

Voices for Change

Domestic Violence and Gender Discrimination
in the Palaung area





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The Palaung Women's Organisation advocates for and advances the status of women in all fields of development and works towards achieving gender equality, justice, peace and a democratic society.

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About Palaung Women's Organisation

The Palaung Women's Organisation (PWO) was established in the year 2000 in response to the lack of women actively participating in Palaung organisations within Burma's pro-democracy movement. It was perceived that the female members of such groups lacked the opportunities, skills and self-confidence necessary for direct and active participation. Cultural factors determined that men had greater access to training, better English language and computer skills, greater self-confidence and more leadership opportunities. PWO was formed with the intention of educating and empowering women so that they could develop and strengthen their own self-determination and achieve equality of participation.

PWO's Mission Statement

We are Palaung women who will advocate and advance the status of women in all fields of development and work towards achieving gender equality, justice, peace and a democratic society.

PWO's Objectives

- To actively work towards the elimination of all forms of violence against women
- To advance the status of Palaung women and encourage their active participation in the political sphere
- To advocate for improvement in the health and well being of the Palaung people
- To increase local, regional and international awareness of human rights violations in the Palaung area, and to encourage action at all levels to address these human rights violations
- To preserve the Palaung language, literature and cultural traditions

PWO's work is structured around 3 key programs and 1 project:

Key Programs, Projects and Departments

1. Women's Political Development Program
2. Eliminating Violence Against Women Program
3. Health Program
4. Information and Documentation and Research Department
5. Income Generation Project

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Map of the Palaung Area



Executive Summary

This report documents how women in the Palaung area are affected by domestic violence and gender discrimination. Survey results collected by PWO show that almost all respondents had experienced or seen physical violence within families in their community, and that physical violence is occurring with alarming frequency, in many cases on an almost daily basis. PWO's research shows that gender discrimination is widespread in the Palaung area, and that many people's attitudes conform to traditional gender stereotypes which assume that women must fulfil the role of homemaker and accept sole responsibility for childcare duties.

Since the 2010 election, Burma's military-backed regime has failed to take any effective action to promote women's rights and gender equality, or to uphold its commitments to CEDAW. Burma remains one of only two ASEAN countries lacking a specific law criminalising domestic violence, and PWO's research has found that there are no government-led projects to raise awareness of domestic violence and women's rights in the rural areas of northern Shan State, where the vast majority of the Palaung population live.

The 'new' regime has yet to address the economic and social crises fuelling domestic violence in the Palaung area. The economic crisis afflicting the Palaung people as a direct result of the state's monopoly of the tea industry, as well as the increase in opium cultivation and addiction in the Palaung area since the 2010 election have directly contributed to the problem of domestic violence, as males resort to physical violence as a means of expressing their anger and frustration with their situation.

More than five decades of civil war have bred a culture of male domination, fear, and violence in Burma. Palaung people, especially males, have been socialised into this culture, and see violence as a necessary means of asserting their authority over their wives, in the same way as the state uses violence to assert its authority over Burma's ethnic nationalities. The regime appears to have no intention of bringing an end to Burma's culture of violence, and continues to wage war against ethnic rebels in northern Shan State.

Domestic violence has a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. Apart from the obvious physical impact of domestic violence, women also suffer psychologically. Domestic violence threatens the stability of the family unit, often has a negative impact on children's education, and acts as an obstacle to community development.

Burma's military-backed regime needs to recognise domestic violence and gender discrimination as obstacles to achieving a peaceful society in Burma, and to embark upon a program of genuine political reform which addresses the social and economic factors fuelling domestic violence and gender discrimination.



Methodology

The evidence for this report comes from a survey exploring experiences of domestic violence and gender discrimination in the Palaung community, as well as Palaung people's opinions and attitudes regarding these issues. The survey was carried out by PWO between November 2009 and March 2010.

PWO's researchers recorded the experiences and opinions of respondents, both male and female, from four different townships; Kutkai, Mantong, Namkham and Namhsan. On average, around 150 people from between six and ten villages in each township responded to the survey; Mantong Township is the exception, with over 200 respondents.

In total, 617 people responded to the survey; 390 respondents were female and 227 were male. PWO surveyed both males and females, as we felt it was important to explore male perspectives of domestic violence when analysing the problem, which disproportionately affects women; the problem of domestic violence in the Palaung community cannot be solved without the commitment of Palaung males to address the issue. The age of respondents ranged from 15 to 60 years old, with just over half of respondents aged between 15 and 25.

Survey data was collected by peer educators from PWO's Eliminating Violence Against Women program and field workers from PWO's Information Documentation and Research Department, who work across the Palaung area in the northern part of Shan State.

Some information presented in this report is drawn from interviews conducted in 2008 with sixty women from the same four townships. These interviews explored women's experiences of the impact of drug addiction on their families, and highlight the connection between opiate addiction and the incidence of domestic violence in the Palaung community.

This report also draws evidence from the CEDAW Shadow Report submitted by the Women's League of Burma in 2008 entitled *In the Shadow of the Junta*, and previous reports published by PWO.

Introduction

This report is an initiative of Palaung Women's Organisation's (PWO) Eliminating Violence against Women program, which was set up in 2006. Under this program, PWO carries out research and raises awareness of human trafficking and violence against women issues.

Many Palaung women are affected by domestic violence. Women's rights are neither recognized nor understood in Palaung society, and Palaung women face acute gender discrimination in their daily lives. Many Palaung of both genders believe that men should be granted a higher status than women within both the family and society, and that males should be responsible for decision-making and the assumption of leadership roles. Such gender inequality is not restricted to the Palaung area and is prevalent throughout Burma, where traditional gender stereotypes dominate. However, it is widely accepted that the situation is worse in ethnic areas.

Since the November 2010 election, Burma's military-backed government is keen to show the international and South East Asian regional communities that they are committed to implementing democratic reforms. However, Thein Sein's regime has failed to carry out any programs effectively promoting gender equality in Burma or addressing the dangers of gender-based violence, especially in the ethnic areas. Furthermore, the military-backed regime does not collect statistics or carry out any research into the issues of gender discrimination and gender-based violence in Burma.

In an attempt to address this data gap, PWO has been gathering evidence of gender discrimination and domestic violence in the Palaung community, in order to discover the extent of the problem and to understand the impact of these issues on women's lives. Between November 2009 and March 2010, PWO field researchers carried out a survey exploring levels of domestic violence and prevalent attitudes about gender equality in the Palaung area, in the northern part of Burma's Shan State. Doing so has allowed PWO to assess the progress made, if any, by Burma's military-backed regime in advancing women's rights. PWO will continue to raise awareness of gender-discrimination and gender-based violence in the Palaung area and across Burma.

Gender-Based Violence and Burma's obligations to CEDAW

In 2007, Burma's SPDC regime submitted its second and third periodic reports to the CEDAW Committee of the United Nations, which is mandated with watching over the progress made by women in those countries, including Burma, which are signatories to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In the report, Burma's military regime claimed that not only have Myanmar women historically 'enjoyed equal rights with men'¹, but that 'Myanmar women enjoy their rights even before they are born'². The report made no specific reference to the issue of domestic violence.

In response, the CEDAW Committee raised its concerns about the continuation of 'patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles, responsibilities and identities of women and men in all spheres of life, especially within some ethnic groups', as well as the high prevalence of violence against women 'such as widespread domestic violence' which 'appears to be socially legitimised and accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity'³. The Committee also lamented 'the absence of data and information on violence against women, disaggregated by age and ethnic



Review of Burma's State report at the CEDAW Committee's 42nd Session in 2008

group, as well as studies and/or surveys on the extent of such violence and its root causes’⁴.

In 2008, the CEDAW Committee put forth recommendations to Burma’s military regime, calling upon them to raise awareness of gender-based violence including domestic violence:

‘The committee requests the State party to raise public awareness, through the media and education programmes, of the fact that all forms of violence against women are a form of discrimination under the Convention and therefore in violation of women’s human rights’⁵.

The committee called upon the regime to reform the domestic legal system in a way which recognizes gender-based violence as a criminal act punishable by law:

‘The Committee calls upon the State party to ensure that violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and all forms of sexual abuse, constitute a criminal offence; that perpetrators are prosecuted, punished and rehabilitated; and that women and girls who are victims of violence have access to immediate means of redress and protection.’⁶

The committee also called upon the regime to begin carrying out research into the issues of gender-based violence and domestic violence:

‘The Committee requests the State party to provide information...as well as data and trends on the prevalence of various forms of [gender-based] violence, disaggregated by age and ethnic group. The Committee recommends that the State party undertake studies and/or surveys on the extent of such violence and its root causes.’⁷

As a ratifying party to CEDAW, Burma is obligated to address these and other issues fuelling gender discrimination and domestic violence in the time period preceding the submission of its fourth periodic report to CEDAW, due for submission in 2013 and for review by the CEDAW Committee in 2014.

Despite the military-backed government’s efforts to improve its image internationally since the November 2010 elections, and its claims that genuine democratic reform is underway in Burma, the progress made towards addressing the issues raised by the CEDAW Committee are negligible, according to the results of PWO’s research in the Palaung area, Northern Shan State.

Findings



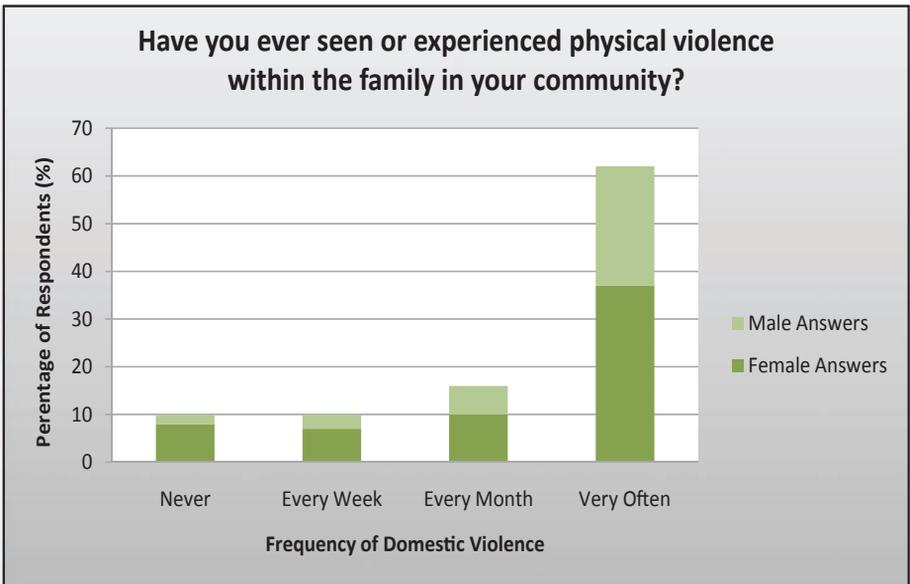
Findings

PWO carried out a survey of 617 people living in four different townships in Burma’s northern Shan State. The survey explored people’s experiences of domestic violence in the Palaung community and people’s attitudes about gender equality. Of the 617 survey respondents, 390 were female and 227 were male; all respondents were aged between 15 and 60 years old, with almost half of respondents falling into the 15-25 age group.

How serious is the problem of domestic violence in the Palaung community?

Question 1: *Have you ever seen or experienced physical violence within the family in your community?*

Survey results collected by PWO show that out of 613 respondents, 90% had experienced or seen physical violence within families in their community. The breakdown of responses shows that physical violence is occurring with alarming frequency; 62% of respondents claim to experience or witness physical violence within the family on an almost daily basis.



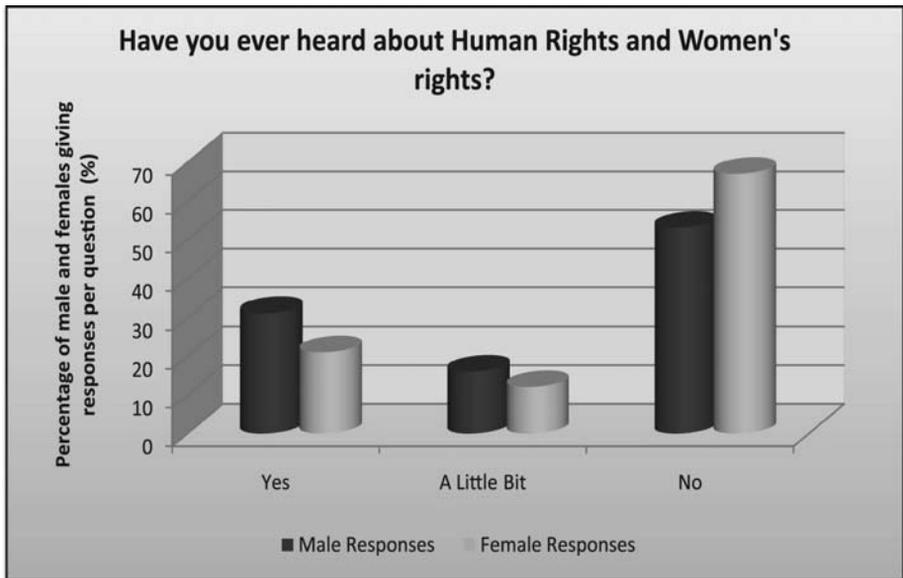
Question 2: *What kind of families experience the highest levels of domestic violence in your community?*

75% of respondents answered that domestic violence is more common in poorer families and communities, although there are still some cases of domestic violence occurring in richer and better educated families.

Are the Palaung people aware of the problem of domestic violence?

Question 3: *Have you ever heard about human rights and women's rights in your community?*

62% of respondents answered that they had never heard of or didn't know about human rights or women's rights. Almost 25% of respondents knew about these kinds of rights.



"I don't know anything about women's rights even though I've finished high school; I never learned about this in my school. In my village, many men beat their wife including my father; I think this is normal for women and women have to depend on their husband. Sometimes my father beat my mom without any reason, it was so sad for me" - 20 year old female, Namkham Township.

Question 4: *Are there any programs that could protect or educate women who are victims of gender-based violence?*

Almost 42% of people answered that there are no awareness-raising or community development projects which addressed the problem of domestic violence.

'I have been studying at university for almost three years. I have never learned about women's rights or human rights at school or university. When I was living in my village, I never saw any development projects or awareness-raising projects focusing on women's rights or gender equality. Since I moved to the town, I have sometimes seen MAAF or some NGOs making speeches about reproductive health or child protection, but nothing has really changed.

I heard that before there was training for women in sewing and handicrafts but those kinds of trainings have been stopped. Now there are no projects for women's development. For example, in my university, women have been teaching Project Management for many years. But this year the university management said that the course was not really effective because it was being run by women, so they have replaced a lot of female staff with male staff. It is clear that they are not willing to do anything to promote women' – Palaung female, age 22, university student

Question 5: *When there is violence in your family, who comes and helps to solve the problem?*

81% of people answered that friends and relatives helped to solve the problem, and just under 10% claimed that nobody came to help in cases of domestic violence.

Attitudes about Gender Equality

Question 6: *Do you agree that men and women are equal?*

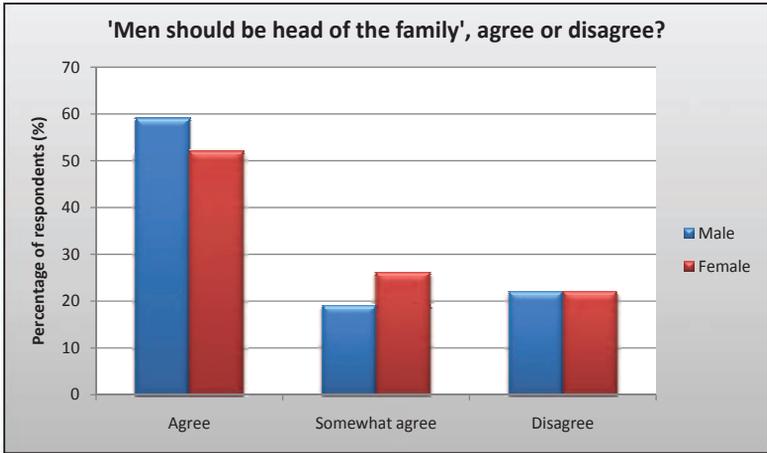
The survey results collected by PWO suggest that many Palaung people's beliefs about gender equality are rooted in traditional gender stereotypes; 33% of people answered that women and men are not equal. However, there is some evidence that attitudes are changing, as 65% of respondents from the 15 - 25 age group answered that women and men are equal.



‘I think men and women are equal but my parents have never treated me and my brother as equals. I really wanted to go to university after I finished high school, but my parents told me that they could not afford to pay for both mine and my brother’s education, and that I must give my brother the opportunity to study because he is a man. Whenever I argue with my brother, my parents tell me that he has more power than me and that I have to listen to him and respect him. I asked my father to allow me to study or get a job but he would not. I am so sad because I will not have any opportunities to study or work during my life’ – Palaung female, age 18, Mantong Township.

Question 7: *Men should be the head of the family, agree or disagree?*

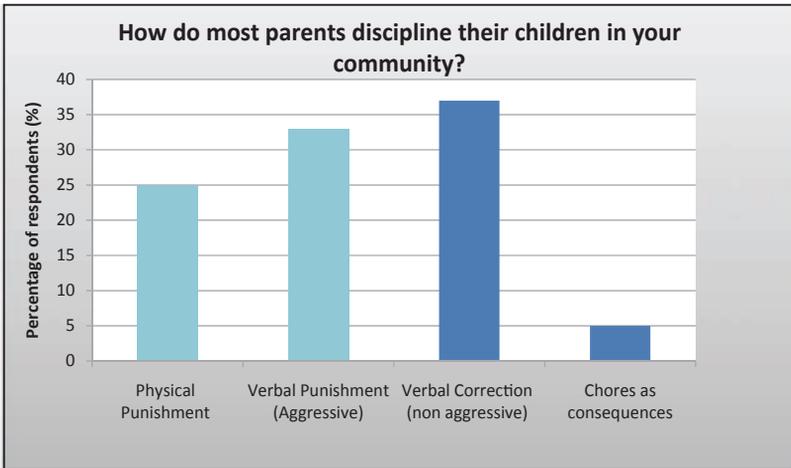
Over 78% of respondents agreed that men should be the head of the family. In a separate question, over 73% of respondents answered that men, rather than women or both genders, take on leadership roles in the community.



Attitudes about Domestic Violence

Question 8: *How do most parents discipline their children in your community?*

As the chart below shows, 58% of people answered that parents discipline their children in an aggressive way, using physical and verbal punishment.



Question 9: *In your community, domestic violence is a problem within the family, agree or disagree?*

Over 76% of respondents agreed that domestic violence was a domestic affair that should be solved within the home.

Domestic Violence Case Study #1

I got married when I was 18 years old. After one or two years of marriage, my relationship with my husband was still good; we did argue sometimes but he didn't beat me.

I had to do all of our house work and also had to work on the tea farm every day. My husband is his parent's only son, so he stayed at home and managed their tea business. He never took care of our children; I had to bring them to the tea farm until they were old enough to go to school because there was nobody to look after them during the day. If I asked him to take care of them or to help me with my work, he just shouted at me and said that taking care of the children was my job and not his.

We couldn't discuss family matters because he got angry very easily and always beat me when we argued. Sometimes he beat me so badly that I had to go to the clinic to get medical help, and he even beat me in front of his parents; nobody can control him. As time went on, we fought more and more, even in front of our children. When we fought, I always ran away from him and stayed at my parent's house with my children. If I didn't go back to his house after a week, he would come and cause trouble. I heard that he had a girlfriend in another village and that he gave her money. Sometimes he took my new clothes and gave them to his girlfriend. I suffered like this in my marriage for more than 7 years.

Once, he asked me for money so he could go to the town, even though I had no control over our family's money as his mother kept all our income. I only had the money that I had inherited from my parent's tea farm, which I had saved so that I could afford to pay to give birth to my youngest son in the hospital. When I refused to give him the money, he beat me. I was 9 months pregnant at that time, and my parents were very upset about it. They asked me to divorce him, and I tried to many times but it didn't work.

After we had had four children I couldn't put up with his violence any more so I went to live with my parents. I requested that the head of the village ask my husband to divorce me. He divorced me but he didn't give me any of our children. One year after we divorced he got married again to a woman from another village. Now my children live with their step-mother, but I don't think they are happy. I try to meet with my children all the time but my ex-husband won't allow it, I only can contact them when he is away from the village. I feel shy and don't want to go out.

The Daily Life of a Palaung Woman

Palaung women have an arduous job as the sole caretakers of the household. Often, they wake up as early as 2 or 3 am to take water from the stream or well, cook food, and clean the house. Women are also solely responsible for taking care of their children; childcare duties are not considered a man's job. It is a woman's responsibility to feed her children, look after their health and make sure they are educated.

If a child gets into trouble, for example, if they do not do well at school or cause problems in the community, it is normal for the majority of local people to blame the child's mother. A typical Palaung woman will have at least 3 or 4 children, although most families have more than 5 children.

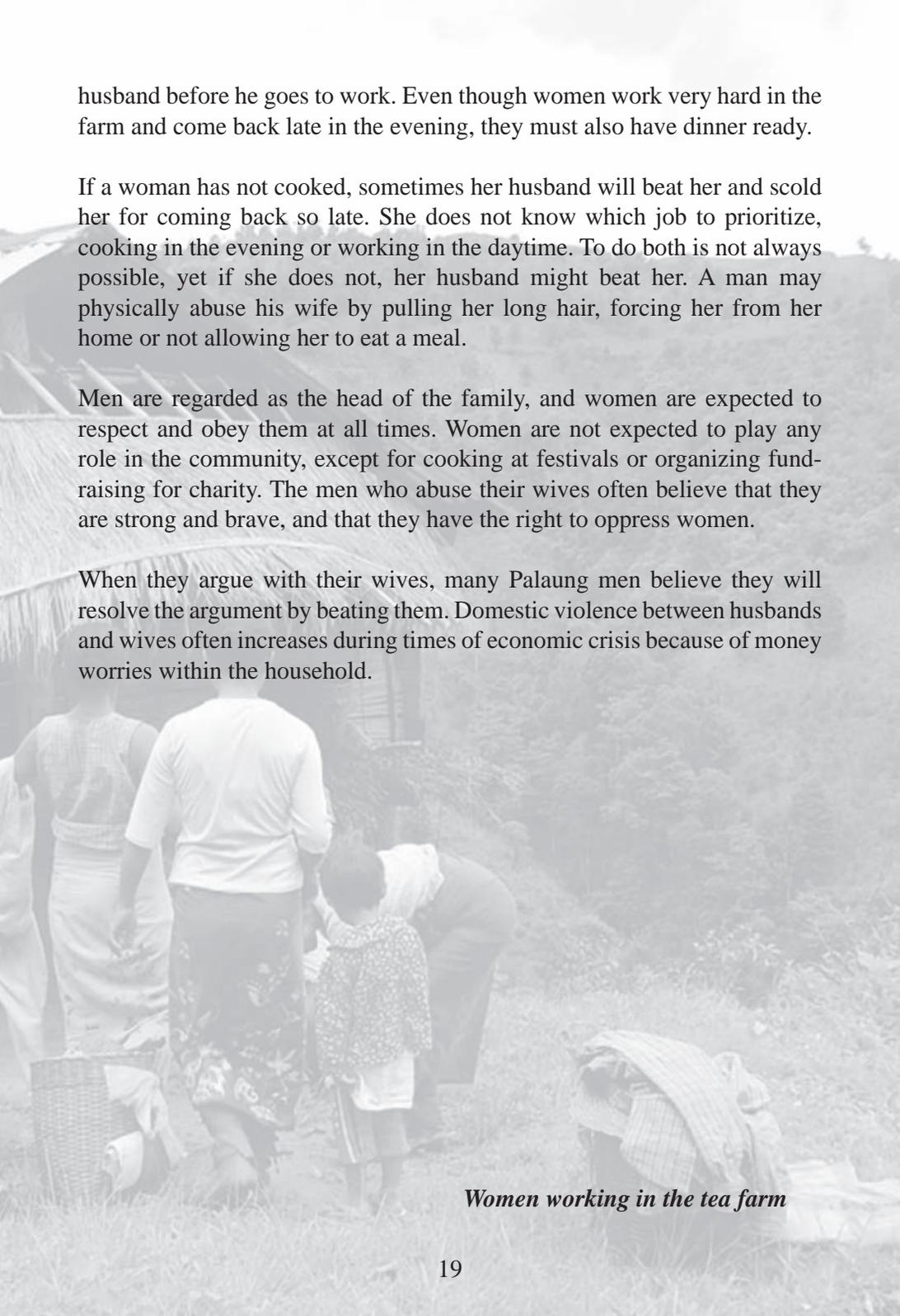
Additionally, Palaung women have to work as much in the tea farm or paddy farm as men do, whereas men only work in the farm, and do not have to worry about household duties. Palaung women must prepare food for their

husband before he goes to work. Even though women work very hard in the farm and come back late in the evening, they must also have dinner ready.

If a woman has not cooked, sometimes her husband will beat her and scold her for coming back so late. She does not know which job to prioritize, cooking in the evening or working in the daytime. To do both is not always possible, yet if she does not, her husband might beat her. A man may physically abuse his wife by pulling her long hair, forcing her from her home or not allowing her to eat a meal.

Men are regarded as the head of the family, and women are expected to respect and obey them at all times. Women are not expected to play any role in the community, except for cooking at festivals or organizing fund-raising for charity. The men who abuse their wives often believe that they are strong and brave, and that they have the right to oppress women.

When they argue with their wives, many Palaung men believe they will resolve the argument by beating them. Domestic violence between husbands and wives often increases during times of economic crisis because of money worries within the household.



Women working in the tea farm

Factors fuelling
domestic violence and gender
discrimination in the Palaung
community



Lack of legal protection for survivors of domestic violence

According to PWO survey data, when asked the question ‘When there is violence in your family, who comes and helps to solve the problem?’, over 81% of respondents claimed that only friends or relatives came to help, and just under 10% of people claimed that nobody came to intervene. These answers reflect the lack of government-run social services available to Palaung people, as well as the lack of legal protection afforded to women who are victims of domestic violence.

As a member state of the United Nations which has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Burma is legally obligated to treat domestic violence as a violation of human rights⁸. Since the 2010 election in Burma, which was accompanied by electoral fraud and widespread human rights abuses across the country, Thein Sein’s military-backed government are keen to show the international community that they will bring change to Burma by implementing democratic reforms.

However, there is no indication that, since the November 2010 election, the country’s laws have been revised to address direct and indirect discrimination or that the CEDAW and its principles have been incorporated into domestic legislation⁹. Burma is one of only two ASEAN countries which have failed to draft a law which specifically addresses and criminalises domestic violence^{10 11}.

In light of this, it is hardly surprising that Burma’s military-backed regime has also failed to implement any awareness-raising programs which effectively highlight the dangers of gender-based violence or promote gender equality in Burma, where acute gender discrimination is present at all levels of society. In the field of women’s rights and gender equality, it would seem that nothing has changed since the 2010 election; the government has not announced that it will take any action to increase the number of female politicians, or to promote the role of women at the community level.

Government failure to raise awareness of women's rights

Most people in the Palaung area are not aware of human rights or women's rights. Almost 42% of over 600 local people surveyed by PWO answered that there are no awareness-raising projects or development projects implemented by the government or by the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF) which address the problem of domestic violence.

The institutional mechanisms for addressing gender discrimination in Burma are extremely limited. The national women's machinery is comprised of regime-organised NGOs (GONGOS) such as MWAFF, whose leadership is made up of the wives of the government elite. They are forced to promote the regime's policies, and are prevented from taking a rights or empowerment-based approach¹². Two of the stated objectives of MWAFF are to 'systematically protect women from violence' and to 'protect the rights of women'¹³.

Although there is a branch of MWAFF in the Palaung area, its members do not work effectively to raise awareness of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, in the Palaung community. Any activities carried out by MWAFF are restricted to the main townships, and do not cover rural villages where the majority of the Palaung population live and where problems of gender discrimination and domestic violence are most acute.

This typifies the approach of Burma's post-2010 regime which does the necessary minimum to achieve a veneer of democracy, without demonstrating any genuine political commitment to the principles of equality, democracy and development. Alarming, PWO's researchers have discovered that even members of MWAFF do not understand the basic concepts of human rights and women's rights, or issues related to violence against women.

"I am a member of MWAFF. I heard people are talking about women's rights but I don't really understand women's rights or violence against women, [the government] never educated us about this." – PWO interview with MWAFF member, April 2011

Until Burma's military-backed regime recognises the importance of women's rights and the need to eliminate violence against women, and works to foster genuine understanding of these issues amongst MWAF members, it is unlikely that MWAF will be able to fulfil its mandate of raising awareness about these issues in the community. In the meantime, Palaung people are effectively being denied the opportunity to learn about women's rights and gender equality, whilst the problems of domestic violence and gender discrimination persist in the Palaung area.

Economic crisis exacerbates the problem of domestic violence

According to PWO's field researchers, local people reported that the impact of the economic crisis, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, are the main causes of a rise in domestic violence in the Palaung area.

Tea production is the traditional livelihood of the Palaung people. Traditionally, the Palaung region produced high-quality tea and traded it in exchange for rice and other necessary items from central Burma. Today however, the situation has changed drastically as Burma's military-backed regime now monopolises the tea industry. Local people are forced to sell



Women sorting tea in the village



Selling vegetables at the morning market

their tea to military-supported companies at low prices. PWO highlighted the extent of the ‘tea crisis’ and its impact on Palaung communities in its 2011 joint report with Ta’ang Student and Youth Organisation, *Monopoly Tea Farms*.

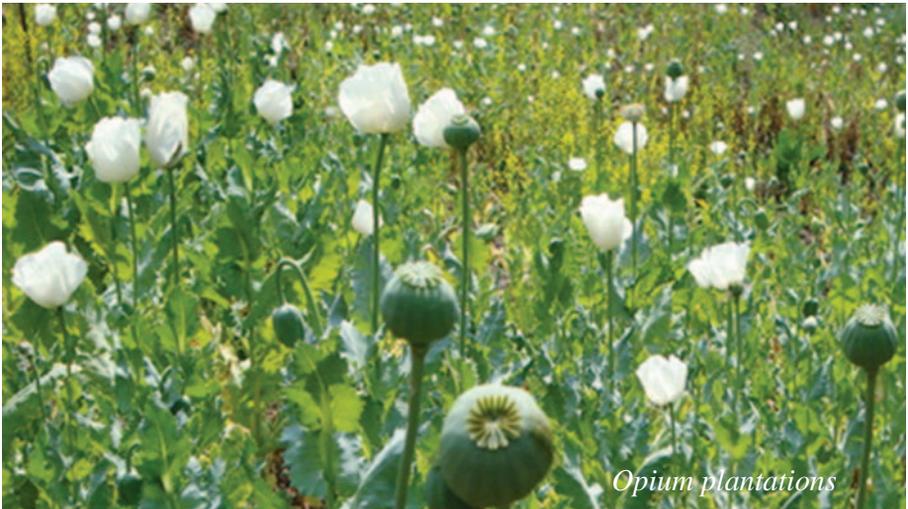
As a result of the tea crisis, as well as high inflation and a lack of earning opportunities in the area, Palaung people have to struggle to achieve economic stability. The cost of living is higher than in other areas as a result of the government’s failure to invest in the local transportation infrastructure, regardless of the fact that the majority of goods sold in the Palaung area need to be imported from other regions of Burma. Despite the rising price of goods, wages in the Palaung area are so low that, even if all family members are employed, their collective daily wages are still not enough to feed their family for one day.

Economic worries and unemployment can cause anxiety and depression; in many cases, males resort to physical violence as a means of expressing their anger and frustration. In this way, the government’s mismanagement of the national economy and Burma’s natural resources has directly contributed to the high levels of domestic violence found by PWO in the Palaung community.

Opium addiction and domestic violence

As a result of the economic crisis, the Palaung people have been pushed towards opium growing as their only means of survival, as the regime does not prosecute opium farmers or drug traffickers. The weak rule of law in Burma has allowed the opium industry to flourish, destroying the traditional livelihoods of the Palaung people. As opium growing increases in the Palaung area, so does drug addiction; many Palaung people see drug and alcohol use as a way of escaping from their problems, especially during this time of extreme economic hardship.

An addict's behaviour is erratic and can often be violent, especially when they are seeking someone else to blame for their problems or are struggling to find enough money to pay for their next fix of drugs or alcohol. Levels of drug and alcohol addiction amongst Palaung males are extremely high and have continued to increase since Burma's 2010 election, as reported by PWO in its 2011 report *Still Poisoned: Opium cultivation soars in Palaung areas under Burma's new regime*.



By failing to address the problem of opium cultivation and addiction, Burma's so-called 'civilian' government is ignoring one of the major causes of domestic violence in the Palaung area. As the economic crisis worsens and opium cultivation and addiction continue to spiral out of control, it is likely that the incidence of domestic violence in the Palaung community will also increase.

Domestic Violence Case Study #2 – Opium Addiction

We got married four years ago and my husband has been addicted to opium for about three years. In the past he did not use drugs. Now, he only works to get money for drugs and he never brings his money back home to our family; I am the one who must support our family now. Our children need to go to school and it isn't easy for me to support them. My husband asks me repeatedly for money. He does other things as well. Sometimes he hits my children and me. He also takes rice from our home and sells it to pay for his drugs. I cannot leave anything at home because he will take it and sell it. I also can't say anything to him because he will abuse me.

After my husband became a drug addict, he brought many problems into our home. I told him I would tell the head of village, and he said if I told the head man about his behaviour he would kill me. I am so worried that he will kill me one day. I don't know why people are planting and producing the opium drug. I pray that my husband will be arrested. If he wasn't at home, my children and I would be happy and safe. It would not be easy for me to divorce him, because I would not be allowed to take my children. I am worried for them, but I have tried to stay with him. The only other option is to run away, which means leaving my children.

Burma's national culture of violence

More than five decades of civil war have bred a culture of male domination, fear, and violence in Burma. Women in the Palaung area are subjected to male violence not only within their own homes in the form of domestic violence, but at the hands of the state in a society dominated by the military, a staunchly patriarchal institution. The widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by the Burmese army against ethnic women have been widely documented and include rape, gang-rape, sexual slavery, and torture ¹⁴. Palaung males have also been subjected to horrendous abuses of their human rights by government troops.

The Palaung National Force, later the Palaung State Liberation Army, waged armed struggle against the Burma Army for almost thirty years, fighting for the rights of the Palaung people until they were forced into a ceasefire agreement with the regime in 1991. Many Palaung adults grew up in a conflict zone, patrolled by government troops who used violence to quash any dissent against the regime. Today, more than twenty five Burma Army battalions are stationed across the Palaung area, where they continue to wage war against ethnic Shan and Kachin rebel forces.



Burma Army soldiers in the Palaung area

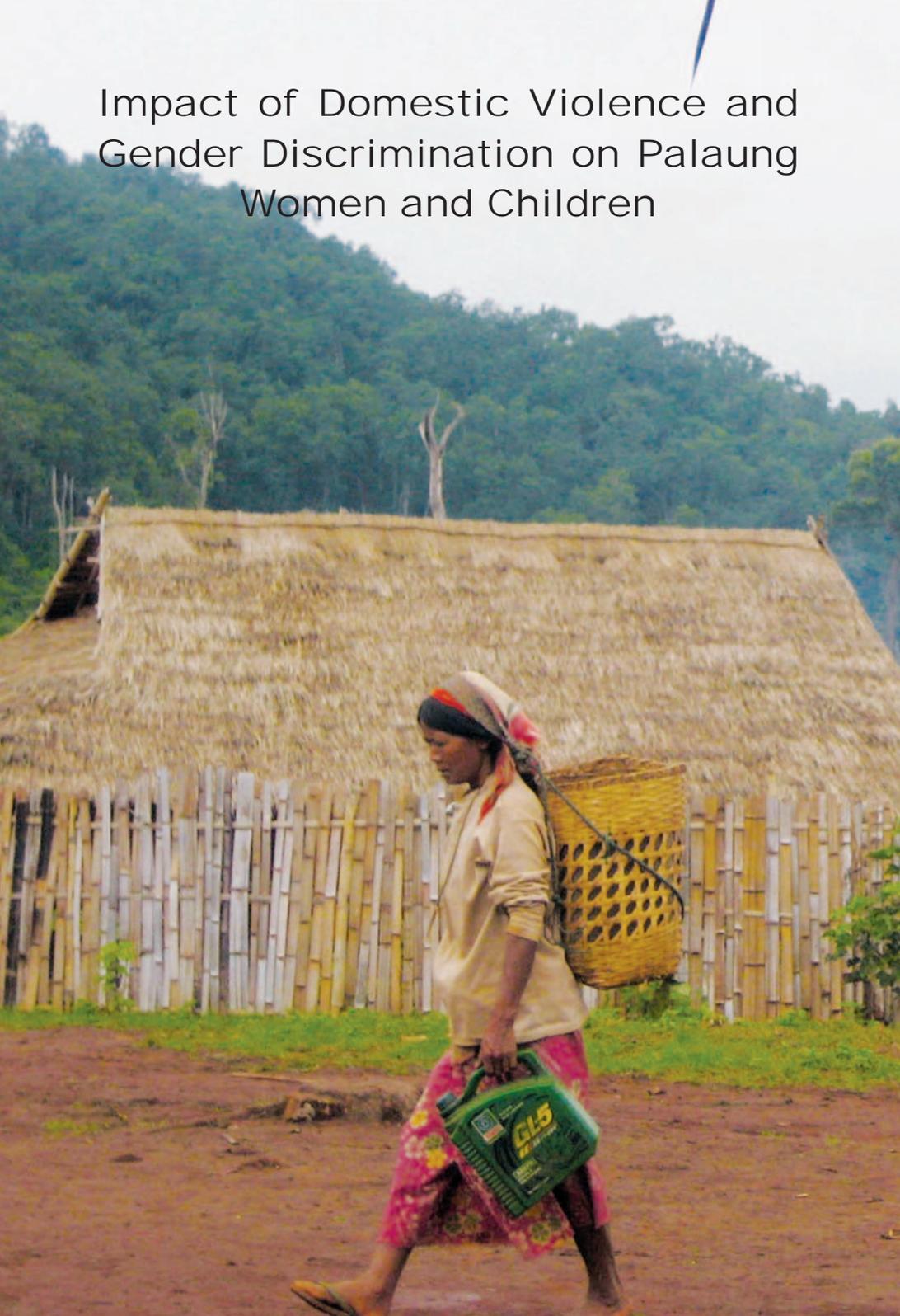
The military-backed government's use of violence to repress any threat to its power has bred a national culture of violence within Burma. As a result of their perpetual exposure to state violence, the Palaung people have normalised violent attacks and come to accept them as an inevitable part of life. Violence is seen as a necessary means of asserting authority over a perceived lesser entity; the state uses violence to assert its authority over Burma's ethnic nationalities, and men use violence to assert their authority over women.

It is within this context that domestic violence occurs in the Palaung community; in this way, domestic violence can be seen as an extension of the military regime's systematic use of violence against the people of Burma, especially its ethnic nationalities.

Burma's military-backed regime therefore reinforces the learning of violent behaviour amongst Palaung people of all ages. When PWO asked survey respondents how parents disciplined their children in the Palaung community, 58% of respondents claimed that physical violence and verbal aggression were the most common forms of punishment. This suggests that children are also learning violent behaviour from their parents, which simply serves to perpetuate the culture of violence which prevails in the Palaung community.

Worryingly, over 75% of survey respondents answered that they believed domestic violence to be a purely domestic affair which should be solved within the home. This suggests that the majority of Palaung people are unable to identify the external root causes of the problem; this is likely to be as a result of lack of access to information, denial of this access being another tactic used by the military-backed government to repress Burma's ethnic groups.

Impact of Domestic Violence and Gender Discrimination on Palaung Women and Children



Impact of Gender Discrimination on Palaung women

Gender discrimination prevents Palaung women from fulfilling their potential in many areas of life. Certain social practices illuminate the gender gap in Palaung society, which is strongly influenced by many generations of oppressive cultural traditions. For example, the education of males rather than females is prioritised in the Palaung community. The Palaung believe that as long as women receive the basic level of education needed for work and survival, then this is sufficient. They do not place a high value on women's education as they assume that women will be taken care of by their husbands.

As a result of this way of thinking, parents grant their sons more opportunities to study than their daughters. If the family faces economic hardship, daughters are expected to leave school in order to help their parents work and support their brothers' education. Palaung women are prevented from gaining the basic level of education needed to pursue further education and career opportunities, or to enter into politics or public life. Young Palaung women therefore have few female role models, and are forced to accept a life of work within the home.

Impact of domestic violence on Palaung women

Women and children bear the brunt of the impact of domestic violence in the Palaung community. Women who have suffered from spousal abuse or violence are often afraid to speak out about their experiences. The situation is worsened by the gender discrimination which permeates every aspect of Palaung society; survivors of domestic violence may fear that, if they speak out about their experience, they will be held responsible for their husband's behaviour.

As a result, many survivors of domestic violence in the Palaung community internalise their suffering, which can lead to the deterioration of their physical and mental health in the long-term. Some women develop psychological disorders as a result of prolonged physical and mental abuse.

*The more your husband beats you,
the more he loves you*

- Traditional Palaung saying

If a woman's ability to work suffers as a result of her exposure to physical and mental abuse at the hands of her husband or partner, she may lose her job. Not only does this have a negative impact on her household income and threaten her family's economic survival, it puts her at risk of further abuse, as her partner is likely to hold her responsible for this outcome and may use violence to punish her.

Some unemployed women travel to neighbouring countries in search of work, which exposes them to the risk of human trafficking. PWO documented cases of Palaung women trafficked to China whilst trying to escape from domestic violence in its 2011 report *Stolen Lives: Human Trafficking from Palaung areas of Burma to China*.



Palaung women in the village

Impact of violence within the family on children

If a couple is affected by domestic violence, their entire family is often looked down upon by local people and shut out by their community. As a result, their children, even when they are grown up, feel ashamed of their family and may not want to be seen in public areas or at social events and festivals. They may feel depressed and withdrawn, afraid that people will ask them about their parents' fighting. Children of a violent or abusive father may drop out of school, or even run away from their parents' home in an attempt to escape the violence. Sometimes these children develop destructive coping mechanisms to deal with the violence in their family life, turning to drugs and alcohol, both of which are easy for young people to buy in the Palaung area.

Violence between husband and wife may result in divorce, thus separating the family unit. Generally, when a couple divorces in the Palaung area, a woman will return to her parents' house and live there with half of her children, although some women leave their children with their grandparents and go to live in a different village in order to avoid being humiliated.



The couple's remaining children will go to live with their paternal grandparents. When their parents' divorce in this way, children may be distressed and confused as they try to adapt to their new living situation, and this may have a negative impact on their educational achievement. It is not uncommon for couples to reunite after two or three years apart, forcing their children to readjust to yet another, possibly violent, living environment.

Early marriage and a new generation of abusive relationships

Most Palaung women get married very young; 60% of survey respondents claimed that the average age of most Palaung brides is between 15 and 20 years old. If violence occurs regularly in their family home, some young women may even view marriage as an escape route, as Palaung women are expected to go and live with their husband's extended family once they are married. Even then, gender discrimination prevails within Palaung marriages; wives and daughters-in-law are seen as little more than an extra pair of hands to help with household duties and working the farm.

"A daughter is like a bag hanging on the wall; she can be removed from the house at any time" - Traditional Palaung saying

Moving out of the family home does not always break the pattern of domestic violence. When children grow up in an abusive environment, they may find that later in life they lack the social skills needed to live peacefully. As they grow up within a culture of violence, either in their home or in their community, these young people learn violent behaviour and are at risk of replicating this violence within their own families and marriages.

The Impact of Domestic Violence and Gender Discrimination on Communities and Society

Domestic violence also affects the development of entire communities in the Palaung area. If domestic violence occurs regularly in many families in the same village, the whole community is affected by the problem; when people do not have peace within their own families, they are unable to work together to achieve peace in their community or in society as a whole. Domestic violence causes individuals and families to withdraw from community life, reducing the number of people involved in community development activities which could improve their quality of life.

As long as Palaung people are forced to focus on immediate problems such as domestic violence, they are unable to look beyond their own communities to identify the root causes of the problem, such as state violence. As a result, people are not motivated to solve the root causes of the problem of domestic violence, which continues to escalate in the Palaung community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report provides evidence of how women in the Palaung area are greatly affected by domestic violence and gender discrimination. In the field of women's rights and gender equality, it would seem that nothing has changed since the November 2010 election, especially for Burma's rural ethnic women.

Domestic violence has a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. Failing to address the root causes of domestic violence and gender discrimination allows Burma's military-backed regime to use these problems as a tool of distraction, preventing ethnic people from focusing on other activities such as community development or political resistance.

Since the 2010 elections, Burma's so-called 'civilian' government has failed to address the acute economic and social crises fuelling domestic violence in the Palaung area. In particular, the economic crisis afflicting the Palaung area as a direct result of the state's monopoly of the tea industry, as well as the increase in opium cultivation and addiction in the Palaung area since the 2010 election have directly contributed to the problem of domestic violence.

More than five decades of civil war have bred a culture of male domination, fear, and violence in Burma. Women in the Palaung area are subjected to male violence not only within their own homes in the form of domestic violence, but at the hands of the state in a society dominated by the military. That Burma's military-backed regime continues to wage war against ethnic nationalities in northern Shan State suggests that Thein Sein's regime has no intention of addressing the culture of violence which prevails in Burma. On the contrary, the regime uses the fear of violence to prevent Burma's ethnic people from demanding their rights and realising their political aspirations.

PWO therefore asserts that unless the military-backed regime recognises domestic violence and gender discrimination as obstacles to achieving a peaceful society in Burma, and without genuine political reform which addresses the social and economic factors fuelling domestic violence and gender discrimination, Palaung women will continue to be subjected to violence at the hands of both their spouses and the state.

PWO therefore makes the following recommendations:

To the military-backed government:

- To end military conflict and human rights violations, especially in ethnic areas, in order to bring an end to the national culture of violence in Burma.
- To acknowledge the prevalence of domestic violence and gender discrimination in Burma and to respect and protect women's human rights by fulfilling their obligations to CEDAW and international law
- To review domestic law, ensuring that it meets international standards for the protection of women's rights, especially in the area of violence against women
- To allow local and international NGOs and CBOs to work freely and securely to address the problems of gender discrimination and gender-based violence, including domestic violence.

To the international community and INGOs:

- To put pressure on the military-backed government to work towards ending gender discrimination and violence against women in Burma
- To work together with and support CBOs to promote gender equality and women's rights through education and providing assistance to rural women

To the local community:

- To help to solve the problem of domestic violence and gender discrimination by speaking out about cases of human rights abuse and violence in the community.
- To recognise that the solution of the problems of domestic violence and gender discrimination is a step towards achieving a peaceful society

Endnotes

- ¹ Government of Myanmar, Combined second and third periodic reports of States parties to CEDAW, 4th September 2007, p.8.
 - ² Government of Myanmar, Combined second and third periodic reports of States parties to CEDAW, 4th September 2007, p.16
 - ³ Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 42nd Session, 7th November 2008, p. 6 – 7.
 - ⁴ Ibid.
 - ⁵ Ibid. p.7
 - ⁶ Ibid. p.7
 - ⁷ Ibid. p.7
 - ⁸ UN Women ‘Domestic Violence Legislation and its Implementation. An analysis for ASEAN countries based on international standards and good practices’ 2011, p.13
 - ⁹ Women’s League of Burma, ‘In the Shadow of the Junta: CEDAW Shadow Report’, 2008.
 - ¹⁰ Ibid.
 - ¹¹ The other ASEAN country which has not drafted any legislation specifically addressing domestic violence is Brunei Darussalam.
 - ¹² Women’s League of Burma, ‘In the Shadow of the Junta: CEDAW Shadow Report’, 2008.
 - ¹³ ‘About Us’, Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation, available at the MWAF website: <http://www.mwaf.org.mm/about%20us/Introduction/mwaf%28aboutus%29.pdf>
 - ¹⁴ Women’s League of Burma, ‘In the Shadow of the Junta: CEDAW Shadow Report’, 2008.
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“A daughter is like a bag hanging on the wall;
she can be removed from the house at any time”