

Women Human Rights Defenders
Organized by APWLD & AI

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Thank you very much.

As you may be aware, we left Burma due to the systematic human rights violations committed by the Burmese regime and have taken refuge in neighbouring countries, particularly in Thailand.

Within this different environment, we have been organizing ourselves to respond to the needs of women and girls from Burma within and around the community, and also have developed strategies to survive, to resist, and to defend our women's human rights.

One of our strategies is monitoring, documenting, exposing and advocating against the ongoing sexual violence against women in Burma. In 2002, with Licence to Rape, we made the international community aware of sexual violence against ethnic women in Burma.

Sexual violence against women in Burma has been raised in the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Commission.

Our friends around the world, from local, regional and international networks, especially women's networks have put all their efforts into supporting and advocating for us.

Forum Asia and the Asia-Pacific Women's Forum on Law on Development (APWLD) assisted SWAN from the outset with the campaign. APWLD has been consistently providing expertise, network contacts, and funding support to SWAN in the campaign.

Together with the positive developments came numerous challenges for SWAN as an organisation. The most immediate of these was the security threat arising from the glare of publicity caused by the report.

Like the many other Burmese activist organisations based along the Thai-Burma border, SWAN relied on tolerance from the Thai authorities to survive. Thailand, which had maintained an expedient policy of constructive engagement with the Burmese regime since 1988, had nevertheless, for humanitarian and pragmatic reasons, been generally accommodating to the large influx of refugees from Burma, including political dissidents. As well as providing refugee camps along the border, for mostly

ethnic Karen and Karenni refugees, the Thai authorities tacitly allowed political dissidents to stay and operate in the border areas. In general, such groups were allowed to exist if they kept a low profile, and did not publicly engage in activities that would embarrass diplomatic relations between Thailand and Burma. The huge amount of publicity generated by Licence to Rape was a violation of this code of conduct, and indeed, about three months after the publication of the report, SWAN was ordered to close by the Thai authorities. To this day, SWAN cannot operate openly, and SWAN members, many of whom lack legal status in Thailand, remain in fear of raids by the Thai authorities.

SWAN members also had to suffer psychological harassment from the regime. In one of their press releases responding to the Licence to Rape report, the SDPC personally slandered some senior SWAN members, and accused them of being manipulated by men to write the report. Rumours were circulated and anonymous e-mails were also sent to SWAN members stating that a price had been put on their heads, and a gunman hired to assassinate them. Stress from threats to personal security was exacerbated by the added workload involved in the constant campaign activities following on from the report.

Recommendations to AP Forum:

To urge States to give pressure to the Royal Thai Government, the governments of India and Bangladesh:

1. To protect and ensure the safety of organisations from Burma in their countries which are working and advocating for women's human rights, particularly by documenting and exposing systematic sexual violence committed by the Burmese military regime. Members of these organisations should be issued temporary stay permits in their countries, and travel documents.
2. To ensure and guarantee the protection and safety of women's human rights defenders from Burma who are documenting, exposing and advocating against systematic sexual violence committed by State actors and non-state actors
3. To ensure that Human Rights Defenders are able to carry out, with the full cooperation of the authorities, educational programmes and activities among Burmese communities in their countries that promote respect for fundamental human rights, including seminars and workshops on civil and political rights, environmental rights, women's rights and ethnic rights.
4. To ensure that Human Rights Defenders who are providing humanitarian assistance to refugees, migrants, IDPs and asylum seekers from Burma are able to assist these populations with the full cooperation of the Thai authorities.
5. To recognise the pivotal role of all human rights defenders from Burma in Thailand, and not to deport them back to Burma.