Special Women’s Edition:
Beliefs about the proper roles of women and men in Burma

Making Headway
Life for migrant women in Thailand

People’s Voices
Ethnic Solidarity - Kayan
Beliefs about the Proper Roles of Women and Men in Burma:
Is Discrimination Against Women in Burma Ingrained in Traditional Practices?

by Naw Cha My

Stereotypes and beliefs about women and men are present in almost every community and they are very powerful. Some examples of stereotypes about women from Burma are that a good woman is gentle, pretty, soft spoken and physically weak. They are not supposed to laugh out loud. If they do, they are considered to be a “loose” person. There are also stereotypes about men from Burma, they are said to be strong, smart, clever, and brave and never cry. These are called “gender stereotypes”.

Once a person is born, their family and community tries to fix them into their stereotype. If they do not fit into their stereotype box, they will be criticised and looked down upon by their community. This is especially true for women. If they do not fit into their boxes properly they may make their family angry and ashamed. Sometimes men commit violence against women in an effort to make them conform to their stereotypes box.

But what about men? What happens if they do not fit into their boxes? Everybody in Burma turn blind eyes to this question, even women themselves. If a man beats women does it mean that they are brave, smart, and clever? Do men really fit into their stereotype boxes which are to be strong, brave, smart and clever?

If a man does not like the way his wife behaves, if she does not cook or clean well, does not like the way she cares for her children, or spends too much money, he will curse her and sometimes he will beat and abuse her. This means that some men oppress women through domestic violence. Domestic violence is not only physical abuse but also mental abuse. For example if a husband says to his wife that she is stupid, does not let her to go outside and talk to friends, makes her feel bad all the time, this is mental abuse. If you were in this woman’s situation where you were physically and mentally abuse, could you imagine how you would feel?

In addition, Burmese women, are suppose to obey their husband’s instructions, even if it is violence against them. Some women stick to their traditional roles and remain in their stereotype box. They just think about having babies, looking after the house and obeying their husbands. They have never though about being a leader in their community. Women who have been brought up to follow this behavior often lack confidence or courage to act differently or put forward own their views, even when they feel strongly about them.

It is difficult to discuss violence against women in Burma because women do not fully understand their rights, and whilst there are laws protecting women, cultural pressures stop them from accessing these mechanisms. For this reason, even if their rights are violated by other people; they just keep silent and keep pain to themselves, and follow their culture practice rather than stand up for their rights.

Women often don’t want to report their domestic problem. They keep quiet to maintain their family’s dignity. They don’t want people to look down on their family. Sometimes they are afraid that if they divorce their husbands, the community will think that she is a prostitute or a bad woman. And that they will not be able to get married again and will have to financially support themselves. Traditionally in Burma women rely too much on their husband.

In Burma, there are many traditions that support the idea that it is acceptable for men to...
dominate the women. Even as children, girls and boys are treated differently in the family. In the family, while boys are sent to school, girls have to work in the house and they are sent to the field. Many parents believe that women don’t need to be educated in order to do housework, and that they are requiring only basic literacy skills. Additionally, after they get married their jobs will be to serve their husbands. In accordance to Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Burma is a signatory, women and men should have equal opportunities to study.

In contrast to CEDAW statement, the system of education in Burma is unbalance because mostly men are selected to study abroad by the regime’s higher education institutions. Women consequently lack access to education, they are relegated to low paying, work in factories, farms, construction sites, such as domestic workers, restaurant workers, entertainers and sex workers. This places them in an extremely vulnerable position in country due to lack the of educations and less chance than men.

For example, a woman and a man work in farm, a man will get higher pay than women, even though they work for the same number of hours. Woman are paid only two thirds of the amount men earn per day in Burma. The reason given why women get lower pay is because women work slower and are not as strong like men. They don’t do the same quantity of work as men. CEDAW states that men and women should be viewed as equal and have the same salary. However the regime in Burma has not adopted an equal employment opportunity policy in the country. The employers in both government departments and private sectors have always set the first priority for hiring men. This discrimination of the women in the work place is deeply rooted in society.

Additionally, women in Burma have no representation at the national level. There are no women in the 39 members of cabinet. Women are not represented in the military regime. There are no women in the current decision making bodies of the military regime. The new constitution will continue excluding women. The political situation in Burma clearly shows that the military junta is an exclusively male structure. If you go and ask the regime “what is the role of the women in Burma?” The regime might not understand what you mean. They would then reply that women have to stay at home to take care of their households, their kids and their husbands.

This is not a fair answer. It seems that the women in Burma are the second class citizens in Burmese society. They are not allowed to be involved in important sectors in the communities. Only men can be involved in the important sectors because traditionally men have more power than women and they believe that it is the man’s roles to have power and their woman role’s to stay under control of men.

Therefore, most of the women inside Burma live insecure lives, isolated from the male community, lonely and unprotected by the authorities. The majority of women in the communities can not rely on the junta’s protection, because it has never protected women who are violated by their soldiers whose ability to act with impunity is deeply ingrained in Burmese culture. In the civil war zone, the regime use of rape as a weapon of war is common and systemic. Rape cases are rarely brought to court, because the court system routinely serves a strategic function and acts as a tool for achieving the military or political objectives of the regime, helping them to maintain their brutal power over the country.

Therefore it is essential for the women to fight for their right and change the ‘man’s domination of women’ system in Burma. Women need to get education or training to realise that they are powerful and have abilities to be involved in the civil sectors. Then they can be empowered to form their own judgments about what they need to be done. It is necessary to provide education programmes on gender issues to both men and women. Men have to share power, and give encouragement to women to participate at every sector in the society.

A Karen woman and child near the Salween River, Karen State, Photo: Saw Kweh Say, Burma Issues
Making Headway: Mainstreaming gender issues in the Burmese refugee camps

By Moo Ko Htee

Life for all refugees is difficult. After making the difficult journey from their homelands where they were persecuted to another country seeking asylum, the journey to safety and a life with dignity rarely ends there. Refugees are often further marginalized in their country of asylum, treated with distain by the local authorities and population, and in the case of the Burmese refugees in Thailand herded into too small, fenced enclosures like animals. Despite this, a semblance of a normal life emerges, however, as traditional life has been violently disrupted, violence has ebbed its way into life in the camps, placing women in a precariously vulnerable position.

Traditional village life cannot continue in the camps. The hardest hit by this, are male members of the community. While women are still able to fulfill some of their traditional roles, such as taking care of the family home, the men have lost their ability to provide for their families and have become completely dependent on international organisations. In some ethnic groups from Burma, there is a great sense of pride in being able to eat food that you have grown with your own hands. However, in the camps families are dependent on humanitarian assistance to sustain them: food rations, building materials, health and education. Furthermore, there are few employment opportunities, and for those who have these opportunities they still rely on organisations to provide basic necessities as their income is not enough to support a family.

As a consequence many men feel that they have lost their dignity. Combined with the constant idleness and the fact that this protracted situation has no end in sight, alcohol and drug addiction has emerged among members of the refugee population, which in turn creates undue strain on family structures and in some instances results in domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Whilst abuse does occur within the refugee community, women are also vulnerable to abuse from local authorities. As women are dependent on international organisations for food, basic necessities and other assistance, this can create an environment where female refugees are vulnerable to exploitation in exchange for assistance. Instances have been reported in the camps with regards to resettlement applications where female refugees are promised to be “moved up” on the list for resettlement in exchange for sexual favours or threatened to be taken off the list if no favours were given by local authorities. Given the isolation of the refugee camps, limited access of international organisations to these sites and the fact that it was the local authorities who were there to supposedly protect the refugees were the one’s exploiting the situation, it placed the women who were propositioned in an especially vulnerable situation with few avenues to turn to for help.

Despite the knowledge of the abuse, within the camps a culture of impunity exists among the local authorities. Issues with local authorities are difficult to raise, due to the power they have over the refugee population and fear of retribution. Even where there are clearly defined processes for addressing issues, refugees are still very hesitant to follow them out of a genuine fear, but also due to the fact that in the past these processes have not proven to be effective. Situations have continued even when refugees have raised very real issues and consequently they do not trust these systems.

However, the refugee camp’s leadership structures, which are made up of refugees, often do not fully represent the community. As there is a lack of female representation in these structures women’s issues are often not formally brought forward within these committees and are not seen as being important for the whole community. However, as women comprise of more than half the Burmese refugee population in Thailand, the outputs of these committees fail to meet the needs of the refugee population. If the refugee committees reflected a more emancipated approach to equality in rep-
resentation, there most likely would be a more realistic opportunity to address gender inequality within the refugee population.

However mainstreaming gender in the camp is difficult. Arguments are made that it is the women who are at fault because they do not take opportunities or assistance offered to them and that they are content with the situation because they do not speak up. Others say that this is against the tradition and culture and is just a foreign idea aimed at colonizing their traditional culture. Religious beliefs often perpetuate inequality due to the belief that God deemed one gender superior to another, for example, men are more important as God created women from men by using Adam’s rib to create Eve. Others argue gender fatigue, saying that they have heard so much about it, that it has been addressed and no longer needs any attention.

That said there are organisations trying to address this issue and to empower women to take a more active role in their own lives and in community life. These organisations working with women in the camp, especially those led by local women themselves have made great leaps forward. For the most part, women are very aware of their rights and have a genuine understanding of them. There have been initiatives to make women more self-sustainable through income generation programmes for instances where hand woven products made by the women are exchanged for necessary items, such as baby kits. These organisations also do advocacy and lobbying work with male members of the community and with camp leadership structures to try and bring forward the voice of women who, in the past, have been excluded. These efforts aim to empower women so that they have the capacity and confidence to participate in all sectors of camp life, and to create the space for them to contribute.

However, this is a difficult task, as it involves breaking down long-held cultural perceptions – some of which people are not willing to genuinely address. Instead delaying tactics are used often, such as: we will take action in due course, but the time is not right yet; discussions of the problem without turning discussions into action; tokenism; undertaking initial efforts and then shelving them and creating initiatives that are destined to fail, for example establishing a committee that can never meet or appointing a person with no power or ability to achieve change.

While the women in the refugee camps are doing what they can to survive and potentially overcome some of these hardships, they cannot do it alone. Sadly, while some members of the refugee committees and population are genuinely unaware of the additional hardships women face, others, who potentially can help, are aware but pretend not to be. It is easier to awaken those who are genuinely asleep, than those who are pretending to be. By strengthening and including all sectors of society, including women, it will create a truly participatory community – something that the people of Burma say that they want. If the people of Burma are serious in their desire for a participatory community this creation cannot wait until the regime in Burma is gone. The change needs to begin today. It is time for all those who are asleep, including those who are only pretending to sleep, to be awakened once and for all and to take those scary steps forward. It is time to stop talking about a better future and to make that change today.
I have worked in Chiang Mai for 10 years and I have no idea, what the city of Chiang Mai looks like because my boss never lets me go outside of her garden. But she treats me very well.” said, Naw Lu Lu a Karen women who is from Burma.

Within those 10 years Naw Lu Lu has to stay at home and work for her boss. She has never been allowed to go outside of the compound where she works and hang around like other migrant people. There are no festivals, no friends, and no relatives for her; she just takes care of the housework. When she first arrived her boss told her that she is not allowed to meet with any of her friends or relatives. She can only use her mobile phone to talk to them. This is the only way she can comfort herself.

“Even when I feel lonely, I am satisfied with my life because I came to Thailand to work, save money and send to my parents. I did not come for fun,” she added.

Every year, thousand of women and girls from Burma leave the country, in search of better living conditions, and employment. Some women express that living illegally in Thailand is better than living in their homeland because they earn better salary and can support their family in Burma. When they come back from Thailand, they have nice clothes, money for their parents and can build a better house. If they work in Burma they earn just a little money and it is not enough to feed their family. The cost of living in Burma is very expensive. For this reason, parents allow their daughters to work in Thailand.

There are many reasons people from Burma cross the border illegally and stay in Thailand illegally. Poverty, displacement, and oppression forces people in Burma to move to neighboring countries illegally. This situation makes women very vulnerable and makes it very easy for them to fall into things like trafficking and prostitution. Further, political instability, militarisation, internal armed conflict and natural disasters also exacerbate women’s vulnerabilities and may result increasing trafficking and prostitution.

Women who leave Burma face the threat of exploitation en route to other countries and in the work place once they arrive. Work conditions are worst for women trafficked into “locked” or “closed” brothels, as domestic workers and other industries, where they are kept in the building and unable to leave. They have no money, no identification documents, knowledge of the local language, or the area where they are kept. Women have little chance of escaping, or finding other works. Many women never know how much they earn, because they are not given cash; only tokens for each customer they service. Their daily expenses such as food, clothing, and health care expenses are deducted from the amounts earned, calculated by the owners using the tokens.

As a result, many women never know when their debt is paid off. It is very common in Burma; a woman will approach and say to a girl’s parents “Do you want your daughter to get a better salary? So let your daughter to follow me to Thailand and I will find a job for her. Then your daughter will send money to you and you will get better life.” Many girls go with this type of cunning woman and get sold to a brothel.

Young women and girls in their teens are at greatest risk, because of the high demand for them. When they first arrive to brothel, their “virginity” is sold to customers. They can not refuse customers, and also they can be forced to sleep with as many as eight to ten men a night. This situation put them into a high risk of infecting HIV/AIDS or STDs. Women and girls in Burma have had little education in method of preventing infection of HIV/AIDS or STDs. Furthermore, women and girls can not demand the customers use condoms for their safety.

So that, by the time when they are freed and return home to their families many are already sick with HIV/AIDS. When they find out that they are infected by HIV/AIDS, they try to commit suicide because the community will think badly about them, and they can not afford to cure the disease.

Since the early 1990s, there has been extraordinary number of Burmese migrating to Thailand. Most of migrants rely on “brokers” to get jobs. Some they fall into the trap of the cunning brokers and end up with sadness. Even though women and girls are aware of the trap and danger of the brokers, the number of women and girls entering to neighboring countries is increasing yearly.
I don’t know my future and I don’t know how to solve the problem that I recently faced. I stay in Thailand and there is no war here, but I still worry for my safety because I don’t have a legal identity in Thailand. Even though I was born in Burma I don’t have a Burmese identity and while I stay in Thailand I don’t have any legal identity. Wherever and whenever I go out I worry. I have to keep my eyes open and be careful of the police because I am afraid of the police. If they arrest me and ask for my identity card I don’t have any card to show. Because of this situation I have a heavy heart and I worry for my future.

As I am a woman I have to be more careful because there are news reports about torture and rape in Thailand, especially, among illegal migrant worker. Women are also often forced to be sex workers. According to Burma Women Union, ‘there are estimate 40,000 young women engaged in commercial sex trade especially in Thailand and China border towns’.

But I know it’s not only me that has to face this situation. According to documents from the Thai government there are 2 million migrant workers in Thailand and only 500,000 applied for the labour card (a form of identification documents). Many Burmese people come to Thailand and work for their daily lives because there is no freedom and human right in Burma. We can’t do whatever we want to do.

The economic situation is getting worse and worse. People work the whole day but do not earn enough for their families. For this reason people from Burma leave their country and stay other countries without any safety.

I am a Karen woman. I grew up in the conflict area and later become a refugee in Thailand. I studied in the refugee camp and later I wanted more knowledge, so I went outside of the refugee camp and now stay illegally outside the camp. Since I left the refugee camp I have met with many Burmese, especially women who came from different places in Burma. They are working in Thailand in different jobs such as in factories, as housemaids, restaurants and some are working as sex workers. When I saw them I feel sorry for them and very sad about the situation of my country. Before I only thought that only the Karen people are struggling for their lives because of the State Peace and Development Council movements. But now I know people all over the country have to struggle for their lives because of the brutal regime. In my life I have never felt freedom. Sometimes I think about freedom and I really want to live in life of freedom. But it is just my dream and I don’t know what will happen to me tomorrow.

**Ethnic Solidarity: Kayan**

Within the Kayan ethnic group there are four tribes: Kayan Lauwee, Kayan Kangan, Kayan Lahtar, Kayan Kadot (Keykoe). These four tribes are made up of 77 clans. Between the clans and tribes there a slight differences of language and clothing based on the region they are from. The Kayan people are also known as Paudang, or the longneck Karen.

Traditionally Kayan women wear brass coils around their necks, which compress their ribs cases and collarbones, creating the illusion of an elongated neck. At five years of age girls start to wear the brass coils, which as they grow older are replaced with larger, heavier coils. Coils on the wrists and knees usually accompany the neck coils.

There are numerous suggested reasons for wearing the coils some say it is to protect their culture and to create a Kayan national identity. Others say the tradition has emerged from their folk-law and stories of creation or is simply a beauty ritual.

As the coiling and uncoiling of the rings is a time consuming process, the rings once worn are rarely removed. If the rings are removed the women do not suffocate, but the muscles beneath the rings are weakened and the neck and collar bones are often bruised and discoloured from the brass rings. Women who have worn the rings for a number of years say that the coils become like another part of their body.
Recent offensive forces 2100 displaced: At least 2,100 people are homeless as a result of a new Burmese Army offensive this month in Burma’s Karen State.

The Free Burma Rangers (FBR), a humanitarian group operating in eastern Burma, said the Burmese Army’s Military Operation Commands 4 and 16 in March launched a fresh offensive in northern Karen State.

“This most recent attack is the largest against civilians in northern Karen State since the Burma Army completed the re-supply of its camps and the construction of roads at the end of 2007,” said the report.

As a result of these attacks more than 2,100 Karen villagers have been displaced and are now hiding in the jungles of eastern Burma.

FBR estimates that over 30,000 people remain displaced in northern Karen State, and are constantly prepared to flee any attacks.

Border closure stopping aid flow:

The closure of a border crossing in the Thai province of Mae Hong Son has left more than 3,900 internally displaced persons in Burma without access to food or medicine, say sources in the area.

The border checkpoint at the village of Mae Sam Laep has been closed since Karen rebels attacked Burmese soldiers on the Salween River on February 24th.

Nearly four thousand ethnic Karen internally displaced persons are sheltering in the Ei Tu Hta camp, located about two hours by boat from the border crossing, are facing an uncertain future, as Thai authorities have given no indication when they will allow border trade to resume.

For more than two weeks, border trade in Mae Sam Laep has been at a standstill, following an attack on Burmese soldiers being transported across the Salween River in a boat owned by a local businessman.

Burmese generals good Buddhists: Prime Minister of Thailand Mr Samak said he was impressed with the Burmese generals after his one-day visit to Naypyidaw. He respected the Burmese generals because they meditate, like good Buddhists, he added.

Mr Surapong Jayanama, a secretary for political affairs to former premier Surayud Chulanot said the trip clearly showed the government’s stance towards Burma and that Thailand cared more about cooperation on infrastructure development than human rights and democracy.

Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej was criticized by opponents after making favourable comments about the ruling Burmese junta and indicating the government plans to focus on making economic gains from Burma.