

English Edition

BURMA~ WOMEN'S VOICES FOR HOPE

Edited by
the Thanakha Team

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ALTSEAN
BURMA

ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA

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Note: Many of the contributors to *Burma ~ Women's Voices For Hope* have opted to use an alias to protect their privacy and safety. The names of characters in some stories have also been changed to protect their privacy and safety.

MAP OF BURMA

including some of the locations mentioned in this book



INTRODUCTION

Janie Conway-Herron

Sometimes life sends you an offer that you know you can't refuse and you know that when you do accept it, the experience will be life changing. Late last year I received just such an offer when I reconnected with Debbie, my old friend from student politics days in Australia and she invited me over to run writing workshops in Thailand with Burmese women refugees. The following February I flew expectantly into Bangkok. Early next morning Mandi, from Altsean Burma, and I set out with Nai Nai (the first of three interpreters) for the first workshop, driving northwest along the flat highway out of Bangkok to Mae Sot, a town set high in the mountainous regions that mark the Thai/Burma border. Three days later we drove eastward down the same mountains to Chiang Mai for the second workshop flying back to Bangkok and driving southwest to the tiny town of Sangklaburi for the last one. It was a lightning trip, but one that was to fulfill its life changing promise to me.

Women from Karen, Shan, Mon, Karenni, Kachin, Tavoyan, Palaung, Pa-O and Burman ethnic groups attended the workshops. They wanted to write about what had happened to them; it was my brief to help them. I arrived armed only with my teaching skills and a willingness to listen. Together we moved from difficult telling, to a type of writing that enabled the women to describe the visceral details of their stories. Many had risked their lives going over the border to collect statistics on human rights abuses for reports, now they were describing the details in a more in-depth way. I expected shyness and a certain reticence to tell stories filled with the pain of an exile's experience and I wondered how I would handle the repercussions of the women's storytelling. But I needn't have worried, the women were so brave and in the trusting atmosphere of the workshop the stories

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poured forth; some women told their own stories, some women told the stories of family members, some told stories about friends or events they had witnessed. After the three days they had all gained enough confidence in their writing to start their own groups and to continue workshopping amongst themselves.

Being part of this process was one of the most rewarding experiences of my writing life and it has been amazing to watch the positive ways in which narrative and advocacy go hand in hand towards creating reconciliation and healing, education and freedom of information. It has been truly life changing to participate in these workshops and gratifying to know that I have played a part in the lives of these women, whom it was such an honor to meet, giving voice to their experiences. It is marvelous to see their stories in print and to know that as you read them you will marvel also at the bravery, honesty and extraordinary spirit of survival that lies within each one.

FOREWORD

By Nursyahbani Katjasungkana

This is the sixth edition of the “Women’s Voices” collections of writings by women from Burma. The rich diversity of women’s identities, voices and experiences in this collection are unified by the overwhelming sense that the women of Burma have not given up on their aspirations. The women, regardless of their age and situation have not hesitated to share the hopes they have for the future. Our sisters from Burma, whether they remain in the country, are refugees, migrant workers or exiles, continue to keep alive the powerful vision they have for Burma.

The stories collected here include voices from all the major ethnic groups from Burma, speaking to each other, and together speaking out to the world of what they have suffered, and what they know their future should look like. Women are risking imprisonment and violence for reconciliation, peace, and democracy.

These stories are about women’s experiences, but also speak of a vision for Burma. A future Burma where the state protects women from violence, rather than causing violence. Where girls are able to complete their education in readiness for opportunities to thrive and grow as individuals.

Here, too, are new voices. A new generation of women from Burma telling us what they want, of their struggle for knowledge, of the lessons learnt on the run. Stories of girls left behind, stories of girls who left to go on ahead.

For the first time in “Women’s Voices”, we are hearing from Yintalai women. Young Talai Lahsa was sent away from her home just months ago, on a mission to save her people from a dam. The Burmese regime will build a dam that will drown the valley that an entire

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indigenous people occupy. She left for Thailand, a place only known for the stories of “what happens to young girls from Burma” without much knowledge of the world. She continues to search for a way to save her entire community.

The vision for a free and democratic Burma is clear. Meanwhile, in their families, in their communities, in their organizations, and in the international community, women from Burma are organizing and doing what needs to be done. They have fled violence and the daily threat of violence, and left many behind. Some cross the border again and again, carrying with them emergency supplies and whispers of hope, to their villages that the world supports them.

This new, sixth collection of “Women's Voices” are the voices of women shouting out to the world for an audience. These are not easy stories. They are stories of rape and violence that are hard to hear. They are stories of abuse by the state that are hard for some of us to believe. They are stories of abuses perpetrated by other desperate people. We must open our ears to these voices who courageously dare to speak out. We must open our hearts to the vision that these women tenaciously work for. We must act to support them, as they refuse to give up in the face of danger.

Ms Nursyabbani Katjasungkana is an Indonesian parliamentarian and a well known feminist lawyer and activist.

TO SAVE OUR PEOPLE

Talai Lahsa

There are 89 households in our village. We all know each other. We are all friends and relatives to each other. Most of us were born here and thought we will live here all our lives until we die, like our ancestors. We don't like to travel too far – going to visit other friends and relatives in the other Yintalai villages in our valley during festival times is enough.

Yes, I am Yintalai. It is a very, very small ethnic group. There are about 1,000 of us. Not many people know about us. Even when I was in Rangoon, I did not tell people I am Yintalai. Many people in Burma don't even know there is such a people as the Yintalai.

When I was 19, my parents sent me to Rangoon for 3 months to help look after a distant relative who was ill. I was chosen because my elder sister was married and had her own family to care for. One of my aunts took me there.

We went in a car. It was exciting, and beautiful to see the countryside, the villages along the roadside, all the different types of people, some with colorful ethnic headscarves and clothes. So interesting! It was my first time to ride in a car. It took 3 days to get to Rangoon. There were also many, many checkpoints. The police at these checkpoints asked us the same questions again and again: Where are you going? Why are you going there? How long are you going to be there?

Before I went to Rangoon, my friend and family warned me: Be careful of your money, there are many liars and thieves in Rangoon, some may even try to rob you with a knife. Be careful of the men, they are cheats and will say anything to get your money. Oh yes, I was careful.

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Rangoon was confusing, so complicated. So many people! So much noise! I had to be careful all the time. I had to keep the doors locked. If someone came to the door and I didn't know who it was, I wouldn't open it. People did not sleep at night. They stayed up so late. In the village we slept early and woke up early. I couldn't sleep until late because the morning traffic noises were so loud. It was strange. In Rangoon, we had to buy drinking water from the street vendor. In my village, we just took water from the stream when we were thirsty. Our water tasted sweeter in our mouth, too.

One thing that made me happy about going to Rangoon was that I had a chance to visit Shwedagon Pagoda. When I got there, I was so happy, I felt like laughing and crying at the same time. I don't have the words to say how happy I was. It was wonderful. All my life I wanted to see Shwedagon Pagoda. The closest I had been to it was a calendar photo of it that was hanging in my home. So, that was really wonderful.

But I missed my parents' love and care. Every night I cried, thinking of them. So when I finally got home to our valley, I decided we will never be separated. We will stay together in our home forever. One trip to Rangoon was enough.

So, over a year later I was truly shocked and afraid when my father asked me to go to Thailand. "You must go because you must help our people. It is the only way," he said. He looked sad and serious. I was frightened. Thailand was a scary place. I had heard on the BBC Radio that many people from Burma had been trafficked there. No one from our village would dare to go there. It was too far and too dangerous. What if something happened to me?

My father was firm. "Don't think like that, don't be afraid. You must go. The government is going to make a dam that will drown our entire valley. You must get help to stop this dam."

How could this be possible? I couldn't believe it. How could the Salween River water reach us and rise up and drown us all just like that? What was I going to do in Thailand? Who was going to help me? Could I do what Papa wanted me to do?

Papa refused to change his mind. I must go. He told me something had to be done to save our people. The valley was our lives, our culture, our livelihood. We were a small community and our traditions would be destroyed if the valley was flooded by the dam. He had seen the report showing how our people were in danger from this dam. We would be chased away by the government soldiers. All of us would be separated from each other and lost from our land, from the spirits who took care of us.

I really did not want to leave. For two months, we argued. My mother didn't want me to leave to another country. She cried just thinking about it. Wa, my younger brother, was unhappy too. If I went, there would be no one to help him with the farm work. Papa tried to persuade me. "When you go to Thailand, you will learn new things. They have computers there. You can learn how to use a computer, you can get more knowledge to help our people. It will be good for you, it will be good for our people."

I was still not happy about it. Mother was not happy about it. But Papa insisted. He told me: "You must go there and do something to save us. You can do it from there. We cannot do much here because of the government soldiers. You must help save us." I had to obey Papa. He decided I must go to Thailand and find a way to save our valley. It was my duty.

So, here I am in Thailand. Mother cried a lot but she had to agree with Papa. She asked me to be careful and to write to her as much as possible. I cannot tell you about the trip here. It's a secret. If I tell you how I got here, many people could be in danger. Our friends and relatives thought Papa was taking me to visit some cousins on the other side of the valley. I think they will know by now where I am. The women will be asking so many questions about me so Mother will not be able to keep it a secret. But I think they will not know what I am trying to do here. So many people in our valley still don't know about this dam, about the danger to our people.

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Papa was right. I am now learning how to use a computer. I can type. I want to learn how to go on the internet, how to send email. I also have a chance to learn more about the dam, how dangerous it is to us and to all the other people in our area.

I don't sleep early now, sometimes I stay up really late til 11 o'clock at night! I sleep late now so that I can read. I am trying to read all the reports about the dam, about our country. We never had a chance to get this information in our village. I am even reading the English dictionary, I must try to learn English. I can say "yes" and "no" very well!

I am working, and learning with other people who are also fighting this dam. I must learn more skills so that I can ask for help to save our people. I have been here two months.

I miss my family and our valley very much. I think about them everyday. I don't know how long I must be apart from them. I wish I can go home but I know I must not give up. If I fail, there will be no home to return to. We must stop this our valley, our forest spirits, our Yintalai people from disappearing under the water.

Talai Labsa is a pseudonym that means "Yintalai Star". She told her story to Ma Thanda.

SPEAKING OUT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Cheery Zahau

It was a cold winter in 2003. I was at the Central Chin Women's Organization (CCWO) in Aizawl, India to help translate Chin language into English. My leaders and colleagues had left me with the huge responsibility of looking after the office.

The deportation of Burmese refugees by the local Mizo people, which had begun on 17th July 2003, had started to calm down. After months of terror, hiding and fear of deportation and homelessness we were now feeling a little more at ease, a little safer than during the worst of the deportation period. Fortunately, our landlord now felt safe enough to allow us to rent another room without fear of reprisal, so some of the girls and I could take shelter. However I didn't know where my family and friends had hidden themselves.

The stories I translated on that cold winter's day changed me. It was the first time I had met with survivors of rape by the brutal Burmese soldiers. Though I always believed that the Burmese soldiers would not spare the women; that they would in fact target women to oppress and punish our people, it was still very hard for me to talk with the rape survivors. I could feel their fear, see it in their faces, the pain and hatred in their eyes. Their hands shook with anger. Their voices blurred with helplessness at the end of the conversation.

I was shocked. As I listened to their stories I was not sure if I was breathing, then I realized that I was weeping alongside them. After listening to their stories they gave me a duty, saying in Chin, "It's not just us. More women will suffer if you don't talk." I cannot forget that moment. Likewise, my colleagues who had heard the stories of women who had been victimized sexually and physically by the Burmese troops were also determined to speak out. In 2006, we started documenting

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incidents of sexual violence by the military regime against Chin women as much as we could. We knew the stories we heard outside Burma, from the few brave women determined to recount their traumatic experiences. But they were just the 'tip of the iceberg,' so we decided to go inside.

My colleagues risked their lives to penetrate inside Chin State to get more detailed information and documentation about the ongoing rapes and sexual violence. Outside Burma I waited anxiously. I spent hours and hours worrying about the lives of my colleagues who were traveling in Chin State because the Burmese army troops are everywhere in Chin State. They can arrest anyone without a reason. My colleagues who went inside with a purpose, with a mission to interview survivors and expose the truth, faced the most dangerous conditions and severe consequences if the military authorities found out.

I myself traveled to several villages to meet with community leaders and women who had been severely hurt by the troops. I remember their words clearly.

One time a rape survivor said to me "Telling my story to you will give me another nightmare because it is so painful, beyond what words can express."

On another occasion, a woman, said, with anger in her voice "Telling my story to you will not ease my pain."

I was frozen because I could feel their anger and their pain.

The attitudes of some of the male leaders, who still clung to the outdated notion that rape brings shame to the community, mocked me, and the work that the women were doing. While they felt more at ease avoiding what was happening to the Chin women, I felt I had to challenge them: "Will you talk about rape only after all the women in your village have been raped by the soldiers?"

One time a woman said to me, "I am not young and attractive but the soldiers still raped me. They raped me because I am an ethnic

woman and they knew I could not do anything against them.” I have become more determined to protect the helpless women in whatever way I can, with the tools that I have. I do not have guns like the Burmese army soldiers have. I do not have the physical strength to save these women from the soldiers. But I do have a voice! All I can do is to tell their stories to the world, hoping that these atrocities will be stopped.

I have talked publicly about the rape of women in Burma on several occasions. Before I delivered the presentation, I wept for nights and days. Often I told myself, “don’t tell these stories anymore,” because the pain takes place inside of me. At times I get depressed after talking about the rape incidents and I ask myself the reason, which I do not need to know. All I know is, I will keep talking about this until rape is stopped, until violence against women does not take place anymore, until the women have laws that will protect them, until the women have political freedom to take part in our political solution. I believe that when the women are given political freedom, when we have rule of law and the protection of the law, when women are safe from any form of violence, our country will be peaceful and prosperous.

Cheery Zabau is a Chin woman activist based in India. She is the Coordinator of the Women’s League of Chinland (WLC), an umbrella group of women’s groups from Chin State, Burma. WLC recently released a report “Unsafe State” documenting sexual violence against women by the military regime in Chin State. Cheery is a vocal defender of the rights of women from Burma and recently spoke at the United Nations during the 51st Session on the Commission on the Status of Women.

THE BRASS RINGS

Ma Lo

My name is Ma Lo. Kayan people don't have surnames; people just call us by our given name. I am 24 years old. This is the story of my life.

I come from Burma, but I live in Thailand now. I came to Thailand when I was seven years old. I came to Thailand because of the political situation in Karenni State.

I was born in Burma on March 26th, 1982. I am Kayan. The Kayan are one of the ethnic groups in Karenni State. The Burmese government persecutes the ethnic groups. When I was five years old my parents and brothers left Burma because of the fighting in the village. Before they left they learnt about the situation on the border from some other people who left ahead of us. They heard that conditions there were better than staying in their old home, so they decided to leave. Before they left my parents took me to stay with my aunty in another village because they were not sure about the conditions on the journey. They told me that they would come back to collect me if the conditions were good. The next morning they left for the settlement on the border, which was in an area protected by the Karenni army.

My Childhood in Burma

When I was staying with my aunt I had only two shirts and two skirts. I had to work hard everyday. In the morning at five o'clock I had to wake up to cook breakfast. After breakfast we had to go to work on the farm. Before I went to the farm I always picked up my small basket and a small chopping hoe to take to the farm. I didn't have money to buy the things that I needed. I didn't have washing powder, soap and shoes. I didn't use to wear shoes and clean my teeth when I was a child.

One day during April we celebrated our traditional *Kan Kwan* festival. The celebration ground was very close to my home so I wanted to join the celebration very much. I asked permission from my aunty, but she didn't allow me to join the celebration. When my aunty didn't allow me join the celebration I was so angry that I cried all night. The aunt I stayed with had one daughter and one son. They are my cousins. Her husband was killed by the Burmese military. That May every family had to provide one porter to the army or pay money instead. My aunty wanted to pay, but she didn't have enough money to pay, so my 15 year old cousin had to go to be an army porter. At that time I was so worried about him. He had to go along with the army for two weeks. When he came back he was very tired and pale.

After two years my father suddenly came back from the refugee camp to take me to join them. When I saw my father I was so happy to meet him. Then he hugged me and gave me some money to buy some things. At the time my aunty asked me to cook dinner for my father. I got up at once and cooked for my father. He only stayed with my aunty for two days then he took me to the border camp near Thailand. It took us seven days to reach the camp. When our group was on the way we had many difficulties. We had to eat poor quality food with salt and chilies only. One day on the way the man who went ahead saw the Burma army and he made us stop and hide. We hid under the trees in the bush for about two hours until the army passed. After that we had to start again on our long journey. It was night time when we arrived at the camp and met my family. I was so happy to see them. When they saw me they were happy too. At that time I had two elder brothers and two younger brothers and my mother was pregnant again. The next morning they took me shopping in the village. This was the first time I went shopping.

I Start to Wear the Rings

After two days my mother gave me a coil of brass to wear on my neck. I didn't like to wear it but I didn't dare to refuse, so I had to obey her. When I started to wear the rings I felt sick in my heart and I couldn't sleep for two or three days because it was uncomfortable, but

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after a long time I got used to the rings. Since many of my friends were also wearing the brass my heart changed to be happy and comfortable.

I like my traditional culture: that is nature and language. I like to keep the traditions because our Kayan ladies have kept the rings for many hundreds of years. If we still keep the tradition they would be very happy, but I also want to be an educated person and I don't want anyone to control me. I don't want to be in a 'human zoo.' Many people have said that we are like a human zoo. Some people think we came to Thailand for money, but this is not true. We came to Thailand because of the war. This is what happened to me when I was a child.

Our Village is Burnt Down

There was often fighting in the area between the Burma army and the Karenni army. During that time most of our villagers lived in anxiety. I was very scared and I can remember crying when I heard the fighting and the boom of the guns. We often had to run away to hide and then return to our homes, because we were worried that the Burmese military would come to attack us. For this reason it was impossible to have schools to educate the children. The last time we ran away the men from the village came back from the battle and told us to run away from our home and take lots of things with us. It was 6:30 pm when we ran away. People kept falling down because they were so scared and trying to run fast. We ran for two hours to one of the Thai villages. We had to rest for two days in the Thai village, Daw Kha Htar near Baan Nai Soi. After two days, some men from the village went back to the border to make enquiries and they found that some of our villages had been burnt down by the military. That is why we had to settle in Thailand. We all moved to live in a new village. My parents' seventh child, my sister Tina, was born there. My mother was very ill after she had Tina and she could not feed her, so we had to buy milk.

When we were settled in the Thai village my health was very bad because I got malaria. Some of the Thai people gave me some medicine so my headache felt better, but in the next few months I got malaria

often; about ten times in two years. Now I am very lucky as I don't get bad malaria anymore.

My Education

When I was young I really wanted to study with my friends, but my mother didn't allow me to go to school because she had bad health. In my family I was the only one able to earn a little money from tourists for my poor family. If I went to school my mother and all my family would be poorer. Everything I did was to help my family. When I was 14 years old I started going to school. In the classroom I was the eldest one so I felt very shy for my first two or three days. After that I told myself to stop being shy, so I felt better.

I only went to school for four years, because I was too shy to continue with the younger children, so I decided to leave school. Now I am really concerned about my education. I know that I was wrong. I realize now that I was too crazy at that time because I did not obey my parents who wanted me to stay at school.

Marriage & Being a Mother

After I left school, when I was 19 years old, I married Gabriel. I met my husband in the village. He arrived from Burma after me and we went to the same school. My husband lived in another village, so after the wedding I moved to my husband's village to live with his parents. There were four people in our new family.

About one month after my wedding my parents started to build their new house in my old village and my sixty-three year old father-in-law wanted to help them. On the way to my old village some police took him to the police station and put him in prison for 12 days. He also had to pay some money to the police so they would allow him to come back home. This was because we are refugees and we do not have any Thai papers so we are not allowed to go out of our village. I felt very sad during that time because I was the newest member of the family and I couldn't do anything to help him.

One year later my daughter was born. I was so happy to be her mother. I gave her a Thai name, but her grandmother gave her a Kayan

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traditional name, Mu Thun. My daughter has started to go to nursery school now.

Surviving Through Tourism

I am a shopkeeper and I also weave scarves, bags and clothes. I have a small shop and sell souvenirs to tourists in my village and I am also a student. When I am studying I miss my daughter so much, because I worry about her health. I want to be two people, one to take care of my daughter and sell things in my shop and one to study. I am the only one able to earn a little money for my family.

Where I have grown up tourists are a way of life. I'm glad when the tourists come because then we can make a little money in our shop and get a better life, but some families are very poor in the village because they don't wear rings and have no shop to sell things to tourists.

Many tourists ask why they must pay to come in our village. We do not want people to pay, but it is not us who make people pay. There are three places in Mae Hong Son where tourists can visit to see Kayan 'long-neck' people. These places are all next to Thai villages. Each Thai village lets us stay near them and then they collect money from the tourists. When there are a lot of tourists they give some of the money to us, but now it is the rainy season and there are very few tourists so we cannot earn money. We have to go to the jungle to get bamboo shoots to eat. We are not allowed to do other work. It is difficult for the men because the tourists aren't interested in them and they cannot earn money for their families. That is why I want my daughter and I to be educated. I like to be Kayan, but sometimes I don't like the very low education, the bad situation, not having freedom and experiences, and no unity. I would like to continue my education, but how? I have to earn money for my family and I don't know where I can study.

Hope for a Better Future

Now I am trying to study on my own, so I have to be very thrifty. After I started studying, some people said I'm a bad person because I'm not spending as much time with my daughter. I don't feel angry at the

people in the village who said this about me because all the villagers have no education, so I understand why they think this way.

I'm sorry about this, but I think that I will teach my daughter all I learn and I'm sure that it will help us all to have a better future. I want all the people in my village to study and get more chances. If one day my education is good I will help my village by teaching others as much as I can. I hope that everything will go well in my future.

Meanwhile we welcome tourists. We like to speak with them and explain about our lives. I don't ever get angry when tourists call me a 'long neck' or treat me badly. I am not happy to be in a human zoo but I am still friendly to them. They help us to earn a little money to improve our community. Without them we would have to go and live in the refugee camp. This way we feel more proud to help ourselves.

POST-SCRIPT: ADDED 3 MONTHS LATER

Taking the Rings Off!

I have taken my rings off! I feel very light and very tired. It feels like I have forgotten something! It is very uncomfortable, but it will get better soon.

I took them off two days ago. At first I thought I would put them back on in a few months because I still love my tradition, but now I'm not sure. If I put the rings back on, I will have no opportunities to study or get resettlement or travel anywhere. I also like that people do not stare at me when I am on the street or at the market. I can also drive the motorbike now. My husband is also very happy because now people do not stare and he wants me to have more freedom. The rings are like a prison sometimes.

I took them off because the Thai woman who controls my village did not want me to both study and work. She wanted me to stay all the time in the village with the tourists. She said she would not give me any money even if I still wear the rings. She will also take my shop away. She said that she will not pay money for my food. Now she says I must

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not talk to any foreigners. She does not want them to know we can take the rings off. She told everyone we have to keep them on all our lives, but that is not true. About ten girls have taken them off because they want to study in the refugee camp.

I don't want to be shown to tourists any more. The Thais made a postcard of me feeding my baby. They sell this postcard everywhere. I feel ashamed but I cannot do anything to stop this. Now I took the rings off because I don't want to be treated like this any more. I want respect. I don't want people to stare at me as if I am strange anymore. I love my tradition, but our tradition is not about tourists. Our tradition is to live in our villages growing our own food and being left alone to lead a free life.

Before I started studying I didn't know much about the world, but my teachers helped me to open my eyes – to understand more about the world and think in different ways, then I started to look on the internet and now I see things differently and I told myself that I must change my life.

Forced Relocation

I do not know what will happen to our village in the future because the Thais want us to move very soon to a new place near the Burmese border. Everyone in my village is very sad at this moment because they don't want to go anywhere. They want to stay in the same place. We have built our own houses here and now we are not allowed to take them with us. We spent a lot of money, but we cannot even take some of the wood. It is hard work to build a new house, kitchen and toilets. There is very little water and firewood in the new place so life will be difficult and it is very far away so not many tourists will come because you can only get there by boat; then how can we all sell things from our shops? We are also worried because there is no clinic and the hospital is very far away.

I want my daughter to stay in her school as long as she can. If the Thai authorities say we must move we shall go to the refugee camp, but I think the villagers will still have heavy hearts to move anywhere and our community and families will separate because some will go to camp

and some will go to the new place. Like my family, I want to go to the camp but my husband and his parents want to go to the new place. That is why we will have problems and may separate.

There is only one good thing about moving to the new place; the Thai lady will not be able to control us any more, but if the Thai authorities told her to leave us alone and gave us ID cards we would all be very happy to stay in Thailand, in Mae Hong Son. We would be free and no one would own us any more. We don't understand. They want us to stay here in Mae Hong Son. They do not allow us to resettle in another country, but they will not give us ID cards.

I wish ...

I wish my country could be peaceful and calm and have true democracy, then I wouldn't have to live in a human zoo any more. I could return to Karenni State. This is my dream: to live a free life in our motherland and have the opportunity to study at university and travel.

I believe that one day I will be able go back to our state and help improve the lives of our people. If I can continue my education I hope that one day I'll be able to help my community and my country. I know our state is a poor state now, but our state and my life must change and improve for the better one day.

LIFE UNDER THE DICTATORS

Yue Ka Lit

Millions of Burmese people have left their country over many years. Most of the people who have come to Thailand illegally did not leave the country willingly. They had to leave because of difficulties in Burma. Many difficulties are caused by the military government regime such as: forced labor, intimidation, and economic crisis. My life story too, follows this tragic path.

My father was arrested by the military because he was an activist. When my father was freed from prison, he hadn't changed his political views. Therefore, he had to leave our family and go to the Thai-Burma border for his, as well as his family's, security. Then, we had five members left in our family. When he left I was six years old and my mother had to work and take care of my grandmother, grandfather, my younger brother, and me. She had to struggle hard when my father left us, but my mother still let me study at school.

When I was in eighth standard, our family faced economic crisis. Our village head office called my mother often and had many discussions with her. I noticed my mother was distraught when she returned from the head office. I asked her some questions, but she didn't reply and looked depressed. Later, an officer started coming to our house twice a month to check who was there. Sometimes guests visited us, but they couldn't receive a permit to stay at our house overnight. The officers didn't like any guests to stay at our house.

I will never forget what happened in the second week of October 1999. I came back home during my school lunch time. On the way, I met with my village officer and two men in white shirts who told me to come with them for questioning. They drove me to the police station. There were five officers in white T-shirts waiting for me. They asked a

lot of questions. At first they asked questions gently and calmly. "Where is your father? What is he doing? Have you had any contact with him recently?" I replied, "I don't know. I haven't had any contact with him lately." After that they gave me a break, but then they continued again, asking me questions one at a time in different rooms. They were very different from the first time. They looked hard and scary. One officer yelled, "You are an enemy's daughter. If you don't tell the truth I will put you and your whole family in jail! I won't let you go free!" I was really scared from all these questions and I started sobbing. They threatened me in many different ways. I was so afraid that I couldn't speak. The questioning went on for four hours. I nearly became unconscious.

My mother and teacher were worried about me and they came looking for me. Finally, they found me at the police station. They took me home. I couldn't control my mind because I was very scared even though I had arrived home safely. I was embarrassed by the whole incident, so I kept on crying hard. I was afraid of meeting those officers again. They threatened me even in my dreams and I screamed out. I proposed to my mother that she should take me as far away as she could from them. But my mother wanted me to pass the tenth standard and she had worked hard for my school fees. So, I had to complete my education. I went to school with my cousin. I avoided going out of the house as much as possible and concentrated on my studies. I completed my final exam and matriculated in March 2000. During the exam I felt ill. After the exam I rested for two months.

One day in June my mother asked us to pack our things to go to my father's place. That night my mother, younger brother, cousin and I started the journey to Moulmein by bus. My mother said, "I don't know when we will return to Burma." I didn't understand what my mother meant. We were happy that we were going to meet my father and to be fleeing from the military junta.

We transited on the train at Moulmein and continued to Ye Town. From there we traveled by boat from Ye to outside of the Ye River. We then climbed up Taung Nyo Mountain. We continued on our difficult path, through the rain with four activist soldiers. We

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arrived at Chair Dite Mon village on the mountain. My father picked us up there. We could not say anything when we saw my father because we were so happy. We were separated from our father for almost ten years, but I didn't feel like anything had changed. It was raining so hard that we could not go on to another city, so we remained there for a week.

We walked two long days from that Mon village to Ha Lau Ka Ni refugee camp on the Thai Burma border. We stayed there for one day. The next day my father's organization from Sangklaburi came and picked us up in a truck. I was really tired from the whole journey. We had climbed a high mountain, and crossed a treacherous river. Finally, I thought we had arrived in a country without an oppressive government, Thailand.

Thailand looked like a beautiful and plentiful country. But so is Burma. I was born in Burma, which is full of natural beauty, has a wealth of precious jewels, and diverse and beautiful ethnic groups. I believe that people from Burma would remain in their beautiful country if they could. If the government changed and forced labor, intimidation, and economic crisis no longer existed, how beautiful and blissful would it be to live in our motherland?

Yue Ka Lit continues to live in Thailand where she works hard to assist migrant workers from Burma.

A MOTHER'S RIGHT

Hamida

Unlike anywhere else in Burma, Rohingya couples in North Arakan State need to apply for official permission to marry. This is granted through payment of substantial bribes and can take years to obtain. In 2005, shortly after Prime Minister Khin Nyunt was removed from power, the authorities even stopped issuing marriage permits for about 5 months. Issuance restarted again in October 2005, but under the condition that the newly-wed couples sign a declaration they would not have more than 2 children. Couples caught together without official marriage permission have been arrested and jailed. Many young couples have fled to Bangladesh simply in order to marry and live together.

Such discriminatory and humiliating measures have caused a lot of suffering for Rohingya women. Some women such as Hamida take the risk to marry 'unofficially' either while waiting for the official permission to come through or because their family cannot afford to pay the fee. If pregnant, they need to resort to illegal abortions or else to deliver their baby secretly. But, as random population census take place at least twice a year, these women cannot include their new-born child on their family list and instead have to register their own baby on the family list of another couple who is officially married.

My name is Hamida and I am 22 years old. I came from a village in Buthidaung Township.

My marriage is an arranged marriage. It was decided between my parents and my husband's parents about two years ago. My parents and my in-laws went to apply for marriage permission at the NaSaKa¹ office. But shortly after the marriage application was registered, the Immigration office declared that they could no longer issue any

¹ The NaSaKa is the border security force in Arakan State.

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marriage permits for the Rohingya community until a new order comes from the higher authorities in Rangoon.

However, my parents and my in-laws went to meet and discuss with the Village Chairman and Immigration officials. They assured our parents that they would definitely do something in favour of our marriage. My father gave some bribes to the Village Chairman and Secretary. They said that they would share this money with the local NaSaKa commander so that he would also close his eyes.

So, our marriage took place according to Islamic law about 1 ½ years ago. The Village Council Chairman, Secretary and members even attended our marriage ceremony. There, they again assured my father that, as soon as the order for re-issuing official marriage permissions would come through, our marriage licence would be granted first. They also told my father that they would cover up the matter in case the authorities would conduct a random population check and would ask about my whereabouts.

After my marriage, I started living one month at my in-laws in Buthidaung and the other month at my parents' house in the village. And so on...

Then, six or seven months ago, I found out that I was pregnant. I was so scared to tell my mother and my husband. Finally, during my second month of pregnancy, I decided to inform my husband. By this time, the authorities had restarted issuing marriage permission. So my husband tried everything to obtain the official marriage permission for us. Then, I also informed my mother when I visited her. My father told her that we must do everything to get this marriage permission as soon as possible. He went to talk the Village Peace and Development Council. They demanded more money in order to speed up the process and my father agreed to pay them again. My parents and my husband were then very confident that the marriage permission would be granted within a very short time. But time passed by and we did not get any news.

By then, 3 or 4 more months had passed and anyone could notice my physical condition. When my pregnancy became too visible, my

mother and my husband decided that I should have an abortion. They contacted a trustworthy midwife. She used traditional methods but that did not work.

We fell into real troubles. If the NaSaKa asked my father to produce me at their office, they would immediately notice that I was pregnant. They would certainly punish my husband and my father for ignoring their laws. My mother also tried to see if something could be done, but it was in vain.

The whole matter was so insulting and humiliating for me. And it was so painful too. I felt so desperate. Finally, my husband decided to send me to Bangladesh to see a doctor there in order to undergo a painless abortion.

On 1 September 2006, my brother-in-law brought me here to Nayapara refugee camp where my elder sister lives. The next day, my sister took me to a doctor in Teknaf. The doctor examined me but told me that it was too late. He said: "Your pregnancy is too advanced and it is now too risky to perform an abortion."

I did not know what to do but my sister advised me, "Don't worry! You can stay with me in the refugee camp for a couple of months until your baby is born. Then, I will take care of your baby and you may go back to your home as you arrived – alone. And whenever you feel for your baby, you can come back and see him here. That is the only solution!"

I know I have no alternative. I know that if I try to abort now, I may die and my baby too. So, my only option is to give birth in this refugee camp and go back to Burma without my baby. This is the only way to protect my husband and my father from possible arrest or punishment. Hopefully, we will obtain the marriage permission sooner or later.

My marriage is absolutely legal according to Islamic law but, according to the NaSaKa law, both my marriage and my pregnancy are illegal. No other community in Burma face the suffering that I feel now.

Postscript

In December 2006, Hamida gave birth to a baby boy in Nayapara refugee camp. At the end of January 2007, her husband visited the camp to see their first son and to take her back to her village leaving the baby behind. Hamida's sister in the refugee camp promised them to take care of the new-born child as if he was her own. By early April 2007, Hamida and her husband have not returned to the camp yet. It is thus assumed that they still await their official marriage permission.

'Hamida' is an alias. Her name was changed to protect her safety and privacy. Hamida told her story to a Rohingya refugee from Nayapara camp for 'The Arakan Project' on 5 September 2006.

ADOPTED DAUGHTER

Na Helly

My name is Na Helly and I am from the eastern part of Shan State. My ethnicity is Lahu. I was born on May 22nd 1983. Three months later I was sold.....

My mother passed away when I was 3 months old. My father was a drug user. He often asked my mother for money and sold our family's property to buy drugs. My father got his drugs. My mother died early because of malnutrition. No sooner had my mother died than my father sold me to a strange family for 500 Thai Baht (US\$14) so he could buy drugs. Don't be so surprised! I would like to point out that there were many drug-addicted parents in my community, and many children were sold by their drug-addicted parents, just like I was.

Fortunately, my adoptive parents have been kind and good to me and loved me like their blood daughter, but many other children were treated badly by their adoptive parents. We knew that we were facing injustice and discrimination, but in Burma there is no law to protect children's rights. Even though I am loved very much by my adoptive parents, whenever I heard people say that I was an adopted daughter I felt greatly distraught. I silently cried in bed many times. I didn't dare tell those things to my friends.

Having finished primary school in my village, I attended middle school and high school in Kying Tong City, staying with my adoptive mother's sister. In Kying Tong, I was treated unequally in the family. Because I was not their blood relative, I was often talked down to. I often had to do extra hard work for my aunt and her children. I had to cook, fetch water, clean the house, and I even had to make the bed for my cousins. My aunt occasionally said, "You came from a rural area, so you must be able to do all the housework."

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Since I had to invest most of my time in housework, I did not have a chance to play with friends and I did not have enough time to study my lessons well. Being boldly discriminated against for a long time I felt inferior, and as a result I did not want to express my feelings; I just kept them in my mind. I always longed for the summer holidays and I looked forward to the time I would spend with my parents in the village.

Drugs are one of the greatest causes of social, economic, health, and education problems in my community. Public participation and the cooperation of local authorities and government action are the only solutions to help eradicate the drug problem. Only after that will the world be a peaceful place.

MY BURNING DESIRE

Pann Yaine Nge

Forty years ago, there was a young girl who was eager to have good schooling and was curious about the world. However, her parents forced her to marry, and her married life began. Shortly after she set up her married life, her husband joined an anti-junta armed group, which secretly took position in the jungle. Her husband supported the anti-junta movement because of the intense political environment at the time.

She was left alone in the early stages of pregnancy with her pre-school-aged daughter, Win Win. After she gave birth to her second child, a son, she took her children and followed her husband whose revolutionary group was in the jungle. The children and her stayed with her husband's colleagues, while her husband was away attending trainings on military and political strategies. She got depressed owing to her husband's lack of attention towards her. The place was located in the deep jungle, without electricity and she heard various appalling noises at nighttime. It was an unsafe situation. There were dangerous animals in the jungle and military offensives could happen at any time. Because of all these mental stresses, every night was sleepless.

After she became pregnant again, she went back to her mother's hometown to give birth. Three days after she delivered a baby girl, she heard unexpected news that changed her life forever. Her husband had died in action on the front line while defending against the junta's offensive. She felt severe sorrow at losing her life-partner. Her in-laws immediately sold her husband's possessions including paddy fields, ornaments, a flock of cattle and all the furniture and took the money away with them. Her children and her did not possess even a needle.

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One morning, by the time the rays of sun covered her mother's garden, they heard a loud shout outside in the garden. Her mother wondered who it could be and she went out for a look. It was her in-laws who said, "We came here to pick your daughter up in order to transplant paddy in our paddy fields. She won't earn anything without doing work. Let her do something." Her mother replied in surprise, "You did not provide my daughter with even a grain of paddy or a piece of firewood and you dare to ask her to work before she is fit enough after her childbirth. I cannot stand for it!" Her mother felt intense sorrow staring at her poor daughter and granddaughter.

When her daughter, Win Win was 4 months old, she left her with her grandmother and started working. Her wages inside Burma were not enough for her children's education, health care and their proper survival. After the 1988 uprising, she migrated into Thailand in search of a job opportunity. Inside Burma, rule of law and economic conditions were deteriorating and living conditions were harsher than ever.

When she arrived in Mae Hong Son, she worked in the King's Park for 35 Baht (US\$1) a day wages. She transferred her money to her children whom she had left behind in Burma. It was a really hard time for her as she was also discriminated against by the local Thai people.

She faced many difficulties including living apart from her mother and children. After struggling for 10 years, she accepted a second marriage in the hope of freedom from hardship as well as a reunion with her children. Unfortunately, what she had hoped for did not come true. Instead she gained three more children as an additional burden. They wanted to see their mother and their mother also wanted to be with them. However, the current situation with three more children to feed stopped their reunion.

Though she wanted to go back Burma and look after her children, it was not possible for her to do so as the economic crisis under the military regime was at its peak. The price for even low-grade rice increased up to 1,000 kyats and 100 kyats could now only buy a candy. Besides, it was very rare to find a job opportunity in Burma. Farm owners worked in their paddy field themselves, so that even their

poor workers did not have work to do. Even though she had an idea about setting up a shop with a small amount of investment, she realized that it would not work out since there were many shops already. As it was essential to spend money everyday, her income was not enough to cover costs. Because of all these conditions, she could not go back inside Burma even though she desperately wanted to go back home. It was very hard to survive even for her. Of course, it would be even worse if she had to struggle with all her children in Burma.

She felt like she was in hell. She secretly cried for the unfavorable fate of her children. Should she blame herself for all these problems or should she blame her circumstance? Finally, she realized she should blame her lack of logical thinking because she had limited education since her fate had allowed her so little schooling.

Her first mistake was that she had been married before she had had enough education to be able to make informed decisions and choices. Then, she tried to rely on married life again while she, as a widow, was working outside her country. That was her second mistake.

She thought that there would be more and more children, who are starving, until the practice of young women and girls getting married so early in Burma changes. The important fact is: the Burmese government should provide education programs for the youth, especially for girls, in order to prevent early marriage before they have education and can think properly.

However, the military government has never considered their people's basic requirements. So, it is very clear that they will not take care of what is happening to young women right now. The majority of the population of Burma is still struggling under the poverty line. She wonders when the time will come for them to be free from the yoke of the military regime.

Pann Yaine Nge is a young Kayaw woman from Karenni State Burma, who has bravely shared her mother's story with us.

NOT "THE LORD OF THE RINGS"

Kham Mai

In this world people have different kinds of lives, knowledge, skills and experiences. Some people have better lives, better education, better health and higher living standards. When I look at the situation of children from Burma, the Internationally Displaced Persons or 'IDP kids' as we call them, I think the feelings reflected in the eyes of these 'IDP kids' is different from other children.

During a trip to the Thai–Burma border, running alongside Shan State I meet with a young Shan girl. When I look carefully into her eyes they tell me something of her aims, her needs and her desires, including what she will request of me.

She explains to me that she wants to be a teacher, nurse or work in foreign affairs and she tells about her experiences and the difficulties of her life. Her request is simple. She wants help from the other people who are kind. She wants them to help her nation, friends, school and her country.

She tells me strongly, "I like to live peacefully." She doesn't like the fighting, but she grew up surrounded by the armed conflict and she had to run away from the fighting. She has the aim of continuing her life, standing on her own two feet, being a good girl and living the right way wherever it is she lives.

She says she thinks about her future, how to make her aims and dreams a reality and she hopes to get help to support her. She says that she is like a little plant, which is waiting for fertilizer and water from someone who will help her grow by giving her a good foundation. She asks, "In this world, are there people who will paint the colors for me, for my hopes to be beautiful in reality?" She has been waiting and waiting.

As she tells me her sad life experience, it seems to be without emotion. But I can see a hint of the truth and her pain in her voice. As she tells me her story, one thing that strikes me as strange is that I cannot see her tears. She tells me that she will never cry again, that she has cried too much before. When she was 12 years old and hiding in the jungle, she watched as her mother was raped by the soldiers from the Burmese military regime. They raped her mother right in front of her father. The soldiers then killed them both. That time she was so upset, she cried for so long. Now, she says she has no more tears left for crying.

After that she left her home, her city and her grandfather and grandmother who she loved the most. A dog that managed to escape being killed by the soldiers also came with her on her journey far from home. She came to stay on the highest mountain in a very quiet location. There were no villages around and it was far from town. Everywhere she looked she could see the massive forest and many layers of mountains.

The place she was living in was built out of bamboo and cogon grass from the wild forest. Her situation was very poor and she had to help the others to try and get the building equipment from the forest. In some other countries, internally displaced people don't have to find anything to build their houses. They can live in tents. But for her, in this place, there was no way she could stay like that.

She says she doesn't understand what she did to deserve such suffering. She thinks, she didn't take anything or rob anyone. She never hurt anyone. But now, she has to run from fighting and escape from the people who she fears will return to get her. Although she has already run away from it, even now she is not sure about her future, she worries when the day will come that she has to run once again. So she asks many people and she asks herself too, "Why are the people in the world different? In other places they don't need to run from fighting and they have enough schools, safe homes, hospitals, land and play grounds. Why are we different?"

She says she thinks about some areas in the world that are rich, peaceful and the people there are educated. Other countries have an

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army but live peacefully. Their armies don't kill their own people and abuse their rights. She questions why these countries don't use their armies to come and fight for her country, Burma, to have democracy and freedom.

She says she thinks, "Everyone knows the country where we live is ruled by bad people who are killing innocent people, forcibly relocating us like animals on a farm and raping the women everyday. So, where are they? Will they help us?"

"Some people in other countries have land and homes to stay in, so why do we live in a place with no freedom, no peace, no rights and no development? Why is the place we are living different?"

Because of the civil war situation, she was separated from the people who she loves. The buffalo that she used to ride has passed away. The school she used to go to has been burnt to the ground. The house that she used to ask her parents to buy snacks from is also gone.

She remembers how her parents used to give her a bath and tell her a story and kiss her face before she went to bed. They are gone too, killed by the regime's soldiers. Now she is alone and moving to different areas around the Thai-Burma border.

This is the reality of her life story. She simply says, "It is not a fairytale story like 'The Lord of the Rings'."

I meet this girl at her new home, a house for orphans in the unfortunate land called Shanland or Shan State. She still prays for her parents and tells them not to worry about her. Even though she cannot change the bad life experience from her past, here she has a chance to have an education, to have friends at school, and even to have a small playground. Even though she has lost many things and she is an orphan, she promises she will honestly try to do the best for her nation and her lovely friends. She believes if people around the world care about people like her, wherever they are, the world will be peaceful.

Kham Mai is an active defender of human rights and women's rights. Her advocacy work has taken her to numerous countries including Taiwan and the United States.

INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN

Mara

Women in Burma can do every job that men can do. As I grew up in Burma, I have seen many women who have to work on farms, carry wood and build houses. They can work as hard as men. When my uncle was forced to work for the SPDC, my aunt had to plant rice in the field to feed her family. However, women are not as highly respected as men and therefore we have fewer opportunities. Men and women in Burma should be equally respected and trained as they are both human beings.

When I was studying at high school the boy students mocked me. I felt very angry but I was afraid to respond to them. When I told them that I would be a Karen leader one day, they laughed at me and said that if I was a leader the nation would be destroyed because I am a girl. This discrimination made my desire to become a leader stronger. I was interested in politics but I did not want to tell other people. I worried that they would tell me I was too stupid and dull to be a politician. So I kept my aspirations a secret.

The more problems I faced, the stronger my decision to be a politician became. I have heard about Aung San Suu Kyi's bravery. The regime's soldiers pointed a gun at her and ordered her to stop crossing the road, but she walked forward without fear. I have also read Florence Nightingale's stories. She was a benevolent woman who worked as a nurse, even helping people who discriminated against her. The quotation "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration" also encourages me to take action and work as hard as I can. All of the above inspire me and give me a strong desire to carry out my responsibilities. I am determined that if I have enough education I will found an organization that educates women and children in Burma. When women have enough education and skills, men cannot oppress women anymore.

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I have seen many women who have become great leaders and worked effectively. These include: Condoleeza Rice, US Secretary of State; Charm Tong who is a founder of the Shan Women's Action Network; and Dr Cynthia Maung who works for the health of Burmese people on the Thai-Burma border. Another woman that I admire is Rosa Parks. She took action for her civil rights work. When the white people banned her from sitting with them on the bus, she ignored them as a protest for her rights.

I believe that I can play a role for Burmese women. I will change the belief in Karen society, that women should stay at home and do the housework. I am a Karen woman who has grown up underprivileged and in poverty. However I won't give up until I achieve my goals in life.

A COUNTRY WITHOUT WAR

Phyu Sin Min

Everybody has an unforgettable event in their life. The experiences that Wah Lar came across in a war zone left a lasting impression. And, she could not deny that these wounds could not be erased from her memory easily.

There were many times that she had run away from the regime's soldiers since her childhood. She still remembered the night that she fled from her place because of the military offensive. She could not bring anything, she just ran for her life. Usually, she brought dried rice as she often had to hide for 3 or 4 days. Not only the older people, but the children also had to flee from their houses. But, this time the place where they hid was an open field, which did not have any shelter. Bullets flew over their heads just like bees. Bombs blasting with very loud noises shook the entire area as if it was the end of the world. After the blasting, there were a lot of people bleeding with wounds, as well as children who had become orphans. She woke up very often as these images still haunted her in her dreams.

Growing up she did not have a chance to study properly. She had to run while she was studying because the regime's soldiers moved towards her village. In that way, her education became on and off, all the time. When the soldiers came into her village, they confiscated chickens and piglets from the villagers. Then, they forcibly questioned the villagers about whether they had contact with Karen revolutionary groups or not. If they were displeased with the answers, the villagers were beaten, sometimes to death. Besides, the regime's soldiers often committed sexual violence as weapon of war once they saw women in the villages.

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That's the reason everyone had to run away as soon as the soldiers came into the village. Sometimes, they had to crawl in open fields or hide in the jungle to escape from the battles with the regime's soldiers. When they wandered around in the jungle, they had to be very careful of the landmines set by both sides of the conflict, the Burmese regime and the Karen revolutionary group. Many villagers lost body parts or died in the jungle due to landmines and the lack of medical assistance for landmine victims.

Her family never got a chance to stay in a certain place in order to hide from the regime's army and war menaces. They did not have time for farming since they spent most of the time running to and fro to escape from fighting. Everyday, the regime's army came into their village and took whatever they wanted, including livestock and people. Villagers, including women, were sent off as porters for the regime's armed forces. The villagers had no time to earn money as a result of doing forced labor for the army. Accordingly, they could not give extortion money to the army and they were often tortured or forced at gunpoint to follow the army as porters. Her family could not stand such circumstances any longer and fled to the 'Za-lar' refugee camp.

She hated the war as she was a victim who barely survived during the civil war. She felt so lost when she saw that many people lost their lives for no reason, just because of the disastrous war. After enduring all these atrocities in the past, she did not do anything except feel sadness. But, she recalled all these memories and thought carefully in the mean time. Then she realized that the culprit for all of these tragedies was the Burmese junta, which never took responsibility for the welfare of its own people. Instead, they focused on gripping onto power.

She did not want the future generation to face the same destiny that she had experienced. Her true wish was for her country to become a place without war and conflicts and to regain peace and tranquility over the entire country.

PAPI

Bianca Son

On a March day, I received a phone call that my father “Papi” was in the hospital. I called my sister, the “super” engineer, who immediately began pounding away on her keyboard in search of the next flight, “...is a layover in Heathrow ok? Is a 6am flight ok for you? Can I bring the kid? You’ll have to deal with the luggage, I’ll manage the baby.” While updating me every few minutes in a controlled panic, I was on the phone with the hospital, “...who is the attending doctor? Where did he go to medical school?” I demanded. After having managed to get my father safe and secured into one of the best hospitals on the east coast, my sister, her baby and I jumped on a plane from Europe to Washington, DC.

Upon our arrival, we learned that he would be released the following day. This was just a scare due to his chronic, but manageable liver disease. We quartered ourselves in Papi’s house. Since his divorce from my mother decades earlier, the family consisted of Papi and us, his two daughters. We understood each other, sometimes spending hours talking, sometimes co-existing in comfortable silence, each engaged in their own task. We moved across continents, changed schools, my father changed jobs, only two things were constant, our family unit and the fact that, all of my life, I grew up with Chin refugees in the house.

One of my first memories was of a Chin man named David. David slept somewhere between our kitchen table and the radiator on which he kept boiled eggs with yellowish-green yolks. David, sitting cross-legged in his *longyi*¹, shared the eggs with me. I remember my

¹ A longyi is a sarong style wrap worn by both men and women in Burma.

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mother coming home looking neurotic, hands on her hips, piercing hazel eyes and curly yellow hair piled on top of her head. She was outraged, "...good lord, what's he feeding you? This is not the Chin Hills for god's sake, become civilized!" Having been used to her nervous anger, David and I understood and smiled while continuing to carefully separate the green yolk from its surrounding white part. David was just one of the first Chin refugees snoring between pieces of our furniture over the years.

My mother, annoyed at every turn eventually left the family for a tall, pasty, bearded European man; a move not only frightening, but mysterious as well, "...how can my mother be with this tall skinny white man?" So strange were his scheming blue eyes and his tense large knuckles and knees, which seemed to be the biggest part of him. He was nothing like my father, who was open, patient, comfortably brown and well proportioned. It was clear, my mother had entered, or perhaps returned, to a realm unknown to me - the life of white people with their odd habits and lifestyles like drinking coffee at specified times of the day and using special spoons to stir in cubes of sugar. They talked about things like the weather and wore matching sweatshirts. When we were given the opportunity to decide, we chose our father. My parents separated, then divorced. Papi took nothing - no furniture, no photos, no objects of value, no money - just the people most precious in the world to him, his two daughters.

My father, sister and I became a new family. After several intercontinental moves, we settled in Washington, DC where he was an active Chin politician. The neurotic woman, who had complained all those years, was no longer present and my father was free to exercise his goodwill and his "hobbies," as he referred to his activist work. Having an open house policy for any and all refugees coming from Burma was a given. In fact, I thought everyone had people stretched out on every possible floor surface of their homes. I thought it was normal to hear several languages and dialects all being spoken at the same time. It was normal to have curry smells pervade every inch of the house. I thought it was normal to share absolutely everything with others. It wasn't until I got older that I realized we were special, that my

father's open-door policy was special - albeit by the time I was a teenager, the bane of my existence.

He assisted Chin people with asylum seeking and general life skills. Our house looked normal, like any American house from the outside. Siding, double paned windows, a mailbox at the end of the driveway, but inside it was much different. We had make-shift furniture, an old restaurant counter as a TV stand, a faux green marble dining table from the 70s that my father had rescued from the side of the road, plywood kitchen counters piled with pots of curry and rice, wooden spoons sticking out. Nothing was ever put into the refrigerator. Our house was a refugee refuge. Chin people came and went. Some stayed for years. As a teenager, footprints on the toilet seat and buckets in the bathtub appalled me. The mattresses piled around every possible surface of the floor annoyed me as I hobbled and leaped over them to my room. When we complained Papi explained, "...you have everything, you can make it, they need our help." That was life with Papi. It was as though Papi never considered our needs.

The evening before an important final exam, Papi told me, "Bianca, please cook something." Confused I asked, "Cook? For how many? What? Did you say 30 people?" This was life with Papi. Some families bake pies for Christmas, watch football and barbecue. We made curry, ate it with our hands and spent weekends building additions onto my father house, to make room, it seemed for more refugees, filling out asylum paperwork or coaching someone for a job interview at the local convenience store.

Two decades later, in that March, things weren't all that different. He was still building his own house. People still came and went and he still had furniture found on the street. After picking him up from the hospital, the three of us resumed our routine, as if no time had passed since we were together last. My sister, now a new mum, attended to her daughter. My father stood in the kitchen cooking or working on yet another addition. I was enjoying American TV and cleaning the house. He was not married and there seemed to be no real prospects. He lived like a bachelor, now and then. Only we had changed. My sister and I had achieved middle class and along with it, the understanding of

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comfort and ease that accompanies a lifestyle above and beyond subsistence.

“Let's get Papi all new furniture! He is still using that sofa he found on the street. And did you notice that his sheets are from 1972?” Together we refurnished his house. A comfortable couch replaced the ragged monstrosity that stunk of hundreds of people's sleep. Papi loved it. To our surprise, he indulged in it. Years before he would have protested, but his stay in the hospital and being surrounded by his daughters had made him soft. He smiled as we assembled a new living room entertainment system and traded his old unmatched dishes for brand new white IKEA dining ware.

As usual, Chin people came and went. Some, those settled in the States for years, visited my father to discuss business ideas. Others came to ask for advice on a distant relative stuck as a refugee in Malaysia, Guam, or some other 'transit' country. Asylum documents cluttered my father's desk, each in a different stage of the process.

When the Chin were not visiting, it was the three of us and although my father's hospital scare was not that serious, something had changed. Still, it always seemed that he was more generous to the Chin refugees than to us. Growing up, we were not given money for haircuts or “back-to-school” clothes. When I would ask for 20 dollars he would tell me that one Chin family could live six months on “that kind of money.”

We hardly ever went out to eat or to a movie. The only movie theater we ever visited was the 99-cent place down the street that screened movies that were two years old. That was how Papi was. We knew he loved us, we also understood that he believed we simply had more opportunities and were less in need than the Chin coming and going. He insisted on us sacrificing.

But that March, he announced that he would retire and no longer house dozens of Chin, that his time would be spent caring for his grandchildren and his activist work. Papi planned on traveling, visiting resettled refugees and occasionally making the illegal trip back to the Chin Hills to meet with other activists inside and outside Burma. In the

States, he had been participating in non-violent resistance training workshops and was writing a great deal of articles on the subject of Burma and the Chin. He would continue this “hobby” from the comforts of one of our living rooms.

Our plans were clear. This was time for the family – for *our* family.

The Chin issue would remain central, but my father would slow down. Life was good. My sister had planned a second pregnancy. Papi was to come out and care for her during her first trimester. She called, “...I am pregnant, are you coming?” Papi answered with a strong enthusiastic “Yes!” We could already see how it would be. He would sit in the garden and read to his granddaughter while my sister, as in all her pregnancies, would be throwing up somewhere in the house. Papi would cook several dishes, patiently, all of which my sister would reject and crawl back into the bed crying-out, “...I feel so bad, I feel so bad.” Papi would pamper my sister, the Engineering Ph.D.! We would sit together in the evenings and watch a movie or talk about politics, philosophy, our lives and the world as a whole. Certainly we would share a lot of laughter. Soon, there’d be more babies. Papi would be the patriarch enjoying the life of a grandparent, worry free.

Little did we know that those days back in March would be the last time we could dream so perfectly. My father died two days after buying an air ticket to Europe. His death was a great shock to us, as well as the whole of the Chin community.

Papi never had the chance to indulge in retirement and the love of his grandchildren. He spent his life living for others, working for freedom and peace for Burma, the Chin and all of the Zo. Whilst in our pain and shock, we have come to learn that we are supposed to look upon his death philosophically. We cannot. All we know is that the loss is awful and there seems to be no real purpose in his death. For now we have elected to do just one thing, to be like Papi, and that is to be human beings above anything else.

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My father, Dr. Vumson Suantak authored "Zo History" in 1986. Zo History is still used by scholars studying the origin of the Zo in Southeast Asia. Dr. Suantak was also one of the founding members of the Chin Forum, an organization primarily occupied with the drafting of a future Constitution for independent Chin State. Although he supported armed resistance groups in the beginning, he later changed and argued for non-violent resistance against the Burmese military regime. Dr. Suantak sponsored hundreds of Chin and other Burmese minorities for asylum in the United States. He wrote extensively on the political situation of Burma as well on the reunification efforts of the Zo. He was officially announced a Hero by the Zo reunification organization. Upon his death, thousands of people attended his funeral in Washington, DC. Numerous funerals and vigils were held around the globe from Korea to Germany. Dr. Suantak was the first Chin to receive a Ph.D.

The author Bianca Son (Mang Khan Cing) is a member of the Chin Forum (www.chinforum.org) the organization founded by her late father. She is now a graduate student at the University of Amsterdam in the Contemporary Asian Studies department.

I WANT LOVE

Ta Eh Soe

When I was three years old, I was separated from my parents and I stayed with my grandmother in town. My father was a soldier in the Karen National Union (KNU) and my mother was worried about problems from the war, so she sent her children to town. I did not have a chance to stay with my parents. Every time the regime's soldiers stayed in my village area and started fighting with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) we would stay at a neighbouring village or in the forest. So for my safety it was better if I stayed in town. When problems spread to the town in 1988, I moved back to my village, but because of security problems I could not stay there either. So, I was on the move again to yet another village.

If I say, "I love my parents so much," everybody will make fun of me. They will say, "Everybody loves their parents." But for me my parents' love is so very important and I hope to be with them. I crave my parents' love everyday. I always stayed away from my parents, only visiting them sometimes. My parents are alive but when I registered my name to go to school I had to write that my parents were dead. When I had to write or say that they were dead, my heart would break and my chest would fill with pain. Many people like me long for their parents' love and parents to care for them, especially orphaned children.

At school, I felt like the teachers did not care about me because I was poor. Every year in school, we had to pay our respects to our teachers and parents. We had to bring our parents to school and show our respect. But I did not have the chance to do this because my parents were 'dead.' I needed my parents' love but I did not get it, so I felt like no one loved me, like I really was an orphan.

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Whenever I saw my friend slip and fall, her mother would come and console her saying, "What happened? Where are you injured? Are you in pain?" Then she would fuss over my friend, "Why aren't you more careful? You have to take care and go slowly." Her mother's worried voice and concerned words made me feel so sad inside. I missed my mother. I too wanted to be like my friend. I wanted my mother to hold me, care for me and fuss over me. I did not have that, but at least my grandmother would make a fuss over me. When no one was around, I would often cry at night. I cried so many times because I missed my mum and dad.

I was always waiting for the time my parents would return. When I heard a dog barking I would run to the gate looking for someone. I thought maybe my parents had come to visit me or maybe there was a letter from them. It was always disappointing to see that the people who had come were visitors to another house. I waited so long for the day that my parents would visit me and call me to stay with them. That was my deepest hope.

The happiest experience in my whole life came when I was studying at the Karen Young Women's Leadership School in one of the refugee camps. I received a letter from my father. I was so surprised because my father had never written to me before. My father is a soldier so I did not get his love. When I lived in Burma I only saw him once every one or two years. When I was child I called my father's name all the time.

In the letter he wrote, "My daughter I love you. Do not worry about your studies. Here everything is good. Please take care of yourself. Please do not give up. Try your best. One day I hope you will be educated and help your community. I want you to know I love you like every father loves his child." That letter was the first time in my life that I knew my father loved and cared about me.

Ta Eb Soe remains in Thailand where she works to improve the situation of Karen women.

THE BALANCED LOVE OF A MOTHER

Mu Traw Paw Lily

Tomorrow it will be Naw Ae-Paw's golden jubilee birthday. As a fiftieth anniversary is equal to a half a century, a golden jubilee birthday is an extraordinary occasion. For such a special event, she had sent a reunion message to her two sons who were in far-away places. Her wish was to have a birthday meal together with her two sons. She wanted to cut and enjoy her birthday cake, cheerfully with her two sons.

It was her desire that her two sons would return home in time to attend her golden jubilee birthday. Both sons were serving the country. Both were officers in an army. One was a cadet and another was a platoon commander. But, the two brothers had not seen each other in a long time. They had both made up their minds to sacrifice their lives defending the nation and the people. Although both were soldiers, their beliefs were very different.

Once upon a time, the mother and two sons had slept under the same mosquito net, enjoyed meals from the same rice pot, played chase-and-run and marbles together. As the two brothers loved each other so much, their father named the two Saw Pyi Chit (Ae-Kaw) and Saw Myo Chit (Ae-Kalu).

Their father had sacrificed his life for his beloved country and people 25 years before. After their father's death, his brother, the uncle of the two boys, came to take them to town for their education. The elder brother, Saw Pyi Chit was 7 and the younger, Saw Myo Chit was 5 at that time. So, they did not want to leave their mother alone. At last, for the sake of her sons' future, she decided to send Saw Pyi Chit to town with his uncle and she asked her brother-in-law to leave Saw Myo Chit with her. When he came of age, she said that she would also let

him go with his uncle for his education. Saw Pyi Chit was crying when he left to go with his uncle as he was unhappy about leaving his mother and younger brother behind.

At bedtime each night Naw Ae Phaw longed for her son. She kept Saw Pyi Chit's shirt without washing it, as she wanted to maintain the scent of her son's sweat. She wiped her tears with that shirt and inhaled her son's scent from it. Every time the younger son asked her about the whereabouts of his brother, tears welled up in her eyes.

Saw Pyi Chit followed his uncle, weeping all the way. Every night at bedtime he looked at the photo of his mother and brother. Then, he wept again and again until he fell asleep. Although he wanted to return to his mother, he did not know the way back. He looked like a bird that had lost its way. Finally, he decided to work hard on his school lessons. He thought that after he finished his schooling, he could return to his mother and brother. He passed his examinations each year.

As he was sharp and clever, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)¹ took him as a member and let him attend its trainings. All of the training-masters were military officers. They lectured the students, misleading them into believing that the ethnic revolutionaries were 'destructive elements' and the enemies of the country. They told them they had to fight against those ethnic enemies if they wanted peace in the country.

After he passed the tenth grade examination, Saw Pyi Chit went on to attend the Defense Services Academy. When he had completely finished his military training, he got a letter from his mother saying that she wished to see both of her sons on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday. Upon receiving his mother's letter, he made up his mind to visit his mother on her golden jubilee birthday. Then he headed for the village where his mother lived.

¹ The USDA is a junta-sponsored organization, which claims to have 22 million members. Membership practices include forced recruitment, coercion and the active targeting of students and youth who are required to join in order to access educational and other opportunities.

When Saw Pyi Chit arrived at his mother's home, he discovered that it was a small bamboo hut instead of a big wooden house. As it was at 10 p.m. at night, mother and son didn't immediately recognize each other. At first glance, his mother's wrinkled face was unfamiliar. In the eyes of the mother, her son was a 7 year-old boy. Then, mother and son embraced each other and cried for several minutes. The younger son who was sleeping inside heard the sounds of crying and talking outside and woke up from bed. Saw Myo Chit entered the front room and found his brother there. He hugged his elder brother tightly, fearing he might disappear.

When Saw Pyi Chit asked his younger brother about his profession he was astonished to discover his younger brother was an officer in the revolutionary Karen National Liberation Army. "What a pity! My young brother is an insurgent," Saw Pyi Chit murmured. When Saw Myo Chit asked his elder brother about his job, Saw Pyi Chit said that he had finished his military training and was an officer in the SPDC Army. He also informed them that when he went back to his regiment, he would have to participate in an offensive against the Karen rebels. So, he insisted that he would like to take his mother and brother together with him to live in the town.

But, Saw Myo Chit did not accept his elder brother's proposal. Both of them were soldiers, but their beliefs were different, just like black and white, or oil and water. The democratic path and the dictatorship practice were incompatible. Saw Pyi Chit saw his younger brother as an outlaw rebel; Saw Myo Chit saw his older brother as a dog of the military dictators. Saw Pyi Chit told his little brother to surrender and come into the legal fold, and then serve the nation together with him. Saw Pyi Chit appealed to his younger brother saying that as long as he walked along the wrong path, their mother would suffer miseries in her life.

Saw Myo Chit did not listen to a word his elder brother said. Their father had died in action while fighting against the military dictatorship's troops. He had decided to take revenge for the death of his father and other martyrs. The SPDC troops were committing crimes against humanity. They burnt down the ethnic villages. They

raped the ethnic girls and women. They killed the innocent villagers. They arrested villagers and forced them to serve as porters in the battle zones. The soldiers forced the villagers to shoulder heavy burdens and did not feed them enough. When the porters could not shoulder the heavy burdens, they were stabbed with bayonets and kicked into the wayside gorges. Because of such inhumane acts of the SPDC troops, the country was in chaos and disorder and had become one of the least developed countries in the world. Saw Myo Chit said, "In such a situation, it is you, my brother, who dares to say that the SPDC is good for the country." Consequently, the two brothers' argument intensified. Neither would abandon his ideology.

Things turned violent. Saw Pyi Chit tried to pick up the gun, but before he could reach it Saw Myo Chit jumped on him and wrestled him. Saw Myo Chit grabbed the gun and fired all the bullets into the air. The neighbors rushed to the scene and they found the two brothers quarrelling. But, the neighbors only knew Saw Myo Chit who was in the Karen revolutionary army. They did not know Saw Pyi Chit. So, with the help of the neighbors, Saw Myo Chit tied his elder brother up with a rope. Seeing this, their mother's eyes filled with tears and she pleaded with her youngest son to stop. Her requests to Saw Myo Chit to release his elder brother were in vain. Finally, she slapped her younger son in the face. Saw Myo Chit was amazed by his mother's act. He asked his mother why she loved her eldest son who never took care of her.

With tears in her eyes, Naw Ae-Paw pleaded, "It is not your older brother's fault that he became the dictatorship's soldier. It is my fault. So, young son, please release your elder brother. Take action against me instead of him."

Since he had arrived home, Saw Pyi Chit had not had his dinner. He said, "Mum, I'm so hungry. It doesn't matter that Saw Myo Chit has tied me up. Let me have my meal from your own hand like in my childhood." She arranged a mixture of rice and chicken curry for her sons. She served a mouthful of rice with chicken into her elder son's mouth. At that moment, Saw Myo Chit also came to his mother and said, "Let me also have a meal together like when we were children." The two men enjoyed their meal together, being served by their

mother. While feeding them, the mother missed their father who had passed away years before.

In their childhood years, Saw Pyi Chit loved his little brother, Saw Myo Chit so much. He gave his younger brother first priority on every occasion, including for snacks. When they went to the stream to bathe, the two boys played, skimming stones across the surface of the water. Saw Pyi Chit taught Saw Myo Chit how to skim the stones across the water's surface. When Saw Myo Chit wept because he was not capable of skimming the stones, Saw Pyi Chit would console him, by carrying him home on his own back.

Remembering those past events, Saw Myo Chit said to his elder brother, "Let's go to the stream tomorrow and have a competition skimming rocks."

Saw Pyi Chit responded, "How can I go there with string tying my hands together?"

"Tomorrow will be my birthday and you should not disappointment me," Naw Ae-Paw said to her sons. Although it was not easy to release his elder brother who was so stubborn, Saw Myo Chit let his brother go free, under the watchful eyes of the villagers.

As for Naw Ae-Paw, she did not want her eldest son to leave. He was still insisting that when he went back to town, he would take her also.

Her youngest son, who still loved his elder brother, took Saw Pyi Chit with rope tied to one hand, to his army base camp to convince him of the real situation. Saw Pyi Chit, who was brought up in town, did not comprehend the true miseries of his own ethnic Karen people. He never knew the about the discrimination and slaughtering of Karen people by the military. Naw Ae-Paw followed after her two sons with tears in her eyes. Saw Pyi Chit needed to be taught the truth.

As a mother, she loved both of her sons equally. A mother's love could not give priority to either the elder son or younger son. Similar to a balanced set of scales, her love would be exactly at the center of two. A mother's love is always higher than the highest mountain and deeper than the deepest ocean.

MY SISTER....

Lway Nway Hnoug

My sister.....

I have told you about our situation before. Now you have asked me to tell you more about the Palaung people of Burma. I am thinking about what I should share with you. I haven't really told you about the Palaung and how deeply they suffer. I would like to tell you about the Palaung women who are eating with tears on their faces after the Palaung armed forces that we used to rely on were forced to surrender to the military regime.

This time I will tell you more details about our women. You will find it hard to believe it is real. I also asked questions when I first heard about these things. Well, thinking carefully about these events, it is real. Not only in our area - in other areas of Burma also. I am sure that you are aware of the terrible situation of our country. Palaung women are raped, their lives are not secure and they are suffering from the economic crisis.

You might have heard reports like this...

"3 Palaung women from Wan Pan Village, Ho Pong Village Tract, Loi Linn district, Northern part of Shan State, were gang raped by 6 soldiers from Battalion No 9 Mai Naung base. They were raped at 2:00pm while they were cultivating. Two of the women escaped from the soldiers with serious injuries. However, the soldiers left the other woman, whose injuries were too severe for her to move, lying in the bush where the gang rape took place. She died from her injuries on October 13 in Lwe Lin Hospital. The delay in getting her to hospital caused complications."

The rape of these 3 women is not an isolated incident. There were reports of 29 Palaung women being raped by soldiers between January and April 2006. On January 3, 2006, 10 soldiers from Battalion 515 gang raped 3 Palaung women; on the third week of March, the same soldiers from Battalion 515 gang raped another 2 Palaung women. Again during March, 6 Palaung women were raped by soldiers from Battalion No 64. On 23 March, 5 Palaung women were raped by soldiers from Battalion No 515, and in the last week of March, 6 women were raped by soldiers from Battalion No 515. On 3 April, another 7 Palaung women were raped by the same soldiers from Battalion No 515.

These rape cases are not happening only in the Palaung areas. You might have already heard about the rape cases documented in Shan State. In May 2002, the Shan Women's Action Networking released a report called "*Licensed to Rape*." This report documented 173 cases of sexual violence against 625 women in Shan State by Burmese troops between 1996 and 2001.

In 2004, another report called, "*Shattering Silences*" detailing rape cases in the Karen areas, was released by the Karen Women's Organization. Now they have released another report called "State of Terror" which draws on over 4,000 cases of human rights abuses including forced labor, rapes, killing and torture. It's really bitter to hear about these events.

We are not lucky being women. That's why women who have been through this kind of experience say that they wish to be men. Some women were tortured before being raped and some were killed after being raped. The soldiers killed these women after they raped them because they were afraid that these rape survivors would become witnesses against them.

Burma is becoming a big ogre of a country because human beings are killing each other and treating each other so cruelly. They prioritize their own interests and never feel sympathy for others. Burma is a Buddhist country and people are very calm, but now, unlike the name the country has become a cruel and ruthless country.

There are more problems aside from rape, my sister. Perhaps you have heard about human trafficking in Burma: taking human beings to the other side of the border and selling them. Before you ask me a question, I will tell you the reasons why they are being sold. As the economy is in crisis and the price of tea is not good, people in Palaung areas have no idea at all how to earn a living. This is what forces them to migrate and risk being trafficked. However, it is so inhumane to do the kinds of job they are trafficked into. Some people went to China to earn some money for their schooling, some are forced to go by their parents or the brokers for different reasons.

My friend recently sent me information about 15 cases of 30 people who were trafficked. At first I did not want to believe it. Only after my friend from Mai Wee told me herself could I believe it. She also said that there are more victims of trafficking in Namkham, because it is close to the border. Some daughters were even sold by their fathers because of drugs. I will tell you more about how people become addicted to drugs later.

Human trafficking happens in our village too, even though it is far from the border. There was a 23-year old guy who took two 18 year-old girls from our village and sold them. He lied to them saying that they would get a good job in China if they followed him, but these two girls have never come home. People looked for them in the place that they were sent to, but they couldn't find them. They had been sold to another Chinese house already.

This kind of thing doesn't only happen in Palaung areas. Trafficking is a serious problem in Kachin and Shan areas too. You can see more evidence of this problem in a report called "*Driven Away*," released by the Kachin Women's Association Thailand. It includes cases involving the trafficking of 85 women and girls between 14 to 20 years old, most of who were trafficked to China. About two thirds of the women and girls were from Kachin State, the remaining third from Northern Shan State.

It is a very bad situation and I kept hearing about this everyday: people trafficking human being as if they were goods. So, my sister do not believe people who make you promises, even if you are in a bad economic situation, because your life will end up unhappy.

The surrender of the Palaung army to the SPDC has had a great impact on the Palaung community. Now it is rare to see men who are not drunk or addicted to drugs. Women face difficulties and danger if one of the family members or their husband is addicted to drugs. In drug-affected families women are the victims. The men always stay at home. If they go out and work, they work only for themselves and do not give support to the family. Moreover, they extort money from the family's income, selling their family's belonging and finally even selling their daughters if they have no idea where to get the money. My sister, do not say that you don't believe it! We can see this in our village, cases where the father did not have any drugs to use, so he sold his daughter.

I am not trying to scare you by telling you this story. I just want to let you know that these things do happen. It is an unbelievable situation. Domestic violence is also a problem in these families. If a man does not get money to buy drugs from the family, he beats his wife violently. There is a saying in Burmese, "Beat the wife until her bones break, then she will love you crazily." They always say women will remember you if you hit them a few times.

Women always suffer, as they have to worry about their family and their husband. Drug addiction has not decreased. Actually, even more men have become drug addicts. As I have said, women always suffer if her family member or her husband is addicted to drugs. I have also suffered due to this problem.

You may have heard more about the drug problems in Burma in the report *"Hand in Glove, The Burma Army and the Drug Trade in Shan State"* or the Palaung Women's Organization report, *"Poisoned Flowers,"* which looks at the problems of drug abuse and domestic violence, based on the situation of 88 Palaung women.

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My sister...

I am telling you now how women are currently hurting. Women suffer in their everyday life. So, we need to think about things we can do to help these women. Although we cannot make the lives of all women peaceful, at least we can find the root cause of the problem and let the world know. It is our responsibility to make change happen. Let me stop telling you about the suffering of Palaung women now. I would like to tell you more details, but I can't stand to, because I keep hearing them crying, screaming and shouting. Let me stop here and I will tell you more in the future.

Lway Nway Hnong

SECOND WIFE

Na Nu

Growing up in Burma, Na Mu was my closest friend. We grew up in the same small Lahu village and, while she was younger than me, we always played together. When we were children, we went to Sunday school together every week. Na Mu was not thin and not fat. She was not tall and not short. Actually she was very cute. We loved and respected each other. Na Mu has three older brothers and her whole family loved her.

She was lucky because her parents could afford to send her to attend school in the township, the same school as me. Although we attended school in the same township we studied at different places, so we didn't see each other for over two years. But from 1995 to 1997 we stayed and studied in the same house and school. She was always so kind to me. She even washed my clothes, because I was so busy attending after-school tutoring.

When she passed sixth standard, she had to change school again because the education costs were too high. As much as she wanted to continue studying her father said, "No! Women don't need to study in town." We were both very sad. Na Mu did however get the opportunity to continue school near our village. Everyday she went to school by bicycle because the school was very far away. When she arrived home, she helped her mother. Every weekend she washed her parents' and her brothers' clothes. She worked hard at home but she still managed to pass seventh standard. I was very happy for her.

Her troubles really started when she was in eighth standard. Na Mu met a man. He wasn't a student. He was quite a bit older than her. At the time she was only 15 years old, and he was 26. But she had fallen in love with him. They loved each other, but her parents didn't like

him. They felt he was too old for Na Mu, so Na Mu and her boyfriend eloped. They had only stayed together one night when her older brother found both of them in another village. Na Mu's family didn't approve and so they were divorced.

Poor Na Mu, everyone in the community gossiped about her, so much so that she left school. I heard all about what Na Mu had done from my parents. I wanted to go back immediately to talk to her and offer my support but I was in the middle of my examinations. She needed me because she didn't have any other friends to talk to.

Our community thinks that women have to stay at home, that they do not need to find a partner outside. Women have to stay at home and do what we are told. We are controlled and made to feel weak. My father always told me that women have to wear their hair long. My father used to compare our women to birds. He said, "The bird is beautiful because it has a long tail. Women have to keep their hair long and shiny. If a woman keeps her hair long, people will say that she is a very beautiful woman." When I lived with my family, I kept my hair long. I wanted to cut my hair but my father wouldn't allow it. I knew that life for Na Mu would be difficult in our small community, with its traditional ideas.

When I came back my village Na Mu had already remarried. I was so shocked when I found out that she had become a second wife and that she was hooked on drugs. I wanted to see her but my father didn't want me to be friends with her. Just knowing her would be a stain on my reputation and that of my family. The gossiping tongues would turn on me. But I didn't listen to my father. I visited her home and we went shopping together. I knew how much she loved me and how much she appreciated my daring and friendship because when we stayed together she asked me, "Why didn't you obey your father? You know if you visit me and someone sees you they will call you a bad woman too!" I told her, "I don't care what the community thinks about me. I only care about you." So Na Mu opened up and told me her story.

Na Mu had married a forester. It wasn't until after she was married that she found out that he already had a wife and two children. She also found out all about his drug problem. As her life became

worse she too started using drugs with her husband. Na Mu said that they had lived together for one year. Her husband's wife knew he had a second wife, but she didn't know it was Na Mu. I told Na Mu, "Please stop it. If you don't stop it, his family will have problems. You should think about his family." She didn't want to cause his family problems, but she didn't know what to do. I told her, "You are still very young. You can find a new man." She was considered very beautiful in my village and I was sure that she could find another husband. Like other young women in our community who used drugs she didn't know what to do. She said that she just wanted to leave the world.

One thing is for sure. She would find no support or understanding in my community. My community just didn't know why young women used drugs. They only viewed these women as 'bad women'. They didn't look at the real problem and try to find a solution. The military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) allows drug production and distribution to occur in our communities. Many people in Lahu communities work growing poppies, tending the fields of the drug producers, because it is an easy way to get money for their survival. Many people also use the drugs. Once addicted, some workers even get paid in drugs. My village is near the notorious Golden Triangle territory. Businessmen from Thailand, China and Laos traffic drugs through my village.

But why did a smart young woman like my friend Na Mu end up addicted to drugs? Well sadly, Na Mu was not the only one. Many young women who end up becoming second wives get trapped into the cycle of using drugs. I was tired of seeing the problems in my community. I wanted to do something to change these problems, so I left my family and my friend and came to Thailand. At last I could work to help my community, especially the women and best of all I could help Na Mu too. Now Na Mu is 20 years old and also studying in Thailand. I am so happy for her because she has found a new life.

The author Na Nu is an active young woman working to promote the rights of Lahu women and to draw attention to the problems of gender discrimination, poverty and drugs in Lahu communities in Burma.

YE CHAN'S JOURNEY

Peral

My life has been a journey filled with difficulties and dangers. The most sorrowful and dreadful event that happened in my life began in a village in a Tavoyan township in 2002.

I was one of six youngsters who wished to possess a bright future. At that time many people were keen to go and work in Thailand. One day a broker arrived in our village. He came to pick up unemployed people and send them to Thailand to get jobs. The broker persuaded the villagers to go and find jobs in Thailand. He used very beautiful and persuasive words while talking with the villagers. He said that a pineapple factory in Bangkok needed a lot of workers. It offered reasonable wages to its workers and provided for social welfare too. He also said that when workers were in poor health the factory took responsibility for medical charges. Besides, the official registration certificates for workers were issued at the factory owner's expense. The owner was a good-tempered man and he paid wages to the workers regularly. The broker also said that people who were working in Thailand got a lot of advanced knowledge and became more developed people.

As soon as he heard the words from the broker, my friend rushed to me and told me all about Thailand. Then all of our friends discussed the matter. All of us were high school dropouts. We could not get a college education because our parents were poor folks, so we were eager to earn money to continue our education. However, it was very difficult for us to get a job with a reasonable salary in Burma. Due to our situation we were easily misled by the broker.

Our group of six close friends made up our minds to go and work in Thailand with the help of the broker. We agreed to work in

Thailand for around two years. We would save our earnings and after two years, we would come back to continue our education. At that moment, we were really happy with our future dreams.

Six of us, Ye Chan, Soe Soe, Kyi Thein, Than Than, Moo Moo and me, paid 70,000 kyat each to the broker. We also promised to pay the broker an additional 4,000 Thai Baht after we arrived in Thailand. Ye Chan was an orphan and he depended on his aunt who was his mother's sister. Ye Chan could not afford to pay for his travel costs. So, as a close friend, I took responsibility for his payment, which I borrowed from a moneylender. Ye Chan and I had the same goal, to continue our education after two years in Thailand.

On the day we started our journey to Thailand, there were 26 people in our group and Ye Chan was the youngest. He was a jovial type of person and he loved teasing people around him along the way. His humorous jokes made us happy and we even forgot how exhausted we were while we walked on our journey.

On the next day, we continued walking through the jungle path. Five Chin nationals were walking at the forefront of the procession. Ye Chan was teasing a Chin girl and he took over the lead from the Chin nationals. Then he went ahead of the procession and ascended a mountain. At 11 a.m. we were halfway up the mountain when we heard an explosion. At first, we thought it might be a boar that had stepped on a landmine. We walked on and just before we arrived at the top of the mountain, we found Ye Chan who had stepped on a landmine and fallen beside the path. When he saw us, he asked for help to pull him up because one of his legs was severely injured. He was also murmuring that our dreams were gone. He continued saying that it was an unfortunate trip, urging us to go back. As for me, I was shocked and numbed after seeing one of Ye Chan's legs was blown off. I did not know what to do and I wept. Soon, the broker and some others caught up with us.

After looking at Ye Chan's injury, the broker questioned us in a detached and unemotional manner about whether we would continue our journey to Thailand or not.

He said, "Will you leave this injured boy here or take him back home?" What kind of an inhumane question is that?

Then I asked him about his plan, "What do you want to do, let me know your idea?"

"I will go ahead to Thailand," he replied.

"We won't go any further. We have to carry our injured friend back. We must bring him to the nearest clinic. And we need money to get medical treatment for our friend So, I would like to ask you to refund our payment," I said to the broker.

After a debate, we only got 30,000 kyat from the broker for 6 people, even though we paid him 70,000 kyat each.

On our way back, we were frightened that we would meet with Burmese army soldiers or the Karen revolutionary troops. After some consultation among us, we decided to go further on and if we encountered any group, the Burmese soldiers or the Karen rebels, we would tell them to arrest us. That would hopefully give us the chance to ask for medical treatment for Ye Chan, because they might have their own medics with them.

Ye Chan was hit by the landmine at 11 a.m. and his wound was bleeding a lot. We took a blanket and made it into a stretcher and put him in it. Five of us took turns carrying the stretcher. The stretcher was soaked with blood from Ye Chan's wound and the flies were buzzing around his injury all the way. In the evening, we were thirsty and there was only a little water left for us. Moo Moo told me to give the water to Ye Chan. But Ye Chan refused to drink and said that he was not thirsty for he was in the stretcher. He told us to drink the water for we were tired from carrying him.

When we nearly reached a farm hut, we all agreed to take a rest there. It was around 6 p.m. but the surroundings were under darkness due to the shadow of the jungle. At that moment, Ye Chan passed away. Before he blew his last breath out, he spoke to me.

He said, "I'm so sorry I cannot have a chance to repay your generosity to me. I'm an irresponsible person, not only to you but also to my younger brother."

I was heartbroken by Ye Chan's death and felt so much hatred towards the broker. One of our friends told me to stop crying, as we had to bury the remains of Ye Chan. We had no tools with us, only a small dagger. We made a hole with the small dagger, but it was too shallow for a corpse. However, we had to bury him there and continue on our way back home. Around 9 p.m. we arrived at a small stream and took a bath there, for all of us were dirty and stained with blood. We abandoned all of our possession and left for home. We did not speak to each other as we were exhausted.

It was midnight when we reached a village. We asked an old man whose house was at the periphery of the village if we could please stay one night. The old man questioned us about our destination. We did not tell him the truth. We told him that we went to find a job in Thailand. On the way, someone deceived us and took our money and we had no other choice but to go home. The old man cooked rice and curry for us and we had our supper there. At 2 a.m. we finished our meal but none of us considered sleeping as we had to take the 4 a.m. bus. All of us were desperate to go home.

We did not eat any food on the way home as we were short of cash. Five of us arrived back to our village at 9 p.m. the next day. We separated from each other and went towards our respective homes.

We recounted a made up story to our family members, saying that we had returned home because the conditions of the passage to Thailand were not safe at that time. It was all right for some time. But we could not hide the true story for long. As all of us came back except Ye Chan, his aunt questioned me about his whereabouts. I was shocked and unable to speak when I heard her query. My other friends were avoiding Ye Chan's aunt. Finally, I consulted my mother and we explained the unfortunate story to Ye Chan's aunt. When she heard about the tragic death of her nephew, Ye Chan's aunt blamed all of us. She said that she allowed her nephew to work in Thailand in order to

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continue his education. She blamed me the most and I myself could not find any reason to answer her rage. I kept silent and let her blame me.

In fact, the whole group of us had decided to find jobs in Thailand in order to continue our education. If we could have found the ways and means to get an education, scholarship awards or educational assistance from the government, we would never have thought of migrating to Thailand to work. After arriving at the Tavoyan Women's Union in Thailand, I have learnt that there are scholarship awards and educational assistance for people from Burma.

Burma's military rulers always black out the news and information inside the country. If the government did not close the doors for education and information to the young generation, I dare say that my friend Ye Chan would not have lost his life. Ye Chan died from blood loss and because he could not get medical treatment. He died not because of his bad fate, but because of the wrong political system. The military regime is totally responsible for the death of Ye Chan.

The members of the groups who plant the landmines also bear responsibility for the fatalities of innocent citizens, including Ye Chan. There are a great number of people who have died because of landmines in our country due to the misguided system. Burma has become a failed state. Thus, I would like to remind the whole population that saving our nation is everybody's responsibility. I would like to inspire our people to make a concerted effort to change this erroneous political system.

The author is a member of the Tavoyan Women's Union actively working on promoting peace and non-violence. She participated in the Burma Women Writers Workshops and believes that, "If we say the development of a nation depends on how much its citizens love reading and writing, then it is our duty to read and write as much as we can."

LIVES DURING MIGRATION

Saung

I feel deep regret and sadness when I see the Burmese workers toiling under the tropical climate, showing signs of fatigue on their faces. These Burmese workers, who do not have opportunities to earn a living in their own country, have to work hard for an unreasonable salary in an alien country. They also have to reside in poor living conditions. It is unquestionable that they face a lot of difficulties as immigrant workers away from their mother country. I feel sympathetic towards them since I too have found it hard to live outside Burma. However, I am not as tired as them, so I have the chance to learn lessons from their lives.

The construction workers, the factory workers and the fishery workers have to work in a state of near exhaustion but earn less than any other laborers. Their standard of living is very different from the middle class workers whose worksites are in the air-conditioned offices. Our Burmese workers earn their living in neighboring countries as migrant workers. They have to move from one job to another because most employers discriminate against them and do not want to pay them proper wages. Moreover, they do not enjoy the same labor rights as Thai workers and have to work harder for less salary. For these reasons, they often cannot have permanent jobs and they have to shift around an alien country.

I would like to tell you about a friend of mine, who came to Thailand as a migrant worker. Her name is Soe Su and she was around 15 years old when we met each other. She was a native of Tavoy Township. Although she was young, she had many experiences. She left her native place five years ago, after she finished grade six, as she had to earn money for her whole family. She came to Thailand with the help of travelers she met by chance. After trekking with a group of 15 people for five long days through mountains, jungles and rivers, Soe Su

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arrived at the refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border close to Mon State. On their way, they encountered a severe battle between the Burmese army and an ethnic revolutionary group, so they hid in the jungle for a whole night. Out of 15 people, Soe Su and an elderly woman were the only female travelers. Soe Su was 15 years old, an active girl and the youngest in the group. There were men in the group who tried to molest the young Soe Su, but Soe Su knew how to protect herself from shameful attempts at molestation. She was also fortunate to receive protection from the elderly woman.

When the group arrived at the Mon refugee camp they stayed in our house temporarily, because some of them were my mother's relatives. So, I got a chance to befriend Soe Su. While staying in our house, she told me a lot about her experiences in life, including her journey through the rough jungle.

A week later, Soe Su and the group migrated into a town called Nakhon Pathon in Thailand. Before she moved into Thailand, I asked her what she would do there and then she replied to me in a faint voice that she had to do whatever fate determined. I did worry about Soe Su as she was a very demure young lady. I was also curious about how people would treat Soe Su when she arrived in Nakhon Pathon for she was a calm, composed and honest girl. I was afraid that the elderly woman would not be able to protect her. I got in touch with her one or two times and then I lost contact with her completely.

A period of 5 years passed by. I myself was busy traveling. They were not long journeys, just short trips to surrounding towns or districts. As I had become a responsible person, I had to go to place after place in accordance with my life conditions. At that time, I discovered why other people became migrant workers, but I did not comprehend everything. Although someone can change their mind and shift jobs, I thought that it would not be easy to change one's ethical conduct or morality.

But one unbelievable situation showed me that my belief was wrong. That very calm and demure young lady, who temporarily stayed at our home 5 years before, who sincerely narrated her true life to me, appeared in front of my own eyes. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse

with one strap and a short skirt. She had painted her face with multicolor cosmetics and one of her arms was around the waist of a white man. At first, I did not recognize her at all. But, gradually, I remembered her through a pair of brilliant eyes. She was no other than Soe Su. It was Soe Su, who I did not help in the past.

I felt conflicting emotions of sorrow and pleasure when I met Soe Su again. I felt heartbroken when she told me her tragic life story.

Years ago when Soe Su and the group arrived at the fish-sauce factory in Nakhon Pathon, they worked there for three or four months. After two months, the elderly woman shifted to work in another place. The woman only told Soe Su that she was leaving the same day as her departure. Soe Su was left alone and vulnerable after the woman's disappearance. A villain, Aung Aung, exploited the unguarded situation of Soe Su. One holiday, all of the workers went out to a trade fair, except Soe Su who did not want to go out at nighttime. Unfortunately, that night, Aung Aung destroyed Soe Su's life.

Eventually, Soe Su made up her mind to get married with Aung Aung, the man who had raped her.¹ However, she did not get married because Aung Aung refused her proposal. In fact, Aung Aung was a womanizer and unashamed rapist who had committed similar crimes before. Soe Su asked the factory-owner to take action against Aung Aung, who agreed to punish him. He also told Soe Su not to continue working in the fish-sauce factory and that he would take responsibility for finding her a new job. She was so happy that she believed the owner. Soe Su followed the owner's instructions fully.

One night the owner picked her up in his car. He drove from Nakhon Pathon to Bangkok. At one place, he stopped the car and asked Soe Su how much money she had. She replied that she had 5000 Baht. Then, the owner called someone on the phone. Soe Su didn't know whom he talked to or what they talked about. When the car arrived in Bangkok, it stopped in front of a big, grand house. Soe Su asked her boss whether she had to work in that house or not. The boss

¹ Cultural prohibitions on sex outside of marriage, sometimes offer marriage as a 'face-saving' response to sexual violence.

told her to wait for a while and he went into the house. After a while, he came out of the house talking to an elderly woman. The woman stared at Soe Su and then she clutched Soe Su's hand tightly. The woman said goodbye to the boss and took Soe Su into her house.

Soe Su stopped her narration for a moment, as she could not stop the tears flowing down from her eyes. She hugged me firmly and cried until she felt satisfied. In fact, Soe Su's clothes and cosmetic face covered up her sincere mind and morality. I came to know that Soe Su had no outlet for her life as she devoted herself to a profession that disgusted her. As she disliked her way of life, one could see her physical and mental appearance was not fresh at all.

She continued her story. The woman who took her into the big grand house was attentive and showed her kindness. Soe Su thought it was a good turn of her fate. She was very happy because the woman bought her new clothes, new footwear, a new sling bag and various makeup and cosmetics of her choice. Two days later, the woman told her to wear beautiful clothes and make herself up to be a beautified lady. Then she took a beautified Soe Su to the upstairs of the house. It was nighttime. When she reached upstairs, she discovered the shocking and shameful views of brothel rooms shining with luxurious facilities. The customers were white, black and from various backgrounds.

Soe Su was bitterly ashamed by the immoral situation and she tried to run away from the house. But, she could not escape from that brothel. The woman used countless pressures and tortures to force her to sleep with the foreign customers. Soe Su stubbornly refused to obey the woman. But finally, due to inhumane and violent persecution, she submitted and had sex with a customer. She had to sell her flesh and dignity repeatedly to her customers. She gave up her dignity in order to fulfill others.

After enduring such a rough life, Soe Su was alien to integrity, modesty and dignity, which were the precious jewels of her life. Finally, she managed to escape from the brothel house and find a job in the next town. Unfortunately, she had to flee, as the boss at her new job was a partner of the brothel house owner. She was so depressed that

she did not know where to go. She sat crying sorrowfully beside the highway lane.

While she was sobbing nervously, a police patrol car met her and asked her what the matter was. Soe Su could not give an answer for she could not speak Thai language well. The police could not easily determine if she was a foolish girl or a girl from a brothel. They took her up to the station where they simply classified her as an illegal Burmese migrant. As she had no legal documents, the police put her in the lockup. Although Soe Su desperately wanted to explain about her life, she couldn't due to the language barrier. Eventually, she had to just shut her mouth and let events unfold.

While Soe Su was in the police lockup, prison guards and some policemen used to take her out to fulfill their passions. Policemen forced her to massage them, dance or fill their whisky glasses. Soe Su tried to defy their abuses, but eventually she had to surrender because she was a vulnerable woman. These inhumane scoundrels spoiled her life and she had no other way out but to be victimized as a whore. Finally, she chose to live together with an elderly policeman who used to take her out frequently. By doing so, she was released from police custody and became the concubine of the policeman.

From that day on, Soe Su never valued her morality. She slept together with one man after another while she was the illegal wife of the policeman. When the policeman could not tolerate Soe Su any more he kicked her out of his room. So she took hold of the old white man. When I met Soe Su, she was together with the old white guy who was hugging her and enjoying drinks and food in front of me. She told me that she had been living together with him for 3 or 4 days. I have no idea how Soe Su, who has experienced so much misery in her life, will run her life in the future. I can't do anything to help her, except stare at her face with pity.

Saung is a Tavoyan woman who has spent the last few years working with migrant workers in Tsunami affected areas of Southern Thailand. She urges us to "Be free from inhumane and harsh lives and possess peaceful lives!"

THE TEA SHOP

Aie

My name is San. I was born in a very small village in Chaung Zone Township. My village is in a remote area. We have a small market in which people sell fish, vegetables and groceries. There is a small stream alongside my village and green fields beside the stream. We also have a lot of teak trees, but we don't own them. Only the government owns the teak. I have four younger sisters and one younger brother.

When I was twelve years old, my parents got divorced. Two years later, my mother remarried another man. Since that time, my life has been miserable. My stepfather was so horrible. We never saw eye to eye. He was mean to me and was attracted to me sexually even though I was a juvenile. However he could never abuse me because my mother always took care of me.

At first, he worked on the farm and provided for my family. However, after my mother become ill and couldn't work with him, he didn't work any more. At that time, I was a student in fifth standard. Because nobody worked, I couldn't afford to pay for my school expenses. Due to my family's problem, I didn't want to go to school. Eventually, I left school because I didn't have money to go anymore and we were starving.

I realized that I was the one who had to provide for my whole family. In 2001, I asked my mother to open a tea shop for me. Fortunately, she had a little money to help me, so I started to work in my new shop.

I felt proud of my little shop. I also studied from the books that my teacher gave to me, but I had no chance to sit exams because I didn't attend school. I really wanted to attend school. I was always thinking about the day that I could return to school. My teachers also

wanted me to attend school because I was an intelligent student. One of my teachers told me that if they had higher salaries, they would provide for me to attend school. Unfortunately their salaries were also not enough to cover their own expenses because in Burma the salaries for teachers are very low.

As the year wore on, my stepfather showed his bad habits again through a weakness for gambling. When my mum was paralyzed, she asked my stepfather to go to the town and buy some ingredients for my shop because I was young and the road to town was not safe for a young girl. She gave him the money to buy the goods. The first time and the second time, he bought the ingredient for me patiently, but later he gambled away all of my money playing cards.

From then on, my mum had to borrow money from my neighbors. I was very upset and ashamed. I also felt depressed and didn't want to work in my shop, so I asked one of my neighbors to give me advice on how to get to Thailand, my neighboring country. She discouraged me from going to Thailand, telling me how difficult working in Thailand would be.

One day, one of my nieces, who was around my age, came to visit me. She had worked in Thailand and I told her my plan to work there too. She agreed that I could go with her. I was so petrified along the way. I saw my niece giving money to police at every check-point. I thought she was bribing police. I slept in the forest one night with many people.

Unfortunately, when I arrived in Thailand, I faced a huge problem because my niece owed a lot of money to her boss and she couldn't pay it back. At that time I realized that she had deceived me to get me to follow her to Thailand. My niece wanted me to marry her boss, but I didn't want to marry her boss because he was very old and I didn't think he would be kind to me. I didn't want to marry a man the same age as my grandfather.

While I was facing that problem, I met a man from Moulmein, Burma, who was also working in Thailand. One day, I went shopping with my boss and I tried to run away from him. At the same time I told

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the man from Moulmein to help me and take me to work with him. Luckily, he came and saved my life. He rescued me from the old man. I planned that I would stay with him for three months, earn some money and go back to my home, but after three months, he also asked me to marry him.

I felt an obligation to marry him because he was my savior. I also realized that I loved him, so I married him.

Now we are working in Thailand together in a rubber plantation. I like being together with him. We love each other very much. I don't know what will happen in my life in the future. Can you imagine how I have lived my life and how difficult it is?

Aie is a young Mon woman who has narrated the story of her friend, 'San.'

WHY?

Pann Yine Nge

I am a Burmese citizen. After I came to visit my parents who were in Thailand, I did not continue my studies. My parents had been in Thailand since they became involved in the democracy movement a long time ago. The Burmese military regime did not apply equal rules and treatment to the whole country, including ethnic areas. The regime seized and maintained power by ruling with the iron rod of dictatorship. So different ethnic groups from different areas in Burma took part in the revolution in order to restore equal rights, human rights and democratic principles in the country. My parents also joined the revolution. Afterwards they fled to Thailand and were firmly determined not to return to Burma until there is democracy.

They knew if they returned to Burma before a transition to democracy, the regime would definitely arrest them, make up false accusations against them and torture them to death. So they did not go back inside Burma. I, however, grew up and studied inside Burma.

My parents asked me to visit them in Thailand, as we had been apart for such a long time. At first, I only came for a short period. Later I could not go back to Burma and just continued staying in Thailand. At first I thought there were only a few Burmese citizens in Thailand. After a longer time I realized that there were many people from Burma living in Thailand including: civil-war victims, activists and migrant workers. I also understood the reasons they came, including:

- Starvation among people living along the border, including those people who lost their shelter because of civil war,
- The Burmese junta threatened people's lives and property,

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- The unemployment rate increased because of the economic crisis inside Burma,
- Incomes remained very low while commodity prices rocketed up and up,
- People could not support their children's education anymore,
- Families faced increasing problems surviving, including accessing basic health care.

We are able to survive living and working along the Thai-Burma border and inside Thailand as the Thai government and Thai people have sympathy towards us to some extent. However, men have more job opportunities than women in Thailand. Women from Burma experience Thai people looking down upon us as if we are not human beings when we work, especially when we work in town. Maybe it is their habit to discriminate easily without any idea about our situation.

I wanted to know, "Why does this happen? Why are women undervalued?" Women also have flesh and blood. They have hearts with feelings. They have dignity. They cherish morals. They have logic and creative brains. They have knowledge. Human beings cannot choose their fates at birth and cannot create their lives in whatever way they want. If time and conditions are not favorable, we have to do whatever is necessary.

Women take risks in their lives, which they do not want to, in order to solve the political situation, the economic crisis, for the survival of their families, or to save other people's lives. They stay in other countries, not because they are happy to be out of their own country, but out of necessity. I do not believe that staying in another country can make us as happy as when we are in our own country. We stay and do what we can to survive, to have a better relationship with people around us and to be secure in a hostile environment.

As a result of our country's political problems, most women cannot get white-collar jobs in Burma even if they hold degrees from university. They run away from Burma and are happy to accept any kind of job.

Once Thai people know that we are from Burma, they immediately look down on us. They discriminate against us. When they see a woman from Burma, they think she is a prostitute or a servant and push her into a corner. If a girl works in a shop, the owners might think, "I can do whatever I want to do with her. She can be my entertainer. Later on, I can traffic her or sell her." They always think of their profits.

In fact, women from Burma can usually only do degrading jobs in Thailand. For instance, let's consider the situation of a Burmese woman migrant worker. She has had a proper education. But she cannot get any proper jobs because of the language barrier. So she receives a blue-collar job such as a housemaid, agricultural worker or cleaner in a restaurant – jobs that local people do not want to do. Such circumstances make women feel depressed and have a deep down psychological impact.

At work, almost every young woman has felt verbal insults from this or that man. Women working as housemaids in particular have to worry about sexual violence from the owners. If she gets married with someone to avoid these problems, the worries may become double. Some women develop health problems because they have to work hard, day and night. They have to decide whether they should cure their health problems or go back home. If they spend money on their health care, they lose their precious savings.

Please put yourself in their position and consider the troubles they face, and why.

Some men took advantage of these types of situations to cheat women and look down upon them. I myself have experienced such frustration and thought that other women might have similar experiences to me. There are some women who work in decent jobs in Thailand but the number is quite small. Even though they can work safely, they still face discrimination in salary levels. However, staying at risk in Thailand is better than living inside Burma. Therefore we should be grateful to the Thai government.

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I've never liked the kinds of jobs available to women in Thailand and I did not want to do them. I always wanted to join the political movement and be an educated person. My childhood dream was to become an engineer, but life designated me as a blue-collar worker. I always struggle to be ready to step out of this condition. Whenever I watch television programs, I see many successful women and I feel deeply depressed. I have cried many times thinking about whether Burma will become a developed country like other developed nations. If they do, women from our country, including me, might be successful and have delightful smiles and bright futures. I have realized that I should not stand still while many women are being humiliated. I should do something good for them. So, I try my best to fight repression in order to restore their freedom.

I want to tell my colleagues and friends: "Women have equal ability with men and they can participate in many important fields apart from giving birth."

I have been working hard in a women's organization and am very happy. My organization contributes to many programs such as higher education for women, women's rights education and promoting women's participation in the political movement.

We hope that women will understand more and more about their abilities and realize they have equal rights with men.

I believe that we will be free from these hardships once democracy is restored in Burma. Moreover, all the Burmese citizens who are viewed as a 'burden' on Thailand will be able to return to their homeland in peace. Then, they can work inside Burma and survive as well. By that time, Burma and Thailand will be good neighbors.

I hope that I will be able to continue working with a women's organization. I hope that many women like me have gained lessons from their experiences abroad. Though we took refuge under another government because of our country's political problems, I would like all of us to go back and serve our new generations with good intentions based on our experiences. We can serve reconstructing our country to become like other developed countries.

DARK SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Lway Nway Hnong

Every human being needs hope to survive. How are those people without hope surviving? They are dying alive. Their life is not stable living in Burma. Some flee from Burma to neighboring countries to seek money for their family, but still their life is not stable. Earlier this year I was terrified when I witnessed a terrible event in Thailand.

I went out to do a job. I saw a group of Burmese migrant workers walking on the street. I thought they were marching because I had heard that there was going to be a march. When I asked my friend, she said, "Police, wearing ordinary clothes are arresting migrant workers in the factory, no-one could run and escape. They are waiting at the front and back doors with guns. My friend, don't go! If you don't have documents, they will arrest you and send you to the border. Then they will ask you to go home to Myawaddy.¹ You will be in trouble."

My task was important, so I had to go ahead although I was so scared. There were 10 military trucks parked on the main street and I saw the police arresting migrant workers from one factory after another. I was so scared, my face turned white. I could feel all of the blood running out of my face. Luckily they did not arrest people in cars and on motorbikes. I was praying, reciting all of the prayers I could remember.

My eyes scanned around, wherever I went as the police were waiting everywhere, around every corner. I had to check everywhere, as I feared I would be arrested if I didn't keep my eyes alert and wide open. This is what migrant workers have to endure in their daily life.

¹ Myawaddy is the town on the Burmese side of the border from Mae Sot, Thailand. Many Burmese migrant workers are deported from Thailand through this check point.

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This was the first time I had seen a large number of Burmese migrant workers being arrested and I felt threatened. When I went out to get information from my friend, she warned me that, "the police will come and arrest people in our compound in a few days, so you should be careful."

Now I have become so scared at night. I have never felt this kind of fear before. Everyday and every night, we have to stay like there is no one at home. At night, I used to hear the sound of cars stopping outside my bedroom, but when I hear that sound now I think that it is a police car and it makes me so afraid. When my friends speak and laugh loudly, I become so angry and worried. There are also police staying near our house and I am always thinking about whether they will come and arrest us. I always have to be careful when I go out, eat and sleep. We are not secure once we go outside.

The fear even invades my dreams. Maybe I put my legs in the wrong position when I sleep, because when I dream that the police are trying to arrest me, I try to run away, but I can't run. I did not have this kind of feeling in the past because we could get advanced warning if the police were planning raids to arrest people. But now, we do not get any advanced information and the police come in civilian clothes, instead of police uniforms.

Sometimes, when the police arrest people they take all of their valuable things and money. Other times, they destroy the lives of beautiful women. I face problems with the authorities every year. The first time I was arrested I had to pay money. The second time was when I was waiting at someone's house ready to go to Chiang Mai. Police in plain clothes came to arrest us. Again we had to pay a lot of money to get out.

One evening, not so long after that, I was driving a motorbike home from the clinic with my friend. I did not see the police, as it was almost getting dark. They stopped us and asked my friend "Do you have ID or documents?" My friend said nothing. I said, "No, we don't have ID." They asked to check my bag, but I did not give it to them as I had money inside. They told me to go home because I was sick and they asked my friend to follow them to the police station. How could I

dare to let my friend follow them? I knew their tactics - they wanted to ask for money. Next, they took my bag, searched it and found 2,000 Baht. They asked me to give them 1,000 Baht but I pretended that I did not understand Thai. They told us if we didn't understand Thai we would have to follow them to the police station. I refused! They asked us again to give them money. Impatiently, I asked them, "How much?" They said 1,000 Baht.

Wow! That's not a small amount of money, in Burmese currency it is about 40,000 kyat, enough for 2 packs of rice. I said I would pay 500 Baht but they said no. I did not want to argue with them so I paid them 1,000 Baht. I don't like doing that and I was not satisfied. I really hate corruption. Police are looking for money, especially when it's close to festival times.

I understand that it is the duty of police to arrest people, but they need to be fair and just. Since there is no peace in Burma, we flee into Thailand and live here illegally, so they can arrest us anytime they want. They can't refuse to arrest people once they are given a command to do their duties, but they need to be fair.

Some migrant workers are so scared and try to run away from the police, but they never escape. The police always get them. Sometimes some police mistakenly shoot them. It's so painful to hear this information, especially about the rape of women. Women rarely dare to talk about this, and the police can give them trouble anytime.

I feel sympathy when I see our people and feel sympathy for myself too. We are facing many kinds of oppression in Burma. We continue to suffer and have no secure life in other countries also.

One of my friends often comes and asks me, "Why don't you go back to Burma? Don't you miss your parents? Have you already forgotten all of your friends? You are enjoying your time in a developed country. How will you want to go back to Burma when your life is stable here?"

She will never understand me and I am never able to explain to her about my work and what I am really doing in Thailand. The only thing I can say is that if I go back to Burma, I will have no food to eat.

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I am not educated and I will not be able to take care of myself. Furthermore, as a daily-wage worker I can't go back to my village. No matter how bad the situation is in Thailand, at least I can still take care of myself and survive. I can also make my family happy. And they don't need to worry about me. This is the only reason I can give to my friend.

The dark night still threatens me at midnight and I worry for the girls who stay at my home. I would like to overcome these midnight fears. I do not want to hear the sound of cars stopping outside my bedroom. I do not want to hear the noise of police arresting migrant workers at 3 a.m. in the morning. I would like people to sympathize with our Burmese people.

Lway Nway Hnong is Palaung woman working for the rights of women and migrant workers in Thailand. She is a passionate writer of literature and poetry and recently published her own book. This article was first published online on 22nd February 2007 at www.burmatoday.net

AN EXCITING NIGHT

Ta Ket Bu

Not so long ago, women activists from Mae Hong Son were preparing to attend a women's rights and solidarity workshop in Chiang Mai. I was among these women preparing to leave for the workshop. Not unlike other trips, things were not going as planned on that day. The vans we booked did not arrive on time. The women were anxiously waiting for the cars with annoyed looks on their faces. While we were waiting for the vans, we teased each other with the words that became an ominous prediction of events to come. Finally, we started our trip around 6 o'clock in the evening.

The two vans drove gradually on the road to Chiang Mai. Along the way I heard various noises such as phones ringing, murmuring, vomiting, and snoring from other people in the car. I enjoyed the pleasant landscape under the moon light with a vivid imagination. The road from Mae Hong Son to Chiang Mai was full of twists and turns, in and out of town after town, valley after valley and mountain after mountain. It took us nearly 5 hours to get to Chiang Mai.

Just before we reached Chiang Mai, there was a military checkpoint. Our earlier jokes started to unfold into reality. A group of soldiers stopped our car to check. We thought, "It's just a routine check. Don't worry, we'll get to Chiang Mai safe and sound." After 15 minutes, more soldiers arrived. They asked many questions in Thai language, starting with "*Pai nai krab?*"¹ We answered their questions with brief and vague responses, "To attend a meeting." We did not give detailed answers, as we were concerned about the security of our organizations. The soldiers took pictures of our group as well as the

¹ '*Pai nai krab*' means "Where are you going?" in Thai language.

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cars we traveled in. They also threatened us, saying if we did not give truthful answers, they would not let us go. They also asked whether we could speak Thai, Burmese and English languages. One person told them that he could speak a bit of English. Then, they took him to their military headman and they continued questioning him. They also took one girl away from our car and questioned her. One passenger told us that the soldiers asked him about the destination and for money.

Some of us held Thai documents and some could not even speak Thai at all. We were overwhelmed with fear, as we had not had this kind of experience before, so we kept silent. The soldiers suspected us more and more because of our silent behavior. After a while, more policemen came down too. Then two more police vehicles arrived and let three soldiers get inside each car. Then, they ordered our van drivers to turn around and go back where we had come from.

On the way back, our feelings were the total opposite of the excitement when we started the trip. Some people were angry towards the soldiers, some kept quiet in fear, some worried about being separated from their families if they were deported back to the border, some thought about jail or court, some worried about their pictures being put in the media. All the while our car followed behind the police cars.

We arrived at Mae Hong Son military base after a 3 hour drive. We were guarded by armed soldiers and asked many questions. They took our original names, addresses and our photos.

I think we faced this security problem because of the power rivalry between the military and police in Thailand at the time. Luckily, we did not get punished or deported and got to go back home safely.

However, we missed the chance to circulate knowledge, experience and information among women from different areas. Finally, I spent the whole night in the car feeling over excited – not with pleasure but nervous with fear.

Ta Ket Bu is a young woman activist, who despite this event has since been able to participate in other trainings and workshops with women from diverse backgrounds.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Ma Nwe

One day two women, Tin Tin and Khin Yi, go to a place near a small village, where migrant worker families live. There are sixty families in this village. They come by motorbike and both of them are silent. Actually, the women are both activists from a women's organization. Yesterday they heard about a case of domestic violence in one of the families, from their friend, Mo Soe, who is an activist also. She told them that Ma Wah's husband has been getting drunk everyday and hitting her and that this problem started fifteen years ago. Consequently, Ma Wah has been losing interest in her family life.

So the two women have to go to Ma Wah's village to discuss this situation with her. As the motorcycle travels to the village, they are thinking about how they can help her and her children. They arrive near the village at 3 p.m. The weather is very hot and the air is so hazy they can't even see the leaves on the trees. Everywhere around the village is very dry.

"Today is very hot, hotter than other days," says Khin Yi

"Yes, it's very hot today," Tin Tin agrees.

At that moment, a woman comes out of the jungle and holds up her hand, calling, "Hey! Hey!"

Khin Yi sees her and says to Tin Tin, "Stop! Stop the motorbike! Do you see over there? I think that's Ma Soe, Ma Wah's friend."

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They stop the motorbike and wait. Two women and two children come towards them. They meet by the road and introduce themselves. Tin Tin and Khin Yi both know Ma Soe already. "This is Ma Wah," says Ma Soe.

"Nice to meet you, Ma Wah. How are you?" says Tin Tin

Ma Wah is silent as she watches the women.

"We want to tell you, Ma Wah, don't be shy. Ma Soe told us about your family problems and I think Ma Soe already told you about us. What do you want? We both believe you. You can decide as you like what is best for you."

"Ma Wah," prompts Ma Soe, "you can follow these women and they can help you."

"Yes," replies Ma Wah, "I would like to follow them."

"Let's go," Tin Tin says "We will discuss many things with you when we arrive at our center."

The three women drive away from the village together. Ma Wah goes with them on a motorbike.

Postscript

The events above are based on a true story. The women in this story never arrived at the center as the Thai police caught them on the way and they had to go to the police station. The author wonders where they are now....

SOBERING EARTH

Wah Nay Moo

Things I belong to lie on me,
I am the earth.

Those who live on me
Consider me spherical
Yes I am

Should it imagine?
That spherical body is worthless
Who dares?

Whatsoever, living or non-living
Surround that spherical body
Who knows?

Master of all
Necessary for existence of everything;
Who recognizes?

Kicking me out
For I am just like a ball
Man plays.

Providing everything they need,
So they thrive
All my might, all my energy.

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Seldom satisfied
Man wants more than enough
My blood, my sweat, my hair, my skin
Deep down to my bones

Oh man have mercy on me
Before I am crushed

Oh man notice
Before I cry

The day I am crushed
Would be the day I cry
Would be the day you are in great trouble

Oh man, have mercy on me
Before I am crushed

Save me man
Before I am crushed
Otherwise, you all get problems
Someday in someday
Oh man.....

COMPOSITION

Wah Nay Moo

I am the earth
Digging on my body, peeling off my skin
For food that you consume
'Cause
I am the master of your life

I am the water
Sipping my sweat and drinking my blood
For prosperity and nourishment
'Cause
I am necessary for you

I am the air
Providing with oxygen
To keep you alive
'Cause
No possibility of survival
Without me

Wah Nay Moo is a young Karenni woman who has been active in the movement for many years. She is currently focusing on environmental issues through her work with an organization called Evergreen.

MOTHER WATERFALL

Mi K.M

Oh! Mother-----
Where does she come from?
-----waterfall
Sometimes she is clear or light
She also shows white and green sometimes
Blue too in my eye to see
Nature of mother

Oh! Mother-----
She prefers to serve others
Her children, husband, and others
But she is not only a supporter
But also a leader, not just a home
Forever

Oh! Ladies-----Future of mother
She can do whatever she wants
That is nature
Her heart is strong
To be a leader who can be a head of people
Ladies, decision-maker and leader
Fresh waterfall of Mother!

LOVELY SALWEEN; MUM SALWEEN

Nan Nount Shan Kham

Salween's Mum, Mum's Salween.
Salween's Mum of Mum
All living things
Shelter under her shadow.
We also drink her sweet milk.
We eat her food.
But people have broken her hands and legs.
Humans take her blood;
Sell her life and her heart;
Profession for our own life.
Just a movement and in the past.
That's the life of Salween.

She's Mum, Mum's Salween;
Salween's Mum of Mum.
Salween's our living Mum.
Master of Mum, Lord of Mum;
If we're not foolish people
Will we be so bold
To kill her peaceful life?

She's a Mum, Mum's Salween;
Should we forget her kindness?
Should we forget her beneficence?
Should we forget her,
Her helpfulness and her life?
Should we kill or destroy
Her peaceful life?
Or should we protect
The peacefulness of her
Lovely Free Life

DAD

Nan Nount Shan Kham

He isn't educated,
But he knows everything.
That my lovely Dad.
He isn't an intellectual,
But he knows how to read.
He isn't educated,
But he has a lot of knowledge.
He's not rich,
He does have a poor life.
Family not so rich,
But he has created a beautiful life.
He's a man,
He's my lovely Dad.
Everyone loves him;
That's my lovely Dad.
He's involved everywhere.
So social, such a family
Such everywhere and everything;
He's a dutiful person.
He is father;
He is Dad,
He is my lovely Dad.

WOMEN'S ZEAL, WOMEN'S POWER

Nan Nount Shan Kham

Dearest, my lovely sister
Don't stay hidden in the hole
Let's show women's power!
Women can change the country.
When women are involved,
What can the dictators do?
Include our zeal and diligence.

Women hold
Two-thirds of the world's power;
Two-thirds of the world's work
Is done by women.
Dearest, my dearest sister;
Don't hide in the hole.

Wake up, and follow us and be up
Let's turn around the world.
Don't gaze, don't nap;
Don't be slow, don't be just thinking.
Women's zeal, our power;
Let's lift the world.

Let's overthrow the unjust government;
Let's try to overthrow the dictators;
So wake up, wake up, wake up;
Dearest; my lovely sister;
Don't gaze and nap...

A COLLECTION OF POEMS BY LA YAUNG

REMEMBERING THE PAST

On a night which I can't recall the date,
Under the wandering rain,
I sheltered in a motor vehicle and,
Drove on along my trip of "sadness,"
together with a Moon,
which was not a real "Moon."

The awareness of our departure
haunted me.

The Moon beside me,
may not be aware how I feel and what I went through.

Did you know,
At that time,
Words in my bosom were mute
and dumb at my lips?

I still wanted to get that similar highway night
-- if possible to get it
Packed full of sadness and excitement.

You are my only "angel,"
who can shake my heart to the bottom.

PILOT OF MY LIFE

O! Pilot of My Life,
I would like to say,
That your strike of suspicion
hurts me dreadfully.

You should know that,
Me, similar to a small boat,
Could sink immediately in the whirls of the world,
And could disappear amid unfathomable waves,
Unless with a Pilot of Life, like you.

As an unprotected and vulnerable one,
Continue to guide me, please!
O! My Pilot of Life.

IMAGES IN MY THOUGHTS

In a dark room,
A man has been trying
to get to sleep

However, it doesn't work and
thoughts revolving around make him awaken.

The images and melody of memory
tremored to the bosom again,
And make me miss you again,
Oh! My love.

THE YEARNING DAY

I am still longing to see you,
even from far away,
And I can't forget
the events from the past.
I could save them
for eternity and for my life.

If possible,
I would like to possess
that valuable time again.

It can't be destroyed in my thoughts
and the rhymes of voices struck my bosom,
Then make me aware the senses, the feeling,
And they make me long to see you again.

LIFE'S MATE

Could it be happy and cheerful,
in the days for us walking together,
whether under the sun or in the rain?

O! My love,
However I have decided
to live together with you,
the nature of love
could be changed by fate,
and I wonder whether it could be long?

If you say, you would love me faithfully,
Could I trust you?

WHERE ARE ALL YOUR MEN?

Y.K.

I grew up in a small village of about 15 households in Shan State, in a place where us villagers were stuck in the middle of the war, torn between the different groups of soldiers – the Burmese soldiers of the military regime, the Wa, and the Shan. My memories reach back to when I was two or three years old, however they are not happy childhood recollections.

My family has five people: my parents, an elder brother, me in the middle and my younger sister.

Whenever the Burmese soldiers came to villages in our area, the situation was usually the same. They killed the villagers' chickens, cows, and pigs. If they saw new clothes, oil, knives or something of value, they took it for themselves. Often men from the villages would flee, but if the Burmese soldiers saw a man in the forest they generally killed him. Sometimes they hit the villagers with batons or forced the village people to carry some commodity or another on their shoulders. Sometimes they also terrorized the villagers by raping the women.

When I was around two or three years old the soldiers came often. When the soldiers came to my village, my father always ran far away and hid in the forest. Sometimes he was hungry, because he didn't eat. Whenever the Burmese and Wa soldiers were fighting nearby my father carried my brother and I, and we ran far away. Sometimes we ran far away and hid in the forest or other villages; night or day, rain or shine, hot or cold. It was always the same. One time I was staying with my mother at nighttime when the fighting began. My mother quickly put my brother and I into the bullock cart and carried us to another village. We had to stay in this village for about two weeks until the war

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calmed down and we could return home again. I was young, but I never forgot this because we always had to run far away.

Growing up I sometimes saw Wa and Shan soldiers as they hid in the forest. I often saw Burmese soldiers as well. I didn't understand a lot about the different soldiers, but I did know that when they came to my village, all the villagers, including me, were very afraid. Nobody spoke.

When the Wa soldiers came to the village, they asked the villagers: "Where are all your men? When did they go? Where are the Burmese soldiers? When did they come through here? Where did they go?"

We were in a no win situation. Whether the village people told them that the Burmese soldiers came or not it didn't matter. They would ask again: "Where do they stay now? If we find them and find that you lied to us, you will be punished. You are my people now. I make all the laws, punish who I wish, tell you when to plant the rice and when to harvest it. You give me half of everything you make!"

So when the Wa soldiers came to ask the village people questions many villagers would just run away and hide.

When the Burmese soldiers came to my village the men always ran far away and hid in the forest. The hard-faced soldiers would spread through the village, kicking down doors and people, waving guns, bringing every person in the village before their sergeant.

When the Burmese soldiers came to the village they asked the villagers: "Where are all your men? When did they go? Did you see Wa soldiers? Where are the Wa soldiers? When did they come through here? Where did they go?" They would threaten us saying, "You are my people now. I have the tanks and the soldiers and you have nothing. I make all the laws, punish who I wish, tell you when to plant the rice and when to harvest it. You give me half of everything you make!"

When I was around five years old, we were still always on the run from the war. The Burmese soldiers shot my uncle in the shoulder, and took him to their army base for one week. After that my uncle was so afraid he went to live in the town. Another day, the Burmese soldiers

came. They saw my father and detained him. They forced him to do labor for them, carrying their heavy goods on his shoulders to take them to Northern Shan State near the China border. We were terrified for our father, we all knew the horror stories about what happened to villagers forced to porter for the regime's army. I wanted my father to come home safe, but I thought that my father was probably already dead.

Every evening my mother and I went to the main road to call my father, "Father...Father ...Father..."

After three months my father came back home. We were very happy, however my father was injured. So my father took my brother and I to stay at a school with my uncle in the town. My father told us, "If we don't have knowledge, they will continue to bully us, make us do forced labor, torture, kill, rape and oppress us."

When school vacation started my father came and called us back home to the village. When I stayed with my parents and everybody together, I was very happy, despite the conflict. Whenever school opened again we couldn't be together. We saw my parents about twice a year. When my parents came to send off us in the town, we were very happy. Why? Because my father bought us new clothes, hats, pencils, bags, shirts, socks, shoes and slippers.

After a while my parents came and called my brother back to the village. Luckily I didn't go back, because the hard-faced Burmese soldiers spread through our village in a forceful attack, kicking down doors and waving their guns, bringing every woman in the village before the sergeant. He demanded, "Where are the women? Bring all of the women here." When all of the women had been gathered together he said, "You are my people. He took hold of one women's *longyi* and then he looked at her. He ordered all of the women to take off their *longyi* and hop on one foot.

My mother was there, but she was pregnant with my younger sister so she didn't take off her *longyi*. My father and brother had run away to the forest when they knew the Burmese soldiers were approaching the village. My father thought that the soldiers wouldn't

stay for long, that they would leave the village soon. But the soldiers didn't leave. When my father thought it would be safe, he came back. My brother ran towards the village and called "mother... mother...mother..." The soldiers heard his voice, found him and beat him with a pine rod across his back. My mother also heard his voice and ran to him.

Another time the Burmese and Wa soldiers were fighting nearby. We were celebrating a festival and my parents were giving "*Pwe Hsang Loung*"¹ for my brother. Before the festival had finished, the Burmese soldiers came to my village. As usual they kicked down doors, waved their guns, and brought everybody in the village before their sergeant. They took my mother before the sergeant. He hadn't even begun his usual routine of questions, when he pushed my mother down and kicked her in the head. Blood came out of her ears. I stood by and watched. I didn't help her. I was very afraid and I cried.

The democracy uprising against the military regime happened when I was a student in third standard. The schools were closed and we had to move to another village. I remember the best thing was that we could all live together as a family.

In the years that followed, I moved around to get an education, my whole family even moved into town. In town we faced different problems, mostly because we were poor and couldn't afford basic things like school fees or proper medical treatment. Once I was so ill with fever, blood poured out of my nose and my parents feared that I would die. Thankfully the doctor gave me an injection and saved me.

Despite all the obstacles, I worked hard at my studies and even worked to help buy pens, books and other things for school. I pitied my parents and didn't want to burden them.

I did many different jobs to get money for school. When I was in seventh standard I even spent the 3-month vacation working, digging for gems at the ruby mountain near Monghsu. It was hard and dirty

¹ *Pwe Hsang Loung* is a Shan ceremony for young boys when they become novice monks.

work and really no place for a young woman like me, but I managed to save 15,000 kyat and I came back and went to school.

Somehow despite all the difficulties, I managed to pass tenth standard in 1997. In 1998, my dream to go to university was put on hold as the government closed the universities because of democracy protests. I didn't give up and in November 2003, I completed my Bachelor of Education at Taunggyi University in Shan State.

Then I worked in Thailand as a migrant worker to save money so my sister could also study at University and in May 2006, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science from Pinlaung University. So now we have all finished University. My parents are satisfied. While they themselves were not educated, they know from experience that education and knowledge are powerful weapons against the oppression and widespread and systematic human rights abuses our people face under the military regime in Burma.

Y.K continues to work as a migrant worker in Thailand and studies computers and English in her spare time.

NWE OO'S NIGHTS

Nwe Oo

I am Nwe Oo. It was in 1991. I was only an 8 year-old girl from Karen State and I did not know much about life. There were altogether 8 people in my family and we earned a living by farming. My three brothers were studying at the monastery. My eldest sister was only 20 years old and she usually helped my mother, but at that time she was pregnant. My mother was also pregnant and her delivery due date was drawing near. The paddy field where my parents worked was not our own. We worked there as employees. But we did not need to worry a lot about our rice as we had enough rice all year round.

At that time, I was also studying at the monastery. Being a child, whatever scenery before me was beautiful and I was happy. We could visit the village once a week to buy food and ingredients for our kitchen. It took us half an hour to walk and we also needed to cross fields to get to the village.

In winter, the rice paddy was piled in the thrashing ground. The moon was shining. I was playing with my brothers jumping up and down from one heap of straw to another. We only played boys' games because of my brothers.

The paddy winnowing work had been done and the paddy only needed to be stored in a barn. One day I heard my father say, "The situation is not so good this week." But I did not catch the meaning. Two days later, my father moved all the paddy into the barn. As my mother put me to bed I still remember her telling me, "If I wake you up during the night time, get up at once. And don't move away from me. If other people run for their lives, you will leave everything behind." I understood what my mother meant.

Later that week, our family fled away from our home when the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)¹ army launched their offensive. Our family and villagers left everything behind. On our way, we moved three times, place after place within a night. Then, we arrived at Mae Ka Ti village. We slept there for 2 nights. There were many people in that village and we stayed together with the livestock. I was overwhelmed with both a sense of fun, adventure and fear. Being a child, I did not have any idea of what was really happening. After staying in that village one week, we continued to run as the conditions became worse.

On our night shift, we traveled from Mae Ka Ti to Sa Khan Thit. All of us arrived at Sa Khan Thit safely with the help of cars from Mae Ka Ti village. The road we traveled was terrible and very inconvenient as it was in a valley. But we were lucky that we could not see anything outside in the dark.

Sa Khan Thit was on the Thai-Burma border and the area was very cold. Our family could not stand that chilly weather. If we continued to stay there, there would be many difficulties. My mother and eldest sister were due to give birth soon and they required medicines. Everything was very expensive there. So my father secretly told us, "It's impossible to stay here anymore." Then, we returned quietly to Mae Ka Ti. Afterwards, we went back to Htaw Wa Law village. On our way to Htaw Wa Law, we heard gunfire noises. My sister's husband drove his cart quickly. But we had to walk as the cart only carried food for us. Bullets were flying over our heads. The whole area was shaking when the artillery hit the ground. The other children and I did not dare to make a sound. Finally the day was over on our journey of running and hiding.

As soon as the dawn came, we continued our walk. I could not even move my legs because of tiredness. I dared not cry even though I wanted to. I felt so much pity for my mother because her delivery time

¹ The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was the name of the Burma military regime in 1991. In 1997, the SLORC was renamed the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC).

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for the baby was drawing nearer and nearer. My father accompanied and helped her. I did not know that she felt unbearable pain early that morning. As I have many siblings I tried to soothe my younger brother. When it was almost dark my mother could not keep walking anymore. She was so tired and her womb ached, but we had not arrived yet at the place where we could stay over night.

It became darker and darker. The darker it became, the more afraid I felt. Whenever I saw dark bushes, I was frightened, but we had to keep on walking. My mother tried her best not to give birth on the way. Around 7 o'clock at night, we arrived at Htaw Wa Law village where we could rest. It was such a relief that my father's friends lived in that village.

Two days after we arrived in Htaw Wa Law village, my mother delivered the baby. My father's friend was kind enough to let my mother give birth at his house.

Six days after she gave birth, the situation became unsafe again. My mother was not fully recovered after giving birth, but all the villagers prepared their carts and ran away from their village around 9 o'clock that night. I was in deep sleep at that time. Our family, relatives from other villages and our friends also fled from the village. My sister woke me up shouting, "Get up! We're leaving!" I got up at once. Because I woke up so suddenly I was frightened and did not know where to go. We started our run-away trip.

When it was midnight, one lady who came along with us, wanted to give birth. There was no house nearby. If we continued forward it would take almost an hour to get to a stream. And it was impossible to turn back. There was no medicine or water. It was also such a long way to fetch water for her. Finally, we had no choice and we let her deliver her baby in a nearby stable. I could not go back to sleep so I just stayed next to my mother and waited for dawn.

I was so hungry in the morning. However, I kept walking with an empty stomach. Because it was 5 o'clock in the morning, I did not want to walk. After an hour of walking, we saw a small stream, but we continued to move as our group was too big to be able to use that small

stream. We looked for a bigger stream. All the children my age were walking. We walked slowly to ease my mother's tiredness. I was starving but I did not dare to cry. Around 7 o'clock in the morning, we arrived at a bigger stream. While the elder people cooked rice, I could not even raise my hand. When the rice was ready to eat, there was no curry. So, we ate rice with only boiled-rice water, boiled vegetables and chili-fish-paste. At other times it was even worse than this. We lost our energy. We did not get enough sleep and our diet consisted of only rice and boiled vegetables. So we could not stand anymore and some people got sick. Luckily, we still had rice to eat. After our meal, we continued forward.

After a while, our group divided into small groups with different directions in accordance with our own safety and survival. We were determined to enter into Thailand. As you can imagine, our morale was very low living among Thai people, as we fled from the civil war of our own country. Our family built a hut in one Thai landlord's beetle-nut yard in Pai Kha Lai village nearby the Thai-Burma border. We were teased and taunted by local Thai children of our age. They threw rocks at our hut. We almost took our revenge on the Thai kids but my mother did not allowed us. So we just kept silent.

We stayed there for two weeks. Later on, the Thai authorities allowed all refugees to make their own huts in a field. There were many people, not only from our village but also from other villages. There was a stream near our hut. We used water from that stream. But the stream water became dirty as there were many people using it at the same time. People took a bath in it. They washed their clothes there too. Besides, they also dumped their waste in there. We lived at the beginning of the stream. So, we drank that water while we were taking a shower. Inevitably we got diarrhea and allergies. After one week, my father and brothers dug a well nearby the stream. Then we used water from that well and we boiled water for our drinking water.

After one month, we moved to Mae Tha Raw Khee refugee camp. The Burmese military regime's army had already retreated from our villages at that time but we did not dare to go back yet. My mother, father and younger brother returned to Htaw Wa Law village for a

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while. My sister had just delivered her baby so she extended her stay in Pai Kha Lai village. I stayed with my sister for a while then my mother sent me to Mae Tha Raw Khee refugee camp alone and told me that they would follow later on.

I stayed with my aunty in the camp while I was waiting for my parents. One week after I arrived in the camp, I got fever and diarrhea. I was scared because many people got sick or died everyday. My father did not show up until a week after I had recovered. Then he picked me up to go back to our village. By the time I got back to my mother, I was still skinny because of my fever. However, my mother's traditional medicine helped me to recover fully.

Though we had returned to our village, we did not dare to enter inside yet. We had already removed landmines set by Karen soldiers, but we could not find the landmines laid by the SLORC soldiers. Artillery shells and bullets that did not explode during the fighting were also all over the village. We were lucky as our house was outside the village. The serious fighting took place inside the village but not outside. My father told me that many villagers' property including houses, were burnt to ashes. Only a few livestock were left alive. Some were consumed by soldiers and some died from bullets and landmines.

Worst of all were the many corpses, buzzing with flies, left behind by the SLORC army. Some corpses were already in ditches so we buried them in those places. For some bodies, we put them into the burning houses. The bodies in some burnt houses were not completely cremated. There were also body parts and bones left behind or torn off by dogs and pigs. The bad smell from these corpses spread out all over our village. In some holes, we had to bury three bodies.

Only after one month had passed did we dare to visit the whole village.

I only got my sound sleep back when we had returned to our village. Let me regain the sleepless nights of those two months.

NO MORE RUNNING AND HIDING

Sha K

It is a night that has stayed with me for ten years. In February 1997 brutal SPDC soldiers burnt down my village. My family and all of the villagers fled to the jungle to hide. My father didn't come with us because it was important for him to serve on the front line. We heard Burmese helicopters fly over us. Fortunately, the helicopters didn't drop any bombs on us.

The chief of the village guided us through the forest and towards the refugee camp. I didn't know what a refugee camp was. I asked my mum, "Where is my father?" She couldn't answer me and I saw tears flowing down her thin, dark cheeks.

We didn't have enough food, medicine and water. I could only carry my two shirts and two pants. We were roaming in the forest for two weeks because of the serious battles between the Karen and Burmese soldiers. We were also afraid of landmines. During the first week of roaming in the forest, we met with some Karen soldiers who became security guards for us.

In the forest, we couldn't stay in the same place for even two days, because the SPDC soldiers were chasing us. When we were sleeping in the forest, we had no mosquito nets. I got a high fever and serious headaches and my body was shaking all over. I was cold, thirsty, tired and I couldn't breathe very well. These were all the symptoms of malaria. I got malaria and my mum had to take care of me. She was worried about my father and me, and she didn't have any proper meals.

It was a fearful time! My mother didn't sleep any more. When it was time to take a rest she asked two people to accompany her to find herbal medicine for me. That area was full of landmines, which were planted by both Burmese and Karen soldiers. She was so brave for her

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family. She exchanged her watch to get two cans of rice and some medicine for me. We were all starving and we didn't have enough water. We couldn't travel in the daytime because we were scared of Burmese troops. If they had seen us, they would have killed us. We only walked through the darkness, crossing deep, strong flowing rivers. We also had to be afraid of wild animals in the dark and deep forest.

I was happy when I saw the sunrise and the light because then I could take a rest. I couldn't play any games with my friends because we were separated and I couldn't walk any more because I was weak. The herbal malaria medicine that I took was too strong for me. I was crying because I missed my father and delicious food. My mum said, "After we pass two more mountains we'll be in the refugee camp," so I tried to be strong and encouraged myself to believe that I could pass the mountains and be safe. No more running and hiding!

Today I feel lucky that I have had the chance to live in a refugee camp. I have progressed through high school and post-ten school in the refugee camp. Now I am a coordinator in one of the post-ten schools in Umphiem camp. Despite the struggles I have faced I have now become an important and useful person for my community.

BROKEN FLOWER

Laz Hone Sone Sar Chan

A morning turns up with the sounds of many living things; moving, shouting, crying with pleasant and noisy voices. My mind may be half awake but I still want to lie in bed and gaze through the opened window. I have the strangest feeling that something is missing. But what? My mind, now alert, considers what it might be. Then I remember the beautiful dark pink colored rose blooming on the rose plant that grows in a pot on the veranda. I rush outside to the veranda and feel a shock through my body as I stare at the beautiful rose now lying on the floor, its petals broken and scattered. Perhaps a mouse has bitten it.

In the days before the rose had bloomed proudly with its smart and fragrant petals. But now it is falling down, its petals broken, its perfume gone. As I look upon the broken flower I feel remorse and suddenly the story of a young girl from several years ago springs into my mind.

It was about seven years ago in a village in my native state. The 1,500 households had a mix of rich and poor, of different classes of villagers staying together; traditional farming their common livelihood.

One evening, the villagers gathered near the main road of the village to relax with the evening breeze. The villagers talked about many issues, joking and teasing each other. At that moment, a young woman came walking toward the village. Everyone stopped and stared at her. She captured their attention, as this young lady had no left hand. She carried her travel bag awkwardly and someone ran towards her to help. When he got closer to her, he suddenly stopped mid-stride and exclaimed "Oh! Look, it is Moe Moe."

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All eyes looked towards her; some with ill-will, some with sympathy, some with indifference and some with remorse. What is for sure, is that none expressed their hospitality to her. Some pitied her while others complained, "Good, now that she herself has suffered she will understand, regret, and show mercy to others." Their hostility was based on the events of the past.

Moe Moe used to be the most pretty girl in the village. She was proud of her beauty and became selfish and conceited. Moe Moe's family was very rich because of their ancestral property inherited from past generations. Born into a family with great class, she discriminated and looked down on others. Because of her beauty, she was quite popular among young guys and many proposed to her. However, Moe Moe wanted none of them. It was her habit to shout often insultingly at the guys who approached her to declare their love. No man could win her love; most were unable even to approach her.

One day, Moe Moe caused a particularly vengeful young man a lot of pain, breaking his heart as she shouted insults and rejections at him. He cursed her, saying "I will break your pride one day."

Days later, the fortune of Moe Moe changed within a few short minutes. Moe Moe went to the paddy fields to bring lunch for her sisters. The man she rejected just days before approached her and politely attempted to propose once more. Again Moe Moe rejected him. Driven by his anger, pain and shame he robbed her love as punishment. Moe Moe was too ashamed to tell her parents about the incident. She couldn't bear to stay in the village and without telling anyone she decided to go to Thailand.

She secretly organized a broker to take her to Thailand, took enough money for traveling and left from the village when no-one was around. She simply thought that she could hide her indignity and shame if she went to a place where no one knew her. Perhaps she hadn't considered in advance how dangerous it could be for a young girl like her in a strange land.

Moe Moe became a maid in a house in Thailand. She had no choice because she could not speak Thai well and she had no legal

documents. From a high-class life, she now was forced to stay wherever she was told, go wherever, and do whatever she was ordered. When she was at home in the village she didn't have to do things for herself, everything was done by the housekeepers. Before she had maids, but now she herself had become a maid in another person's house and she needed to do all the basic work.

After about one year had passed, her boss started harassing her. One day when there was no one in the house, her boss cruelly sexually violated her. It was the second time that her body had been taken without her desire. Her boss began to sexually violate her regularly, threatening her and saying he would kill her if she told anyone.

What could she do? She had no money to return home. She just had to accept everything that happened to her. She had food, clothes and a place to sleep, although no wages had been received for all her hard work.

One day she saw a woman that she knew in front of the house and she told her story and asked for help. However, her boss returned from work at that moment and saw her talking with a stranger.

That night when she was nearly asleep, her boss came to her room with a sword and attempted to kill her. She jumped aside, saving her life, but the sword cut her left hand. Her boss dumped her bloody body away from the house. A police patrol found her and sent her to the hospital. After she had recovered they sent her back to the police station and on to the Thai/Burma border. A friend of the broker who originally sent her to Thailand saw her and felt sympathy for her, so he sent her back to her native village.

When we think about this terrible story, people ask, "Who bears the most responsibility?" Some people might mistakenly believe that Moe Moe's behavior brought this on herself. What about the man who stole her virginity to punish her for shattering his ego? Maybe the community whose attitudes contribute to a culture of shame and silence among survivors of rape bears some responsibility? Or those brokers who traffic young women to Thailand and send them to employers who can treat them however they like? Or those bosses who

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sexually abuse their female workers? And what about the Burmese government who grossly mismanage the state economy so people are unable to work for their survival and are forced to migrate under unsafe and exploitative conditions? What is their responsibility for young women like Moe Moe?

This contribution is based on a true story. Laz Hone Sone Sar Chan is expressing her reflections on the terrible events that happened to her friend Moe Moe.

UNFAIR EVENT

Myat Noe

Growing up I had a close friend, Ko Zaw Naing, whose home was about ten households away from my house. He was like my own brother. He married a woman called Ma Kwa Nyo and they had a son. They were poor and Ko Zaw Naing had to make an income from riding a trishaw. Ko Zaw Naing was a calm and quiet person, who used to smile whenever someone made fun of him.

He had five siblings. His elder sister was the eldest child and Ko Zaw Naing was the third son in the family. Only Ko Zaw Naing and his elder sister had their own families and they all lived together under the same roof. They even shared the household work. Their whole family lived happily and peacefully.

In September 2005, tragedy struck and their family's peace and happiness disappeared. A problem developed over how to divide the inherited assets among his siblings. One day, his elder sister suggested selling the house that they all lived in and dividing the money into five equal shares among the five siblings. At the time Ko Zaw Naing agreed with his elder sister's idea.

However, Ko Zaw Naing's neighbors incited him to ask for a greater share for he had a family of three to support. They said, "Ko Zaw Naing you should get more shares than your siblings because you already have your own family." Because of the frequent agitation from his neighbors he started to become selfish. So he asked his elder sister to provide him with more shares.

His younger sister and brothers totally disagreed with this. They said, "We all should get an equal share and no one should exploit the inheritance." Despite his siblings' disagreement, he still insisted on more shares. However, even his wife forbade him from asking for

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more shares, saying, "You should not be greedy. You should accept an equal amount of shares with your siblings."

However, he didn't listen to his wife, and still asked for more shares. Consequently, his younger brother began secretly plotting against him. But he did not notice his young brother's evil plan.

One day around 9 p.m. Ko Zaw Naing went to bed very early because he didn't feel well. His younger brother prepared to put his evil plan into action. When Ko Zaw Naing went to bed under the mosquito net, his younger brother suddenly appeared and stabbed him three times with a knife. At the same time, Ko Zaw Naing's wife and son entered the bedroom and saw the attack. She was shocked and speechless from sudden fright. Eventually, she cried out, "My husband was stabbed!" I could not hear her voice because my house was a little bit too far from their house. The people near their house could hear her screams for help. But, even though they heard her scream, nobody dared to go out into the night to help her.

Nobody knew about Ko Zaw Naing's young brother's devilish plan to attack his own brother like that. Ko Zaw Naing's younger brother had also got drunk before he committed the crime. Ko Zaw Naing's elder sister was surprised when she saw what had happened. After a while, she called some section leaders from the village and asked them to inform the police. The perpetrator was put into custody in the police station and Ko Zaw Naing was hospitalized and given a blood transfusion. During the blood transfusion he whispered, "My son...my son," and then he became silent and passed away. Ma Kwa Nyo fainted when she saw that her husband had died.

As Ko Zaw Naing was the only one she relied on, she felt severely heart-broken when she lost him. Her son couldn't do anything except cry and look at his father's dead body. He couldn't understand what had happened to his father. Their relatives, neighbors and some villagers took responsibility for her husband's last journey to the graveyard. Ko Zaw Naing's elder sister couldn't do any thing except cry. Several good friends of Ko Zaw Naing came to his funeral. Ma Kwa Nyo fainted from grief several times on the way to the cemetery.

When some people asked Ma Kwa Nyo's son about his father, the child just innocently answered, "My father is sleeping."

The funeral finished at 2 p.m. on the day of the memorial service. But, that same night, Ma Kwa Nyo had to face further misery. Her sister-in-law told her, "Now your husband is dead, so you and your son cannot stay with us in my house. We will sell this house." Ma Kwa Nyo didn't dare question her sister-in-law so she promised, "Yes, my son and I will move away from this house." But, when she asked for her share of the inheritance they just replied, "Your husband is dead, so the share is no longer related to you." Ma Kwa Nyo collected all of her things and descended from the house holding her son's arm.

She had lost everything because there was nobody to advocate for her rights. However, she was able to manage the money that her husband had saved and she rented a small house for shelter. At the same time, she was deeply concerned about her son's education. She had to work very hard to make some money for her son's school fees. Because she knew that she must try hard for her son, she decided to be strong, spiritually and physically. Her neighbors also suggested that she should open a small shop, and she decided to do so. After she opened the shop, she could use the profits from the shop to send her son to school. Now she doesn't need to be worried for her son any more.

This event has proved that a woman can manage her life well, even without a husband. Women can be self-reliant. Women need to know that women can bravely struggle for their life. For me, I really admire the strong spirit of Ma Kwa Nyo.

The author is a young woman activist from Arakan State.

AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR'S LIFE

Kalaya Nee

Dear Thuzar,

Thank you very much for your congratulations card for my PhD graduation. However, I don't feel proud of my PhD because our PhD in Burma does not qualify as highly as a foreign PhD. As you know, there are very limited facilities in universities in Burma. Books in libraries are very outdated and the latest edition books are very scarce. There are no computer labs for university students, the internet is not accessible on campus and there is no regular electricity supply. Moreover, in every university there are, at most, three or four well-experienced professors who have obtained their PhD from foreign countries. PhD thesis supervisors themselves often have no PhD or research experience. Imagine how great our theses are.

Don't be impressed! My dear friend, I feel so embarrassed to say, "I have achieved a PhD."

As you know, the reason I tried to pursue a PhD was to avoid being transferred to some college or university in the provinces away from Rangoon. That's why I tried to prolong my thesis writing as long as possible. Actually, I didn't want it at all. When I completed my PhD, I no longer had an excuse to work in Rangoon. Then I was transferred to a college in a province and it broke up my family. I had to leave my 12 year-old daughter and 8 year-old son with my parents as my husband was not able to manage his work and two kids. Luckily, my parents are still healthy and live in Rangoon.

A friend of mine faced a worse hardship. Her parents and mother-in-law have already passed away and her husband was sent to the new capital 'Kyat Pyay.' Her daughters are 6 and 4 years old. As she

has no one to look after her kids, she decided to resign after she got an order to transfer to Monywa, near Mandalay. But she was not allowed to resign from her job because she had taken a government scholarship to do her post-graduate diploma in Japan. Finally, her poor kids were left with her close friend in Rangoon. What a terrible life!

Although we were promoted as Associate Professors this promotion did not give us happiness. If possible, I really want to throw this position away. If you do not know about the situation of academic life in Burma, the position of 'Associate Professor' sounds so great.

Unlike in other countries, Professor, Associate Professor or Assistant Professor, are not genuine titles of an academic. In other countries only those who have undertaken many research projects and published many research papers in internationally-recognized journals achieve such a title. However, in Burma people who are willing to work at college or university in the provinces can easily become an Associate Professor or Professor.

Nowadays, there are many universities and colleges all over the country. The main purpose of establishing universities and colleges all over Burma is to prevent students from gathering in large numbers at the same place and protesting against the military junta. As a result of the large number of universities and colleges, there are many Professors and Associate Professors in Burma. However, these large numbers are not an indication of high quality education in Burma.

In fact, we have nothing to do with a PhD in our career. Us teachers in provincial colleges mostly think about how and when we can go back home to Rangoon. Whenever any opportunity comes up; for example, a long weekend, long holiday, casual leave, annual leave, attending meetings in Rangoon – we happily 'go home.' As you know, PhD holders are supposed to do research and publish research papers. But for us doing "research" is totally out of the question. We have no time, no money, no facilities, no government funding, nothing! Our salary, less than US\$100 a month, is not sufficient for even three meals a day and travel expenses. When I was in Rangoon, at least I was able to give private tuition illegally to earn extra income.

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Our college is about five miles away from town and there is no public or private transportation. We stay at a college hostel and we have to ask our students who own cars to give us a lift whenever we want to go out or come back to the college. How poor we are!

Imagine what us university teachers are doing in Burma! You would be surprised. We are often assigned to take day and night duty as security on university campus when there is likely to be student gatherings or demonstrations. The university authorities are never concerned about how us female teachers sleep on campus without proper facilities. We have to prepare everything ourselves, with our own money, food, bedding, transportation, and other necessities. Then, the following day we are not given a day off. See how terrible it is! Have you ever heard of university teachers taking security duty at university campus gates in other countries?

Furthermore, we are also assigned to grow 'castor oil plants' in front of the college. What a funny thing! You know there are some supervisors who come to check how the castor oil plants have developed and whether we are really taking care of those plants. These supervisors have to report weekly on all these developments. Have you ever heard of such a silly thing?

Many female teachers whose husbands earn a high income quit their jobs. Others, like me, who do not have a large amount of money to invest in a business enterprise or cannot rely on their husband's income, have no choice. Some money is better than nothing, isn't it? But I am not sure it is worth working for our survival.

We will continue to endure these miserable things as long as the military regime rules the country. There are many more horrible things to tell you. As I don't want you to feel very upset, let me stop here. I will write to you again later. I hope I will be able to do right thing for our country before I retire.

Your loving friend,

Kalaya Nee (Burma)

Kalaya Nee is a democracy activist now living in Bangkok

BAW POP CHAN'S GARDEN

Baw Pop Chan

Growing up as a young lady in Mon State, the garden was the center of my family's life. My parents used to teach me while they worked in our garden. At nighttime they taught the other children in our garden and in the daytime they worked in our garden. They grew many things in our garden such as, coconuts, peanuts, rubber, mangosteens, durians, vegetables, sugarcane, bananas, flowers, jackfruit, oranges, limes and mangoes. I can't even count all the things my parents grew there.

Our garden was close to the village but we lived in our garden and worked there. My village was very small. There were about 30 houses there. If we wanted to buy something we could easily go the village and buy whatever we needed. Our garden was a very happy place because it had a stream and the water was pure and very clean. We had big trees in our garden also. I loved our garden very much.

My parents used to have a party for our garden every year. They would invite the people who lived nearby and they would also invite many monks to pray for good luck for our garden. We would have music and a small show and many people would dance along to the songs. I will never forget that time. That is my favorite place in my whole life. I miss that place very much. I miss that time so much. There is a popular saying, "Time and tide wait for no man." So everybody should save their special times in their memory.

I lived with my parents for almost ten years. During that time, my parents taught the local children. My mum and dad used to teach me while they taught the children who lived nearby. They taught about 50 children who lived near our village or garden. I learned how to write and read in our language. But when I was still so young, about eight years old, something happened in that area. All of the students who

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studied with my parents had to run away and they lost their chance to continue their education.

Why did we have to stop our studies? Because Karen and Mon soldiers were fighting each other, so we all had to run away from my home to another village. We all had to change places again and again. At that time the villagers had a big problem when we changed places, because the Burmese military regime's soldiers came looking for the Mon and Karen soldiers and they destroyed our village. They killed all of our animals such as pigs, cows, and chickens. They also destroyed our vegetables and burned our land. My precious garden was destroyed. They forced people from my village to act as porters for the army, to carry their things while the Mon, Karen and Burmese soldiers were fighting each other.

At that time I was so young I didn't know what was happening when they were fighting. Some days my parents couldn't find any food, so I couldn't eat anything. We had to live quietly in the forest for many months. My mother couldn't cook in the daytime. She had to cook at nighttime because if we cooked in the daytime the soldiers would see the smoke from our cooking and they would arrest us. Almost all of the villagers had to run between the guns and war. We ran like that for about one year and we changed places many times, going to new villages again and again.

In 1992 my dad sent me to study in the New Mon State Party School on the Thai-Burma border. It was a big chance and good luck for me. I was lucky I had studied with my parents, so I could read and write just a little bit. At that time I had one brother and one younger sister. I couldn't study in the Burmese government's school because it cost a lot of money and my parents couldn't afford to pay for me to study in that school. It was very difficult to pay those fees because my parents were so poor. That is also why I couldn't study for a long time.

When I was 13 I was able to attend the school that was run by the Mon Education Department in the area of Burma controlled by the New Mon State Party (NMSP). It was my first time to go to a real school. To get to the NMSP school, I had to walk from my village for five days and four nights with no car and no boat – just my feet.

Sometimes my parents sent me to the school and sometimes my teacher picked me up and took me there. On the way we just slept in the forest or jungle. We carried our things and the food, pots, rice and fuel to cook along the way. It was very difficult to travel there.

After primary school and middle school, I arrived at high school and at that time the old school changed places to Nyisar. At that time the Mon and Burmese soldiers had also agreed on a ceasefire. From 2001 to 2003, I studied at high school. I tried to complete tenth standard for three years before finally passing. After that I attended the Mon post-ten school.

In 2004, I taught in a primary school near my organization, the Mon Education Department and during that time I also worked in our office. Then in 2006, I studied English classes in Sangkhlaburi, Thailand for about a year. I applied and was so lucky to be able to join the Earthrights School. I will never forget the time that I spent studying with my friends and the nice friendships I've had with both the teachers and students there.

Baw Pop Chan is a 25 year-old woman from Mon State. She was born in 1981 in Palon village, Mon State. She is currently studying in Thailand.

STOP DESTROYING THE YOUNG SPROUTS

Chin Thant Win

If asked what I want the most in my life, the answer would be “the right to study education freely.” Since I was child, I faced many difficulties to seek education. Now I am over 20 years old. Even though I have endeavored to seek education, if asked whether I have already gained the education standard that I want or not, the answer would be “No”.

My father was a politician who was involved in the “88” people’s democracy movement in Burma. My family was made up of my mum, my dad and my four sisters. My father stayed with us when a lot of students from our country’s new generation fled into the jungle to rebel against the military regime after the people’s uprising. My father didn’t flee and was forcibly arrested by the military government in the round up of “dissidents” after the “88” people’s movement. After my father had been in prison for three years, my mum left home, so my sisters and I had to grow up in my aunt and grandmother’s hands.

I am so hungry for my parents’ love. At the same time, I feel pain in my mind because I have had to struggle for my life. Since then, I really hated unfairness and I was so eager to try the best for my life. When I was incapable of changing anything, I thought that the only thing that I could change was to sincerely study. I believed that if I graduated from school I would have a stable and peaceful life, and I hoped that somehow I could find the truth about the unfairness that I hated in our society.

My four sisters and I studied inconveniently and with painstaking determination. As a result, we consistently passed each respective grade, year by year. Eventually, I could attend grade 10. Grade 10 has a lot of lessons and it was really important to us to get good scores in

grade 10 so we could enter university. Therefore, I attended classes regularly and studied hard to get good scores in the final exams.

However, we were not taught well in the regular classes because the teachers opened paid tuition sessions outside of the class to make extra money, as the salary that they were provided by the government was insufficient for their families' survival. Consequently, students like me, who couldn't afford to take tuition and who had to rely only on the sub-standard teaching in the classroom, were severely disadvantaged.

It was also extremely important that we passed because if we couldn't pass the exam with good scores or if we failed the exam, we wouldn't be able to attend the grade again, as one year's study cost was very expensive. Therefore, we were always stressed about the final exam.

Furthermore, in Burma we had to memorize all of the lessons regardless of whether we understood them or not. In the final exam, we had to write down all the lessons that we had memorized. But, how could I remember all the lessons?

Like me, other students also couldn't memorize everything and they had the same concerns as me about failing the exam. So, some students secretly brought pieces of papers with answers to the questions into the exam room and copied them. It was the only easy way to pass the exam. Cheating like this is widespread in the grade 10 exams throughout Burma and is typical of Burma's education system.

Since we were young we had to study what the teachers ordered us to study. We had to write down what the teachers ordered us to write down. We were conditioned not to ask questions. Regardless of what was right or fair many students thought that they could only pass the exam by copying from their secret papers. Therefore, after the exam a lot of pieces of papers, which were brought secretly into the exam room, were found scattered on the road.

I am not entirely sure why the teachers kept quiet when they saw that many students were cheating. Maybe it was because the teachers already knew the terrible system of Burmese education. Or, maybe it was because they feared that a poor performance by the students would

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reflect on their poor teaching in the classroom. Perhaps, they worried that if they asked the students not to copy, the student would reply, "You didn't teach us well in the class, so we have to cheat." Whatever the reason, they ignored the students' cheating.

I got bad scores in my exam. Subsequently, I felt depressed, like my hope was gone. However, I decided to pursue my further education at university. When I attended university, I faced many difficulties again. University entrance fees were high and the textbooks were also very expensive. Furthermore, I was under stress to pay for the various kinds of "donations" such as monthly school fees, donations to purchase computers, and donations for school construction.

It was so stressful and I was always worried that one day I wouldn't be able to pay the school's fees and would be forced to drop out.

I couldn't fully understand the lessons when I attended university because I only knew how to study by memorizing the lessons. Furthermore, nobody else could explain the lessons to me because the teachers themselves had also passed their exams over the years by memorizing or cheating. They too had grown up under the Burmese education system. Under this unfair education system, our students were bored. Students' own talents were disappearing.

After finishing my final years in university, I decided to find a job in Rangoon. But coincidentally, my father was released from prison. After one year he left for the Thai-Burma border. I followed him in January 2006. Once I arrived in Thailand, I could learn freely about literacy, human rights, and factual political histories. When I had the chance to learn all those things I came to understand the military regime's brutalities, and their ruthless oppression of the civilians in Burma.

It was unbearable when I realized that the regime deliberately blocked out information from all around the world to oppress our new generation, to isolate us so we would know nothing. I felt deep sorrow that our people have lost their basic human rights even though we are human beings. Until this realization, I had always thought of myself as

‘a useless person,’ or that despite trying my best that I had failed because of fate and unfortunate circumstances. I understand now that the main reason was the Burmese regime’s constant repression and restricting our access to actual facts and information.

Youth are the future of a country. So the new generation should be provided with a proper education system. Moreover, every democratic country has developed their education sector in order to step up the intellectual power of future generations. Only then, were they able to develop their country.

However, our country has repressed its sprouts and keeps on oppressing them. This will definitely diminish our people’s abilities rather than create development. So I made up my mind to revolt against this regime in whatever way I can to stop their deliberate destructions of our future sprouts.

Both Chin Thant Win and her father continue to live in Thailand. She is currently working in a political organization in exile and is passionate about human rights especially the right to education.

BEST FRIENDS

Lway Poo Peing

She is a Burmese woman and she was my best friend. Whatever we were doing, and wherever we went, we were always together. Her name is Ngwe Kyi and my name is Aye. In combination, most people of our village recognized us as Kyi Aye. Yes, our community named us Kyi Aye. How lovely is that name?

She had a simple life. Her parents had a small domestic tea industry. She was the eldest of six siblings. Unfortunately, her father was a drug addict and regularly consumed opium. Her mother was a good cleaner. She liked her house neat and tidy at all times. So she cleaned her house, day and night, making her house spotless. Do you want to know about their financial situation? It was always dire. Imagine, the head of the family was a drug addict, and unemployed. How could such family be prosperous? Whenever there was an opium shortage, her father sold household goods, even furniture to buy his opium. Plus, their family was not a rich one originally.

My friend and her siblings always dreamed about getting higher education. Was it possible? No! For them, dreams of going to high school never came true. They went to elementary school and had the opportunity to study until grade three. This was the maximum grade that the village elementary school could provide. And it was free. In 2004, I worked as an elementary teacher in the village school. I always encouraged her siblings. I offered them free home tuition every evening, for I loved that family.

My friend Kyi was a hard-working woman. Her father was a drug-abuser, her lazy-bone mother could not earn a lot of money, and so, it was the eldest daughter, Kyi who worked for the whole family. Religious days were holidays for people in Burma, but these were not

holidays for Kyi. She often could not participate in religious ceremonies. Sometimes she came to participate in religious or ritual ceremonies, but she showed up late. She had to work all time. She was also not interested in some ceremonies simply because she did not have a nice dress to wear. Generally nice dresses were not a priority for her. Regular food for her family was her priority. She only had two dresses, and neither was a dress for special situations, nor could she afford to buy a new one. Sometimes I offered her my clothes.

She asked me, "Why is my life so different from others? My father is an opium abuser, my mother doesn't really work, and my siblings are too young to work. Sometimes I am so depressed with my life I want to run away from this village and get work in another place." If she ran away from her family, she alone would escape, but her other family members would be helpless and suffer. I reminded her of that and encouraged her, "Please do not go away from me and your family. You should look up to your family even if you don't care what I am saying to you." She showed her love for us by not leaving the village.

From then on, we were always together. At funerals, wedding receptions or ritual festivals, you could see us, always together. We even dressed in the same fashion. When she was 19, I suggested that she should get a boyfriend. "I always have to struggle for my family, I don't have time for a boyfriend," she replied. But by the time she was 20, she had a boyfriend. I did not know her boyfriend very well. He lived in a nearby village, half an hours walk from our village. His name was Aik Mg and he was a soldier. One evening, we went and watched an opera. On our way back home, she was together with her boyfriend. I thought her boyfriend was going to take her home, but he took her to his village, to his home, and to his family, to be part of it.

Neither sex before marriage or multiple marriages are culturally acceptable in Burma. When my friend did not return home that night, her parents were extremely concerned about her personal security. They thought Kyi was with me. They came to me and asked about their daughter. I was so surprised and simply answered that I thought she had gone back home the night before. They wandered around the village in search of their daughter. They could not find her anywhere,

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so they bounced back to me and asked me about their daughter again. I honestly did not know about her marriage at that time. I felt so sad about my friend's disappearance.

The next day, her husband's relatives came over to her parents' house and told them about the newly married couple. In Burmese tradition, the parents of the bridegroom have to pay some money to the bride's parents, as compensation for their daughter. They paid 5,000 kyat (US\$4) to her parents. Her husband's relatives did not like my friend very much and her husband, Aik Mg, was indifferent. I did not think that he really loved my friend. I thought it must just be lust. Anyway, Aik Mg had to marry Kyi just because of culture.

Kyi's parents-in-law did not treat her well. They treated Kyi as if she was a housemaid, as though she was not their family member. Kyi did not speak to her new family members, as she could not get along well with them. Above all, her husband was not tender to her and never tried to help her have a role in the family. Burmese women have to depend on their parents or their husband once they are married. Kyi had no one to rely on. She was so depressed in her new family setting.

Within a month, Kyi's husband went back to his military unit. Kyi understood the nature of a soldier's work and she agreed to live with his family in the village. In fact, her husband wanted her to be near his parents, to run daily chores. Kyi could put up with everything, and withstood every obstacle she encountered. Not only did she work hard for money, but she also ran the household errands. In her husband's absence, her parents-in-law treated her as though she was even more inferior. They did not allow Kyi to go and visit her village. She did not see her parents for months. One day, I went to see her. Her life in this new family was so frustrating. I tried to bring her back to our village. I wanted her to be in our village, at least for a short time, to see her parents. I lied and told her parents-in-law that Kyi's parents were sick, so that I could bring her back to our village.

At last I had a chance to talk openly with her about her situation. She told me about her experiences in her new family, how badly she was treated by parents-in-law. She was crying. And tears rolled down my cheeks too. I suggested that she should leave that family and

divorce her husband. She refused. She said her husband really loved her. She said no matter how bad her parents-in-law were, her husband was good to her. Then she went back into the hell.

Before her husband went back to his military unit, he told Kyi that he would come back to the village for the *Thingyan* water festival days. *Thingyan* is very special for Burmese people as it represents the Burmese New Year. Kyi was working hard for her husband's family, waiting for his return. But, he did not show up during the *Thingyan* water festival. Kyi showed no sign of depression, she kept on working and waiting.

Though she was good to her parents-in-law, she did not get any kind of love or affection in return. Worse, her parents-in-law had deceived her and told their son that Kyi was not a faithful housewife, that she was doing bad things in his absence, that she was having an affair. When other villagers told Kyi about this she was shocked. She cried out in the pain of great distress. Kyi did not understand why her parents-in-law lied like that. Finally, she decided to go back to her parents.

Kyi's parents never refused her desire to return home. They welcomed Kyi with great sympathy and affection, but they worried that maybe she was pregnant. If she was pregnant, no father would financially and psychologically support the baby. But she was lucky. She was not pregnant. Actually, she looked skinny and exhausted.

Gradually, Kyi got her regular life back. She enjoyed spending time with me and her family. She worked hard for her entire family, as she did before. We talked a lot, just like before but I could read her mind: she could not forget her husband.

Aik Mg missed her too. He came and visited her off and on during his holidays. He realized his misunderstandings about her. He wanted a family reunion. One evening, there was an opera show. They went together to watch the opera. On their way back home, Aik Mg asked Kyi for a family reunion. Kyi did not agree at once. She told Aik Mg to ask permission from her parents as she was now under their care. Aik Mg instantly went and met her mother and humbly requested

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that he be allowed to reunite with Kyi. Her mother said Kyi was not his wife anymore and that her parents would not allow her to be with him again.

Aik Mg had no ability to handle that problem. In Burma, many social and family factors play a significant role in the lives of newly married couples.

Kyi wanted to find out a solution so they could be together again. In the meantime, she waited faithfully for Aik Mg. She did not speak with any man, for she did not want another misunderstanding with Aik Mg.

What would be a good solution for them? Nobody knew. However, Kyi never gave up hope of being with the man she loved. She kept waiting for Aik Mg, spending most of her days alone, and working hard for her parents and siblings.

Lway Poo Peing is a young Palaung Woman from Shan State working for human rights and democracy in Burma. Lway Poo Peing has chosen to tell her friend's story to highlight the devastating effect that drugs, particularly opium and heroin have had on Palaung families and communities in Burma.

A NIGHT SOBS WITHOUT RHYME

Mya Aye

I desperately want a past event to be put out of my mind, to be left in the past. But, I am still bitterly haunted by the past as though it was the present. Hence, I reveal my pain through this letter. This terrible event happened five years ago when I was an 18 year-old girl.

I was living in a village, a little bit away from a town in northern Shan State, Burma. As there were many siblings in my family, I had to leave school as a middle school drop-out. I pursued my livelihood in farming together with my parents.

I had a close friend in the same village. Her name was Nang Su. She was more active, popular and attractive than me, and she had more friends. I was so fond of her and fully respected and trusted her. I hoped she felt that same as I did. I always recognized the pure love of our invaluable friendship.

One day, she confessed to me that she had a boyfriend in the town. She told me that her boyfriend was not only smart but also handsome and rich. He was running a business. To show my friendship, I supported her dream. After a week, she visited my house together with her boyfriend Soe Min, and she introduced her boyfriend to me. As I was a close friend of Nang Su, I got to know her boyfriend within a short time. From that day on, the couple often came to visit my house. They told me that I was very sociable being friends with them.

After befriending them for two months, I learnt that there was a pagoda festival in the town. I rarely visited around the town and I wasn't familiar with the places in the town. Besides, I had never visited a festival in town during nighttime. But on that day around six in the evening, Nang Su arrived my house and urgently asked me to

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accompany her to visit the pagoda festival in the town. I told her, "It's too late to go to the town. Look it's dark already," and I refused to go with her. She insisted that she had to go there for an urgent matter, but she didn't dare to go alone. She needed me to accompany her. I thought that she was really in need of my help, so I decided to go with her to the town.

When we arrived to the pagoda festival, we took seats in a *Khong-Ye Shop* (traditional whisky shop) to relax and chat together for a while. Around 10 o'clock she told me she was going to the bathroom, and she asked me to wait for a few minutes. Then she left me in the shop alone.

Several minutes passed by, she didn't appear. I started worrying. When it was about 11 o'clock, her boyfriend, Soe Min, unexpectedly came into sight and said that Nang Su was waiting for me at his home. She had asked him to pick me up and take me there. The shop owner also heard what he told me. After that I said goodbye to the shop owner and went together with Soe Min.

After a ten-minute walk, we reached a grand house. As I thought Nang Su was waiting for me inside the house, I excitedly entered the house. But there was no one inside and everything was quite. Just as I was about to ask Soe Min where Nang Su was, he suddenly embraced me from behind and kissed me without my consent. I was shocked and I shrieked and shouted loudly. Then he yelled at me not to shout. I got down on my knees and begged him for mercy, tears flowing down my face.

I tried to stop him, saying that I didn't love him. But he didn't comply with my wish. He refused to release me. He told me that Nang Su had created this chance for him. He accused me saying that when I needed money I cheated him. I was stunned when he accused me like that. He said angrily that I used my feminine ways, my womanly trickery. Then he raped me. That night, I was deprived of my virginity by force, by a man I didn't love.

Early the next morning, I went back to my village by pony-cart. After I arrived at my village, I immediately went to Nang Su's house, but she was not there. Her mother told me that she was on a journey. It

was hard to believe that I had been trapped and tricked so mercilessly by my close friend. But now she made me feel extreme pain and hurt in the deepest corner of my mind. I hate her deeply, even now.

Two months later, I heard that Soe Min, was hospitalized in a township hospital, covered with many rashes on his body. As it was a small town, the news that Soe Min was suffering from HIV/AIDS spread quickly. I sensed that I had been dropped into the deepest black-hole for I discovered that I was also contaminated with the disease from Soe Min. I had contracted the most horrible disease in the world.

For my friend, Nang Su, I made wishes quietly in my heart. “Nang Su, because of you my life is destroyed, but may you be spared from the dreadful experience that you trapped me into, which ruined my life.”

After 4 months, I heard that Soe Min had died of HIV/AIDS in the hospital as he could not resist the virus anymore. Over time my health also became worse. I tried to commit suicide many times as I felt depressed with the disease, but I did not succeed.

In my present existence, can I ever have the chance of finding true love and wonderful happiness with harmonious rhyme and rhythms?

FOLLOWING OUR DREAMS

Kie Kie

It is with pleasure that I share my experiences as a young girl and the conflict between my parents and I. I write in the hope that other daughters throughout the world will not have to face the problems I have faced. Usually girls are not allowed to speak out, so these problems stay secret, but I want other people to learn about these things.

When I was a young girl, I didn't have free speech. In March 2003, after I finished grade ten, my father wanted me to teach school, so I could contribute to our family finances. But I didn't want to teach because I didn't have any experience teaching and I didn't like teaching. I wanted to continue my studies, so I tried to ask him to let me go to receive some other training. He got angry with me and tried to persuade me to accept what he wanted. Sometimes he would use a soft voice to try to persuade me and sometimes he would use a hard voice. Either way, I still didn't agree with him.

Later, both my father and mother started to scold me all the time. Whenever I had a meal my father said, "When you swallowed the food I had hoped my words would follow the food and would go through to your mind and you would be a clever girl, but nothing has changed your mind, so you shouldn't eat rice anymore." Sometimes I couldn't control my tears and I had to stop eating.

One morning a woman who was our neighbor visited our home while my mother was scolding me. She heard my mother's words and joined in, saying, "Daughters like this are not good for the parents. When the parents die they won't even carry you to the cemetery. They will only cry like a dog barking at you." When I heard her words I went to my room and I secretly tried to stop my tears. I felt like no one

supported me because I was a bad girl who didn't respect or listen to what my elders said.

At that time I couldn't reply to them, so I just kept everything in my mind. I couldn't do anything, so I just kept praying to God to give me a strong heart and to open up an opportunity for me to study. During that summer season I didn't feel happy. The weather was very hot and my feelings were soft. If they had scolded me for only one week I would have been ok. But after being scolded and blamed every day for three months I really wanted to die. Some days I didn't eat anything and I could not sleep at night. Sometimes when I woke up during the night my parents still scolded me. I secretly cried on my bed and I became very weak. But no one knew how sad I really was.

In June, when school was about to start, I asked my sister to talk to my parents for me. Maybe they would feel pity for me and allow me to go back to school. But my father told me, "Ok, you can go to school now, but you need to pay your own school fees. Don't come back and ask me." In my mind I was very happy but disappointed too.

When school started I went to school. I stayed with all the students in a dormitory. I studied there for almost a month. Living at that school we didn't have much food. We had only fish paste and bean curry every day because the school didn't have a lot of funds. Sometimes I didn't want to eat breakfast or dinner. It was a big challenge for me.

I kept praying to God and at the end of June I got a chance to replace a friend of mine at a teacher training in Chiang Mai. I didn't want to be a teacher, but I thought I would accept this chance. I couldn't stay where I was any more because the food was not good for my health. So I decided to go to Chiang Mai.

When I said I would go to Chiang Mai to study, my father was worried about me. He had heard that some young girls who arrived in the city faced many problems and he was aware of the risk of women being trafficked. But I wasn't afraid. I knew that I would go to study and nothing bad would happen to me.

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After I finished the teacher training I knew that I would have to teach at school so I was very sad, but I didn't say anything. I tried to obey my parents' wishes. When I taught at school I was not interested in teaching, but I tried very hard for the children and I kept praying to get another opportunity to study. I was teaching children at an elementary school in 2004. I taught there for almost a year, and in November 2004, I met two young people from the UK who helped me to study more. In January 2006, I got the chance to participate in the Burmese Women's Union. Since then I have continued my education.

I feel it is a big problem that there are many young girls or children who are forbidden from doing what they want to do by their parents. Daughters don't have the right to speak freely or to choose what they want to do. I'm not saying that parents shouldn't take care of their children or make decisions for them, but they should not stop the young people from following their dreams. I have seen many parents in my community who reprimand their children very harshly. When you treat children this way and force them to do things, this can create big problems for the children.

As for me, now my father and mother understand me and try to help me with what I need in my life, and I feel like they respect me very much. I am very thankful to everyone who has supported me and encouraged me through these difficult times.

I was lucky. I survived these difficulties, but lots of children or young women are still facing similar situations. So I hope and pray that in the future children and young women will be free from serious pressure like this. They need support and encouragement. I hope people everywhere will understand and work to solve this problem. Then young women all over the world can speak freely in their own voices and follow their own dreams.

WOMEN'S EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION PLAY

Foreword

Several months ago, a group of six Burmese women living in Tsunami affected areas of Southern Thailand and I (a Canadian woman) developed a piece of theatre. Each woman had come to Thailand at a different time and for a different purpose, but all were involved in some way with the Burmese organization where I worked. Some were teachers, one a seamstress, one worked in a shop. They all shared being Burmese, and female, in Thailand. It is from these similarities that they developed the trust to explore their differences and unique stories.

We began without a strict agenda. The table was left open for the women to write about what was on *their* minds, rather than the issues that perhaps I was most interested to learn about. It is always both more truthful and interesting to listen to what people will say when you give them the opportunity to speak on their own rather than to prompt a voice that a speaker does not have a *need* to express.

The piece was written in part collaboratively, as the shared situation of being a Burmese woman in Thailand provided a supportive outlet for exploration for the women. Other stories are unique to the individual woman. Some scenes were written on paper, and others were written while being improvised on their feet. The collage of the scenes explore what life is like *now* for this group of women, and includes the imbedded influence of their pasts in Burma, as well as the interaction of their future hopes with their present lives. The play was performed for office staff and community members.

This play was written with much dedication and hard work, in English. I believe this demonstrates these women's willingness and immense effort to communicate their stories with a larger audience.

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There are stories existing in the lives of every person in Burma, and the current situation in Burma makes it nearly impossible for these stories to escape. Some stories do, by illegal border crossings and dangerous passages on the part of those who carry these stories. A smaller percentage of these stories manage a longer life-span, should the carrier have the courage and be in a position to tell their story. As *listeners*, I believe we must undertake a responsibility at this point to use our voices to carry on this momentum.

Ulla Laidlaw
Facilitator

Women's Education & Development Association Play

Scene 1: Police 1

Su Su: Please stop here.
Tuk Tuk Driver: Where do you want to go?
Khin Myint: We want to go to BN market.
Su Su: Here we are!
Khin Myint: How much?
Tuk Tuk Driver: 30 Baht each.

Shopkeeper: What do you want?
Su Su: We want to buy clothes and fruit.
Khin Myint: How much is this shirt?
Shopkeeper: 199 Baht.
Khin Myint: I'll buy this.
Su Su: How much are the oranges?
Shopkeeper: 1 kg is 25 Baht.
Su Su: I want 1 kg.
Khin Myint: We'll go eat something.
Su Su: What would you like to eat?
Khin Myint: I don't like Thai food. I'll eat papaya salad.
Su Su, do you like the papaya salad?
Su Su: Yes.

Khin Myint: Me too.

Tuk Tuk Driver: Where are you going?
 Su Su: We want to go to Khuk Khak.
 Policeman 1: Please stop.
 Policeman 2: Do you have your identity cards?
 Khin Myint: No, we don't have them.
 Policeman 1: You are arrested because you don't have your identity cards.
 Policeman 2: You must follow us to the police station.
 Su Su / Khin Myint: He! He! He!

Policeman 1: Do you have money? If you don't have money you must go to Burma.
 Su Su: We don't want to go to Burma. How much money do you want?
 Policeman 1: You must pay 5,000 Baht per person.
 Khin Myint: I will phone my husband.
(She uses the policeman's phone)

Khin Myint: Hello! Darling! Now, we were arrested by the police. We must pay 10,000 Baht.
 Husband: Oh no! We will go to our boss.
The office of Khin Myint's husband's boss.

Husband's boss: What do you want?
 Husband: We want to borrow 10,000 Baht for our wives. They are arrested. Can you give us the money?
 Husband's boss: Yes, Ok!
At the police station

Husband: Where are our wives?
 Policeman 2: They are here.

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Husband: How much money do you want?
Policeman 2: 5,000 Baht each.
Husband: Can we have a discount?
Policeman 2: No.
Husband: Ok, here is the money.
Policeman 1: Ok, you can go now.

They leave.

Policeman 1: Come on, let's go to the disco! Let's go drink whiskey.
(The policemen go to party!)

Su Su & Khin Myint: waaaaah *(crying)*

Scene 2: Travel

Ah Rha

"The World" has always been my dream. I have been interested in traveling since my childhood. My idea is that traveling will give me knowledge. I think everywhere is very interesting. Every place is new for me. Every place is different: economically, socially, and culturally. I want to understand about the development of countries. I want to go to famous historical countries. I like Egypt, Burma, China and Japan. I will go there. I know Burma has two places, Pagan and Mandalay. Pagan is an ancient capital of Burma. It has many famous pagodas, rich resources, ancient art and culture. Pagan is a tourist attraction. I've got plans to visit. Mandalay is the second largest city. It is the capital of Upper Burma. I'm going to take a trip there too. I am already excited. I can learn about art and culture everywhere. After that, I want to go to foreign countries.

(Ah Rha goes to meet other friends)

Ah Rha: "My life is dark. I want to go into the world's light. Why don't you come along with me?"

Scene 3: Police 2

Su Su: Please stop here.
 Tuk Tuk Driver: Where do you want to go?
 Khin Myint: We want to go to BN market.
 Su Su: Here we are!
 Khin Myint: How much?
 Tuk Tuk Driver: 30 Baht each.

 Shopkeeper: What do you want?
 Su Su: We want to buy clothes and fruit.
 Khin Myint: How much is this shirt?
 Shopkeeper: 199 Baht.
 Khin Myint: I'll buy this.
 Su Su: How much are the oranges?
 Shopkeeper: 1 kg is 25 Baht.
 Su Su: I want 1 kg.
 Khin Myint: We'll go eat something.
 Su Su: What would you like to eat?
 Khin Myint: I don't like Thai food. I'll eat papaya salad.
 Su Su, do you like the papaya salad?
 Su Su: Yes.
 Khin Myint: Me too.

 Tuk Tuk Driver: Where are you going?
 Su Su: We want to go to Khuk Khak.
 Policeman 1: Please stop.
 Policeman 2: Do you have your identity cards?
 Khin Myint: No, we don't have them.
 Policeman 1: You are arrested because you don't have your
 identity cards.
 Policeman 2: You must follow us to the police station.
 Su Su / Khin Myint: He! He! He!

 Policeman 1: Do you have money? If you don't have
 money you must go to Burma.

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Su Su: We don't want to go to Burma. How much money do you want?

Policeman 1: You must pay 5000 Baht per person.

Khin Myint: I will phone my husband.
(She uses the policeman's phone)

Khin Myint: Hello! Darling! Now, we were arrested by the police. We must pay 10,000 Baht.

Husband: Oh no! We will go to our boss.

The office of Khin Myint's husband's boss.

Husband's boss: I don't have money. I won't lend it to you!

Husband: Please please!

Husband's boss: No, I don't have the money.

Husband: *(to his friend)* I'm angry. Let's go home.

At the police station

Husband: We don't have the money. Please wait one week. We will get new jobs and a new boss. The new boss will lend us the money.

Policeman 1: No. We will send you to Burma. We will send you to the forest because you don't have money.

Su Su / Khin Myint: *(to husbands)*

Ok. Let them send us. Don't worry we will return to Thailand in 2 weeks.

Scene 4: University*Khin Hla Shwe*

I have a close attachment to three girl friends. Their names are Ya Mon, Aye Aye and Khin Nyine Oo. Khin Nyine Oo got married last year. We were all very sad because Khin Nyine Oo got married. Khin Nyine Oo also failed her basic high school examination. We attended the East University in Yangon. We were happy. My home was very far away from my school. I left home for school at 8.30 in the morning and I returned at 12 noon. We went by bus. The bus was very expensive. I passed my first year Geography examination. I returned home. After that, I came to Thailand. My friends attended school in Burma. I remember my friends and my school. Next year, my friends will finish their finals. In Thailand, my friends don't phone me.

I'm a teacher. My hobby is teaching. I teach in a Learning Center. I have worked in that school for 5 months. This school has very good natured teachers. They love me. I love them too. This school doesn't have problems. I teach the children Maths. I play with the children. I'm very happy. Sometimes I want to be a child.

I lived in Burma and attended university. In Thailand, I give back to the children.

Scene 5: Family*Zin Zin*

I have four family members; father, mother, brother and me! My father's name is U Maung Maung! My mother's name is Daw Than Nyunt. My father and mother have died. After they died, I came to Thailand. My brother lives in Burma. He is in second standard at school. He is 8 years old.

My name is Zin Zin! I am sixteen years old. I work in a house job in Thailand. I have lived in Thailand for 3 years. I can speak Thai very well! I like to eat fruit. Now, I have worked in my current house job for 3 months. My job pays 2,700 Baht (US\$77) per month. I wake up at 6 o'clock everyday. I sleep at 11 o'clock every night. I miss Burma because my grandmother and brother live there.

Scene 6: Police 3

Su Su: Please stop here.
Tuk Tuk Driver: Where do you want to go?
Khin Myint: We want to go to BN market.
Su Su: Here we are!
Khin Myint: How much?
Tuk Tuk Driver: 30 Baht each.

Shopkeeper: What do you want?
Su Su: We want to buy clothes and fruit.
Khin Myint: How much is this shirt?
Shopkeeper: 199 Baht.
Khin Myint: I'll buy this.
Su Su: How much are the oranges?
Shopkeeper: 1 kg is 25 Baht.
Su Su: I want 1 kg.
Khin Myint: We'll go eat something.
Su Su: What would you like to eat?
Khin Myint: I don't like Thai food. I'll eat papaya salad.
Su Su, do you like the papaya salad?
Su Su: Yes.
Khin Myint: Me too.

Tuk Tuk Driver: Where are you going?
Su Su: We want to go to Khuk Khak.
Policeman 1: Please stop.
Policeman 2: Do you have your identity cards?
Khin Myint: No, we don't have them.
Policeman 1: You are arrested because you don't have your identity cards.
Policeman 2: You must follow us to the police station.
Su Su / Khin Myint: He! He! He!

Policeman 1: Do you have money? If you don't have money you must go to Burma.

Su Su: We don't want to go to Burma. How much money do you want?
 Policeman 1: You must pay 5,000 Baht per person.
 Khin Myint: I will phone my husband.
(She uses the policeman's phone)
 Khin Myint: Hello! Darling! Now, we were arrested by the police. We must pay 10,000 Baht.
 Husband: Oh no! We will go to the Thai NGO for help. We will come back soon to the police station.

At the NGO office.

Husband 1: Please help us because our wives were arrested and are in the police station. They said they need 5,000 Baht. We don't have the money. Can you help us?

The Thai NGO helps with negotiations with the police. The women are set free.

Husband 2: Thank you NGO!
 Husband 1: We will tell Burmese migrants if they have problems, you have information for them!

Afterwards we see the police sipping whiskey.

Scene 7: Future Wish List

(All 6 women on stage together)

W1: I want everybody to be free!
All: We want to help many people! We want to learn English!
W2: I want to speak English fluently!

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- All:** I hope that Burma will get democracy! We want the young people to develop! We want all children to learn to read and write! We want people to be happy! We want Burma to develop!
- W3:** I want to be a tour guide!
- W4:** I want to eat Burmese food!
- W1:** I want to be a clothes designer!
- W4:** I want to live in Burma.
- W5:** I want to go to my mother's home in Burma!
- All:** We want to make a lot of money.
- W3:** I want to manage the money for my family.
- W1:** I want to travel the world.
- W6:** I want to learn to drive a car.
- W2:** I want to live my life in the best way that I can.

END

***Editor's Note:** For the purpose of the Burma Women's Voices book several scenes were cut from this play. The original names of the actors and characters have also been changed.*

BECOMING AN ACTIVIST

Thoe Lay

In 1999 I came to Thailand because I wanted to learn more. I wanted to attend high school and learn about women and politics. When I stayed in Burma, I heard that you could do all that in Thailand.

Inside Burma you cannot go to study freely. If we do not have money, there is no chance for us to study anymore. Many people must stay at home. Some people are able to work doing something when they finish high school. They don't have money for further studies.

As for me, I stayed in a small township. There was no university there and I had no money to attend school. I didn't even have enough money for food. Everything is difficult in Burma.

Then, I came and attended school in the Karenni camp. There is good education there. I got some information about other issues when I lived in camp. I became very interested in women's rights and political issues. I wanted to join a women's organization.

From 2003 until today, I have been working with the sisters of the Burmese Women's Union. I need to try and learn more and get more skills. I want to be an expert and do something for my organization and for all the women of Burma.

"I HAVE A DREAM..."

An Expression of the Dreams of 5 Young Kachin Women

"I have a dream"

Jessica

I have a dream that one day Burma will become a federal democratic country. There will be no more discrimination between Burmese and other ethnic groups. There will be a free economic system, a qualified education system, good hospitals, fair salary for all the workers, and the chance to get a passport easily. Then citizens can visit all over the world and Burma will be a developed country in the world. The people from Burma could live their lives in peace. This is my dream for my country.

"I have a dream"

Ah Bawk

(recent graduate of a law school in Burma)

I have a dream that one day our country will become a peaceful country. The country will require a good executive, legislature, and judiciary body for a democracy. Our country has many ethnic groups, and they want to be equal. In a democratic country, the judiciary is also important. If all the people know the laws, I hope our country will become a peaceful country. If I am a good lawyer, I want to serve as a lawyer for justice.

"I have a dream"

Ah Htoi

I have a dream that I will learn politics in America. The USA is a developed country but my country is underdeveloped. But I hope in the next 10 years, Burma will be an independent country. I want to be a philosopher. I hope that my dream comes true and then my country will be very beautiful.

"I have a dream"

Seng Zin

I've had a special dream since my childhood. I want to be an ideal woman in our Kachin tribes. Long ago Kachin people lived in the mountains and forests and our living standards were very bad and our life styles were also pitiful. But after Kachin people believed in God, our lives changed. Nowadays, our organizations still develop, but after the 1988 revolution the Burmese military took all the power and discriminated against all ethnic groups. So every ethnic group opposed the Burmese government and the revolution took place everywhere.

Even though the Kachin Independence Organization signed a cease-fire with the Burmese Government in 1994, we have had no chance to earn money freely. Inside Burma when we travel, we must show a national identity card. All Burmese people suffer from the effects of corruption. We can see these unfair things. But we have no chance to fight against the dictatorship. I think one day it can be changed. And then we should have many educated people, patriots, wealthy people, political activists and military strategies to defend ourselves and to avenge the Burmese government. And then many educated women will be needed too. One day I will need to be a really energetic and popular woman for our society.

"I have a dream"

Ja Si

I have had a dream since my childhood. Designing is my hobby. Everybody likes my designs. That's for sure! I have a dream that one day I'll make a fashion shop. I will sell handicrafts in my shop. I will hire expert handy-workers. I want to learn about handiwork very much. While I'm thinking about my dream, I'm so excited. But no one supported me or allowed me to become a designer. I don't care about anyone else. I'm looking for the way to implement my dream. I have a nice dream. I'm sure I can do the best. I like the best work. When my dream comes true that day in my life will be perfect and the world will be peaceful and beautiful too.

FREEDOM

Zue Ko Ko

In 1999, when I lived in my village, the SPDC soldiers came to my village and arrested my father. I followed my father and the SPDC soldiers. The soldiers said that my father belonged to the Karen National Union. So they arrested him and put him in prison. In 2001, my father was released from the prison. Now my father lives in the village. He is a farmer. In my future, I want to live in a federal democracy. I want Burma to be a free country.

MY HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Daisy

The misery that my people face: when will it end? Karen people are discriminated against by the SPDC regime. People who live in Karen State become displaced people. They face many problems.

Firstly, they don't have anywhere to stay. Their villages are burnt down by the SPDC soldiers. In Taw Oo District, the SPDC entered one of the villages called Plah Hta. The villagers tried to escape from them. However one of the villagers couldn't escape because he was sick, so the soldiers killed him and burnt his house down. The SPDC soldiers also attacked villagers in Mu Draw District and killed innocent people, burnt villages and destroyed the lives of the people who then fled and hid in the jungle. The villagers were full of fear.

Secondly, they don't have nurses or medics to take care of them. When they are forced to hide in the jungle they don't have enough medicine. They have to face many diseases, especially malaria. Many people die. There are some hospitals, but some villages have nothing at all. They need midwives to deliver children. One rainy season, a pregnant woman gave birth in the jungle. She didn't have safety, medicine, a nurse or a roof to protect her from the rain. Later she died.

In Taw Oo District, women who live near the SPDC soldiers are forced to work for the SPDC soldiers to build fences for them. If they don't go, they have to pay money. If the soldiers don't like the fence, they have to build it again. They have to go every day. On top of that the SPDC soldiers accuse them of having contact with Karen National Union (KNU) soldiers.

I don't want my people and Karen women to face a life of misery.

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Now I am studying at the English Immersion Program (EIP) School. After I graduate I am going to study to be a midwife. I know this is essential for mothers and children. After that I will continue my studies to be a medic. I know health is the most essential thing in human lives, especially in Karen state. I will try my best until I achieve my goal, to help my Karen people.

FINDING MEANING

N.L.

I am very happy that I have chance to express my feelings as I am a refugee in the camp. I am a young Muslim girl who has been in the camp for 4 years. The rest of my family has been in the camp for over 10 years. In the camp we have a chance to study and we get rations provided by an organization, the Thai Burma Border Consortium.

In the refugee camp we have high schools and many Post-Ten schools to promote the young refugees' lives. I am a person who loves education and I want to be an educated person. My parents are also people who love education, but they are uneducated people because of their unlucky lives. Therefore they want their children to be educated people and they inspire us to try hard in our studies.

Now I am a student in the camp and try to be the educated person that my parents want and hope to see. I study at the English Immersion Program School, which provides advanced skills such as reading, writing, speaking, grammar, teaching skills, critical thinking skills, creative skills, management skills and listening skills. This school is the highest level of education for refugee people on the Thai-Burma border.

Life in the camp is different from life outside. In the camp we get rations to eat that are provided by the TBBC. At the end of the month they provide the refugees with rations such as rice, oil, salt, chili, yellow bean, fish paste and Asian mix. We get rations to survive in our life, but we have no chance to go out of the camp or move around to find jobs.

The young people in the camp are jobless, easy going and not worried about their life. There are people who have no hope and no aim for their future. I am a young person among them, but I don't want to be a person who feels meaningless where I live in my community.

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All in all, these are all my feeling and opinions about where I live now. I want to be a person who is helpful for the community where I live and for the people who I have to deal with everyday in my life.

DREAMS OF A FUTURE LEADER

Anonymous

I have a dream to become a leader for my people. Now, I'm not satisfied with my current situation. I want to change it before I become old. I want to become a university student. Now, I am a refugee girl. I have no chance to go to university. However, I am still thinking about university. I can't forget about it. If I can graduate from university I believe that I can help my country and my people.

Nowadays, I notice that, it is rare to see women leaders, like Aung San Suu Kyi in my community. She is an educated woman so she can do many things for her people. She tries to get freedom for Burma. She has to talk with leaders of other countries. She can be proud of herself because she is a patriotic woman. Even though she is a woman, she is wise and educated. People admire her actions. I think that when she was a child she had good opportunities to continue her studies and because she tried hard, she became an educated women. I respect her so much and I want to become a strong woman like her.

In my situation now, it is not easy to become a good leader because I am staying in a refugee camp. When I look at my background I am disappointed. I am not a citizen in Thailand and I am not a citizen of Burma. I don't have any identity.

If I get the chance to attend university, I know that I will really help my people. I am interested in learning law. If I graduate in law I can be a famous woman in Burma, just like Aung San Suu Kyi. Moreover, I can find a way for other young people who are interested in law to continue their studies. Then I can provide new lawyers or politicians for my country.

When I look at my community there are many young people who want to change the current situation, but they don't know how to find the way to get there. As refugee students, there is no chance to go to university. There are many post-ten students in the refugee camp now. Among them, I am the person who is the most obsessed about looking for a university to go to.

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Furthermore, many young people don't know what is important for their future, such as education and helping their community. It is my desire to show them the way to develop their lives. They need to know how to open their minds and be useful for their own people. That is my hope for them.

All in all, I want my dream to come true. One day, I would like my plans to be beneficial for my people. Moreover, I hope that I will be a patriotic leader like Aung San Suu Kyi.

WAKE UP! LET'S TRY OURSELVES

Ying Kon Tai

If there were no Altsean-Burma, there would be no Ying Kon Tai at the sixth training of School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY) in 2006. I say this because Altsean-Burma was the road for me to get the opportunity to study at SSSNY. Continuing my education had always been my dream, but the needs of my family had to come before my dream. Before I came to work at Altsean-Burma, I had been away from school for 7 years. Therefore, I had to start to study English again at Altsean-Burma.

After various jobs as a migrant worker in Thailand I started working as a house cleaner and cook at Altsean-Burma in February of 2003. Working there gave me the chance to do many things, such as studying English and Thai, cooking in my own style and also learning from the staff and interns. I had many experiences. The Altsean staff are from many countries and they work like a family. They were all very kind to me and very good at taking care of me. They never thought of me as just a house cleaner, they just thought that I was also one of the staff like them and they helped me with everything. I can never forget one thing that Debbie (the coordinator of Altsean-Burma) told me. She said "Ying! The jobs that you are doing now also mean you are helping your country, because all of us are working for your country together." This made me feel very happy and I enjoyed my work there.

I had a chance to think by myself and cook for everyone. They were not serious about the food that I cooked, but they always enjoyed it. I had never cooked for so many people before and the fact that my cooking could also be useful helped me believe in myself. I was so surprised that Phi Nong was not afraid of different food or my cooking, because in my experience most Thai people are afraid of food from Burma. This also made me realize that there are still some Thai

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people that understand people from Burma, now and in the past. She was the first Thai person I met that understood about people from Burma and I really respect her for that.

I usually studied English for 2 hours a week, with teachers from three different countries. They taught me English grammar and sometimes I had a chance to join some classes with the Altsean interns. This was the first step for me to study and live with many different ethnic groups from Burma. I was very happy to study with them because we were sharing our experiences with each other. The interns helped me a lot too.

I had two days free time every week, so I could go outside and study Thai at the monastery. I never had holidays on weekends before I came to work at Altsean. On my holidays, I could read, practice on the computer and do homework and exercises given to me by my teachers.

I learnt a very important lesson for my life at Altsean: how to think for myself and use my ideas. This means not just following other people or waiting for other people. We need to think by ourselves. Before I came to work at Altsean, I used to follow other people. For example, my boss would show me how to cook chicken curry first. Then I would copy her and make it myself. I don't think I am the only person that just followed other people or waited for other people to do something for me. I think there are still many people who act like I did, following or waiting. I would like to tell them, "Wake up! Do not wait for other people to do it for us. Let's try ourselves."

Ying Kon Tai has now successfully completed her studies at SSSNY. She works for a Shan community organization and is also teaching the Shan children of migrant workers. She says she "still wants to study a lot more to get more knowledge to change our government's ideas."

HOW LUCKY AM I?

Hsaw Nga Meh

I was born on March 20, 1986 in a rural area inside Burma. Life was very hard as the country is run by a brutal dictatorship. In my village, there were about 250 houses and over 1000 villagers. There was a primary school up to fourth standard. The school wasn't formed or funded by the government, so every student who attended the school had to pay for their own school materials, including books, pens, pencils, erasers and rulers.

As the village was built in a rural area, the living standard was also very low. My family was very poor and both of my parents were illiterate. They could not even support me to go to school. They just wanted me to work on the farm. When I was too young to help on the farm, I still had to work, looking after my nephew while my siblings and parents were farming.

The seasons, climate and weather changed day by day, but the village, country and my family situation never changed. Up until I was six years old, I could not go to school. My family could not afford it. I used to think that I was missing out, that I was losing my future.

By 1995, I had decided to follow the Karenni soldiers to set up my life in another way. I didn't know whether the trip would be smooth or rough. Fortunately, at that time, there was a boarding house, which collected orphan children and helped them to go to school. This boarding house was formed in 1994 and in 1995 I was in the second batch to start, with over 100 other students.

There were only two guardians to look after all of us students. We faced various difficulties everyday. We lacked food, clothes and medical care and our personal hygiene suffered. Due to malnutrition we

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got various health problems and became physically weak. Anyhow, at least this was better than the fate I had escaped from.

Life was more comfortable after we could stay safely in the refugee camp in Thailand. I started to see a light for my future. I was very happy to go to school, because my teacher taught me many valuable lessons. Gradually, I passed school, year by year. When I realized that nothing is impossible and that trying is never in vain, I tried harder and harder. I finally passed high school in 2004-2005 and proceeded to a two-year program of higher education. This year, I will finish my education and I am sure that I will be a good leader for my people someday. At last I have overcome the difficulties involved in farming and the rural life. I will try my best to be a bright candle that glows and will ask God to bless me to live in a righteous way.

Hsaw Nga Meh is a Karenni woman who balances both her activism and her ongoing education.

MY LIFE

W.H.M.

When I was young I had to sell snacks everyday to earn money for my studies and survival. I did not have time to play with or visit my friends. So, I did not know what fun was. Everyday I had to spend time selling snacks before, during, and after school. Even in school, I had no time for fun. I became a nervous person because I did not spend time with friends. I was afraid to talk with other people. I felt my life was miserable. At the same time I tried really hard to win first prize every year in class. I knew that although I was poor I would never give up.

I remember one time when the brutal SPDC soldiers came to our village. They burnt houses and destroyed fields and farms, so we had to flee from our village. We had to stay in the jungle until the cruel SPDC soldiers had gone. In the jungle, we faced a difficult life. There was not enough food or medicine, we had to sleep on the cold ground and eat banana plants in our curry. Sometimes we stayed in the heat and sometimes in the rain. We were often sick, but we did not have any doctors. After the soldiers had gone, we had to start our life over again from the beginning. We had to work even harder than before they came. As I am a determined person, I tried to finish my high school even though I had to struggle.

After I finished high school, I attended nursing training for 10 months in Khont Ko, Karen State in an area under the control of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). While I was there, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the DKBA fought each other in the place where I was staying. As I was young, I was very shocked and afraid of what I saw, so I did not want to stay there anymore. I fled to the Thai-Burma border with my three friends who attended nurse training with me.

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While I was on the Thai-Burma border, the DKBA soldiers arrested my father. They arrested him because I had fled from Khont Ko. None of my friends' fathers were arrested. My father had to stay in prison. When I heard about that I felt very ashamed and incredibly guilty. Because of me, my father had to stay in prison!

When I stayed on the Thai-Burma border, I joined the Overseas Karen Refugee Social Organization (OKRSO). For six months, I attended an English course and helped the organization to produce a magazine about the lives of migrant workers. Six months later I started two years of study at the Special English Program School. After I finished SEP School I became an English Immersion Program student in Umphiem refugee camp, and I continue to study at EIP now. As I have studied in different schools, I realize how much my education opens my mind. For example; when I watched the film *Animal Farm*, I learnt about political ideas. I understood more about politics and how the dictatorship in my country controls the people.

Now I will look for solutions for all of the different ethnic groups who are oppressed by the SPDC. We must all put forward our visions and ideas to be able to get rid of the dictatorship.

FROM FACTORY TO DEMOCRACY

Zar Zar

From 1997 to 2002, I worked at a garment factory. During that time, the owner of the factory wanted to pay us our salaries in US dollars. But the Burmese government wouldn't allow that because their own officers didn't get US dollars for their salaries. So most of the employees hated the government.

In April 2002, our factory closed because other countries would no longer accept our factory's goods because they opposed our government's policies.

From 2002 to 2006, I worked at a baby food factory. Our owner didn't want to manage things according to the labor laws. He often ordered employees to work overtime, without vacations or leave and sometimes he refused to pay an overtime fee to the workers. Why was he able to act like that? Because he gave presents, like money, cars and clothes, to the SPDC government officers, who gave him his factory license. Then he cut the employee salaries.

At that time, my sister was working at a knitting factory in Mae Sot. She contacted the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) and attended their workshops. When she came back to Burma, she told me about her experiences. Since that time, I decided that I wanted to work at the BWU organization, for democracy and for women. I hope we can live peacefully, without war and we can get democracy in the future.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MY PEOPLE

Jungle Parrot

I am the only child in my family. My parents got divorced when I was just one year old. My mother and I lived with my grandparents in a small village in the countryside in Eastern Shan State. I always hoped that my father would come back to me, but he never did. After one and a half years my father married another woman. He did not care about me anymore.

My mother tried to earn money to send me to the primary school near my village. In my hometown the education system is very bad. The teachers get low salaries so they don't teach the students well. This low pay also increases corruption in the education system. The school costs are also very expensive. Many Shan people have a lack of education, especially the women and children who live in the jungle or rural areas. Parents want to send their children to school but they cannot support them. Only some parents manage to send their children to school.

The teaching system is very different between the rural areas and urban areas. I went to school in a rural area, near my village. The teachers who taught us did not graduate from university. They had not even finished teacher training and had no experience of teaching. The teachers did not teach or explain topics to the students well at all. Even though they did not teach us well, the villagers still had to provide them with food and give them salary. The government didn't help us at all.

The headmistress of the school was my mother's friend. She loved me, so even when I did not do my homework or I did something wrong she did not punish me. I passed the exams every year even though I didn't understand anything. Our teachers always spoke in Shan in the class, so I couldn't even speak Burmese language.

In 1994, I moved to study at No (1) Basic Education Middle School in the town. There were many students. Most of them were Burman and Akha. When I arrived there, I was very happy because I met many new friends. In the class many people spoke Burmese but I did not understand what the teachers said or what they asked me to do. Everyone in my class laughed at me. I was very disappointed and I wanted to leave school but my grandfather did not allow me to. He told me, "A person who does not have knowledge is like the curry without salt." So I kept his words in my mind and tried my best. One of my friends encouraged me to speak Burmese as much as I could. She helped me when I did not understand what the teacher taught. I also learnt outside the school with a tutor, so I passed the exams every year.

In 1997, I passed eighth standard, but I could not continue at school because I got a disease and I could not walk for over a month. After I recovered, my mother didn't have enough money left to send me to school, because she had spent a lot of money on my disease.

I thought, "Because we don't have enough money I cannot continue my education." I was very sad and then I thought about my Shan sisters and brothers. If they moved to the schools in the town they also would have language problems and would not be able to follow the teachers, just like me. Even worse, if parents have not got enough money, they won't send their sons and daughters to school at all. So I decided that if I ever got the chance to study free of charge I would try my best to be an educated woman and teach my brothers and sisters in my hometown.

One day I had a chance to study English at the monastery. I was very happy and tried hard to pass the exam. This gave me the chance I needed. I got the opportunity to attend the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth in Thailand. There I learnt English, computer skills and many other topics. We studied about the different ethnic groups of Burma, human rights, democracy and politics. Now, I have joined with one of the women's organizations and am working for my people. I hope that one day I can be a good teacher for my people.

Jungle Parrot currently works sharing her skills and knowledge with other young Shan women.

ON THE RUN

Ma Ma

When I was a child, I was always at risk and in danger from the Burmese government. I will never forget that feeling. One night, the Burmese soldiers came to fight near our homes. We had to run away from our houses. We couldn't take anything with us. We had to run like that many times.

The last time we ran away from our homes, we ran all the way to a refugee camp. We lived there for a while. Inside Burma we weren't able to get much education because of the war. When we were learning, the SPDC soldiers would stop our lessons. Because we were afraid of them, we had to hide and move places. It is hard to learn when you are running. We faced this problem many times over many years.

Fortunately, when we lived in the refugee camp, we didn't have to run anymore. We had a chance to learn and get education in the refugee camp. I passed my tenth standard in the camp.

While I was attending school, my mother was working for women's rights with a group called the Burmese Women's Union (BWU). When I saw my mother working like that, I wanted to be a leader, too. My mother talked about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi every night, telling me many stories about her life. When I listened to these stories, I felt very proud. I wanted to be a leader like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

When I finished tenth grade, I joined the BWU and began working with the group's leaders. I learned many things from them. Now I can do something for my people, especially for women from Burma and women who are in danger and face risks and problems. One day, I hope that Burma will get democracy and the people can live in happiness together.

A WISH FAR FROM HOPE

Myo Htoi Ja

Everybody has a goal in their life and they have to strive to fulfill that goal. Sometimes, we might mentally fall down, when we meet obstacles on the way towards our goal. Many authors and leaders have portrayed these kinds of experiences to their audiences. Likewise in this composition I have strived to share the thoughts that have been in my mind for a long time.

I am an ethnic woman born in a town, which is located in the northern part of Burma. I have yearned for education since I was a child. I wanted to be a successful and famous educated person when I grew older, so I studied hard towards my goal. Although my parents were uneducated, they encouraged us a lot in our education. Although I had many siblings in my family we could all join school. My parents were very ambitious for us to become educated people in the future. My parents used to say, "It would be our pleasure if our children become graduates. It will only be worth having these children when their graduation photos decorate the walls in our house."

I always remembered one thing that happened when I was in middle school. One day, my father brought us in a pony cart to go around in the town, and he treated us to various snacks. Then he took us to visit inside our township's college. He said, "You kids must try hard from now on in order to join here one day." He also encouraged us by showing us a video of our neighbor's graduation ceremony in Mandalay.

I was very happy while I was studying at school. In our country, the schools opened in the rainy season. It was raining almost everyday at our place and sometimes, I was absent from school because I went there on foot and I caught colds when it was raining. I felt pity for the

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parents each time the schools re-opened. School enrollment fees, stationary fees and school uniforms cost so much for them as they had many children. That is also why some children from other families gave up their education, as their parents could not support them anymore.

I encountered all these difficulties and still passed my high school through a combination of my parents' support and my own effort. I was very happy and excited that I was going to start university. When the university was about to open, one of our neighbors suggested, "It may cost a lot if you send both of your daughters to the university. Why don't you let them work and join the University of Distance Education?" Then my father replied, "It is kind advice, but they will only learn a little bit if they join the University of Distance Education, so I want them to go to regular university." My neighbor said, "I tried to give you my advice in good will," and she left.

During my university years, I put in a huge amount of money and time to work towards graduation since the political situation was unstable. The universities were on and off all the time.¹ Although I had earned my degree, still it was not easy to find a job. It was impossible to be a civil servant due to the very low salary. Besides, to get a job in the civil service it was essential to have good relationships with respective departmental heads. Finally, I gave up on becoming a civil servant, as I recognized that that job could not support my survival. I became depressed and felt that my degree that I had worked so hard for was useless. I regretted all the time I had spent to get my degree. In fact, in Burma we got a fake education that did not guarantee our future. It was just a 'parrot-learning' education system where the students have to obey the teachers and the students are not allowed to question anything or develop critical thinking skills. They never allowed students to question anything or develop critical thinking skills.

I was reminded of the words one of our women neighbors used to say, "Hum..! Nowadays, you cannot survive with a names-sake-

¹ The military regime in Burma routinely closes the universities during times of political instability in an attempt to prevent students from gathering and politically organizing.

degree. There are numerous degree holders without any jobs. So I asked my children to earn their living as vendors who could stand on their own feet.” That was also the truth in one-way or another. Anyway, being an educated person had some benefits in the community. One of my friends made me smile when she said, “Our degree helps us get a good reputation for our wedding invitation card.”²

Later on, I decided to settle down in Yangon in search of a job and to continue my studies. Once I arrived at Yangon, I read the job classified in all the newspapers. But all of the jobs asked for a university graduate with pleasant personality, good with computers and fluent in English, both written and oral. So I joined English language classes, computer training and accounting classes in order to meet the job requirements. With the help of these skills, I got a job and gained some work experience. I worked hard to earn more money to support my family. But this was only my dream, which did not come true. Finally, I decided to leave for Thailand in accordance with our traditional proverb, “Without moving to a new place, you cannot get a better life.”

In Thailand, I faced many difficulties such as language barriers and security concerns. The Thai people, who were famous internationally for their hospitality and smiling faces, looked down upon Burmese people, calling us *Phar-Marr* and discriminating against us. After experiencing these insecurities and cultural shock, I wanted to go back home. But I could not. Actually, I could not transform my wish into reality because of the unstable political atmosphere, social degradation, economic breakdown, and decimated health care system in Burma.

Overall, my burning desire is to light the fire for democracy in Burma and reform in the fundamental sectors of education, health, economy and social affairs, so that Burma will bloom into a developed country.

² In Burma, some people like to put their degree in their wedding invitation card to give a good impression

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When will my wish come true? Today or tomorrow, I dare not predict. If there is someone who can give an answer, please let me know. I really want to know an exact time when Burma will become a democratic country as I want to feel the essence of democracy.

Myo Htoi Ja is currently living in Thailand, where she uses her knowledge and skills to help build the capacity of other young women to participate in the movement for a democratic Burma.

PLEASE UNDERSTAND

Nann Naunt

My village was in Northern Shan State. It was composed of nearly 500 households. When I was 5 years old, during my first year at school a group of Burmese soldiers settled near our primary school. Their language and behavior were different from our people. From the moment they arrived, my parents told me to stay away from them. I did not understand why my parents and elders asked us to avoid them. But I followed my parents' warnings and tried not to face them. By the time I turned 10 years old, Burmese¹ teachers both men and women, also arrived at our village school.

I asked my mother, "Do I need to keep away from the teachers, too? Are they just like Burmese soldiers?"

"You can treat them well. But Burmese soldiers don't have any good characteristics. They don't have sympathy for others. That why I don't want you to greet them," my mother replied.

At first I thought that my mother lied to stop me having a friendship with the Burmese soldiers. My parents got angry whenever they talked about these Burmese soldiers.

I wondered, "Why do my parents get mad towards the Burmese soldiers? Why do my parents hate them so much?" But I had no answer for that.

However, I got a sense of changes in our villages since these soldiers came. Villagers were aware of their visits here and there. Every house closed their doors and went to bed earlier than before. I wished, "May all these Burmese soldiers go back from here quickly." But it was

¹ When the author talks about 'Burmese' people in this story she is referring to ethnic Burmans.

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in vain. Constantly, the Burmese soldiers changed, one group after another, in my village.

As I became an adult, there were more restrictions on me. I could not make friends with this person or that person. Now, I understood more about the Burmese soldiers than before. They never asked permission to take villagers' property or even paid any money for anything they took from the villagers including chickens, piglets and other property. I saw that they treated the villagers with no respect. Eventually, I hated them like my parents did.

My mother grew rows of chili plants in front of our house. When these plants yielded their chili-pods, some soldiers passed in front of our house and they saw the ripe chili plants. Then they plucked off some chilies without even asking permission from us. They did the same thing on the next day too. My father did not say anything both times. After the soldiers plucked chili for the third time my father cut down all the chili plants

“Why did you cut down those plants? What a pity! We've lost all the plants,” I said. My father replied in anger, “I don't like these people coming in and out of my compound. They won't be satisfied with only chili. They will keep on demanding various things afterwards. So don't keep things they might want outside the house. No Burmese are good.”

I argued with my father, saying, “Our Burmese teachers are good.” Then, he asked me, “How can you say the Burmese teachers are good? If you look carefully you will see clearly the differences between when they arrived here and when they leave.”

Eventually, I noticed what my father meant. When they arrived they did not have any valuable things with them. Later on, they received money from students for private tuition.² They collected money for various reasons. They took bribes from students. They returned home with many possessions. As a result, we disliked all Burmese people due to the behavior and characteristics of the Burmese

² In Burma, the lessons provided during regular class time are often substandard or incomplete and students are required to pay extra fees to the teacher to attend after hours 'tuition'.

teachers and soldiers in our village. Whenever there was a duty change we hoped that the new troops might be better than the previous ones. But it was never the case. They kept torturing villagers in different ways. They demanded large amounts of taxes on farms, paddy fields and cattle and they forced villagers to act as porters for the soldiers.

After I passed my 6th grade, my parents arranged to send me to Mandalay in order to continue my education there. I felt strange because I had to join a school among Burmese people.

“Why do you want me to study in a Burmese school, if the Burmese are not good?” I asked my father.

My father said, “Education in Burmese schools is better than in Shan schools. I plan to send you there because I want you to become an educated person. Only if you are educated, will you be free from their oppression. I send you not to turn you into a Burmese, but to study hard. But, don’t call me ‘father’ in Burmese when you come back home. If you do so, I will kick you out of my house.”

I did not know whether I should be happy or not about studying among Burmese people. I got a chance to join a high school in Mandalay after we gave an expensive bribe to the headmaster of that school. At school, I had better relationships with the ethnic teachers and classmates because of my hatred towards Burmese people. Though I had to deal with many Burmese, I did not trust them at all. I just concentrated on my studies. Every time I went back home, I had to take care not to use Burmese words in conversation. “I could be liberated from Burmese repression only when I made myself a knowledgeable person.” I kept that reminder in my mind and focused on my study.

I passed my high school exam in 1988 but then all education institutes were closed down because of the students’ uprising. I was upset about losing the chance to join a university. My father and aunty got in contact with one organization from Thailand while I was waiting for the universities to reopen. I did not know a lot about that organization, even its name. I found out that it was an anti-military

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government group. I was interested in it and arrived in Thailand in 1999.

I had many chances to learn more about Burma in Thailand. I learned a lot about the education system in Burma, human rights abuses, conditions of the ethnic minority groups, and so much more. I came to know that there were many Burmese people who were fighting against the military regime in Burma. My understanding of the issue deepened and I was convinced that the major player behind the inhumane oppression in Shan State was the military junta.

There may be many Shan people who do not know much about the real situation, just like I didn't. They may feel hatred towards every Burmese person as they have lived in a society, where their experience of the Burmese has been Burmese soldiers and so they have bitter images of Burmese people. Actually, the mistakes and abuses of the Burmese soldiers are not connected to the ordinary Burmese people.

So, I think that we should not show our hatred towards all ordinary Burmese people. We should not continue our prejudice because of our unclear visions. I would like to share my own experiences with people in order to encourage understanding and a progressive way of thinking.

Nann Naunt is a young woman from Shan State working for Shan refugees along Thai-Burma border.

TO BE AN ACTIVIST

Mi K. M.

When I first heard the word ‘activist’, I felt it was a very strong word. In fact, I thought it was so strong that I did not even dream that I could be an ‘activist.’ But now, it seems, my blurry dream is coming true, a little bit in my life. It is within reach now. I believe I can be a young woman activist.

Even though I first learned that word a few years ago, I didn’t discuss it, think about it in depth or clarify to myself what it meant until I was interviewed recently by a group of US students who want to help Burma. Even though I have been involved in activist work, I got a terrible headache thinking about whether I myself am an activist yet or not. At that time, I remembered that my teachers from Earthrights School-Burma (ERS-B) had told me and encouraged me. They said, “You are not someone who has no knowledge. You are intelligent and you have had many experiences in your life. Education does not come only from academic books or universities but also from our real life experiences and our wisdom.”

During the interview with the US students, I felt it was hard to answer the questions and to include myself as an ‘activist,’ but I did my best. After that I continued thinking and asking myself some questions: “What are the things that support me? When was the first time something made me think for myself? Why was it so hard at first for me to talk about my own feelings and ideas?” Now, I have the answers.

The thing that currently supports me is my school (ERS-B) because all of our classes are student-centered and the learning method is participatory education. When we are learning all of our subjects with many different teachers, we have to speak up and share our own opinions and ideas. It seems our teachers are helping us to think about

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our ideas and to keep our focus in the different subjects. I believe that all the activities that we do are meant to give us a chance to ask questions about things that interest us. So now I have a strong ability to answer questions by myself.

To find the answer to my other questions, I had to think back to when I attended the government-run state school in Burma. I learned not to think. That is the curriculum, system and teaching method there. The teachers threatened us and taught us to copy or memorize the facts that they taught by heart. The most important thing was to write down exactly in detail what the teacher had taught us would be on the final exam paper. That was the most important skill, and there was no need to keep this knowledge after the exam, so I would always forget the information. So I can honestly say, I find it hard sometimes to think and express my feelings and ideas quickly.

After I had answered my own questions, the word 'activist' was still stored in my brain. When our teachers at ERS-B gave us a practice activity on interviewing focus groups I had to act as an interviewer and think of a topic to ask interview questions about for our group. At that time, my brain immediately said, "Discuss the topic of 'activists'."

First of all we discussed the meaning of the word 'activist.' According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, an activist is "a person who works to achieve political or social change, especially as a member of an organization with particular aims." During our focus group interview session, we all thought about our own ideas about the meaning of the word 'activist.' We shared our individual ideas and reached a common agreement, which was basically the same as the dictionary. Then we focused on some details and examples. We decided that we all are activists, but we have diverse activities or ways of serving. So we have environmentalists, human rights workers, politicians, lawyers, community leaders, teachers, social workers, youth workers and media; many activists who have similar goals. It is like there is an umbrella connecting our different activities.

We continued the discussion, focusing on my question, "How can we train ourselves to be different kinds of activists?"

My friends responded that in general we need to learn about everything that is happening in our community, country, region and all over the world if possible. Each individual should learn about the things that interest them the most, and which they want to focus on.

The politician and journalist said that they always listen to the news on the radio. One focuses mostly on political news while the other focuses on other kinds of news that are broadcast daily. The politician tries to join political groups and the journalist tries to learn how to report about our current situation and to learn the technology and communication techniques. The environmentalist said that she tries to learn more about forests, global warming, climate change and other issues connected with the environment. The community leader and social and youth activists said that they are always involved and learning from community social activities. The human rights activist said, "I attend many trainings such as human rights, women's rights, child rights, trainings on declarations and human rights treaties and other things." The lawyer and teacher said that they have also learned from their work experience and from trainings on legal subjects and teaching methods.

I still wanted to know more about being an activist, so I asked, "What do you have to give up or what is difficult in your life as an activist?"

They said that the first main risk is security. There are many unsafe places for them as activists. They cannot go where they want to go freely. I remembered when one of my teachers from ERS-B said, "As activists, especially human rights activists, we are working for the truth that the whole world accepts and that is also spelled out in the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but we have to face security risks because of our activist activities. So whatever we do and wherever we go for our movement, we need to stay confident even when we face problems, because we are working for the truth."

I also remembered something I heard in a training that I joined last year. The woman, an activist trainer, said that she has many challenges with security working as an activist in her job because she does not have regular work hours. Sometimes she has to go out or

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travel during the night and she knows she is not physically strong enough to protect herself. So, even though she is single and a virgin and she is not familiar with sex, she brings a condom with her so if someone tries to rape her she will ask him to at least wear a condom. If somebody knows she carries a condom, especially the people from her community, they will not understand her explanations and they will not believe her. But she has no other choice. This is something she has to do as a woman activist from Burma.

Another thing activists have to give up is their time, especially fun time. They don't get to spend time with their families like other people.

My final question was, "As activists, what makes you feel happy and satisfied?"

My friends replied that they are happy and satisfied because they believe that they can help their people, preserve their communities, share information, build education, and stand for their people. All of these activities make them happy, and make them smile at the thought of "Being an Activist".

WAITING FOR A FAMILY REUNION

Chaw Khlei

Our family used to live in Pha-Lam Township, Chin State. I am the second daughter out of six siblings. My father worked as a community health worker in Pha-Lam until I started 9th grade. After my father took a pension from his work, our family could barely survive and he could not afford to support our education. We could not bear to watch our father's sorrow over us dropping out of school. One day, my brother encouraged me.

“I think father can afford for the three youngsters to continue their schooling. So, the two of us, as elders, should go to Rangoon for employment and we can continue our education there as well.” I agreed with him and our father gave us permission to go.

In that way, we arrived in Rangoon. We worked very hard and kept up our education. After I graduated from college, I submitted an application for a post as a teacher in Rangoon. Everyone in Burma knows that in order to get the job you want you, need to give a large bribe. I could not afford to pay a large amount of money for a bribe so I could not get a job. It was also necessary to speak English language to become a staff member at a company. So I left to continue further studies in Aizawl Township, Mizoram, India, in June 2003.

One month after my arrival, all foreigners including Burmese and Chin people were forced to go back to their homelands, after community outrage following accusations that a Chin man raped a nine year old local Mizo girl.¹ However, hundreds of people could not go

¹ In 2003, local Mizo people led a campaign of forced repatriation against Chin and Burmese people in Mizoram, using eviction from houses, threats, intimidation and violence. The rape of the young Mizo girl discussed above was the incident that fuelled pre-existing underlying racial tensions.

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back inside Burma as they were engaged in political activities and feared persecution. However, they also did not dare to stay in Mizoram.

Throughout this difficult year, filled with bitter experiences, I worked hard for my Chin community until the situation became safer. Later on, I was elected General Secretary of the Chin Women's Organization as I was highly regarded by the Chin people due to my hard work. I am still carrying on my duties now.

My activities in India have prevented me from returning to my family inside Burma. Moreover, the rest of my siblings also had to leave their native land for foreign countries to find jobs in order to survive, as conditions inside Burma went from bad to worse. I miss my childhood days when all of my family members enjoyed dinner together with happiness.

All of our the family have been separated from each other as our country is run by the nastiest government. Our country needs democracy, to reunite our families. So I am longing for the restoration of democracy in our country, as well as for our family reunion.

WITH MY OWN TWO EYES

Naw Paw Gay Khu

I have seen many things on my journeys through Karen State. Many Karen people have been forced from their homes to live as Internally Displaced People within our borders. The operations of the ruling military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) seem to be never ending. They've already wiped out almost all of the people living in parts of Northern Karen State.

On one of my journeys, I happened to be in an area where the villagers were growing rice. The villagers took good care of the paddy fields, expecting that they would soon be able to collect the harvest. Then one day, the SPDC troops came to the village and took over the area and the plantations. They confiscated the harvest. They literally occupied the top area of the plantation to scare away the villagers. The villagers did not dare to go back to their fields and collect the harvest.

These villagers fled to the jungle to save themselves from the oppressive hands of the military that occupied their fields and homes. Like so many others in Burma they became internally displaced from their homelands. The conditions in the jungle are very harsh. Women and children are the most affected emotionally, physically and mentally.

I remember one village in particular, where practically everyone was sick, some worse than others. I witnessed a situation where six members of a family were seriously ill, but they had not received any medical care. In another family a six year-old girl and her mother who was seven months pregnant were both suffering from fever. Her older daughter had died from malaria just two months earlier. I also saw twin babies who were orphaned in the jungle after their mother died of a uterus infection. She died because she didn't get medical care after delivering her babies. Three days after delivering her babies she had

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struggled, through heavy rains, carrying her two newborn babies as she fled from the SPDC. She became ill and eventually died. Her babies were only 3 months old. These were horrible scenes witnessed with my own two eyes.

In war zones, like the areas I have traveled, people don't have security. They do not have the luxury of time and the opportunity to think about human rights and the environment or to work for these concerns. They are busy just surviving their difficult situation. No one can guarantee the protection of their human rights. It is in this context that we work with the communities to raise awareness of human rights and environmental issues.

The building of dams has a negative effect on the lives of people in Karen State. As part of the movement against dam building, we try to explain to people the negative impact that dams and these mega development projects will have on the environment and on the ever dismal condition of human rights. At first people cannot see it, or recognize this issue as important. But as we persistently, steadily and slowly work, empower and educate the people about dam issues, they gradually understand and realize the magnitude and significance of these issues, which will affect their lives in the worst possible ways.

There are many challenges in our work. The situation in Burma continues to get worse and the obstacles increase. Inside Burma the security of human rights activists is tight and risky. You need to have 3 eyes in order to detect danger. As a human rights and environmental activist, part of my work is establishing bridges between the work of people inside Burma and the work of those outside and in exile. I believe that the activities of people, including me, who are working on different issues like human rights, education and the environment in IDP areas are a strong force that contributes to the whole movement for peace, justice and democracy for Burma.

Despite the challenges at hand, we still are savoring the humble successes we have achieved as people working for our country.

I am not an educated person in the context of formal education. But in view of my work and experience, I know that it is indeed

important for people to be united, solid and passionate in their work for Burma if we want to achieve our goal of a peaceful and democratic country free from oppression. I personally think that it is better for some of our friends in the democratic movement to get higher education and work with us when they finish their education. I think it is equally important to go and visit the local communities and encourage them to persevere even though we cannot help them directly. I do this often. I get a sense of fulfillment merely visiting them and spending time with them, sharing whatever I can. Taking care of local people takes away my worries and gives me relief.

It has always been my desire to make a difference in the lives of our people. When the local community leaders see us being active in our work with our people and our community, they are pleased to see us taking responsibility in the areas where we were born and grew up, despite the difficulties we face. They always encourage me to be the best person that I can: to stand and speak for my community. This will always be part and parcel of my life. I will never grow tired of doing these things.

I will never forget the time when the SPDC atrocities were so severe that we didn't have enough food to eat and enough medicine to take care of the sick. One image that is stored in my mind reminds me of the trauma in my life and serves as a motivation for me to continue my work. It was when the army came into a village and shot many villagers and a villager was shot right in front of me. One constant voice I always hear in my memories are the cries, screams and mourning of my people. It was horrible for me to see and hear my own people dying. This trauma is painful for me, but it is also the very fire that is burning inside me to persevere and to continue working for my people and my country at all costs.

Naw Paw Gay Khu is a 37 year old Karen human rights and environmental activist. This story was adapted from an article originally written by Naw Paw Gay Khu and published in 'Yadana- ERI Alumni Program Newsletter' Volume 1. Issue No.6, 2006."

IN THE DAM'S PATH

Nan Nount Shan Kham

"All of the Yintalai people's lives depend on the Salween River. If these dams go ahead the remaining 1,000 Yintalai¹ people left in the world will become extinct."

I'm Nan Nount Shan Kham. I was born in the township of Pasaung in Karenni State, which is a small state in Burma. I come from a very poor family in a poor community. I'm the second daughter of U Sai and Ei Bue. Both of them were farmers, and they were very poor. I have five siblings. We didn't have money to prepare for our future.

I grew up in the refugee camp and I learned a lot there. I have had many different experiences in Burma and outside, which I want to share. I want people to understand why I became a refugee, what is happening in my heart and my fears about how the regime's Salween dam development project will wash away the remaining 1,000 of my people, the Yintalai people.

I will never forget when I was 8 or 9 years old and my peaceful life changed forever. It was October 1993 when my lovely dad was taken and forced to work as a porter by Light Infantry Battalion 337 of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). At the same time my kind mum, who had suffered from heart disease ever since she was young, was sick with a fever. So with mum sick and dad gone, there was no-one to support our family.

We had many problems in my family. We didn't have any money to support ourselves. We had to pay for school costs, medical care, and

¹ A common variation on the spelling of Yintalai is Yintaleh.

to take care of my younger brothers and sister. We used to eat soup, rice cooked with corn, maize, bamboo and vegetables.

My brother was just seven years old, but he left school and took over the duties of my dad. We didn't hear anything about my dad. We didn't know if he was alive or if he had died. My sisters and brother were always asking where our dad was. But one thing my lovely mum always told us was, "If you do good things the best things will come to you." But I knew that we had a lot of debt because my brother's wages were not enough to pay for what we needed for my family. So I also had to leave school to take care of my younger brothers and sister. We didn't have money to pay the nursery school costs for them, so I became a housekeeper and babysitter.

In November 1995, after two years had passed, we were feeling both sad and happy at the same time. My lovely dad was back, but he had not been released from his duties doing forced labor for the SPDC. He had fled, because the soldiers tortured him and his friends who were also detained and forced to work as porters. The SPDC soldiers knocked, kicked, and beat them. They didn't give them food to eat or water to drink. So my poor dad and three of his friends ran away. When he arrived home he was sick. He had wounds all over his body and he was very weak. When he found out that both my brother and I had left school and my mum was so sick during the time he was taken away by the SPDC, he felt so sad and became very depressed.

After my dad and mum started feeling better another development project of the SPDC regime came to affect our lives again. That project was to build a highway system through the area where we lived. When they built the highway they destroyed many farms, gardens, and houses because the highway was going to cross them. We were in the way of their new road, so we lost our house and we had to stay with my grandparents. Many families were affected by this development project, but like us, those families didn't get any compensation from the government.

After a year, my dad tried to send us to school, but it was impossible because we had many debts to pay back, so I started to

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work and tried to help my family however I could. For the next three years I sold things at the Thai-Burma border.

While I was selling goods at the border, I met my cousin who lived in the refugee camp near the Thai-Burma border. He found out about my family's life and felt so sorry for us. He asked me if I wanted to attend school. I really wanted to learn and get an education, so I told my parents, but they didn't want to go to the refugee camp even though they didn't have a place to live inside Burma. Why didn't they want to go? The SPDC had spread propaganda in Burma saying that the refugee camps were dark areas and that the families who live in those camps supported the rebels. My family didn't want to go and they didn't allow me to go either. But I went anyway and became a refugee.

I arrived at the camp in July 1999. I could study well in the refugee camp, but during my studies I missed my family so much and I felt so lonely. However I tried to improve my life and I had a clear goal: to help my community.

While I was in middle school, I joined some women's and human rights organizations and participated with them. I gained a lot of knowledge from them. When I finished high school in 2003/2004, I continued at post-ten school for a year and joined the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) at the same time. After completing post-ten school I worked with BWU – one year with camp justice and one year as a teacher in the school.

Through my political work, I became more aware about human rights abuses in Burma, and more determined to work for our people to end these abuses.

My family, like many others in rural areas, has suffered the consequences of the SPDC's so called 'development projects.' The SPDC's current plan to build dams on the free-flowing Salween River will be no different. The dams project will affect many people as well as the natural environment, species, and forests. There are many villagers who depend on the Salween River. The project will damage many lives. It will destroy the ethnic people's livelihood and indigenous life because

there are many villages and towns on the Salween River. It will affect villages and towns both upstream and downstream of the dams.

One of the ethnic groups with the most to lose from the Salween Dams is the Yintalai. All of the Yintalai people's lives depend on the Salween River. If these dams go ahead the remaining 1,000 Yintalai people left in the world will become extinct. Most of the Yintalai people live in the northern part of Pasaung Township, Awe Aung village, Baw La Keh village and Ray Nii Pont village in Karenni State. Many of these villages and towns will have to be relocated because of this dam project. So those Yintalai people will lose their livelihood, culture, lifestyle and population.

Currently I'm studying at the Earthrights School. When I complete my education I will use everything I have learned to help them. I have to protect human rights, the environment, and the poor Yintalai people, because I belong to a Yintalai family. I hope the military dictatorship in Burma is overthrown soon.