

IMAGES ASIA'S CEDAW PROJECT METHODOLOGY

THE AIM OF THIS REPORT

This report was written by researchers from Images Asia, a non-government organization based in Chiangmai, Thailand, working in close collaboration with women's groups based along Burma's borders with Thailand, India and China. We submitted an earlier and shorter version of this report to the CEDAW Committee to provide alternative information about the experiences of women from Burma, which from our point of view were inadequately represented in the government's report to the Committee.

In 1997, Burma ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 1999, Burma submitted its first obligatory progress report to the CEDAW Committee. At the January 2000 meeting of the CEDAW Committee, representatives of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta ruling Burma, appeared before the Committee at the UN in New York to deliver their report and hear the Committee's comments and recommendations, like reports made by their predecessor regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and at other UN fora, it was expected the SPDC's CEDAW report would not accurately reflect the realities of life for most women in Burma. Because of restrictions on association and access to information inside the country, women in Burma did not have the opportunity to directly contribute supplementary material to the CEDAW Committee. As a result, it was important for organizations based outside the country but aware of the current human rights situation for women to submit background information.

The government's report on its implementation of the CEDAW is one of its first official reports specifically about women in Burma, and as such it is a positive development. However, the contents of the report are largely descriptive and lacking in analysis and detail, particularly about the implementation of government programs, the number and distribution (geographically and by ethnic group) of women

benefiting from these programs, and the exact program locations and budgets. Most of the demographic statistics provided in the report are not sourced. The government also claims that women do not experience gender discrimination in Burma, despite the fact that there is ample evidence to the contrary. The report does not take into account the varied circumstances that exist for women because of geographical differences, ethnicity, and socio-economic conditions. Two major factors affecting women's lives are completely omitted: the country's ongoing civil war and the deterioration of the country's economy over the past five years.

We have tried through our own report to present a truer picture. Images Asia began its documentation for this project in 1998, and information was collected over a two and a half-year period. The project was planned from the start with direct involvement of women's organizations from Burma in exile, in Thailand, India and China, some of which are also active inside Burma, in the recognition that they know best the situation on the ground. Individual women from various Burmese ethnic communities worked on the project as informants, resource persons and research associates. Women researchers from other countries with extensive experience working with Burmese communities and on gender issues were also engaged to conduct research, analyze collected data, contribute observations based on first-hand experiences in Burmese communities, and write the English-language reports.

We relied on three principle sources of information to compile this report: interviews with women from Burma and some key male informants, including medical practitioners, lawyers, gender specialists, and NGO workers; focus discussion groups with women from Burma; and reliable secondary sources, including published and unpublished data about the country.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

In order to design the first questionnaire for use in conducting interviews, we consulted the International Women's Rights Action Watch's publication about CEDAW implementation, *Assessing the Sta-*

tus of Women.¹ to draw up a core list of government obligations and possible questions for each article of the Convention. We then held two workshops with women from Burma in Chiangmai to generate other questions and to refine those we had. Several of the people attending these workshops agreed to conduct trial interviews with the initial set of questions. Subsequently, their feedback as interviewers and interviewees was used to modify and adjust the questions to produce a base-line document of about eight pages, as a guide for interviews.

The interview topics were arranged around the substantive articles of the CEDAW, addressing the following (although interviews were not always conducted in this order): the government's actions to eliminate discrimination and undertake programs, including affirmative action, gender stereotypes, trafficking, public representation domestically and in international fora, nationality; education, employment, health, social activities and credit, rural women, representation under the law, and issues of family law. Researchers also asked specific questions relating to violence against women, and sometimes collected personal histories. Questions were usually added to tailor the interviews to the interviewees' particular experiences, for example, of forced relocation or imprisonment. In addition to the general interview questionnaires intended to address women's personal experiences, more than ten supplementary questionnaires were eventually created. These investigated the specialized knowledge of health practitioners, legal professionals, NGO workers in different fields, educators, SPDC army defectors, political activists, detainees, women living in cease-fire areas, and women working in various occupations, such as trade.

Before each interview, the researchers gave the subjects background information about the CEDAW and the upcoming review of the government's implementation of it. We also explained that the purpose of our project was to document the conditions that exist for women in Burma and present this information to the CEDAW Committee at the UN. Because of the sensitivity of conducting interviews in some areas (for example, inside Burma, in refugee camps, or at work-sites in neighbouring countries), we obtained oral rather than written permission from the interviewees. Interviewees were assured that they did not have to participate unless they wanted to and that if they did not wish to answer specific questions, they were free to decline.

Interviewees were also assured that their names and other bio-data would be kept confidential so as to protect their identities. Oral permission was also obtained to tape-record interviews, so as to get an accurate rendering of what interviewees said. In cases where it was not possible to use a tape recorder, or when subjects did not wish their voices to be recorded, interviews were transcribed by hand. Most interviews were conducted in Burmese or another ethnic language, except when interviewees were comfortable speaking in English. The tapes were later simultaneously translated and transcribed in English at Images Asia's office. Although men did participate in some cases as translators, mostly of the recorded tapes, every attempt was made to use women both as interviewees and translators throughout the project.

In addition, we discovered through the process of conducting interviews that it was at times necessary or preferable to speak with women as a group rather than individually. Generally, we tried to speak privately with a single person, since many of the questions, for example, regarding reproductive health and violence, were of a highly personal nature. However, in some cases, interviews had to be conducted quickly, in cramped quarters, or at the risk of attracting attention from officials. Therefore at times, interviews were done with groups of anywhere between two and ten people, because conditions were less than ideal. This experience helped us to recognize that in some situations, women are more willing and comfortable voicing opinions and concerns when they are part of a group, rather than the sole focus of attention. Sharing ideas with peers often seemed to be a more rewarding experience for the women involved. As a result, where it was possible, we also conducted focus group discussions on particular topics, such as health, violence against women, gender stereotypes and political participation. When possible, these discussions were also recorded and later transcribed from tape.

In the end, more than 20 researchers from Burma and other countries conducted interviews and focus discussion groups for the project, producing 293 transcripts. A total of 450 people participated in these sessions, 411 of them women from Burma. Of the remaining interviewees, 30 were men from Burma. Another nine were foreigners, three of them male. The transcripts of individual interviews and focus group discussions are entered into a computer data-base at Images Asia, where each has been as-

signed a label composed of the prefix CINT plus a number from 01 to 293. Throughout this report, when the interviews are quoted, they are referred to using their database codes, for example as CINT 05 or CINT 269. When names of interviewees do appear in the text, they are pseudonyms.

Many of these interviews were conducted with the assistance of women's organizations, or by their members for Images Asia. Three interviews were conducted independently by members of the Karen Refugee Camp Women's Development Group (KRCWDG) and later sent to Images Asia. With permission of the KRCWDG, they have been added to our database and appear as CINT 239, CINT 240, and CINT 241. Similarly, CINT 143 was conducted by an independent researcher commissioned to report for Human Rights Watch Asia and appears with permission in our database. Interview excerpts from another research project conducted by Images Asia and Forum Asia on human rights violations in Arakan State are also included. These are referred to using the project name (the Arakan Project), the interview number, date and location. Interviews conducted by independent researchers for other projects are referenced separately using the interviewer's name and interview date. Excerpts are also included from an interview with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi conducted in December 1999 for use in this report.

OBSTACLES DURING RESEARCH

With restrictions on access to many parts of the country, a great number of our interviews were conducted with people who were outside Burma at the time of the interview, in refugee and migrant communities. Interviews were also conducted inside the country. Because of the government's censorship and restrictions on the sharing of any information perceived to be "political" in nature, or critical of the regime, these had to be done carefully in order not to endanger the interviewees. Organizations conducting programs for women inside the country are required to obtain permission from the government to implement projects and risk jeopardizing their continued activities by publicly distributing sensitive information. In order to protect interviewees, place names and other particulars have been omitted from some interviews.

In certain situations, the status women held in their own communities directly affected our access to them.

For example, sometimes it was nearly impossible to secure privacy or to conduct interviews without men present in the room, either because space was not available, or because the interviews were not considered important enough to warrant making the necessary arrangements. It was particularly difficult to gain access to interview Rohingya women, because they so rarely leave their houses, and because male relatives were often present (and unwilling to leave) in potential interview situations. Another great drawback was that often, when Westerners conducted interviews, finding female translators who could interpret into English was impossible, as fewer women than men receive the education, training or work experience to allow them fluency in English.

Many women had very little time to spare to interviews because of work, so schedules had to be planned around the meal preparation, child care and other activities that filled their days, sometimes after their jobs outside their homes had finished. This was particularly apparent in refugee camps and communities without electricity and piped water, where women often had to complete tasks at specific times, daylight permitting. Women migrant labourers were often only free on Sundays, or for one or two days a month. As a result, on days off, they were busy with all the activities they could not conduct other days of the week, including household chores, marketing, visiting health care centers and relatives, socializing, and attending religious ceremonies. We are greatly indebted to the many women who sacrificed considerable amounts of time to participate in these interviews, which often took an hour or more to complete.

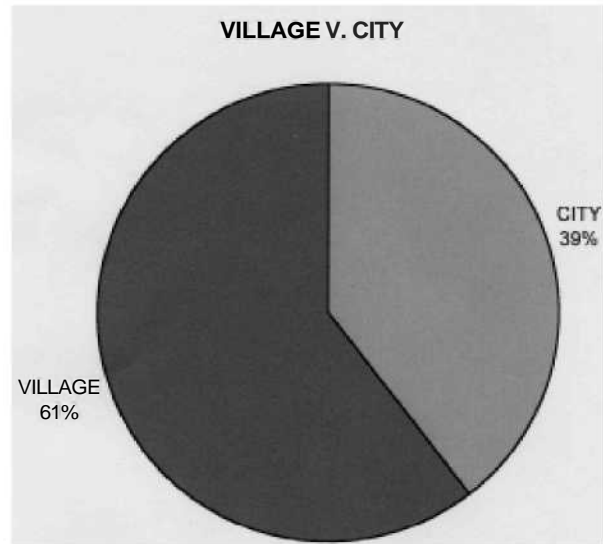
It was also difficult to gather information on some subjects, for a variety of other reasons. The problems encountered can be illustrative in and of themselves. Sometimes women were unfamiliar with issues concerning their rights or had difficulty in understanding why the information sought would be important. For example, very few of the women we spoke with had any experience or knowledge of whether women enjoyed equal rights under the law, because the whole notion of appealing to law was unknown to them. Concepts of women's human rights under international law were even more foreign to them. At times, both interviewers and interviewees found discussion difficult, because the information was very personal and upsetting. Many interviewers reported feeling uncomfortable broaching sensitive topics with the women they interviewed,

because they felt they were offering nothing in return. Both Burmese interviewees and interviewers said they sometimes found the questions concerning government responsibility absurd, especially when the women interviewed had fled state-sponsored violence. Because human rights abuses of a very brutal nature are prevalent in some areas of Burma, women sometimes felt it was inappropriate to focus on their own experiences, in particular on such issues as development needs, when the male members of their families had faced harassment or even been killed by agents of the government. We found that when we organized workshops prior to interviews (see below) or worked with members of women's groups who were familiar with the CEDAW, women were more comfortable and more forthcoming discussing their own experiences and opinions.

DATA ANALYSIS

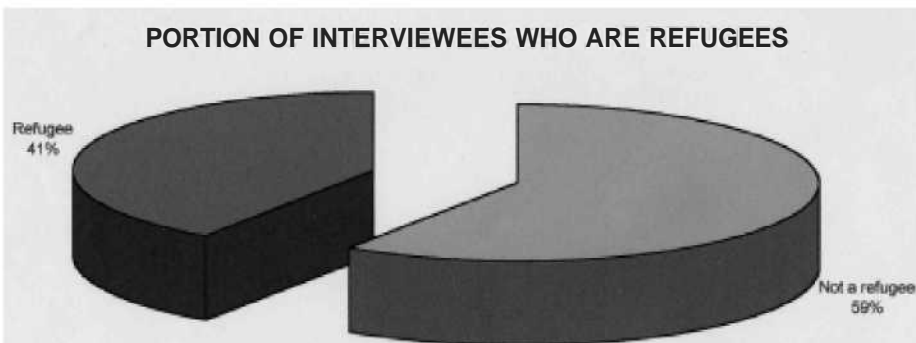
The initial aim of this project was to gather qualitative, not quantitative, data, specifically about violations of women's human rights. No two interviews were identical in terms of the questions asked. Although the general distribution of rural versus urban women roughly matches the country's demographic spread of 70% to 30% respectively, we did not try in selecting interviewees to identify a random sample or to match other specific country demographics. We cannot claim that the women we interviewed form a representative cross-section of the Burmese population, with all its regional, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic diversity. Thus, in offering statistical information about our interviewees here and in other parts of the text we are not suggesting that it mirrors the national situation for women in Burma. Rather, it is presented to give readers a clearer and more complete picture of our interviewees.

Out of necessity, our sampling was opportunistic



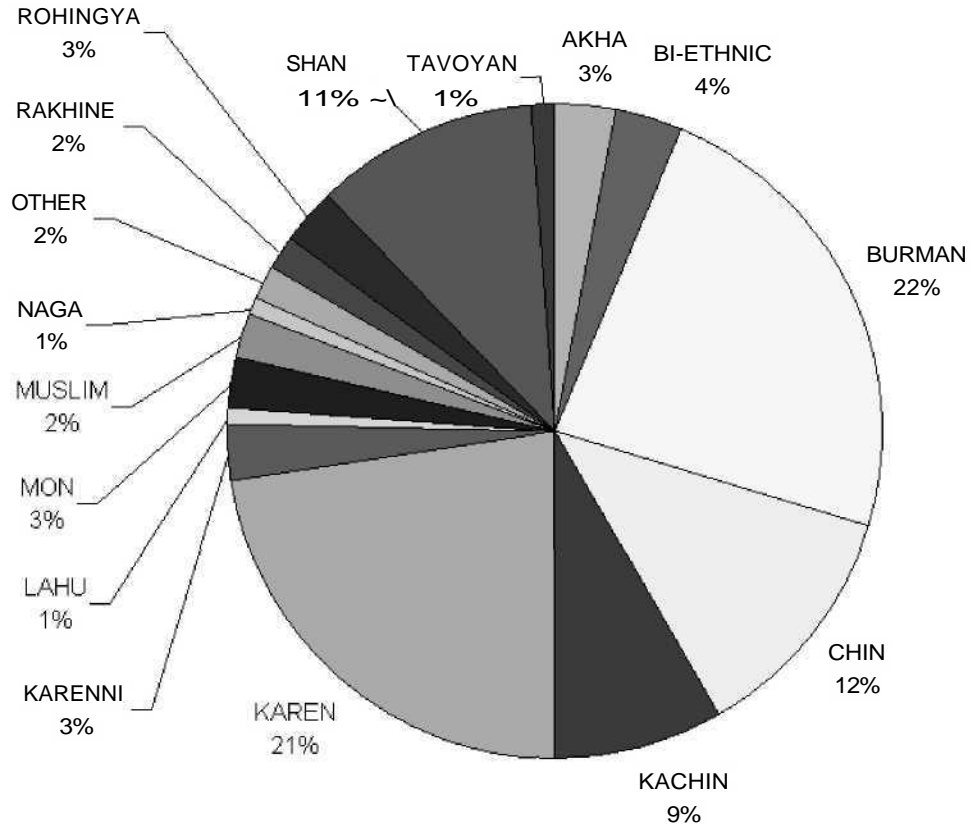
rather than random: we interviewed women whenever and wherever we could. Priority was given to those who were still living in Burma or who had been outside the country for a year or less at the time of interview. Efforts were also made to ensure that different ethnic groups and geographical areas were represented in the interviews. However we were confined very often by security, since most of the people we interviewed outside Burma had entered their host countries illegally, and were severely restricted in their movements. The diagrams included here illustrate the ethnic and geographic distribution of the women we spoke with.

Partly because we were actively seeking information about human rights abuses, and also given that the communities we had greatest access to were those outside the country, some subjects arose with greater or lesser frequency than would be the case if freer access were permitted to communities within Burma's borders. We also recognize that the perspectives of people who have left their country, sometimes in fear for their lives, may differ considerably from views of those who remain inside the country.

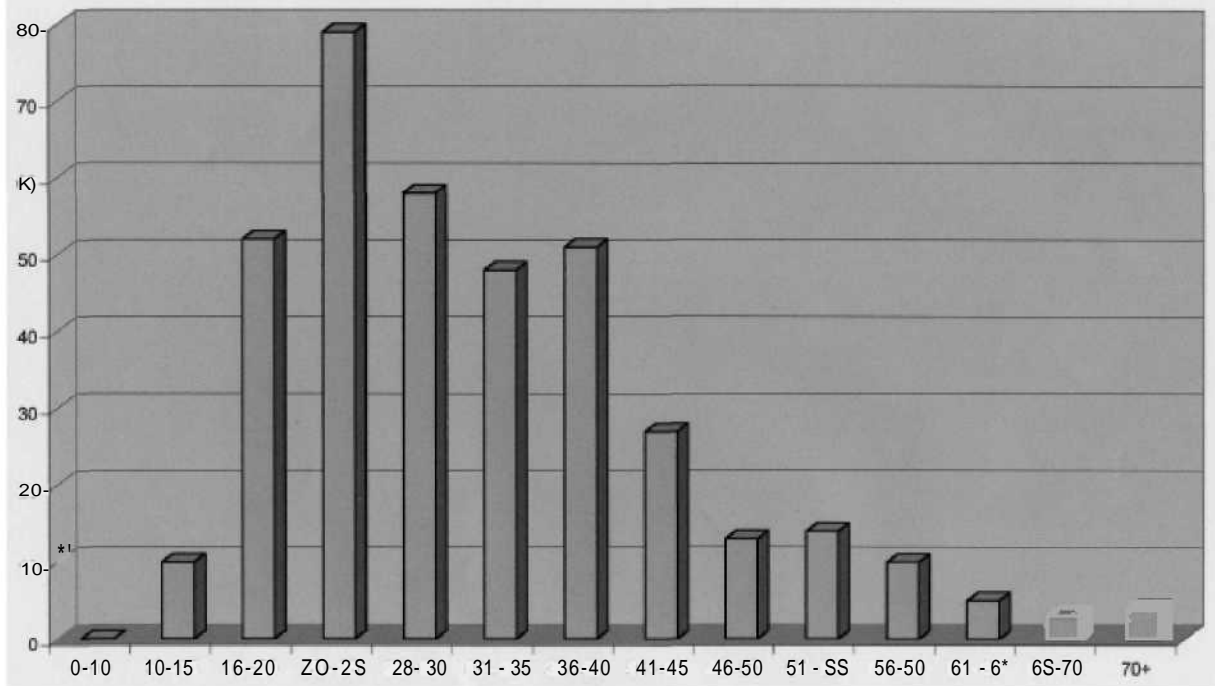


We believe, however, that our "sample" of women has sufficient geographic and ethnic variety to warrant certain generalizations, especially given the remarkable consonance in women's comments regarding the social restrictions they face.

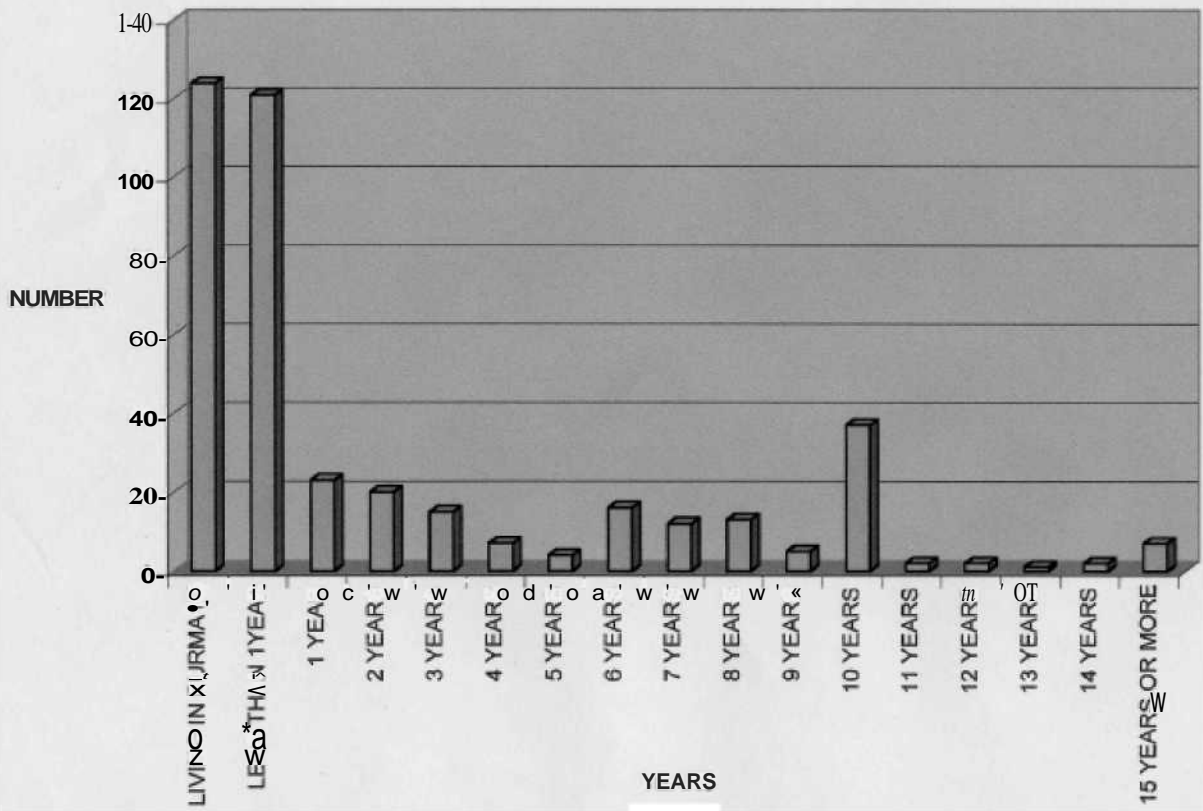
INTERVIEWEES' ETHNICITY



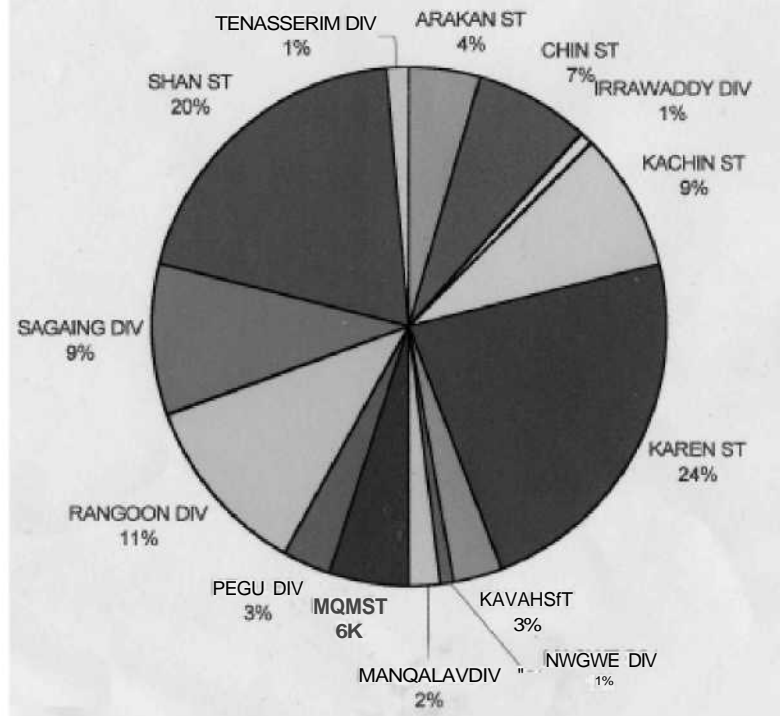
INTERVIEWEE AGE DISTRIBUTION



INTERVIEW DISTRIBUTION BY NUMBER OF YEARS OUTSIDE BURMA



INTERVIEWEES' PLACE OF ORIGIN



We also believe that it is important to amplify the voices of those most often silenced and unheard, including women who are economically disadvantaged, and women who face double discrimination, for example, on the basis of sex and ethnicity, particularly since it is these situations the government is least likely to address.

Information from primary sources has been further supplemented with data from available secondary sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, books, reports, information from the Internet and unpublished (and sometimes confidential) documents from non-government organizations (NGOs), international non-government organizations (INGOs), academics, UN and multi-lateral agencies, and Myanmar government sources. Inside Burma, restrictions on freedom of information significantly impact on reporting of any kind about social, economic, political and human rights issues. Very little in-depth research has been done on women in Burma, and unfortunately much of what does exist is for limited distribution. As a result, some of the sources in this text have been kept intentionally oblique. Regretfully, some of the most pertinent information cannot be made public, for fear of compromising the sources, jeopardizing programs set up to assist women, or affecting women's access to existing information and services. As much as possible, data from interviews, focus discussion groups, observation of researchers in communities, and printed resources have been compared to corroborate findings.

OTHER PROJECT AIMS

In addition to providing information to the CEDAW Committee, this project was conceived as a way to raise awareness in local communities about women's human rights and the Burmese government's obligations to women under the CEDAW and other international agreements and declarations, such as the Beijing Platform for Action. Hence, we also undertook workshops with women from Burma about the CEDAW, sometimes in collaboration with other organizations. In these workshops, we enumerated the government's responsibilities toward Burma's women as a ratifying party to the Convention, citing the Convention's articles. Additionally, the CEDAW was used as a platform from which to discuss gender equality and disparity in day-to-day life. Along with the interview and focus discussion group data mentioned above, many of our research findings have

been confirmed by discussions that occurred in the course of CEDAW workshops or in conversation with participants and members of women's groups. Throughout this process of coordinating with women's organizations, we have shared the information we collected with them.

We have also tried to stress, in workshops and informally, the importance of documenting and publicizing violations of women's human rights. Collecting information is an essential part of holding the SPDC accountable for its failure to uphold its obligations to the CEDAW and other international human rights instruments. We have also seen first-hand the strength that women gain from speaking out and sharing their experiences, not only in international fora, such as the meetings at the CEDAW session in New York, but also in informal settings. Knowledge is a source of power, and recognizing common problems and interests paves the way for joint action. We hope that in the process of working on this project, we have contributed in a small way to the momentum of the movement of women from Burma claiming their rights.

1. International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP). *Assessing the Status of Women: A Guide to Reporting under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Second Edition)*. London: IWRAP US and the Women's and Youth Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996.