



PROGRAMMING

6. ADVOCATING FOR GIRLS' RIGHTS

SUMMARY:

In Burma, especially along the border, many teenage girls and women have been subjected to rape and sexual assault by the Burmese military. These attacks occur in the villages, in the forced labour projects and as people are fleeing to Thailand.

The Shan Human Rights Foundation and the Shan Women's Action Network conducted a research project to document these rapes and sexual attacks.

Their study focussed on the area of Burma where the Shan Nation lives, both in the villages and along the border. This study was coordinated by a five-member committee and carried out by one researcher with the support of the Shan community.

When the report, titled License to Rape, was released in June 2002, it received considerable international attention. The Burmese military reacted with outrage and held a press conference to discredit the report, saying that Burmese soldiers were too polite and well trained to commit these types of actions. The findings of the License to Rape report have been verified by US AID.

INTERVIEW WITH MO HOM, PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER OF THE LICENSE TO RAPE REPORT

Q. What prompted you to do this project?

A. I want the SPDC to see that we know what they are doing. We know about the rapes. It isn't that nobody knows. This is happening in the countryside, in the jungle, in the remote area. But if we speak out about it, maybe other people will hear about it. Maybe the international community will put some pressure on the SPDC. Maybe if the SPDC realizes that people in the world know what they are doing, maybe it will stop them a little bit

That is what I said to the women. I explained this to the women when I asked them to take part. Because the women are so scared.

Q. So you spoke to your community before you began the project?

A. Yes, of course. I went and spoke to the people about it to see what they thought – to see whether they thought it was a good idea. They responded really well, saying, "We can help you with this." So many women have been hurt this way; so many women have been raped. So many have been talking about this problem. They saw this project as being really necessary. Without this kind of support I don't think that the project could have happened.

Q. And for you, how did you come to know that this was such a big problem?

A. In 1998 I was working with the Shan Human Rights Foundation to document information about forced relocations in Shan State and also about the situation of internally displaced people and people hiding in Thailand.

At the time I heard a lot about rape cases, especially during the forced locations. Every month we had two or three rape cases. In 2001 I started to work on the state violence by the SPDC of women who live in Shan State and from this we began our research about the raping of women by the SPDC.

Q. What were the first steps?

A. We were able to obtain information from the monitoring reports of the Shan Human Rights Foundation Monthly Newsletter. These report provides statistics – how many, where, the description of how it occurred. Through these reports 145 cases have been reported. Then during 2001 a reporter and myself did a series of interviews with women. We wanted to find out information that the statistics could not provide. We wanted to know about their feelings; their family's support and the community's response. We wanted to know more about what happened to them not just the statistics.



Drawing: What I remember

In our work we received support and assistance from other groups. For instance the Lahu Women's Organization (LWO) helped me to document that situation. It was easier for them to talk to the women in their language. We created a series of questions that they translated and used as a guide when interviewing the women.

Q. How did you approach the interview with these women?

A. We had to go slowly. I would begin by introducing our organization and myself. We would ask them generally about the human rights violations, about everything: forced labour, forced relocation, so many things. As our discussion went along we might say, "How about rape? Has this been happening to women as well?"

Their response depended on how the women felt about themselves and about us. They might say, "Rape – we don't have that." And I had to accept that, I had to recognize that they were not ready to say anything about it. I did not push them, I just continued the conversation, went on to other topics. Then when we were finished I thanked them and said good-bye to them. Even though sometimes I knew that a woman there had been raped.

So the first time they usually didn't reveal information. It would take two or three times. Then maybe, some women might speak up or say that they wanted to talk with me privately. So we would have a small interview together. Just maybe two of us because they didn't want their friends or family to know about it. It can be difficult to have this kind of information because you know how important it is to protect their privacy.

Q. So many women were reluctant to openly admit that they had been raped?

A. Yes, sometimes they tell someone in the family; other times they tell no one. For instance if you were interviewing five women maybe only two would speak out. And some of them would say, "Oh this is what happened to a friend of mine."

Other times you might have an interview with five women and only one woman would be open to speak with us, to say that she had been raped. The others might say that they know someone this happened to, or that it happened to their friend or other women in the village. They did not want to say that it had been them. And the information might be very specific so you wonder if it might be them but they don't want to say this.

I heard that it is the same with some of the interviews that were done with women who had been raped in Bosnia. They are afraid to say it – and I would never force them, that is very important. It is also important to protect their privacy and to keep things secret if that is what they want.



Drawing: What I remember

Q. Yes, I agree. But did it create any difficulties for your study?

A. Yes. For example, that is one reason we have to be careful when we get confirmation or double check about the facts of the case. Other human rights violations we can double-check more easily, but with raping it is much more difficult. I check the military base number, the name of police and also their rank. But I didn't confirm the rape case directly with people in the community because I was worried about the privacy for the woman and the difficulties she might face. I would not do that to them. It is such a big decision to speak out. If they have the strength and courage to speak out I must respect their situation and need for privacy. But anyhow, we have our networks within the community so we can indirectly crosscheck the information.

Q. What measures did you use to protect the women's privacy?

A. We asked for their names but we agreed that we would not put their real names in the report. We just created names – we take care about the families' security too. If we put the real name the SPDC might want to investigate and they could go to see their parents. So we had to be very careful. We use the name of their village or their town, but we agreed that it was not a good idea to use their name or their parents' name.

Q. Did women talk about the long-term effects for them?

A. Yes, the women talked about this. For example there was one woman who was engaged but after she was raped the engagement was broken. In another case the family didn't accept her anymore, they said that she was a prostitute now.

In the Shan Nation it can be very difficult. Even though the men who rape have a gun and force the woman, they still cannot accept it. One girl who was in high school after she was raped her family deserted her, they took very little interest or care in her. So she became very depressed and couldn't do her exams. That kind of thing happens a lot.

Q. This must be very difficult for you to hear, that women are hurt two times.

A. Yes. Sometimes I just listened, I didn't write down anything. Because it is very emotional; there are strong emotions. Even for me, after listening to them. Even though I am not a survivor after listening to them I almost feel like I am. Everything stays in my mind, even to now, and I have so many feelings.

Q. When you did your interviews, did you organize it as a series of questions or as a conversation?

A. As a conversation. In my experience, this is the best way. Then you can go with what they are thinking and saying. It is more natural and makes them more relaxed.

I needed help from the community leaders. For example, I got a lot of help from a headman who had been helping people coming across to Thailand. He knew their situation. Before I did an interview with the women I met with him first to get information from him. The women trust him so it was important for me to work with him as an intermediary. The women are very scared.



Drawing: What I remember

Q. So if you went to a particular village would you go to the headman first?

A. Yes, sometimes he would help me to identify the women and sometimes he would use his network. He would tell his network to send four or five women to me. After that I would have to find who was willing to speak to me about rape cases.

Q. Did you normally speak with women individually or in groups?

A. Usually individually. Sometimes a woman might want to bring a friend with her. It was really up to them – whichever way made them feel more comfortable. I didn't find group discussions as good because they are shy to speak in front of each other. And also if there are several who want to talk at a certain moment, it can be difficult. You may miss the chance to get the information.

Q. Where did you conduct your interviews?

A. I did some interviews in the IDP area inside the Shan State but not very far inside, more on the border on Shan side. There is an internally displaced person's camp on the border and I went there.

Q. How were you able to identify women in Thailand?

A. For me it was relatively easy. As I said earlier, I had done research work before with the community so I know them personally or through my job they know me.

Q. I know your report has received a lot of attention. Can you tell me about this and also the reaction of the women?

A. There has been so much. It has been covered by many journalists. We have five in the team and we help each other with all the requests and questions we have had.

I took the report with me to the women and showed how I had changed their name and also how good the report was. I told them about the response to it, that the international community was bringing pressure on the SPDC. The women who could read were able to look at the report. Because some of them are migrant workers they move around a lot to get work so sometimes it can be difficult to find them. But I did what I could so that they could see the report and see how their contribution had made such a big difference.

After the report came out, we had to go to the women again because we had to take the journalists to them and also representatives from the US government.

Q. What has been the reaction of other women?

A. After our report many women came to speak and to say that they had been raped as well. About 14 so far. These rapes had occurred one or two years ago. We haven't put them in the report yet.

We have also heard from women from ARAKAN State who are refugees in Bangladesh. They released a statement saying that their women had been raped by the SPDC as well. They did an interview on the radio saying that they were hoping to do a similar investigation about their women. Also the Karen women. They all say that the same thing has happened to us.

Q. Has anyone questioned the truth of your report?

A. So many people have done that. They say, “How can you know the name and position of the men who have done this?”

And we say, “Well they are stationed in the area or the village and these villagers worked for them as forced labour or forced porter or if they were patrolling in the area there would be a local guide or translator for them. So people know the name very well.” Sometimes the head village man would also know.

The SPDC men have a gun, a car, a uniform and they have a tag on their shoulder. Women who cannot read can ask others to tell them who is that man. – What is the number for that man. So that is how the women know exactly who it is.

Q. How has the SPDC responded?

A. At first they said, “No this is impossible. It did not happen. Our soldiers are well trained and well educated. They would not do this.” And they would say how Burma is a Buddhist nation and that they are kind people. But they have no proof against us. Now they are saying that they are going to send an investigation to the border area. This worries us.

But we have someone from the US Government who is investigating the cases on the border. She has spoken to some of the survivors and has said that she will try to find a way to help them and to punish the ones who have done this. This makes us feel very good, that someone is standing up for us.

Q. Are women worried about anonymity?

A. Yes, because the SPDC soldiers in the area know them very well. Sometimes we have given the name of the family or the name of the headman. So we are worried about that.

Now we have so many things to do. We have more work with the women. They want to see the report. They still have many emotional problems.

Q. And for you?

A. After the report came out, I was very tired. But still I cannot rest. The last two or three days I feel that I am being watched. I worry about my family who are still living inside. I am worried about what the SPDC might do to them, the problems they might create for them.

For myself, I decided I would do this, so if anything happens to me, that is okay but it is different if it happens to my family.