

# Involving men on the Thai-Burma border

by Melissa Alvarado and Benny Paul

**Programmes to address gender-based violence (GBV) must address and include all members of the community, including men. Implementing these initiatives, however, is an enormous challenge.**

It has long been recognised that to fully address the issue of GBV, both prevention and response activities must be in place. What has only more recently been acknowledged is that active male engagement is fundamental to successful GBV prevention activities. Men can play a significant role in helping to end GBV in their various roles

as brothers, fathers, husbands, friends and community leaders.

As the majority of perpetrators of GBV are men, it is important for men to reflect on attitudes towards gender and violence that disproportionately affect women and girls. Unfortunately, there have been few efforts to involve men in addressing GBV in conflict-affected settings.

Since 1992, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been providing health, nutrition and sanitation assistance in two refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. Responding to high incidences of domestic violence and several high-profile sexual assault cases, in 2004 IRC began a GBV programme which includes a 'men involved in peace-building' (MIP) component. The MIP project has not been without difficulties. Changing men's attitudes towards gender is a formidable task in any setting; in the context of closed refugee camps, the challenge is all the more significant. The MIP programme requires a steady, long-term and flexible approach.

## Initial results and reactions

The MIP project began with a series of focus group discussions with married and unmarried men to discuss their attitudes and beliefs about gender roles, GBV and violence in the community. These first sessions seemed to catch men off guard. Many

it became clear that some staff members were themselves beating their wives. Clearly, the selection and supervision of staff had to be re-evaluated. The programme recruited new male staff members with a clear commitment to the work, and developed written agreements on non-violent behaviour and a code of conduct for staff members.

The men insisted that they too have suffered loss of self-esteem and power and questioned why the GBV programme only focused on

women's issues and women's rights. The MIP project has helped to highlight the issues of disempowerment that men feel and has enabled dialogue about their role in relationships and family life and in resolving community problems. The frustrations of men in these refugee communities must be understood to fully address the causes and contributing factors to GBV. The project tries

to identify areas of strength where men can and want to get involved.

While it is important to acknowledge the validity of the issues faced by men, their concerns also reveal misconceptions about GBV (for example, that a wife's complaints are a form of violence against them). The GBV programme as a whole, including the MIP project, has needed to clarify the definition and meaning of GBV. The patterns, causes and consequences of GBV have an enormous impact on the refugee community and cannot be easily equated with the loss of rights that men feel. The programme strives to improve understanding of the issue and develop concern for the terror of personal violence, experienced primarily by women, while



Andrew Levack/EngenderHealth

Young Burmese men, Mount Popa, Burma/Myanmar

claimed that it was the first time they had been asked to reflect on these issues. The initial results from the focus groups indicated a very male-dominated social structure strongly influenced by militarisation, and attitudes that condoned violence as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. While violence against women was an acknowledged, documented problem in the camps, it was not accepted as a community problem by many men. When the results of the focus group discussion were made public, some men reacted defensively, claiming they were unfairly being blamed for violence.

Male camp-based staff were hired to facilitate further activities with men but their commitment was half-hearted. To make matters worse,



*In November 2006 in Ban Mae Nai Soi camp for Burmese refugees, Thai government officials open the first Legal Assistance Centre in a refugee camp anywhere in the world.*

recognising that men have a critical role to play in addressing violence.

### Lessons learned

Since its beginning, the MIP programme has met significant challenges – challenges that have enabled us to learn important lessons about gender dynamics in refugee camp settings. The MIP project has had to keep pace with the community's readiness to address issues surrounding GBV. Men in particular need to be afforded significant time and space to reflect and internalise new concepts related to gender roles and violence.

MIP has identified and support key individuals in the community – men and women – who understand GBV and either directly or indirectly support the programme. Over time, many men have expressed the desire to be involved in community change projects and to become more knowledgeable about issues such as GBV in order to be active in finding solutions. Many people, including many male leaders, now openly recognise that they do not have the skills to deal with problems related to GBV and need assistance. A number of recent GBV-triggered suicide attempts have underscored the need for an appropriate understanding of GBV dynamics by the entire community. Other lessons learned include:

- Male beliefs condoning GBV must be addressed in order to effectively implement community-based GBV programmes.
- GBV must be presented from the outset as a community-wide issue, not merely as a women's issue.
- Programmes should focus on the positive potential of all men to be partners in prevention.
- Time, pragmatism and sustained funding are needed to achieve change.
- Careful screening and selection of staff are critical. Expectations about behaviour outside of work-related activities must be clear.
- Training must be context-relevant: where there are no local words for the idea of gender, staff and translators must find vocabulary to describe the different social roles and expectations of men and women.

In light of the lessons learned, the MIP project recently reviewed its strategy and goals in order to meet the challenges ahead. Married men and adolescents are now prioritised as target stakeholders. In the next year, MIP activities will focus on capacity building for male leaders and reaching the broader male community. These include: identifying male role models

to document their stories and experiences; training peer educators to work with adolescent boys; training community, school and religious leaders; and developing a mass media campaign. The MIP project will also collaborate more closely with other community organisations to raise awareness and create a shift in social attitudes. MIP also plans to work with the local women's organisation in the camps to train peer educators

and to broaden awareness about the connections between drug and alcohol use and violence.

### Challenges ahead

There are competing priorities in this community. Ongoing conflict across the border and continued displacement are constant preoccupations. Ensuring that GBV is taken seriously requires constant re-evaluation of programming methods and strategies. Redefining masculinity in a closed camp environment is especially difficult. In this militarised, inward-looking community there are few male role models to promote non-violent solutions to problems. It will take much time and effort to identify men who have the capacity to effectuate changes in attitudes. Encouragingly, the GBV programme has received feedback that gender roles and relationships have very clearly become a new topic of discussion and debate in camp. Slowly but surely the community is beginning to openly discuss the hitherto silent epidemic.

*Melissa Alvarado (melissa.alvarado@theirc.org) is the IRC GBV Program Manager in Thailand (www.theirc.org).*

*Benny Paul (bennyp@ircthailand.org), a Burmese national, is a Project Officer with the MIP project in Thailand.*