



## FACING VIOLENCE AMONGST OURSELVES:

### *Domestic Violence in Refugee Communities*

**“Domestic Violence” is a very sensitive phrase that can cause many arguments, because some of us disagree about what domestic violence is.**

In an effort to help increase understanding about this subject, we at EarthRights International (ERI) interviewed many people from Burma living in Thailand to find out their thoughts about domestic violence. By talking to people, we discovered how little knowledge most people have about domestic violence and gender-based human rights problems. We also learned that many people we talked to from Burma don't realize how much the military government of Burma discriminates against women and treats women badly. We believe this regular discrimination against women by the government helps people to accept domestic violence in the home and in the community as a normal thing.

But for women who experience domestic violence, it is not normal. It is violent, painful, and harmful. Almost all victims of domestic violence are women. And almost all the people we spoke to described domestic violence as a problem where men oppress women. These two pieces of information made us think that, if we tried to inform people about how serious domestic violence is as a problem, they might try to take some action to stop it. And by stopping domestic violence, or at least making people understand it is NOT normal and NOT acceptable, we think that is a first step in improving the lives of many women.





## Stories of Domestic Violence

The people we interviewed talked about their own experiences with domestic violence. As you can see, unfortunately, there are many different kinds of violence. By telling these stories, we hope to help people understand that domestic violence can take different forms and can happen for different reasons. Here are some of their stories:

### Daughter Punished by Family for Being Raped:

“There was a family inside Burma. One day when the parents went to the market, their son and daughter were left at home. The son was addicted to drugs and used drugs with his friends while their parents were away. When he fell asleep, his friends raped his sister. After knowing this, the parents felt so angry with the daughter that they beat her to death, put her body into a big bag and threw it into the river. She did not get any mercy even though she told them that she had been raped. The parents did not accuse their son.”  
—20 year-old woman

## Background

The civil war and conflict between the military regime and ethnic groups in Burma have caused many human rights abuses such as forced labor, forced relocation, rape, and murder. Some who flee became Internally Displaced People (IDP)—people living without homes inside Burma. Throughout our interviews, we found out that while most people know there is no guarantee for peaceful daily life in Burma or outside of it, in a refugee camp, they don’t realize how many extra abuses women experience simply because they are women.

Hundreds of thousands of people, many of them women and children, flee to neighboring countries and stay as refugees and migrant persons. Under those difficult conditions, people are often focused on survival, and they don’t pay attention to gender issues. They fail to realize that survival IS a gender issue. The abuses women experience that threaten their survival are often abuses that occur because they are women.

People from Burma are used to the idea that physical power—force—becomes an effective way to control everything. They are accustomed to the use of force as a method of control because they see it every day; it is the way that the military regime maintains control over Burma. This idea, that physical force gives control, gets transferred from society in general to the home, and helps to justify domestic violence. The people who are more powerful oppress the people who are less powerful than them. Men seeking control might use force against their wives to achieve it. In

the home, this sometimes means that men oppress women in the form of domestic violence.

EarthRights International interviewed both men and women from Burma living along the Thai/Burma border from different backgrounds and positions including leaders of women organizations and camps, people who are working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and teachers. They are Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Kachin, Pa’O, Burmese, and Tavoyan. They are of diverse religions, ages (between 18 and 66 years old), and marital status, and live in a variety of conditions. Many of those interviewed live in or right outside of camps.

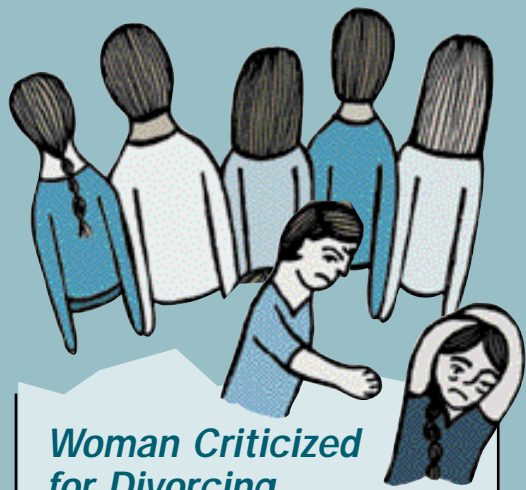
The following are the voices of different people talking about domestic violence: what it is, what causes it, and what to do about it. Some of the people quoted below are victims of violence, and others have observed the violence but have not suffered from it themselves. We hope their voices help to show that domestic violence, even if it has different meanings to some, should be unacceptable to everyone.

## What is Domestic Violence?

Here are some definitions of domestic violence given directly by refugees—both men and women—from the various communities from Burma:

- **“Domestic violence is a man showing control over a woman by harming her physically, mentally, or emotionally.”**
- **“Domestic violence is a kind of torture of women at home.”**
- **“Domestic violence—violence against women in the home—happens less visibly than violence against women in the community. It is just as serious a problem, however.”**
- **“Domestic violence is abusing women not only physically, but also mentally—for example, telling women that they are stupid, not letting them have any friends, making them feel bad all the time.”**
- **“Some societies abuse women’s rights and the reason they give is that they are just practicing the culture. Just because a culture says it’s ok to abuse a woman does not mean that is really true.”**





### **Woman Criticized for Divorcing Abusive Husband:**

"Both of us got married early in a Karen refugee camp. I couldn't look after the house. My husband couldn't either. After we were married for five months he started to hit me occasionally. He said I spent a lot of money. How can I save the little money that I need to buy things? He hit me with a hammer and stick and kicked me. It hurt my stomach. I didn't want to live with him. I felt ashamed. When I got pregnant, he started to ignore me, maybe because of his friends or his work; I am not sure. One month after I gave birth to my son, when I was in my friend's house, he came and beat me in front of other people. He beat my head and my whole body and said I did not look after my son. I could have had patience if this beating happened in my own house, but it happened in public, and you can imagine how ashamed I was. We went to court three times and after that I got divorced, as I asked. I really want to forget that case [the divorce], but some of my friends criticize me because I have a baby without a husband, so I feel pain in my heart."

*-25 year-old divorced woman with one child.*

Some experts have defined domestic violence as "behaviors used by one person in a relationship to control the other." Others have said domestic violence is "emotional abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse between people who have at some time had an intimate or family relationship." Regardless of which definition you use, it is clear that domestic violence is about using power and control over someone else; and it usually is a man or a boy using that power and control over a woman or a girl.

## **Root Causes of Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is a human rights abuse. When women are beaten or hit, strangled, emotionally battered, forced to have sex with their husbands, tied up, intentionally isolated by their husbands or boyfriends from friends and family, they are suffering from abuse. Just because the abuse is being committed by a husband or other loved one makes it no less abusive. These types of violations are not natural, normal interactions within a family, and there is never any justification for these acts. Women never deserve to be hurt, and men never have a good excuse for hurting them.

Unfortunately, even though domestic violence is not normal or acceptable, it happens a lot. Why? In order to understand how to stop this kind of abuse, we need to understand where it comes from and why it happens. Our interviews with women and men from Burma helped us to understand that domestic violence is connected to the following problems:

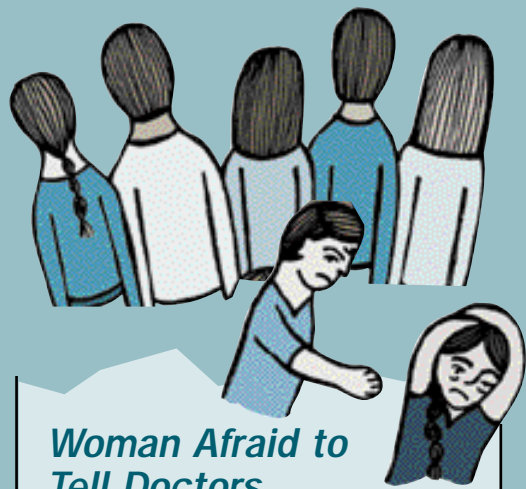
## **Social norms and traditional or religious practices**

There are many traditions that support the idea that it is acceptable for men to beat their wives. For example, the idea that women are "ruled" by men and have to be obedient to men is sometimes used to justify male violence. According to this idea, if a woman doesn't follow her husband's instructions, he has the right to control her, even through violence. These kinds of deeply held beliefs affect the ways men treat women in families, and the ways communities respond to domestic violence. Here are some ways traditions and culture contribute to domestic violence:

- **"In my family, my father beat my mother and so I thought it was normal. No one interferes when this happens in the community because they believe it should be resolved in the family."**
- **"A man may believe he can change his wife's behavior by beating her. Since the community often believes that a man has the right to control his wife, this kind of beating is acceptable. A husband can beat his wife for different reason, sometimes he might want to."**
- **"We have a rule saying that, unless the husband agrees, women can't have a divorce; but a husband can have a divorce even though he doesn't get agreement from his wife."**
- **"Discrimination is based on the culture. Even as children, women and men are treated differently in the family."**
- **"There is no rule to make men feel guilty when they beat their wives."**

## **Stereotypes and beliefs about men and women's "proper" roles**

Stereotypes are general ideas that we have about a group of people. Stereotyping and beliefs about men and women in almost every community are very powerful. Sometimes these stereotypes are based on truth, but because they are generalizations, they are never true for every member of that group. Some examples of stereotypes about women from Burma are that a good woman is soft, pretty, soft-spoken, a good cook, and physically weak. There are also



### Woman Afraid to Tell Doctors About Beating:

“A husband beat his wife when he got drunk and broke three of her ribs in Karenni refugee camp. It happened in the middle of the day, but no one interfered. She became unconscious for a few minutes. After that, she went to the clinic and complained that she was sick because she was afraid of her husband and dared not talk about what had really happened to her. No one diagnosed her in the clinic and her suffering became worse. Finally, people sent her to Mae Hong Son’s hospital with IRC’s support. After taking a x-ray, the doctor found out that three of her ribs had been broken. Then everyone asked what had happened to her, and later she couldn’t bear it, and told everything to people.”

–28 year-old unmarried man.

stereotypes about men from Burma: they are said to be strong, smart, clever, brave, and never cry. Many of these stereotypes are based on our sex, and are called “gender stereotypes.”

Once we are born, our families and communities try to fit us into our stereotypes or “boxes” according to our sex—we are taught what kind of person we are supposed to be based on whether we are a boy or a girl. Even though we may not want to accept these stereotypes, we will try to fit into that box because we think this is what we should do. We are also afraid that we will be criticized by our community if we don’t fit into our expected role or stereotype. If women do not fit into their “boxes” properly, they may make their families angry. Sometimes, men commit violence against women in an effort to make women fit into their “box.”

## Common Stereotypes and Beliefs about “Proper Roles” of Women:

- **“Most women are lacking in self-confidence; women don’t know they have the knowledge to help others and continue to suffer from discrimination.”**
- **“If I get a divorce, I’m afraid my community will think I am a prostitute. I think I will not be able to get married after that or get any support.”**
- **“Some women might want to stick to their traditional role; they just think about having babies and looking after the house. They have never thought about being leaders.”**

- **“Some women depend on men too much.”**
- **“Most of the time, women don’t want to report their domestic problem. They just keep quiet to maintain family dignity. They don’t want people to look down on their family.”**



## Economic and Other Pressures

When you meet with trouble and feel powerless, sometimes it makes you feel better to find someone else to blame; it’s easy to blame people who have even less power than you do, because they may not be able to fight back. It is difficult for people coming from Burma to refugee camps in another country. They have limited contact with the outside world, no way to make a living, no land, no livelihoods, no income. People are bored, they are anxious because they have no money to buy food and clothing, and they see no change in the future. For the men, who are, according to stereotypes and social roles, supposed to provide economically for their families, it can create a lot of frustration. This frustration and feeling of powerlessness can lead to a desire to take control over something, anything. Sometimes, violence within the family becomes the way men try to deal with their frustration and try to feel like they have some control over something in their lives.

- **“In the camp, people have no money to buy the things that they want. Concern about money can lead to tension and violence in the family.”**





### **Husband Beats Wife and Withholds Money:**

"I got married when I was only 18 years old. My family was very poor so I got married to a man who was 10 years older than me because I thought he would support me. We eloped together because my parents were against the marriage. Then my husband started to beat me. He would curse at me and refuse to give me any money. I was afraid of the dark, because that is when my husband would come home and find an excuse to beat me. Since my parents had been against the marriage, I was afraid to tell them about the beatings. He would look for any excuse to beat me. For example, he would not buy any cooking oil; then he would beat me for not cooking with oil. If I tried to be kind and greeted him with a smile, he would ask me why I was looking at him like that, and would start accusing me of doing something wrong. Then once a friend told me that my husband was cheating on me. I followed my husband and saw him eating with another women. My husband told me that he had no money to give me, but how can he buy a new house for his second wife if he didn't have money? He ended up dying at his second wife's house and his second wife did not even care about him so I had to arrange for his funeral."

*-42 year-old, woman with three children. She remarried after her first husband died and is now pregnant with her fourth child*

- **"My husband is the village chief, and because he has to work all the time when the military asks him to work, he doesn't have time to work for his family anymore. We only have a little money and he gives it all to the soldiers when they ask for it. We get mad at each other for this reason."**
- **"In the camp there is nowhere to go and people get moody; it leads to family arguments. Most people are depressed because they have nothing to do in the camp."**

## **What we can do to eliminate domestic violence**

Domestic violence is not a private family matter; it is a public, community issue. It can and does affect the whole community. When a woman is harmed, other people in the community have to help her care for her children and her household. When children see a woman beaten and abused, they are affected emotionally and psychologically. In these and other ways, even if the abuse happens "privately," people in the community feel the impact. So it is everyone's responsibility to work to end domestic violence. Even an ordinary person, a person who is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, can make a difference to eliminate the violence.

The suggestions below about what action people can take are from the people we interviewed. They offer good ideas about how we can creatively work together to reduce and, hopefully, some day, eliminate domestic violence.

## **Education**

Education is not only very important for daily life, but also for the long-term health and well being of communities. Education is the key to liberty; by educating people, we can hope to free people from military oppression. But we can also free women from the

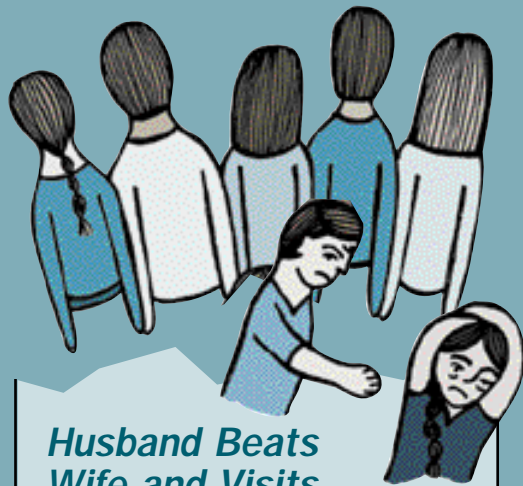


oppression they experience when they suffer domestic violence. Here are some opinions of how we can use education as a tool to start to eliminate domestic violence.

- **"We should provide more education programs on gender issues for both men and women".**
- **"We should educate men to understand women's issues. We should include men in health education and gender issue training. The men will not change if only women understand how to protect themselves from having babies."**
- **"The problem is that we are lacking in education. Even though violence against women and domestic violence happens, both the victim and the one who does it do not recognize that it is violence."**
- **"Women need to get education or training to realize that they are powerful."**
- **"Most women don't understand their rights. NGOs should provide more training for people to understand women's issues."**

## **Regulation and Rules Enforced By and Within the Community**

Without rules and regulations, people cannot know how they are expected to behave, and what behavior is outside acceptable boundaries. Regulations and rules not only help to create expectations; they serve as tools to hold people accountable when they violate those rules. However, regulation and rules are only effective if they are enforced within communities. When we speak about domestic violence, we see how important it is to have rules and regulations that guarantee the safety of women,



### **Husband Beats Wife and Visits Other Women:**

"In my village, there was a woman who had been beaten by her husband until she was bleeding. The problem was that her husband did not look after the family and always hung around with other women. One day she needed help and went to look for her husband. She saw her husband in another house with another woman. Knowing that his wife saw them, the husband came out and dragged his wife and beat her and strangled her. Some people dared not interfere and told the village leader to stop the violence. The village leader punched the husband two times. He [the husband] asked the village leader why he stopped him, because this was his personal problem. The camp leader said, "You hurt our village women, that is why I stopped you." That was not the first time for that family. Her husband had beaten her many times. Seeing this unfair treatment, the community wanted the woman to get divorced from her husband. Even though she had been hurt, she dared not get divorced."

*-55 year-old woman,  
mother of five children*

even in their own homes. Community members must hold themselves and others accountable when these rules are broken, so that the rules have real meaning and effect.

- **"They need to make sure that all people understand the regulations; then they will build understanding among women and men."**
- **"There should be more regulations to protect women under the camp rules."**
- **"I would suggest that for domestic violence, there need to be specific rules and laws to follow."**
- **"Whatever case happens in the family, women should report it to the camp leader. In the camp, we should have some regulations to protect and empower women to give them self-confidence in their future work."**
- **"There should be a strict rule for men in order to protect women. Many people, not only one person, should write the rule."**



## **Community and Individual Action**

While education and regulations and rules are very important to address the issues of domestic violence, there are also some simple, everyday things we can do to help stop domestic violence. While no one expects that a difficult

problem like domestic violence will be solved quickly, it is important to start with small steps. If people begin to talk and think about domestic violence as a serious problem that is everybody's business, that is an excellent beginning. Some other ideas people had include:



- **"In order to avoid these things we should speak openly among each other in the women's group. Couples should also have discussions whenever they have misunderstandings with each other."**
- **"We should have some counseling groups for women, especially women who are suffering from domestic violence and violence against women."**
- **"Action should be taken soon after a case happens. People should take these cases seriously."**
- **"Men should stop looking down on women. For women, they should not be overly aggressive in pushing for their rights; otherwise there can be a conflict between women and men."**
- **"After women have suffered both physically and mentally, and nothing happens, you can imagine how these women would feel. Partners should respect each other as well."**
- **"A man should not hit his wife, if something is wrong with her, he should tell her or they should negotiate with each other. They got married to love, not to hit."**





**Wife Accused of Seeing Other Men and Beaten:**

"I am married and my husband oppresses me a lot. He would support his parents, but not mine. Sometimes my husband would get jealous when his friends would come to visit and I would bring them water. He beat me and tied me up for two-and-a-half days in the house without letting me eat any food or water. He strangled me around the neck or threatened me with a knife. Sometimes, he would beat me all over so there was no place on my body that did not hurt. I sometimes became unconscious. One year ago, he threatened me with a knife, accusing me of sleeping with his friends. But I did not do that, and I did not know what to tell him to make him stop. Finally, I decided to just tell my husband that I slept with his friend so he would stop beating me. He did stop, and then he went to his friend to demand compensation. But his friend denied that he did anything wrong and he refused to pay. Later his friend asked why I told my husband that we slept together. His friend also asked me why I stayed with my husband who treated me so cruelly and I explained that there was nothing I could do."

*-25 year-old woman who was beaten by her husband right after they got married, and still feels undecided about whether she should divorce her husband or not*

# Conclusion

Domestic violence is a difficult and confusing subject to discuss. Many people disagree about what, exactly, domestic violence is. Some people think domestic violence is not a good subject for discussion, as it is a private matter between a husband and a wife. Others think domestic violence is normal between a man and a woman; it is the way a man controls his wife.

Beating, hitting, torturing, forcing to have sex, isolating, verbally abusing—these are not normal interactions between a man and woman. These are human rights abuses. If a man does not like the way his wife behaves, if he thinks she does not cook or clean well, if he does not like the way she cares for the children or spends too much money—none of these are good reasons for abusing his wife. It is never acceptable for a man to abuse his wife, no matter what the circumstances. And if he does abuse her, it is not a private matter; it becomes a subject for the community to address.



*EarthRights International (ERI) combines the power of law and the power of people to protect human rights and the environment.*

**Funded by the American Jewish World Service**  
**EarthRights International**  
**1612 K. Street, Suite 401, Washington, DC, 20006**  
**email: [infousa@earthrights.org](mailto:infousa@earthrights.org)**  
  
**Southeast Asia Office**  
**email: [infoasia@earthrights.org](mailto:infoasia@earthrights.org)**  
  
**[www.earthrights.org](http://www.earthrights.org)**