to a health worker who visited one of Moulmein’s largest hospitals in June, “Out of all the dengue patients there, almost 90% are children. They are separated into hospital rooms for emergency patients and those that will stay a long time. There is not enough space for all the patients, and even the passageway leading to the toilets [in a building outside] is full of patients.”

Dr. Nyan Sint of the Mon State Health Department said the latest records show that 997 people have been infected with dengue in ten townships of Mon State, though none have died from the mosquito-borne virus. However, the national-level Ministry of Health reported that so far this year in Burma, 13 cases of dengue fever have resulted in deaths and the number of cases recorded is greater than all of 2012.

In response to the wave of disease, the Mon State Health Department and local village authorities initiated cooperative community education efforts to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds, one of the principal preventive measures. Mon State Prime Minister U Ohm Myint, Social Minister Dr. Hla Oo, and

Minister of Municipal Affairs Dr. Toe Toe Aung recently visited Moulmein Hospital to assess the incidence of dengue and the hospital's capacity for treatment. After the evaluation, U Ohm Myint called for immediate action regarding dengue protection measures and the construction of a new building to provide adequate space for patients.

Record dengue seasons are being forecasted in other Southeast Asian countries as well, with Thailand, Singapore, Laos, and Cambodia experiencing high numbers of dengue infections.

A health practitioner working on the Thai-Burma border also indicated the frequency of malaria cases, particularly *Plasmodium falciparum*, or "Pf," which is a parasite species causing more acute forms of the disease that can lead to cerebral malaria or death without treatment.

"We divided our healthcare team into small mobile clinics and sent them out to different villages. I went with a group that visited Htee Pa Thoe village [close to the Thai-Burma border]. When we tested the blood of 10 patients, we saw that 5 were positive for Pf."

One Moulmein resident said, "Hospitals in Myanmar don't check [to determine] the kind of disease, they just treat everything like dengue. If [malaria] goes untreated it might move to the brain and patients could die."



Child Education

[From page 1>> Education reform remains little more than good intention](#)

According to education officials, registration fees have been waived, textbooks are provided free of charge, and the local administrators' practice of collecting "donations" to buy school equipment (for everything from the headmaster's chair to a football for the schoolyard) was targeted for elimination.

Although renewed dedication to educational outcomes is welcome after decades of their systematic decline, changes are allegedly only being experienced in urban areas, leaving rural villages and border communities largely exempt from reform. Families in these peripheral areas report that schools can still impose fees for registration or to supplement administrative costs, and students say that while free textbooks are now available, there often are not enough for everyone. The announcement last year that primary school instruction was to be free reportedly caused a surge in enrollment, but a large number of children subsequently dropped out because there were not enough books and parents could not afford to buy them. There has allegedly been little enforcement or oversight in these regions to ensure compliance with new standards, and primary schools have mostly been left to determine, independently and on a case-by-case basis, whether and for what they will charge their students.

Students who do complete primary and middle school face new challenges once they reach high school. The final two years of secondary education, called 9 Standard and 10 Standard (informally called Grades 10 and 11), are particularly expensive for students living in rural areas who do not have a local high school. Families must then fund daily transportation to the nearest high school or shoulder the cost of a hostel so the students can live closer to the school.

“I completed Grade 9 at the Mon National Middle School in Khaw Zaw village in 2012,” said a student from Pope Htaw village. “My parents can’t afford for me to continue to Grade 10 because the

Inn Din village [high] school in Ye Township is very far away and the school costs are expensive. My parents are poor and work on a rubber plantation and they are not interested in supporting or encouraging my education. For these reasons, I have to stop my studies this year.”

One student from Khaw Zaw village in Yebyu Township said, “I passed Grade 9 this year. I have to go to Inn Din village to continue to Grade 10, but this is difficult given my family situation and that my parents are poor. The cost [of Grade 10] is two or three times more expensive, up to 700,000 or 800,000 kyat. Where can I get this money? Others are able to continue their studies only because they have a brother, sister, or father working in Thailand or Malaysia.”

In addition, the Ministry of Education only distributes the national standardized tests that high school students are required to take to urban or township-level high schools. Those attending sub-township schools are also obliged to take the test but have to travel to test sites and pay for their own transportation to get there. For example, the high school students in Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai-Burma border have to travel 47 miles to Kyain Sei Kyi for the requisite examination given in March, but there are no school buses to take them, and they must pay for the travel costs themselves.

Another common characteristic of the Burmese education system that greatly increases the cost burden on families is “tuition,” a fee-based, after-school class in which schoolteachers or community members charge money to assist students with their school subjects. However, as an incentive for children to attend tuition, teachers provide minimal instruction during regular class hours and offer more detailed and relevant information in tuition. Students allege that they cannot understand the classroom lessons without tuition, and they and their parents worry that grades will suffer if they do not attend. The pressure to join tuition is particularly acute in Grade 11 (10 Standard) because the final exam scores determine whether students graduate, if they can get into university, and what they can study there.

Tuition has therefore gained in notoriety over the years as a significant roadblock to universal education that unduly targets poorer families. Students may be unable to afford tuition or are busy helping with the family business after school, and they describe the frequent discrimination students receive from teachers who do not attend tuition. Teachers are allegedly more responsive and helpful to students who join



tuition and may put the other students on the spot, making them feel uncomfortable and adding to their challenges for finishing school.



Yet school costs are still only one piece of a larger puzzle that reveals why young people in Burma may not finish their education. Students point to the continued and widespread use of rote learning styles and a “top-down” approach to teaching as opposed to more participatory classroom methods. Studying for exams often entails students memorizing whole sections of their textbooks that must then be reproduced, word for word, in the exams. Students assert that teachers rarely, if ever, encourage them to think critically, share opinions, or even ask questions. Additionally, young people contend that they often leave high school without practical skills that would help them secure work, like computer proficiency, English, or a meaningful grasp on math or science.

Correspondingly, the reputation and perception of the country’s education system has starkly deteriorated among Burma’s people. Students allege that school is not useful or engaging, and the absence of an identifiable bridge between education and employment leads many parents to place little emphasis on their children’s graduation. Both young people and adults say there is ample evidence to show that a degree does not lead to work, and in communities with high joblessness and low average salaries, the draw of migrant work in neighboring countries is often stronger than the desire to stay in school.

Feature

[From page 1>> Beyond the male: The case for a gender analysis of illicit drugs in Burma](#)



International reporting and community-level observations of the drugs trade in Burma reveal that it is usually perceived as a male-dominated sphere. While research and testimonies gathered for this article do not contradict this assumption, they suggest that nonetheless some women *are* using or selling drugs and that, where this is the case, the challenges these activities pose for women are different from those encountered by their male counterparts. Furthermore, research reveals that even when

women are not involved with drugs themselves, they may have indirect exposure through family members that can lead to serious mental or physical stress.

Justification for pursuing a gender analysis of illicit drugs in Burma is presented herein and draws from community opinions and two interviews held this month with the director of the Mon Youth Progressive Organisation (MYPO), an ethnic Mon group that campaigns for social, political and environmental rights, and the director of the border-based health group Border Health Initiative (BHI).

In their interviews, the directors said it is unusual for women to use illicit drugs, but they could both name some instances. MYPO's director alleged that female drug users in Mon State are predominantly prostitutes who encounter drugs through work, whilst in eastern areas along the Thai-Burma border drug problems have been identified amongst young teenage girls. BHI's director discussed one case in which a drug-abusing husband had drawn his wife into addiction. However, it is unlikely that these female drug users would feel confident seeking help from Burma's already limited drug rehabilitation services. According to a 2010 UNODC report, "The cultural and social stigmatization of female drug users [make them] very difficult to reach with harm reduction services."¹ The report went on to note that only 4-7% of drug users in Burma who received services from AIDS or harm reduction programs that year were women.

As for women selling drugs, the MYPO director said that many women inside Burma are reportedly dealing and smuggling, though she said it is less common along the Thai border due to a more rigorous security presence there. Testimonies collected for HURFOM's *Bitter Pills* report support this claim, with various sources from southern Ye Township observing female drug traders in their communities. A farmer from Khaw Law village identified one or two women selling drugs in his area,² and a teacher from Han Gam village said, "One surprising thing is that our village is full of female drug smugglers."³

With limited options for earning income and heavy pressure to support their families, women may experience a disproportionate incentive to deal drugs or excessive difficulty when attempting to exit the trade. Interviews collected by HURFOM have shown that women are regularly paid less than men for performing the same jobs and, except in certain industries, have a harder time getting hired for work when men are available.⁴ Since the degree of hardship in an individual's financial circumstances is directly linked to the lure of selling drugs, women are especially vulnerable.

"When [women] work in a factory they just get a small wage," said the director of MYPO. "But if they sell drugs they can earn a lot without as much energy."

In addition to these direct implications, one of the major indirect consequences of drug addiction is its impact on the user's family. A 2002 UNODC paper exploring women's drug-related problems in India echoes reports collected from women in Burma:

"The adverse impact of drug use on families is tremendous. It is the family to which the dependent user turns to or turns on either in emotional or physical distress or crisis. Relationships suffer, financial sources get depleted, health costs increase. There are greater employment problems and increased emotional stress...Within the family, it is often the woman, in the role of

¹ Zar Ni Soe (UNODC Myanmar), 'Female Drug Users and Services' Accessibility in Burma', 2010.

² HURFOM, *Bitter Pills: Breaking the Silence Surrounding Drug Problems in the Mon Community*, p.21

³ HURFOM Interview, Han Gam village, May 2013.

⁴ HURFOM, *Destination Unknown: Doubt and Optimism Toward IDP Resettlement in Mon State*, 2012.

wife or mother who is most affected by the individual's drug use, and has to bear a significant part of the family burden."⁵

Given Mon women's traditional role in the household as the primary caretaker and head of family finances, they are reported to come under particular stress when a family's income is diverted to drug use or new expenses crop up from associated arrests or medical bills. For example, two women from Three Pagodas Pass detailed how their drug-abusing children started stealing from the family. When the family's income dwindles, pressure on women increases to supplement the shortfall and provide for their families. The strain, both financial and emotional, can be severe.

"His reason for using drugs was that he needed to get energy for his job," said a Three Pagodas Pass resident about her husband. "At first he just took half a tablet [of methamphetamine] per day, but later he used a whole tablet and now he can't stop using. Now he takes 4 tablets per day. It costs 120 Baht per tablet. We cannot survive on his income because he just spends it on drugs...we have almost lost our house. Our daughter will start Grade 8 this year. It seems that we almost can't afford to let her go to school. Our family feels so hurt...I feel embarrassed that our neighbours know about his drug use".⁶

According to a physician from Kyainnsiekyi Township, "Men are lazy and unintelligible after using drugs, and so mostly are not able to work. As a result of this their wives, children and parents, who depend on their income, are confronted with a daily income problem".⁷

Whilst women struggle to cope with drug-use in their families, they often face additional criticism or ostracism from a community that may view them as having failed in their role as wife and mother.

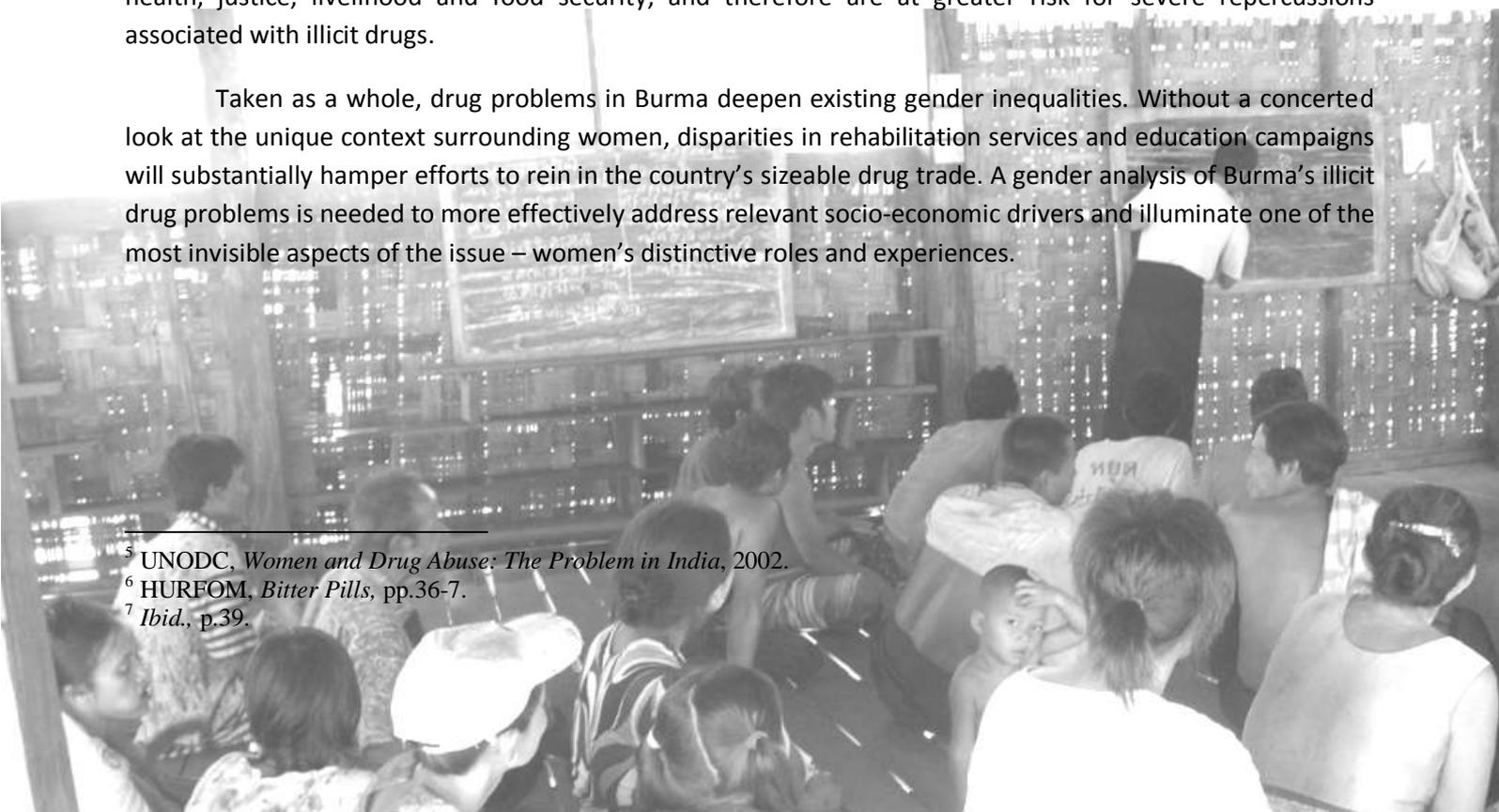
Finally, empirical evidence in Burma reveals that proximity to drugs makes women more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, exploitation, and psychological abuse, whether they are using or trading themselves or related to someone who is. For example, MYPO's director reported that female drug dealers may be forced to have sex with authorities in order to avoid arrest, an outcome that is much less likely for male traffickers. Women in Burma are already at a substantial disadvantage regarding access to education, health, justice, livelihood and food security, and therefore are at greater risk for severe repercussions associated with illicit drugs.

Taken as a whole, drug problems in Burma deepen existing gender inequalities. Without a concerted look at the unique context surrounding women, disparities in rehabilitation services and education campaigns will substantially hamper efforts to rein in the country's sizeable drug trade. A gender analysis of Burma's illicit drug problems is needed to more effectively address relevant socio-economic drivers and illuminate one of the most invisible aspects of the issue – women's distinctive roles and experiences.

⁵ UNODC, *Women and Drug Abuse: The Problem in India*, 2002.

⁶ HURFOM, *Bitter Pills*, pp.36-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.39.



Tier 2 Watch List mirrors real incidence of trafficking on the border

In February of this year, a Mon broker from Mudon Township coerced Mi Nu (an alias) and her two young children to migrate to Thailand. He explained to her that she would be placed as a domestic worker and that the job would be easier than alternatives like construction or factory work. She believed the broker and left with him and her children for Thailand. Since that day, Mi Nu has had no contact with her relatives or neighbors and the broker has not been seen again.



This story was shared with a WCRP field reporter earlier this month by relatives of 30-year-old Mi Nu. While it does not have a definitive end, and family members still hope that she and her 8-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son are safely living in Thailand, the narrative highlights the doubts, suspicion, and risks that shroud many stories of migration between Burma and Thailand. Variations on this account have become startlingly common in border communities and throughout the country, and are reflected in international reporting on the human trafficking issue in Burma.

Every year since 2001, the U.S. State Department has released a “Trafficking in Persons” (TIP) report as a tool to engage countries around the world on the issue of human trafficking. The report uses a four-tiered system to rank governments on a scale of compliance with the minimum standards set forth in the U.S.’ Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. For 11 straight years, Burma remained on the list’s bottom rung, Tier 3, but in 2012 was upgraded to Tier 2 Watch List. This classification, which Burma received a second time in June 2013, indicates that the government is making efforts toward compliance but the number of trafficking victims remains high, there was a failure to provide evidence of increased action to combat trafficking,

and commitments to achieve compliance are largely scheduled for the coming year.^[1]

This year’s TIP report acknowledged some progress on cross-border sex and labor trafficking by the Burmese government, but concluded “the government’s victim protection efforts remained inadequate [over the last year]. The lack of specialized services and rehabilitation efforts, as well as weak local-level coordination between police and social welfare officials, undermined its ability to successfully prosecute and punish trafficking offenders.”

This report and others like it showcase narratives and activities that are already well known among communities throughout Burma, and villagers have intimate knowledge of the “weak local-level coordination.” A case reported by a woman from Kyait Myaw Township near the capital of Mon State underscores this particular community-level challenge and the barriers average citizens face when seeking justice.

The mother of 15-year-old Mi Pone (alias) approached her village headman and other local authorities to report that in December 2012 a man who worked as a fisherman in Thailand’s Samut Prakan seaport had secretly absconded with her daughter to Thailand. After Mi Pone disappeared, the mother discovered that the man was already legally married, increasing her fears that Mi Pone was taken unwillingly for some exploitative purpose. In response to the mother’s appeal, the village headman and police refused to pursue the case. After hearing the details, the local authorities dismissed the mothers concerns and said that Mi Pone must have run

^[1] Trafficking in Persons Report 2013, U.S. State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, June 2013.

away with the man voluntarily and that he was probably her boyfriend. The case has since been passed to a labor rights group in Thailand, but as of yet there is no trace of the young girl.

Training in Chiang Mai covers women's protection law in Burma

For most of July, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) is hosting trainings in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to offer intensive instruction on women's protection laws. The event is targeting practitioners who work on women's issues in Thailand and Burma to assist them to become better informed about laws that apply to women in and from Burma. Discussion topics include relevant protection laws, feminist legal practices, ritual and customary law, attempts to strengthen domestic violence law in Thailand, and the "automatic response mechanism," a 10-step process for assisting victims of sexual violence.

Most of the 23 women trainees come from areas in Burma like Toung Kyi, Mon State, Lashio in Shan State, and communities along the Chinese border, though a few are from Thailand.

"This training is very useful for people who work on women's issues," said an ethnic woman attendee from Burma. "Especially because we learn about laws relating to women in Burma. We can know what our rights are according to the law. After we learn about the law concerning women, we know what aspects of the law are beneficial to women. We can also discuss laws related to domestic violence in the training. I most enjoy the discussions about women and customary law in the ethnic areas. This is very useful for us to understand how the law impacts our women."

WLB is a membership-based organization made up of 13 ethnic women's groups including representation of the Kachin, Karen, Palaung, Pa-O, and Shan ethnicities among others. Since 2005, the WLB has coordinated a Woman Against Violence program in Burma and the border areas that organizes community dialogues, or "exchanges," to create a space for women and men to openly discuss and consider violence against women. Team leaders document cases of violations against women in the various communities to use for advocacy tools, and follow-ups to the exchanges provide direct assistance to women who suffer from violence.

"We always appreciate feedback from our readers. Please feel free to contact our mailing or email address."

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