

## INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In late 1997, Images Asia learned that the State Peace and Development Council (formerly known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council) had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), also known as the Women's Convention. Recognizing that human rights treaty bodies often depend on NGO documentation to assess governments' compliance with their international obligations, we felt it necessary that accurate and timely information be provided to the CEDAW Committee prior to their review of government implementation of the Convention. To this end, we began a project in 1998 on women's human rights in Burma that aimed to produce a report.

Our research was undertaken in the conviction that in order to address problems, they must first be acknowledged, brought to light and investigated. Furthermore, we believe that women are the best authorities on the realities they face. As yet, there are very few comprehensive sources of information about women's human rights in Burma. The lack of data about women in itself is evidence that women's situations and concerns remain largely ignored, and thus go unexamined. In the first report to come out of this project, submitted to the CEDAW Committee in January 2000, we attempted to use our research to fill some of the gaps in the knowledge regarding women's problems, raising and addressing issues under the framework of the CEDAW articles.

Numerous sources, including some Burmese women writers from by-gone days, have contended that Burmese women share an equal status with men, and a much higher one than women in neighbouring countries. However, most of those who have vaunted Burmese women's elevated positions have themselves enjoyed considerable wealth and social privilege, and their assertions are contradicted by the experiences of those in more ordinary circumstances. Whether it can really be said that women enjoyed equality with men in Burma in some golden age of the past or not, it is certainly not true today. As one feminist lawyer consulted for this report commented, "Perhaps Burmese women occupied a higher status,

relative to their Asian sisters, in the Victorian era. But if this was ever true, it is not now, when great strides have been made throughout Asia by women's movements, particularly in securing legal guarantees of their rights and representation in government."

In this respect, Burma has lagged seriously behind. Women have not been able to benefit equally from the advances made internationally by women's movements because of the repressive government over the past four decades and the country's long period of isolation from 1962 to the early 1990s. Furthermore, the militarization and economic regression, rather than development, that have characterized this time, have deprived women of opportunities for advancement in social and economic spheres. As a result, any assessment of women's human rights in Burma must be seen against the backdrop of the state's political oppression, human rights violations and economic mismanagement.

Of course, as is true elsewhere in the world, government repression is not the only source of pressure on women. If it were, the obstacles women face would be considerably easier to overcome. In fact, social and cultural gender stereotypes perpetuated daily in communities throughout the country and beyond its borders, by the men – fathers, brothers, husbands and sons – whom women love and live with, and by women themselves, often prove to be as much of a challenge to initiating change as practices of the State. In this respect, it should be noted that women themselves are not necessarily always gender conscious simply by virtue of the fact they are female. Gender roles are social and cultural phenomena, and women participate in their construction and maintenance just as men do. Equally important, culture and social norms are not static, but constantly changing. In communities throughout Burma, on its borders and overseas, new pressures and opportunities are altering social perceptions and affecting the way that families live and people interact. We have tried in our report to reflect these changes.

In attempting to assess the current state of women's human rights in Burma, we have relied on as many

resources as possible. Our primary sources of information have always been women from Burma. The voices of women presented here were collected during a more than two years of interviews, workshops and focus discussion groups. What became obvious during that period was that many women's concerns are not being heard, not only by the SPDC but also in women's own communities, in international fora, and even sometimes by NGOs and international agencies, including those conducting programs aimed at specifically addressing women's needs.

In the process of compiling our first report for the CEDAW Committee, we realized that we would have to condense a great deal of the data that we had collected. In order to produce something succinct enough to be useful to the Committee members, some of the most interesting comments and analysis women made about their situations could only be alluded to or summarized. Subsequently, we felt that we needed to find a way to present more of the women's statements, preserving their tone and integrity. We decided that there was need for a longer publication, including information about the CEDAW and incorporating the outcomes of the Committee's review of the SPDC at the UN. This report is the result.

While examination of gender discrimination was the catalyst for the present report, we recognize that not everything we have included here explicitly concerns women's inequality with men. In fact, in some sections, there is considerable information about problems that affect both men and women equally, often because women gave importance to these subjects, or because women's experience of these situations has not been well documented. Sometimes, we have included data of a general nature for those unfamiliar with the conditions in the country or because it appears in few places elsewhere. Furthermore, in addition to highlighting problems women face, we wanted to point out situations where women's work and achievements deserved greater recognition.

The present report does not pretend to be all inclusive. Significant issues that have been omitted for want of both space and information include women and the environment, women and drugs, problems of the aging female population, orphaned and institutionalized girl-children, women and the media, women and girl-children with disabilities, specific problems suf-

fered by widows, and lesbian rights. While recognizing all these issues are very important and deserve to be addressed, they are beyond our current capacity to include or analyze. It is also virtually impossible under prevailing conditions to do justice to the diversity of women's experiences, when access to whole areas of the country and large groups of people is severely restricted, and the flow of information is so tightly controlled. Thus, we also recognize that we cannot give adequate treatment to many pertinent issues surrounding women's varied experiences of culture and ethnicity.

What we have tried to do is to combine women's own evaluations of the situations they face with supporting information from the existing literature about women in Burma and to also include information about the CEDAW and its review process. We hope that this will prove useful as an introduction to the situation of women in Burma. It remains for individuals and women's groups from Burma to go on to correct the mistakes we have made and provide a broader and more complete view. Here we aim to share some of the insights the women we interviewed shed on their lives, their cultures, and their difficulties, in the hopes it will help to make the voices of women from Burma heard – internationally and in their own communities.

It is also worth noting here that the work that women from Burma are doing to ensure that women in and from their country enjoy their rights is not always supported by those within their own communities. While working on this project, researchers were often told by men from refugee and exile communities that they "wanted to give women some of the rights they desire, but not all of them." Not only does this statement betray a misunderstanding of the concept of rights, which are inherent rather than endowed, but it shows the degree to which men sometimes feel threatened by women's empowerment. At the same time, we encountered other men who continue quietly to do what they can to support women's struggles for equality, including some who provided invaluable assistance to this project. In addressing gender discrimination, it is not our intention simply to cast aspersions on men, but rather to point out how our societies often place women and men in narrow slots that limit the wholeness of their experiences as human beings. As many women who participated in this project remarked, the cooperation and support of men is essential to women's achievement of equality.

Throughout the process of collecting information and compiling the present report, a great number of women and men have generously given their knowledge and expertise. We are grateful to all and regret that for security reasons, most cannot be named. We would like especially to thank the women who shared their life experiences and thoughts in conversations, interviews and focus group discussions, and those who participated as researchers. We are indebted to the members of the following organizations, without whose involvement our project on women of Burma and the CEDAW and this publication could never have begun, let alone been completed.

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