Do dreams come true?

‘Illegal’ young female Shan refugees in Northern Thailand: coping with contradicting (in)securities.

Master’s thesis

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Refugees without a Camp

The regime’s soldiers advance.
They kill our animals, take our rice.
From our schools they take the learning and light.
They burn our villages and steal our minds.
We hear the soldiers’ voice, and we are filled with fear and hate.
And we must run, run, run, until our legs break,
Refugees without a home, without a camp.

They dress our Buddhas in women’s underwear.
We see our people floating bloated in the river.
We have land but cannot farm it, forced labour in our lot.
“peace, peace, peace”, they say. Burma says we are at peace.
But we are not. We hear gunshots night and day.
And we must run, run, run, until our legs break,
Refugees without a home, without a camp.

Some Shan live in Thailand, work as servants or as slaves,
Some live in relocation camps, without money, food, or hope.
Some live in the jungle and hear their dying child’s cries,
Mosquitoes on their limbs, and leeches in their eyes.
They dig a shallow grave and place the child inside,
And then they must run, run, run, until their legs break,
Refugees without a home, without a camp.

Original Shan language poem by Lenghsim (hshenhoe)
English adaptation by Bernice Koehler Johnson (In SWAN 2003: 2)
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I want to dedicate this thesis to all the inspirational Shan young women,

Thanks my beautiful friends for your warmth, strength and integrity. I think about you often and wish you many good things throughout your lives.
I also want to thank their families and friends who were always happy to talk to me, no matter what time of the day or how long it took.

Pao Naing (you know who you are), thanks a million for translating, for being a friend, for always helping me out, you are a beautiful young woman.
Nang Lao, your smile will always be with me, thanks for your ever accepting love.
Noon, your strength goes a million miles, thanks for sharing yourself with me.
Nam Pon, beautiful, powerful, engaged young woman, thanks for sharing your inner strength.
Kham Yin, strong and spirited, thanks for showing me your world.

My warm gratitude goes towards all the people in Thailand who helped me throughout the research: Teachers at the migrant school, Professors at the University, you have been patient and very helpful providing me a wealth of advice. Jildou, Ben, Steve, Sandra, Roger, Plai, Sachiko, Amporn, we will meet and share our passions again.

I owe great thanks to Ellen Bal, who’s supervision throughout the process was spirited. Your passion for people and your enthusiasm is inspiring. Above all Ellen, thanks for your trust in me, it has strengthened my belief in my own abilities.

Of course I need to thank Arjan, for his encouragement and trust within times where I found myself lost in chaos. My family and friends, who are always there, tanks. I am very happy that I know you all.

The painting on the front cover is from Mg Aw, an artist from Burma. I have chosen to use this painting because the face of the woman is not visible. It stands for the anonymity that the women in this thesis need. Beside this the painting in my eyes expresses the light, power and beauty of the Shan young women within a restricted space. This is how I visualize their ‘being’ and context.
1. Introduction

“Last Saturday, a Thai student was raped and murdered by two migrant workers ……Hundreds of Shan migrant workers have been arrested when Thai authorities conducted an immigration raid in buildings resided by Shan migrant workers since yesterday…… “If raids are staged because of this crime, it is not fair,” said a worker. “They should arrest only the perpetrators and punish them but not all the migrant workers.” Following the incident, some workers were dismissed out from their jobs, and others were facing difficulties to apply for any jobs, according to many workers” (Shan Herald Agency for News, 11 February 2009).

It happened overnight: a twenty two year old Thai University student was raped and murdered by two Shan construction workers. The next morning, Thai students and civilians took their rights into their own hands and raided the areas surrounding the university grounds together with the police. Since a large number of the city’s inhabitants are Shan refugees gathered together in cheap apartment blocks and work places, it was not difficult to locate their place of residence. The reason why they live so close together is that most of the Shan are only permitted to work as unskilled labourers in seven types of jobs within 11 sectors. These include farming, orchards and plantation, shrimp and fish farming, fishing, food and seafood processing, animal husbandry, forestry, construction and domestic work (MAP 2006: 38). Cheap housing in these industries is provided by the employer, tying the Shan to one place without much space to move.

The harsh reaction of the Thai community to the murder and rape incident was provoked over time by large influx of refugees fleeing from Burma into Thailand. The discourses on Shan illegal migrant workers, who cause both unemployment and disturbance of the peace in Thai society, have been spread all over the country in Thai media and in everyday conversations (Yasuda 2008: 70). Interviewees and Shan scholars observed that a hostile attitude towards the Shan had already surfaced, and the murder of an innocent Thai University student evoked rage in the community that had been simmering for a long time.

The murder and rape incident occurred after spending one month in the field, having already heard about the feelings of insecurity faced by young Shan women. Scraps of field notes reveal the tense atmosphere at the time:
“13th February. Did the police arrest or harm anyone we know? This is the first question I ask Pao Naing after reading the news about the raids that happened in my research area. It was time to get a visa extension and I just left the day before. She calls me back within a couple of hours to tell me every one we know is okay, but the people on the construction site told her that some of their family members were arrested during the raids. She said: The police also arrests people with work permits and especially young people are arrested. Near my cousins and boyfriends place there were raids the police came knocking on the doors at night and arrested lots of people, luckily both of them were unharmed.”

The example above illustrates the tenuous situation faced by Shan refugees who confront insecurities on a daily basis. They came to Thailand in order to flee a harsh political atmosphere in Burma, where repression and civil wars have been ongoing for forty seven years now. Many of the refugees are young people, with no other place to go than behind the national border, fleeing into new uncertainties of ‘being’ an ‘illegal refugee’. The young Shan females in this research are expected, by Thai authorities, to fall into illegality or semi legality because they are not officially recognized as refugees. Once the young ‘illegal refugees’ arrive in Thailand they have to find their way through the complex circuit of Thai bureaucracy, joining the many illegal Shan already living inside Northern Thailand. In the absence of many formal arrangements and with no local support structure, the majority does not have much political freedom; they have to move within the given system.

The research for this thesis was conducted in a city in Northern Thailand, for safety reasons I will not mention any real names of people and places. The fact that the Shan are illegal or semi legal puts them in a precarious position, wherein the Thai state can severely interfere in the lives of the young women. In turn, the Burmese regime has spies surveying illegal refugees who fled from Burma. If they discover what they see as indecent acts, especially with regard to political activities, they will deport people to Burma. Even though I cannot reveal the true identity of the inspirational young women I met, I want to acknowledge the way they lead their lives with tremendous appreciation.

This thesis will specifically focus on young women; I want to depart from the stereotype of refugees which characterizes them as one homogenous group stereotypically depicted by an adult male. Besides this, within youth and refugee discourses females are given less voice than men and
are mostly seen as victims, which leads to policy making based on victimization theories. They are seen as lacking agency. What do the young women themselves think about their situation and how do they cope with the external pressure they live within? The aim of this thesis is to take a bottom up approach to get an understanding of the young females’ perceptions; what are their fears, what do they think of their life chances and what are their future dreams?

The position of young, ‘illegal’ Shan refugees is difficult in general. They have less power than adults and are expected to be the bearers of the future. The insecure circumstances faced by them every day, with hardly any opportunity to reach a higher level in society, tremendously influences their life chances. Where do these young people belong if they cannot go back to their ‘homeland’ and they are not allowed to become citizens of Thailand? Is the fate of the young female Shan refugees to keep on floating in between?

There is an urgent need to address these multifaceted insecurities in order to contribute independent, valuable research on the Shan ‘illegal’ Shan refugee youth community. This knowledge could be useful for policymakers and NGOs working with young people in order to make programmes that can really support Shan young women inside Northern Thailand; in order to address issues that are important for young Shan women themselves, these programmes must integrate methods which connect the young Shan with their own cultural values and beliefs.

**Research question**

Having a past in a country divided by internal pressure and civil wars, in addition to living on a daily life basis under severe circumstances shapes the young Shan women's behaviour and actions. It is their experiences within these circumstances that I am interested in: focusing on their perceptions of (in)security, their coping strategies and how this shapes their future dreams. Hence the central research question is:

*How do ‘illegal’ young female Shan refugees in Northern Thailand perceive their daily life (in)securities and in what ways do they cope with these (in)securities?*

The sub questions are:

- What does being young and female mean to the illegal female Shan refugees?
- What are the most important daily life (in)securities for the illegal female Shan refugees?
How do the illegal young female Shan refugees cope with their daily life (in)securities?
How do the illegal young female Shan refugees describe their future aspirations?

Human Security has been used as an analytical tool during the research in order to give a holistic analysis of the gathered data. It gave me the opportunity to point out the most important (in)securities of the young females under study.

**Research Motivations**

My own motivations to research ‘illegal’ young female Shan refugees in Northern Thailand are diverse. I have always been interested in ‘helping’ people, so I studied Creative Therapy and have worked as a therapist in various places in the Netherlands and abroad. Travelling and working in Asia and South America opened up a new world for me, I became concerned with people who were born in countries where freedom was not easily attained. When visiting Burma in 2006 I saw the cruelty of daily life for the inhabitants, unlocking the feeling that I could no longer ‘do nothing’ for the people from Burma; therefore I started volunteering at The Burma Centre Netherlands. For all of the above reasons, the decision to research refugees from Burma was easily made.

Burma, the second biggest dictatorship in the world after North Korea, is still unknown to many people. Human rights are violated on a daily basis, causing severe insecurities for the population as a whole. It is therefore necessary to illuminate the circumstances in which people flee from this country. Going inside Burma as a researcher would endanger people, because of tight state control; talking to a foreigner can lead to imprisonment. The people fleeing from the military regime crossing the border into Thailand do not get asylum easily. Once outside the boundaries many are not recognized as refugees, causing severe insecurities on top of the already problematic circumstances. State policies deny basic human rights for the Shan, therefore it is important to address the young women who are generally portrayed as victims within these circumstances. The central aim of this thesis is to narrate the stories of the young women themselves, including their verbal experiences, daily life practices, ways of coping, and future aspirations. I tried to write myself into the thesis as much as possible so that the reader can see the ideals, worldview and visions of the researcher herself, encouraging the critical reader to interpret the thesis through various lenses to get as close to the women as possible.
Setting the scene

This part of the introduction will briefly explain the background of the Shan and their position within Burma. It will address the ‘ideal postcolonial nation state mission’ of Burma in order to understand why so many ethnic groups and specifically the Shan flee the country. Then the position of the Shan in Thailand will be addressed to highlight the difficulties faced through political and public debates.

Who are the Shan?

The term, ‘Shan’ is derived from the British colonial period referring to Tai-language speaking people who live in present Burma, comprised out of various Tai groups; in turn, the Shan refer to themselves as Tai (Jirattikorn 2007: 4, Yasuda 2008: 4). However, Tai-language speaking people do not only reside in Burma; the creation of nation state borders resulted in the spreading of these people over various territories, “including Thailand, Burma, Laos, Northern Vietnam, Southern China, and Northeastern India. Broadly speaking, they are divided into six groups: Tai-Long, Tai Nü, Tai Khün, Tai Khanti, Tai Lue and Tai Yuan” (Yasuda 2008: 4). Various historical explanations have been sought in order to identify the Shan, yet it must be noted that Burma in general has a complex ethnic history, for ethnic relations have been in a constant flux: politically, socially and culturally (Smith 1991: 33).

Eberhardt (2006) observed that most of the Shan people are Theravada Buddhists, linking their beliefs with other beliefs and practices, including rituals related to spirits. They cannot be easily categorized as ‘hill people’ or ‘valley people’, for they live in narrow upland valleys halfway up the mountain sides. They mainly cultivate their valleys with irrigated rice and many of them are therefore farmers (Eberhardt 2006: 14). Many of the people in this research came from a farming background and, before coming to Thailand, worked on farms their whole lives. Besides farming, trading was also mentioned regularly as a source of income for the family.

The specific community that is the focus of this thesis lives in a city in Northern Thailand, where there are altogether over 200,000 Shan (Jirattikorn 2007: 4). Most of the refugees in the city end up as construction workers, housemaids, market sellers, factory workers, cleaners or security workers. The reason for a high density of Shan workers in certain industries is bound to

1 Tai is pronounced as Dai.
state policies concerning migrants. Most of the Shan are only permitted to work as unskilled labourers in seven types of work in 11 sectors; these include farming, working in orchards and plantations, shrimp farming, fishing, food and seafood processing, animal husbandry, forestry, construction and domestic work (MAP 2006: 38). Unskilled labourers get a work permit card, which is a ‘Temporary Residence Permit while awaiting deportation’ (MAP 2006: 38). This permit and the low wages within these jobs tie the Shan to one boss, living in a bounded district; the boss provides cheap, over-crowded housing near the workplace, giving them hardly any space to move (MAP 2006: 39). This will be further elaborated on in the theory part on displacement and refugees.

The next question that comes to mind is: why do the Shan flee from Burma when their situation in Thailand is far from ideal?

**Shan and the Burmese State**

When looking at the map of Burma, it is evident that a division of states are drawn into the map. Lang (2002) writes that since the colonial days and thereafter, politization of ethnicity and mobilization of ethnic allegiances in opposition to the state took shape. Burmese ‘State’ leaders have tried to create a unified Burmese nationhood opposing the central population of Burma to the people living in the ‘margins’ or border areas (Callahan 2004: 28). People in the centre are pushed to become a homogenous group, set up against the people in the ‘margins’ (ibid: 28). However the people living in the borderlands have fought for five decades against the Burmese State in order to obtain political freedom.

2 Website “there is work to be done”
Jirattikorn (2007) claims that the struggle for Shan independence is one of the most longstanding ethno-nationalist movements in the history of Burma, starting from the point where the Burmese regime broke with the Panglong Agreement\(^3\) (p. 13). The ongoing unrest in Shan State causes extreme insecurities. One of the people I talked with during the research, Sai Hark, a nephew of Nang Maw, often told me about the situation back in Shan state:

“When I was young the Burmese, Shan en PAO armies were fighting the whole time. It often happened that people from our village were abused, shot and killed. Now the shooting is less, but the armies still control the village and if the villagers have a mutual problem the soldiers hit them and tell them that they have to pay money and put them into jail, if they don’t pay they get shot. The armies also come to recruit men to work for them for free so it becomes very difficult to earn a living.”

Abusive practices and severe human rights violations in their ‘hometowns’ were mentioned by all the Shan with whom I spoke. While having dinner with Nang Lao and a close friend coming from the same village in Shan state, they told me how it is almost impossible to live inside Burma. People lose their homes and farms through forced relocation programs and no longer have the possibility of sustaining themselves. There is tight military control carried out by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)\(^4\) in many areas, demanding the villagers to do forced labour and pay high taxes to the Burmese State. Human right abuses produce severe insecurities for Shan living inside Burma, instigating large numbers of people to flee across the border into Thailand. According to ALTSEAN\(^5\) (2008), Burma is the world’s third largest source of refugees after Afghanistan and Iraq. “During 2005, the highest numbers of new and appeal asylum claims worldwide were filed by nationals from Burma (55,800)” (ALTSEAN 2008).

\(^3\) The Panglong Agreement was signed during the struggle of independence in 1947 where ethnic minority groups agreed to become incorporated into the Union of Burma with maintenance of their right of secession from the proposed federation after ten years (Silverstein 1958: 34-57).

\(^4\) The SPDC is the political party of the military regime.

\(^5\) Alternative ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Network on Burma.
The Shan in Thailand

“Upon arrival in Thailand there is hardly any possibility to become a full member of their host society, so many of them are forced to work long hours. Others must steal food, beg, and sell themselves into prostitution as they struggle to escape their extreme circumstances” (Refugees International 2008). The Shan are not received as refugees in Thailand neither are they allowed to become a full member of the Thai society. Policies addressing asylum seekers are the root cause of this ultimate hardship faced by the Shan. The Thai government characterizes refugees as displaced people ‘fleeing active fighting’, a definition that does not comply with international law and excludes large numbers of refugees from Burma (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2006: 1-2, Lang 2002: 18).

World Refugee Survey (2004) and Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2006) describe the situation in Thailand as follows: since the mid-1980s, hundreds of thousands of Burmese refugees have fled to Thailand. The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) estimated that over 400,000 Burmese refugees were living in Thailand at the end of 2003. Approximately 2 million additional Burmese were living in undocumented status in Thailand, of whom USCRI estimated 260,000 had fled human rights abuses but remained unrecognized as refugees. This included approximately 200,000 Shan refugees fleeing forced relocations and forced labour in Shan State, who are not acknowledged by the Thai authorities and are generally labelled as “illegal” migrant workers.

Multiple state designations of cross-border migrants, different identification cards and the changing registration system and criteria for work permits represent a confusing, vague, arbitrary and contradictory classification system of the Thai state (Grundy-Warr 2004: 230). The registration process for these identification cards is, in theory, based on the immigrant’s ethnicity, country of origin and time of arrival (Vicary 2006: 69). There are various types of these cards; some are more valuable than others, offering either basic rights or hardly any at all. The Shan are perceived as migrants despite their socio-political background, and mainly qualify for the “alien labor card” (“bad raeng ngan tang dao”) known as “work permit card.” It was first introduced in 1992 in order to

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6 Website: “Refugees International”
7 In addition to rejecting a comprehensive refugee definition, the Thai government has applied different policies at different times to refugees from Burma. (See Human Rights Watch report, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Thai Policy toward Burmese Refugees” February 2004).
control “illegal” migrants from Burma as well as to supply labour to offset Thailand’s labour shortage (Yasuda 2008: 74). “Since the beginning, however, the conditions and criteria of registration and regulations for migrant workers have changed almost every year. Not only have shifting state policies brought confusion among cross-border migrants but also the high registration fee has rendered them reluctant to apply for a work permit. It is also said that the Thai government profits from the registration system, which requires migrant workers to renew their work permits every year. Furthermore, in some cases, employers withhold work permit cards from Shan to restrict their mobility, in order to deter them from running away or moving to a better work place”(Yasuda 2008: 74).

Besides Thai state policies, national discourses concerning the Shan are widespread, addressing the Shan as Tai Yai (Greater Thai) especially in Northern Thailand and presenting them as distant siblings. Historically, the Thai and Shan have a connection and are culturally related through commonalities such as Theravada Buddhism, speaking a similar language and sharing historical perceptions (Yasuda 2008: 6-7). This latter point dates back to the sixth century, when great migration waves in the Tai speaking areas, including what is now called Northern Thailand and Shan State, took place, and borders were not defined as today (Yasuda 2008: 47-48).

To the outside world, the Shan are often portrayed as 'distant siblings' which comes across as a very friendly label. However, presenting “intimate ethnic relations may result in obscuring class differentiation between the Shan and the Thai which has been socially constructed and reinforced by various social institutions such as borders, check-points, citizenship, social classification and immigration law in practice ( Yasuda 2008: 8).” The father of someone who became a close friend during the research told me that the Shan are generally discriminated upon in Thailand.

“The Thai calls us Tai Yai, when they talk to you and other foreigners they say 'the Shan are our big brothers', this must sound friendly to you, but they are not welcoming us here. They tell us we are alien workers, this term cannot be translated into English directly, it is a rude word in Thai language, by no means friendly at all”.

The migrant assistance program states that families, women and men migrating from Burma lose their individual identities, as they are merged into one official categorization: ‘illegal alien workers’ (MAP 2006: 8). There is a tension between the discourse presenting the Shan as a 'distant sibling', emphasizing similarities in terms of language and culture, and the discriminative discourses and

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8 Tai is how the Shan call themselves, Shan is an English name given to them during colonial rule.
policies labelling the Shan as 'alien workers'. The Shan feel betrayed by the way the Thai present their sibling affection to foreigners and the outside world and at the same time use discriminative policies and discourses towards the Shan community.

This chapter gave an historical overview of the Shan fleeing persecution and severe insecurities brought about by the Burmese state, eventually arriving in Thailand as asylum seekers. The Thai state does not receive them as refugees and labels them alien workers, which does not respect their basic human rights. At the same time, they are portrayed as big brothers to the outside world. The Shan feel there is not much justice for them; they live in-between conflicting discourses and policies. It is therefore necessary to address this in-between position of the Shan.

**Outline**

This thesis consists out of seven chapters. The next chapter on theory will address important political and theoretical debates within the arena of displacement and refugee studies. Chapter three will present the methodological approach taken within the research.

Chapters four and five are the data chapters of this thesis addressing various layers of insecurities through thematic chapters. The chapters are based on the most important themes that arose during fieldwork. How young Shan women first reacted to state terror, and the impact of this on their daily lives, is highlighted in chapter four. Chapter five will explain what it means to be a young Shan female, revealing the daily life practices and the influences they have on life chances and future aspirations. Finally, I shall conclude by referring to the debates discussed within the theory chapter.

The key words of this research are displacement, young female Shan refugees, future aspirations and human (in)security.
2. Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how this thesis looked at the Shan young women under research it is necessary to address specific theoretical concepts. This chapter will start explaining human security with a main focus on existential security operationalized as future aspirations. It will then address political and theoretical debates on displacement and refugees clarifying the necessity for careful labelling of the displaced. The in between position of the Shan will be highlighted, which will bring understanding of why I label the Shan as illegal refugees in this thesis.

Being young and female within the context of refugeeness are important aspects for the Shan asylum seekers affecting live chances profoundly therefore the focus will turn towards youth and gender illuminating the importance of social constructions of youth and females. The chapter will finish off with explaining coping strategies tactics and agency providing an overview of coping mechanisms in relation to ‘being’ a refugee.

Human Security and long term human fulfilment

_Human beings the world over need freedom and security that they may be able to realize their full potential (Aung San Suu Kyi)_

When the UNDP in 1994 introduced the concept of ‘human security’, it was argued that the concept of security was too narrow and focussed on threats to the state and national sovereignty, with this excluding the people and communities living within the state (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff forthcoming: 2). Human security was defined by the CHS in terms of freedom from want (livelihood) and freedom from fear (peace-keeping and post-conflict reconstruction) (CHS 2003: 4). This seems to imply that human security only exists if these two requirements are fulfilled (Alkire 2003: 18).

It also seems to entail that a human security approach should define and overcome a problem. From an analytical perspective this is bound to give problems. It suggests for example that there is a hierarchy among insecurities, but who will decide which insecurity is first and which is last in line (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff forthcoming: 2). “Moreover, human security for one person might bring insecurity for another, or worse, might cost the security (or life) of someone else…. In other words,

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^9 Website: “Daw Aung San Suu Kyi”
new securities come with new insecurities, are perceived differently by different people, are context related and thus also shift in time (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff forthcoming: 2).

Human security in my perspective should be focused on individuals or communities, while at the same time not neglecting national, regional or even international dimensions (Alkire 2003: 25).

Following Alkire (2002) this thesis stresses the importance of including long term human fulfilment, which is based on an existential dimension within human security. Existential security includes: cultural, cognitive, emotional, religious and symbolic dimensions (CONSEC, 2007). This dimension of life according to the CONSEC document and Alkire is what makes the individuals truly human. Existential security is related to the feeling of being; it gives meaning to people’s lives (Giddens 1991, CONSEC 2007). According to Giddens 1991, it can be seen that existential security contains three elements: first, giving meaning to life; second, controlling personal reality, and third, fulfilment of one’s dreams. All these existential aspects can be threatened under external pressure of economic, physical and social insecurity.

In order to enable an emic perspective, I will especially use Leanings concept of human security, as described by, Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff. Leaning stresses the social and psychological well-being of individuals and communities. The needs of people can be seen on three levels: 1) Relationships with location: sustainable sense of home and safety, providing identity, recognition, and freedom from fear. 2) Relationships with community: network of constructive social or family support, providing identity, recognition, participation, and autonomy. 3) Relationships with time: acceptance of the past and positive grasp of the future, providing identity, recognition, participation, and autonomy (p. 3). These three dimensions are of importance, because location, relations with the community and relations with time are all part of the holistic analysis within this thesis.

In this thesis I will be aware of all the dimensions of human security in order to understand how young women define and prioritise their sense of security. I will address the (in)securities of importance to the young women. I will specifically focus on existential security assuming that, people need meaning in their life, and when this is not possible, due to harsh circumstances or lacking freedom, people take risks in order to obtain this freedom and regain meaning in life (Horst 2003). Existential aspects can be threatened under external pressure of economic, physical and social insecurity. In the data chapters, the layers of insecurity will become even more prevalent, showing for example how social security can cause existential security. Existential security is operationalized in this thesis as ‘future aspirations’; this has been very useful for this research as will become clear in the data chapters four and five.
Displacement; migrants or refugees?

“Nationalism is an infantile sickness. It is the measles of the human race” (Albert Einstein\textsuperscript{10}).

\textit{Displacement and the nation state}

Literature on displacement generally lack clear cut definitions, which contributes to the problem of defining Shan living in Thailand. Politics, scholars and media address them as illegal migrants, forced migrants, or refugees; using these concepts greatly influences the way that people are looked at, impacting general discourses and perceptions and causing inaction (Wolf 1994, Grundy-War and Wong Siew Yin 2002). Since conceptualization of the displaced Shan people affects their life chances, limiting freedom in an immense way, addressing these concepts is of great importance. Insight into these matters on a global and local dimension will bring forth the reasons behind complex labelling politics, making it possible to take a stance in theoretical and political debates.

When looking at the global dimensions of displacement it immediately becomes clear how displacement is tied to the concept of nationalism and putting people in a nation state straight jacket; people belong to a nation and need to identify themselves with this concept (Malkki 1995: 5). So when people are forced to flee their country, becoming ‘stateless’, they do not fit into this neat category of the national order of things anymore (ibid: 5). Nation states were created to structure the world, dividing land into political entities. By doing so, people living within these structures are bound to belong in one country. As a consequence of state neglect to care for and protect its population, certain groups of people living within national boundaries are harmed by the state and left on their own. Instead of a protective system, the state becomes a threatening system for certain individuals or groups of people. Many scholars (Turner 1976, Douglass 1966, Malkki 1995 and more) have written about how the stateless are pictured as an exception to the national order of things, forming a threat to the structured organisation of social and political life. Malkki (1995: 7) cites Turner (1976), who suggests that “transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’ all the recognized fixed points in the space-time of cultural classification”. Policymakers tend to turn a blind

\hspace*{1.5cm}\footnote{Website Thinkexist.com}

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eye on the problematic concept of the stateless and make policies under the token of nationality (Malkki 1995: 7).

Besides being labelled as a threat, displaced people are mainly depicted as being helpless and are seen as victims. The stateless are displaced and thus seek asylum in a country ‘foreign’ to them. Asylum literally means ‘freedom from seizure’ and this already implies a need for protection (Lang 2002: 13). Being stateless is seen as a loss of humanity because the stateless are exposed to “the abstract nakedness of being human, when they can no longer rely on a state to insure their protection” (Lang 2002: 13, Horst 2003: 12).

**Labelling; politics and ideology**

Knowing now that within theoretical debates the stateless are conceptualized as a threat and portrayed as victims, it becomes possible to turn to the political challenges of displacement. Horst (2003) says, “The actual labelling of people as asylum seekers, refugees, labour migrants or other legal categories is often a matter of political or ideological considerations, as it determines who a state allows to enter. For a nation state, granting refugee status to an individual simultaneously entails a political act towards that individual's home country, as it implies the failure of the that other state too protect its citizens” (p.13). This has of course major implications for foreign affair relations with the home country of those fleeing.

External policy-making debates on displacement mainly focus on refugees without looking at displacement as a whole, excluding groups of people who are not defined as refugees. Lang (2002: 14) argues that the 1951 UN Convention based on the conception of a refugee fails to take into account the challenges and conditions of displacement frequently encountered today. The convention defines a refugee as “a person with a well-founded fear of persecution due to nationality, race, religion, political conviction, or belonging to a specific social group” (Horst 2003: 12). Lang (2002: 15-17) summarizes the definition of a refugee in the 1951 UN convention, as an individual who is personally engaged in political controversy and/or a target of abuse by state power. Horst (2003) and Lang (2002) agree that the concept of the 1951 Convention is not all that clear in its definition of a refugee; it is highly subjective, and excludes many displaced people. They ask the questions: “what is well-founded fear?”, and “what about people who are not personally political engaged and are not targeted directly?” Excluding in this case the Shan from the refugee status, not all Shan are targeted personally by the military regime or are politically active. Many flee forced relocation programmes, causing homelessness and poverty as was explained in chapter two.
The UN has repeatedly confirmed that the abuses Burmese people, including the Shan exodus, from would fall under the definition of 1951 Convention for refugees (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2006: 11). Scholars like Callahan (2004), Lang (2002), Smith (1999), and Silverstein (2004) have also acknowledged the rampant and violent human right abuses imposed upon the entire Burmese population by the dictatorial regime.

The reasons for not labelling asylum seekers as refugees are often based on political and economic interests. In political discourse, it becomes evident that when asylum seekers are labelled as refugees, this directly implies the ‘hometown’ state’s failure of protecting the people who fled from their country. This has consequences for the contacts that nation states have with each other. In the case of Thailand, this becomes very clear because it has long term business and military ties with Burmese leaders (Grundy-War and Wong Siew Yin 2002: 115).

Economic considerations play a tremendous role in defining the displaced, for it is seen worldwide that there is a need for cheap labour forces which creates illegal or semi legal circuits (De Genova 20002: 422). Undocumented migrants have an economically added value for the services they supply to citizens (De Genova: 422). It is important to understand that the Thai state perceives the Shan as migrants no matter what their socio-political backgrounds are, deeming them either illegal or semi legal. With semi legality I mean that many qualify for an ‘alien labor card’ (bad raeng ngan tang dao) known as ‘work permit card’. This is a temporary permit for awaiting deportation, handed out to the Shan in order to be able to control ‘illegal’ migrants from Burma and to supply cheap labor to offset Thailand’s labor shortage (Map 2006: 38, Yasuda 2008: 74). Furthermore it should be noted that the massive stream of displaced people coming into Thailand from various neighbouring Indochinese countries and Burma in the 1970’s and 80’s made Thailand suffer from “refugee fatigue” (Lang 2002: 98). It became clear in foreign affair relations with the Burmese regime that the use of Shan people as cheap labour forces and huge amounts of refugees can be seen as reasons why Thailand defines them as alien workers, migrants or refugees (Grundy-Warr and Wong Siew Yin 2002, Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2006).

In this thesis I will address the Shan young women as ‘illegal’ refugees for the following reasons. First of all, because the Shan people fled rampant and violent human rights abuses, the UN, scholars and Burmese asylum seekers legitimise the use of the refugee label for the Shan people fleeing their ‘homeland’. The second motive for making this choice is that Thai internal political and economic issues are chosen over human security issues of the asylum seekers. The positions of Shan within the Thai state are ambiguous in that they fall between “political and economic” and “refugees and migrant workers” which disregards complex root causes of migration and displacement. Thai policies concerning the Shan are complex state control mechanisms ranging from political, social and
economic aspects and covering regional, national and international scales. On a political level, they are denied refugee status but on an analytical level, they have to be seen as refugees. Migrants, refugees, legality and illegality are socio-political constructs; therefore I choose to call the Shan ‘illegal refugees’ to address their political, physical, economic and existentially insecure background and their present precarious position within Thailand. As unacknowledged refugees, they fall in a different nonexistent political category which on an analytical level can be differentiated making it a useful concept for the Shan. In this way the Shan asylum seekers are acknowledged in their complex in-between situation, enabling holistic and inclusive analysis possibilities.

**Young female refugees**

‘Youth is just a word’ (Pierre Bourdieu).

*Is being young the same as youth?*

At the start of my research, theory on youth was taken as a point of departure. Youth was perceived as a life-stage; however, while the research evolved, questions arose on the relevance of youth as a category. Does being young automatically mean that one is part of the youth? Do young people always belong to a category or do they carry out a certain lifestyle? Is youth, in the case of the Shan young women, relevant as an analytical concept? Before answering these questions it is important to address literature on youth in order to understand the departure point of my research perspective.

In general, research on youth lacks a clear conceptual definition and shows that youth, as a separate category, is difficult to define (Bucholtz 2002: 526). The definition of the UNHCR on youth for example is diffuse. On the one hand, they suggest that definitions of youth vary across cultures, and on the other hand, they define youth as encompassing people between the ages of 13 and 25 (UNHCR and Refugee Youth 2003: 2). Many anthropological, sociological and psychological studies have granted the concept of youth a meaning, seeing it as a developmental or life stage. However the transition from childhood to adulthood should not be seen as a fixed stage (Christiansen et al 2005: 10). Youth should also not be seen as a homogeneous group; young people are heterogeneous in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, political position, and age (Abbink 2005, De Boeck and Honawa 2005).

Furthermore, the relations between the youth and their contextual surroundings should not be taken for granted; they can be given opportunities in their environment, and at the same time be constrained. Sometimes young people gain and other times lose from and within these relationships.
Discourses of state terror within the Shan community tremendously influence the relationships between youth and their multi-contextual surroundings. Durham (2004) argues that many studies appear to discuss youth as a generational category. By identifying a set of relationships such as, for instance, children and parents, a certain meaning is given to each group. The centrality of relationships in these conceptualizations of youth has the danger to suggesting binary oppositions. What makes this approach complicated is that the meaning of the generational relations is influenced by the context. Despite the fact that a person has achieved an adult age, his or her parents might still call that person a child. Therefore Durham (2004), Bucholtz (2002) and Christiansen et al (2005), argue for an analysis of youth as a 'social shifter.'

As the research evolved, it became clear that the young Shan women did not experience themselves as young and did not claim to be treated by others as a separate group. Bourdieu’s expression, “Youth is just a word” is clearly demonstrated within the case of the young Shan women. Obviously the concept of youth is contextually bounded, having limited relevance in the opinion of the Shan young women living in Thailand. However, even though it has no meaning to the young women themselves, community discourses reveal that the young are generally targeted as a different group when it comes to carrying out coping strategies of the community.

In light of Shan community discourses (as will be demonstrated in chapter five) there is therefore some analytical relevance to the concept of youth. Looking intensely at context and dependency in the case of the young female Shan refugees fostered a better understanding of their experiences and the importance of future aspirations as a coping mechanism within their contextual surroundings.

Refugees and gender; victims or agents?

Before leaving the field, I did not pay much notice to gender specifically as a theoretical concept. However, during the research process, being female became a prevailing subject. Lammers (1999) notes that, as an analytical tool, human security gives space to actors which offers significant opportunities to address practical gender issues (p.61). In this thesis, I will demonstrate that the human security lens has enabled the women under study to voice out their individual experiences.

Regarding gender, Schrijvers (1999) writes, “Gender can be seen as a key relational power dimension of human activity and thought. Informed by culturally and historically specific notions of masculinity and femininity, it has far ranging consequences for the overall positioning of women, men and children in all social domains, and it determines to a great extent the way in which people experience lives” (p.308). Especially in the field of refugee studies, gender has not been taken into
account deliberately and refugees are still too often portrayed as an all-male, homogenous group (Lammers 1999: 61, Schrijvers 1998). Not taking gender into account not only excludes women, it neglects views of how gender affects refugees lives tremendously; refugees carry a past and have to adapt to new, mostly different circumstances, which may impart a re-negotiation of gender relations and identity (Kusakabe 2007: 301). “Women juggle multiple identities and create their own spaces in different locales as leverage to empower themselves to resist oppression and exploitation Kusakabe 2007: 301). This image of women as active agents who create their own spaces is not a concept taken for granted in traditional refugee studies. Mainly refugee women are portrayed as victims; victimization concepts are thus taken for granted with regard to women (Lammers 1999: 58).

Schrijver (1999) urges people to look at gender in relation to power relations, privilege, and prestige, and how these are informed by “notions of maleness and femaleness” (p. 308). In order to understand how women themselves experience their position, it is important to move away from victimization theories to view women as social actors who can gain and lose within every given situation and relation. The Sri Lankan refugee women Schrijvers describes were vulnerable because men had powerful positions; however, at the same time, they reframed their positions as women that were based on caste, ethnicity, age, and class, and succeeded in creating more powerful positions for themselves (1999: 328-329). Therefore refugee women can be seen simultaneously as strong and vulnerable and can be “pitied and admired at the same time” (1999: 327).

In this thesis I argue that refugees have to be seen as a heterogeneous group wherein gender and power relations between men and women must to be considered. Women have to be viewed as having diverse roles within a context of shifting, multiple identities.
Coping and agency of refugees

‘Does anybody really think that they didn’t get what they had because they didn’t have the talent or the strength or the endurance or the commitment’ (Nelson Mandela\textsuperscript{11})?

Contradicting coping strategies

Before I left for the field, my focus on theory was predicated on how female refugees are treated as victims who become traumatized due to their violent past and their uprootedness. Consequently, I assumed they were not seen as social active agents. However, I argue now that while they have endured suffering, they are still capable of managing their lives, and that it only becomes interesting when asking the young refugees themselves how they experience their ‘refugeeness’ and how they deal with the situations they encounter. I suggest that agency should be chosen over victimizing and traumatizing theories as a means of approaching the subject of illegal Shan refugee females. I propose actor-oriented agency as “that which is made or denied, expanded or contracted, in the exercise of power” and simultaneously as “an actor engaged in a project, a game, a drama, an actor with not ‘just a point of view’ but a more active projection of the self towards some desired end” (Ortner 1999: 146).

Using social networks as a way of coping is common among refugees. Refugee studies show the importance of social networks as a way to cope with severe insecurities. Social networks transfer important information and are used to exchange services (Horst 2003: 68-69). Horst saw how for the Somali refugees, relatives play a central role in all circumstances, providing security in times of need. Neighbours and clan members also play a major role in providing security in times of risk (2003: 125). When the outside world is experienced as dangerous, a community can be seen as a safe haven where its members feel secure (Bauman 2001: 1).

However social networks are paradoxical because they bring both security and constraints that are related within social hierarchies operating within and community groups. Security cannot be obtained without the loss of individual freedom. In general, Bauman (2001) explains “we cannot be human without both security and freedom; but we cannot have both at the same time and both in quantities which we find fully satisfactory” (P. 5).

\textsuperscript{11} Website “Thinkexist.com”
Migdal (2004) observes how social networks provide security wherein people feel safe; the familiar was determined based on mental maps, with checkpoints separating the unfamiliar (p.11). However, this social safety within groups can also put pressure on people’s existential securities, for people belong to various groups with different mental maps and these groups demand various group ‘codes’ from a person. When contradictory mental maps and checkpoints come together, it can tear people in different directions (ibid. 31).

In times of danger social networks are needed to survive daily life insecurities which is proven throughout refugee studies (Horst 2003). Social networks among refugees can constrain the individual’s existential security for oppositions between men and women are exaggerated within insecure life circumstances (Schrijfers 1999: 308). Within male dominated societies, this can be a complex situation for women.

Ortner (1997) explains how subjugation and domination have to be taken into account when looking at agency of the ‘weak’; in the case of the Sherpa’s Buddhist practices, agency can be seen as “extended meditation upon the meaning, uses, and appropriations of power in human affairs and a set of practices for engaging actively and productively with or against power……constructing a certain kind of quite effective agency” (p.: 148).

It is the paradoxical workings of social networks that need to be stressed in order to understand how agency is constructed within the dimension of meaning and power. Agency is both a source and effect of power and culture. It is important to keep in mind “that symbolic orders (‘cultures’, ‘discourses’) are (part and parcel of) systems of dominations and must be studied for their dominating/subjugating effects, both in terms of (re)construction of subordinate/superordinate subject positions and in terms of (re)producing regimes of power/knowledge” (Ortner 1997: 157). However, this should not give the suggestion that women submit to power or do not resist it in any simple sense; they work through it and try to turn it to their own purposes. This can be found in the concepts of tactics and ‘future aspirations’ as will be explained in the next section.
When young Shan women were under high pressure and control, they used certain tactics: acting within small spaces. De Certeau’s (1978) concept of tactics helps to understand how practices are developed into tactics of negotiation in everyday life. He states that tactics are ‘weapons of the weak’ and practiced in everyday life by those who are “caught in the nets of discipline” of the other. Tactics are “ways of operation” of everyday practices through which the weak contest the spatial domination by the strong (Cresswell in Yasuda 2008: 35). “Space and place are socially produced, constructed and represented through social practice and imagination, spatial tactics refer to the various ways of manipulating space and place in everyday life as a means of negotiation, contestation and resistance in response to dominant social relations” (Yasuda 2008 : 36).” I also argue that tactics are weapons of the weak, and the use of tactics gives agency to the people living within dominating systems.

Tactics, however, are only short term solutions of coping whereas future aspirations are related to long term human fulfilment. I therefore argue that it is important to focus on future dreams in particular, for they are related to existential security issues.

Existential security is related to the feeling of being; it gives meaning to people’s lives (Giddens 1991, CONSEC 2007). Bound by the insecurities instigated by the State, it is not always easy for people to achieve existential security. Existential means “standing out,” that one has to make herself visible in order to confirm her existence, to become free agents of her own actions (Abbs 1997: 132).

Jackson (2005: xii) adds to this that human well-being “involves endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived decisively, on one own terms”. As humans, we possess consciousness of ourselves and the world surrounding us; this consciousness is related to the things we think, can do and also frequently cannot do (Jackson 2005: xiii). This means that humans not only have intentions and purposes to strive for, but often come across conflicts and become at risk. We humans are in a constant “struggle to sustain and augment our being in relation to the being of others...” (Jackson 2005: xiv). It has to be taken into account that, in the situation of refugees specifically, this can be a fairly painful process; however, it has been noted that existential security gives hope which strengthens one’s ability to cope with grave circumstances.

Khawaja et al (2008) state, “Positive cognition focusing on hope and aspirations for the future has been shown to help in overcoming psychological problems. The role of hope and aspiration in these strategies is consistent with the cognitive theory of depression. According to this theory, hopelessness aggravates depression and other psychopathologies, whereas a hopeful emphasis on the future promotes emotional well-being and provides individuals with a structure to continue in life.
(p.429).” This thesis draws from the above quote by focusing on ‘future aspirations' as means of coping with the insecurities faced by the Shan young refugee females. It will specifically take into account the struggle that comes with the aim to achieve existential security.

The construction site: a fire at night

Around eight o’clock: many of the women are still working over time

Shan festival: bird dance

All the young professional women meet each other at this festival
3. Methodology

Ethnography was the main tool of my fieldwork. The significance of ethnographic methods became obvious during my research. Participant observation and informal interviews uncovered “processes and meanings that undergrid sociospatial life” (Herbert 2000: 550).

This chapter will first address the respondents within the research. Next, the methods will be highlighted; the chapter ends with limitations and reflective thoughts.

Informants

In order to easily recognise the names of the young women throughout the thesis, I will give an overview of my key informants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction site one:</th>
<th>Construction site two:</th>
<th>Young professional women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nang Ong</td>
<td>Mo Moon</td>
<td>Nang Lao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nang Maw</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pao Naing</td>
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<td>Nang Noe</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Noon</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kham Yin</td>
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The people under research also include all the people living on the construction sites, the relatives and friends whom visited, and the supervisors of the job. It includes the relatives of all the young women, the Ajarn’s (teachers) within the community, the youth leaders, and the migrants students (coming from various backgrounds) at a school.

I did not expect to find informants within a city as quickly as happened. Within two weeks contacts from The Burma Centre the Netherlands, NGOs and a University gave me lots of contacts and a rich overview of the situation of the Shan in Northern Thailand. Two NGO’s helped me profoundly, one was a school and the other was a media organization. The school introduced me to a young Shan woman translator, gave me the opportunity to use their facilities and organized focus groups for me. In return, I taught English four hours a week and I organized drama training. The media organization showed me various residence settings and work places of Shan illegal refugees,
from these visits three young women who worked at two different construction sites were chosen as key informants. Construction work is one of the main industries where Shan illegal refugees are used as cheap labour forces; they make up a large majority. As I wanted to give voice to a large group of people, I decided to focus on these people working within large cheap labour forces industries.

However after a week of working together with my translator, researching various sites, the choice was made to include English speaking young women\textsuperscript{12}. Having a translator in between gave me an awareness of the distance with the people to whom I spoke. To overcome this, I chose five educated young women who spoke some English. Most of them I had met at the start of the research through the NGO’s. Pao Naing was my translator, Nang Lao became my roommate, Noon and Nam Pon worked for one of the NGO’s who helped me out during my fieldwork. Kham Yin was the last young English speaking woman I met through the university she was a young leader of a youth group. After four weeks, a relative from a construction worker (she was a cleaner of an apartment building and spent a lot of time together with Nang Maw who lived at construction site one) became a key informant as well. This enriched the information on the situation of the illegal refugees whom came from poor backgrounds without having the change to get an education; they are the majority in Northern Thailand.

A description will now be given of the construction workers and the young professional women:

\textbf{Construction site one}

The construction site is located in a suburban area it is a small piece of sandy land surrounded by many big buildings. About eight shacks stand in front of the building that the construction workers have to finish. There is a road next to the place; it is fenced off by a black polyester cloth. The shacks are made of hardboard and the roofing is a corrugated sheet; a one meter wide wobbly wooden ‘veranda’ is attached to the shacks. They cook on this ‘veranda’ and often eat their meals. The children always play in front of the shacks, where a few piles of sand are heaped up. The shacks are attached to each other and they can look into their neighbour’s room, for there is half a meter space in between the roof and the end of the wall. The people living here, all come from the same area in Shan State and are friendly towards each other. Some of them share their meals together, play football after work, drink, and chat. The atmosphere feels friendly and open. They work between eight and ten hours a day.

\textsuperscript{12} It should be noted that the English spoken, was not always fluent.
Construction site two

This construction site is located in front of a highway; traffic is always passing by, day and night. There are four shacks located right in front of the construction work. There is a sort of wooden veranda on the side of the shacks. It is scarcely used, for there are always mosquito’s buzzing around. The people all live on their own, they cook and eat their meals inside their rooms. The atmosphere feels reserved and impersonal. Mo Moon and her husband work around eight hours a day and seem to have some more free time than the people at the first construction site.

The young professional women

On a motorbike I drove through certain parts of the city to pay visits to all the informants. My translator Pao Naing was one of my key informants. I got to know her through informal talks, formal interviews, and through meeting her boyfriend and brother. The decision to have my translator as a key informant was made with several considerations. In order to get close to all the informants whom spoke Shan, I wanted only one reliable translator. She had to be a young Shan woman herself otherwise it would be too difficult to gain a trustful relationship and to expect that the gathered information would encompass the topics close to the hearts of the informants. In order to gain understanding of the miscommunications that took place within the translation process, I had to become close to my translator. To understand the view of the translator on the researched topics, I decided that the same questions should be asked to her as to the rest of the informants.

Another key informant was Nam Pon, a young woman always on the move, going from one place to the other. Together with my translator, I followed her on my motorbike, visiting almost all her workplaces. Nang Lao was my roommate, whom played a big part in my daily life, we chatted in the morning, before going of to our jobs, in the evening before going to bed and we met each other after work, to have dinner together or with her friends. We really became close friends and participating in her life went natural which gave me lots of interesting knowledge. Noon became a very close friend, even though she left the field for three weeks. We met each other in the weekends at her parents place and during the week we had lunch or dinner together. After four weeks Kham Yin became another key informant. She invited me to places where activities with the youth were organized by her. Besides this we regularly shared our meals together.
**Participant observation and interviews**

Participant observation and informal conversation provided a rich source of information. I found myself growing closer to my informants, and was able to adapt to their daily life routine. Some informants even told me that they had never encountered a Westerner who had been able to adapt to their culture as I did. I found myself gradually blending in, asking questions about Buddhism, about the role of their family in their lives, the position of young girls in their society, about the importance of relationships, education, going back to the Shan State. The insider gaze they enabled me to understand their worries and dreams and the position they had as young women in their society. I want to emphasize the importance of participant observation that made me part of their world and gave me a glimpse of their experience of everyday life. For example, the worries about driving around; when my translator told me that if she were to get into an accident, no one could pay for her hospital bill. I had my insurance, but what about her? Every time on the motorbike after this conversation, it went through my mind when she sitting behind me, but also when I drove alone.

Interviews and focus groups gave me the above information more directly; I found that my interpretation through participant observation was rectified. Besides rectification, in depth interviews gave me a more comprehensive look at the topics, from the point of view of the informant. The informants challenged my way of analysing in in-depth interviews and gave me a broader perspective and new angles of looking at their situation. Focus groups encouraged the young women to talk together and it was inspiring to see them sharing their ideas together.

**Limitations, reflection and ethics**

The intensity of the shared stories and the daily life activities at times made me feel sad and angry. Why are people treated this way by their own government, by their host country, by the world community? Why is life unequal and unfair? I could feel the unrest of the ever changing circumstances and the opposing necessities in myself. It made me feel powerless and disappointed in world politics. I often told the young women about these feelings. The shared experience of the young women made me part of their daily life which enabled a deeper understanding. At the same time I influenced the stories of the young women by talking about inequality. The fact that I am a therapist had the biggest impact, for I cannot listen to stories without asking questions about hidden feelings. In general people tell me their problems easily, so this has also happened during the
fieldwork. I am fully aware that this influenced the gathered data and the fact that there are so many insecurities visible throughout the thesis. This can be seen as a bias in the data, on the other hand I would argue that ethically one should always take into account the people and their faced problems. Showing yourself and showing understanding and sympathy with the situation of the people under research makes it not only an academic trajectory but a human exchange of experiences, where the researcher is not the only person who gains from ‘being together’.

The main limitation of the research was having a translator in between. It brought distance within the relationship, for everything had to be translated. I specifically felt this when Pao Naing was with me with the professional young women. Nam Pon did not speak English very fluently and she often asked if I could bring Pao Naing, she felt too insecure to talk otherwise. Although Nam Pon was very open, I sensed the difference with the other professional women. Talking to them alone made them tell stories which I would not have heard otherwise. It is not only the distance, but also the structure of the language that makes translation difficult and the opinion of Pao Naing. She had a very outspoken opinion and was not always able to hide this when we asked questions. She told me how she sometimes forgot that we were researching, because we became friend and the other informants as well. My opinion on inequality and hers together were very strong, which could lead sometimes to heated discussions.

Cooking dinner at the construction site: they teach me how to cook Shan food
4. ‘Illegal refugees’: coping with insecurities instigated by the state

Theoretically, young displaced women are victimized by the media, pictured and portrayed as vulnerable victims. With this stigma clearly in my mind, I stated before leaving the field that the young Shan female ‘illegal refugees’ were not mere victims of their life circumstances. When I arrived in Thailand and got to know the young women themselves, I heard these stories:

Mo Moon:
Being a woman alone in Thailand is not so easy, especially when she works at a construction site. It is dangerous. Besides this people (men and women) gossip about you and other women can think that you will take their husbands.

Pao Naing:
The police tell the Shan girls that they are beautiful and because of their power position they can say things like this. When it happens to me I feel that I cannot say anything to them. Sometimes when the police stop Shan girls on the motorbike, they do not have to pay as much as boys or they even get away with it. This happens because the policemen talk in a sexist way. It makes me feel bad and uncomfortable, but it happens.

Confronting discourses on vulnerability within the Shan community brought the realization that there were many limitations for young Shan ‘illegal refugee’ women. I started doubting my firm stances within the theoretical debates about actor-oriented research. Is it ethical sensible in severe insecure circumstances, to believe that everyone makes choices in life based on individual consideration? Yes, of course one could decide to stay in Burma, there are still people living inside the borders; however, the young women left, choosing themselves, making them active agents. However, stating that women choose individually seems to imply that agency is only situated in meaning giving processes without taking subjugation and domination of powerful systems into account. If being an active agent is only situated in the realm of meaning (Geertz 1950) it would picture the women in the same ‘harsh’ manner as the discourses on vulnerable victims do. This is why in this thesis I want to give a detailed ethnographic overview of the topics discussed within the community during the fieldwork, enabling a more nuanced picture of the displaced Shan women themselves. The focus is on the young women, but the Shan men are present as well, as they actively took part in various conversations and discussions.
This chapter will focus on insecurities instigated by the state. In it, I will describe the complex situation of Shan refugee women. Doing so will give a better understanding of daily life insecurities faced by Shan young women. The goal of this chapter is to situate Shan displaced people who are not recognised as refugees but labelled as 'illegal' or 'alien workers' within specific contexts. It is within these contexts that discourses on vulnerability take shape. At the end of the chapter, the opposition of vulnerable victims and active agents can be addressed in a more holistic way. In this chapter I will first describe state policies, revealing the experiences of the young women based on their situation in Thailand, followed by a brief section on discrimination. A counter reaction on the policies and the discrimination of the Shan community leaders will reveal conflicting survival strategies. The last three sections will focus on the coping mechanisms of the young women within the context of the severe insecurities. The main purpose of this chapter is to analyse and uncover several conflicting insecurities for the young Shan women brought about by state policies instigating discrimination in the Thai community, and the counter reactions of the Shan community to these insecurities. I argue that labelling policies are based on political interests, affecting the Shan in enormous ways.

Restricting policies

The murder and rape incident as described in the introduction exposed the underlying structure of state policies and the way these were experienced by the Shan on a daily basis. Police checks for example were a commonality in the city, even before the murder and rape incident controls were held almost daily. These checks are used to fine the Shan people and deport them back across the border. Thai policies excluding Shan from owning a driver's licence or a vehicle make it easy to stop them in a traffic check. When they are caught driving, either they have to pay a fine that costs around two weeks of salary, or they are imprisoned, fined and deported back across the border. These policies restricting movement within the city are faced by all the Shan: legal, illegal or with some sort of registration. However, those without legal status face the most vulnerable position, for deportation is awaiting them when caught by the police.

On top of the travel restrictions in the city, there is a law that does not allow the Shan to move around the country. Illegality makes it impossible to travel in a lawful way, but legal documents do not imply freedom of movement, either; registration is tied to the area of the delivery of the documents (Jirattikorn 2008: 80, Yasuda 2008: 74). The most accessible legal document that can be obtained by the Shan is a work permit, a ‘permit awaiting deportation’ which only allows one to move around in the area of registration. This permit is almost worthless as it has abundant
limitations, tying the Shan to one workplace and one boss and making it almost impossible to change jobs or obtain permission to travel outside the registered area. Legal documents like the work permit do not therefore imply security at all times; moreover, they are restricting in many ways, as was explained in the introduction.

The policies that allow the Shan only a temporary work permit for certain jobs and restricts their movement is used for three main purposes. The first purpose appears to be to control labour market demands. Cheap labour through the use of illegal and ‘semi legal’ migrants has historically been used in various countries around the world (De Genova 2002: 422). Thailand is no exception to this rule, which is demonstrated by, for example, the way the authorities define the work permit: ‘alien labor card’. Labelling the Shan as alien workers, which is in Thai language considered a very rude label that can be translated as ‘unskilled labourers’ unable to think, obviously refers to the use of Shan people as cheap labour forces. The second purpose may point to monitoring and controlling the number of Shan people residing inside Thailand through tying the Shan to one workplace and restricting their movement around the city and country. In the case of being caught in an act of malpractice, people can be deported back across the border. Third, not giving the Shan refugee status has to do with maintaining nation-State ties between Thailand and Burma. Both countries need each other for economic and political reasons.

These policies are all related to having the correct identification papers at one’s disposal. Not having the right documents is the main uncertainty in the web of insecurities brought about by the state. When I ask Nang Lao if she thinks she can move freely within Thailand, she says: “I think I can but if I don’t have a Burmese passport I would feel more afraid. Before, when I did not have a passport, I worried a lot about it. I didn’t go anywhere. I could not go.” One afternoon while looking for a research location, this statement is demonstrated by Noon who does not have any legal documents. We arrive at a huge deserted construction site, where about hundred migrants live in shacks, just behind their workplace. Noon gives the impression that she is stressed after talking to the lady who owns a shed like shop in front of the living area. When I ask her what the lady just said, she explains that many people are anxiously hiding in the forest awaiting a police check. “I am afraid that the police will come and find me while we are here.” Noon, her nervousness and the tense atmosphere covering the construction site underline the precarious situation of the illegal refugees. The fact that these people do not have access to legal papers, confirms the political insecurity of the Shan brought about by national and international policies on labelling of the displaced.

The ever changing rules concerning the Shan ‘migrants’ are often addressed by the young women and their relatives. When Nam Pon is driving on her motorbike from one radio station to the other I often follow her with Pao Naing at the backseat. On a Monday at 18:30 we arrive at an eccentric
place just out of the city surrounded by palm trees, the studio is a tiny worn out concrete room with basic radio broadcasting equipment standing in between some bamboo huts along a small river. This is the first announcement Nam Pon makes: “The municipality of the city wants people to report where the Shan migrants are living and how many there are. So everyone be careful and don’t take any risks. If you have a work permit, please go and extend it, if you don’t have a permit, please don’t believe people who say they can give you a permit. There are no new permits handed out right now and it will not happen in the near future. If you get caught with a fake permit you will end up in jail, if you are caught without a permit you will be send back to Burma, but most likely you will not end up in jail. After a few times of attending I notice that these kinds of announcements are repeated and all my informants talk about how to deal with the situation, afraid to get caught by the police in one way or the other. They tell me how after the murder and rape incident policies change rapidly.

When I arrive at the second construction site, Mo Moon sits on a log in between her and the lady from next door, a kettle full of water boils on a fire. She says to the lady “I just don’t know what the Thai government will do to all of us Shan people, they will make it even more difficult to live here than before the murder and rape incident.” An hour later, it is around four o’clock, at the first construction site Nang Maw and her husband return from the hospital, their story confirms Mo Moon’s fear about new government policies making life difficult for the Shan. “We had to do our yearly health check-up and a blood test”, they tell me, “to renew our work permit”. Nang Maw says that they don’t know if the permit will be extended and even so, the extension is reduced from one year to six months. The circumstances after the incident will diminish the chances for extension. When the other workers return from their work at six o’clock, they join in the conversation and talk to us about the police following the Shan, confiscating motorbikes and raiding apartment blocks. The people tell me they do not use the motorbike at the moment for they are too afraid to move around. Pao Naing tells them about how students at the migrant school do not come to classes, frightened to be caught in a police check. How the teachers at the school are worried about the Shan who live in the surrounding areas of the University, where the student was killed. Written and spoken reports come out, mentioning raids all around the city. These reports give information on work permits being torn up by authorities and deportation even of legal Shan refugees. Discussions on new policies of the Thai state and what will happen to all the Shan people living in the city increase in prevalence. When I talk to Nang Lao about the changing policies she becomes emotional: “Last year there was a policy for the migrant people. We were not allowed to use the mobile phone. It makes me feel very bad, we are human. Why do they treat us like this? Why? Why can’t we have everything the same like other people? Ooh it is so bad, because these things happen a lot, every day.”
These examples highlight once more how political decisions inflict severe insecurities on people’s everyday life. The Shan in this case are seen as a threat to national security; in order to raise national security, the state tightens policies concerning Shan migrant workers and illegal migrants. National security is chosen over human security, and the Shan persecuted in their country of origin are again targeted by their political and physical security.

This section demonstrates how various insecurities caused by state politics addressing the Shan either as illegal, legal or semi legal migrants are experienced by the young women and their relatives. It shows how a vast structure of denying basic rights, like travelling around without restrictions, owning property, being part of a healthcare system, and so on, impacts upon these women. Young women are perceived as vulnerable but at the same time they have to be strong in order to survive their daily life insecurities. Politically and ideologically labelling systems cause not only insecurities on a political, physical and economic level but also on an existential level as Thai and Shan community discourses reveal in the next section.

**Discrimination of the Shan**

It is not only state policies that affect the Shan, also discourses and practices within the Thai community; political labelling of the Shan as migrants and alien workers is experienced as discriminative. Nang Lao demonstrates this in an interview. “I don’t feel at home here, for example sometimes when I travel and I communicate with Thai people, they talk to me in a cold way. It does not feel friendly and I can see that they behave different towards Thai people. It is so difficult to adapt here in Thailand we not are treated in a nice way.” Nang Lao told me this when we were talking about the ever changing policies of the Thai state concerning the Shan. She explained how this caused inequality and discrimination of the Shan by the Thai community in general. She feels that she is not welcome in Thailand and this makes her feel sad, because in Burma as well as in Thailand, the Shan are discriminated against. “Where and how can we be ourselves?” was a question often posed. It becomes clear that on an existential level the Shan cannot be themselves; they have to adapt in Thailand, but are discriminated.

Existential insecurity can cause feelings of exclusion; this becomes clear when I visit Noon’s parents on a Sunday and her father talks about how the Shan are discriminated here in Thailand. He relates that the Thai “think that we are foreigners and they are not welcoming us. The neighbours do not talk to us at all. This was especially in the beginning when we just arrived very hard”. Noon, her
mother says: “I was so homesick, because back home every one was sociable and open, whenever someone needed a helping hand it was given. Now there is no one who takes care of us and the people are not friendly. I am also afraid for Noon, discrimination and the policies affect her. She is vulnerable as a young woman without any legal documents and no one to help her because she is Shan. There is no one outside me and her father who take care of her.” From the first part of the story of Noon her parents it becomes visible that it is difficult for the Shan to feel at home in Thailand through discriminative discourses and excluding practices within the Thai society.

This thesis will not delve deeper into discriminative discourses and practices of the Thai community, as I realize that I can only refer briefly to these problematic circumstances. It had to be mentioned in order highlight the existential insecurity, for this is a very important aspect for the Shan community. In turn, it is important to discuss, in order to understand the reaction of the Shan community leaders. As a result of discrimination, they proposed conflicting strategies on how to cope with the existential, political and physical insecurities brought about by the State. These strategies will be addressed in the next part.

**Conflicting survival strategies of Shan community leaders**

*Shan community leader: “Now we live in Thailand, but we must not fight the people we are living with. We have to be able to adapt to the culture where we live. If we don’t assimilate with the other people we live with, there will be confrontations and misunderstandings”.*

**Discourses of the Shan community leaders**

The above example clearly shows how Shan community discourses address assimilation with the Thai community. Kham Yin, herself a young female community leader, underlines the above statement, telling me that assimilating within the Thai community is of vital importance for the Shan. While we are having breakfast at a Burmese restaurant she explains her idea for the Shan community on how to blend in with the Thai people. “We have to go to Thai temples very often then the Thai citizens will know we are good people and good Buddhist, they will not blame the whole Shan community when an incident like last week happens.” Assimilation as a discourse can be seen as a survival strategy to partly overcome the insecure life situation of the Shan refugees.
Besides assimilation, preserving Shan culture is a highly valued strategy to show the Thai community and the world community the Shan civilisation. A well known man within the Shan community who is a teacher in Shan culture told me in an interview: “We are highly civilised people who still believe in and practice the old culture however many people do not know this. The people who know are always very impressed with Shan culture. If we want to get a better life within the Thai and world community it is very important to preserve and propagate our culture.” Expression of Shan culture he told me will reveal the beauty of being a Shan which gives us better chances to survive the insecurities brought about by the State. Presenting oneself as a Shan to the Thai and world community is thus, just as assimilation, used as a survival strategy.

It immediately becomes clear that there is a tension between preserving and presenting Shan culture -which includes one’s ethnic identity- on the one hand and to blend in with the Thai community on the other hand. Assimilation means to blend in, whereas presenting one’s ethnic identity signifies standing out: to show or express oneself against otherness. These two strategies are conflicting, for standing out and assimilating are almost impossible to achieve at the same time.

Practices of the Shan community leaders

There are various youth group leaders, NGO employers and some well known individuals who take a lead in spreading these messages through meetings, cultural events and visiting people at work or in the home. Radio programmes are also frequently used to announce that the Shan have to be careful not to stand out within the Thai society; people are told to be careful, not to put up fights, not to do things that disturb others. Cultural practices are almost always part of every meeting or event, and radio programs always address the importance of the old Shan stories, songs, music, and history, remembering the people who deem it important to not forget these old practices. Before the murder and rape incident, these messages were already circulating in the community but because policies tightened and people felt more insecure every day it became more prevalent in the media.

Community leaders addressed the youth as the ones who had to make the changes, expecting them to fulfil these conflicting strategies; they are seen as the future actors of change. During a Shan community meeting a respected elderly said:

“I want you to be wise with how you use your time. When you work, work hard. When you are free, use your free time well. You are the future, in a few years you are the Shan elders, therefore you need to help and prepare each other for this task.” The Shan culture teacher told me the same: The reason why I specifically teach the youth about our culture is because they are the once that have to preserve and remember so that in the future they will be able to spread their culture around the world.” These
statements clearly provide examples of the vision of youth as bearers of the future; they emphasize the expectations of the elderly. They are asked to adapt to the Thai society and show and preserve their ethnic identity at the same time. It becomes clear that the community puts quite some pressure on the young people. Young people in this case are distinguished as a separate category who have to achieve strategies set out by community leaders, this gives them extra responsibilities on top of their daily life survival struggle. As demonstrated in the chapter on theory, there is no one, homogenous, universal category of “youth”; rather, young people reflect a diverse group of actors.

It seems that when the Shan come under severe pressure brought about by state policies, they have to make sure that they, as a ‘Shan people’, survive. The community leaders’ discourses reveal their attempts to achieve adaptation of the Shan people within the Thai society while at the same time exposing the wish to hang onto their Shan ethnic identity. These two conflicting strategies are not an uncommon phenomenon. In debates on immigration it can be seen that these two strategies are acted out by most immigrants, especially when they feel alienated by their host community. Alienation causes the wish to hang onto one’s own ‘culture’. As Erikson (2002) mentions, groups or individuals draw themselves using cultural characteristics. These characteristics create a social boundary between groups of people. People tend to make more use of their ethnicity if the contacts with other groups are unpleasant (p.19). I only address the ‘inverted refrigerator’ “syndrome” (Erikson 2001: 65) briefly for it is not the scope of this thesis, but the community leaders’ discourses and practices were prevailing throughout the research and are important to address regarding community youth, particularly since they were targeted by the community leaders. It could be interpreted that the community leaders felt responsible to act as care takers/parents of the young people and at the same time they felt as teachers. Eberhardt (2006) in her work on the Shan in Northwest Thailand notes that parents and teachers have very important roles in the Shan community for they are the ones that have to make sure that the young people will become ‘responsible adults’ (2006: 82-83). It is in these situations that being young has significant meaning for the young Shan females, for community leaders refer to them as bearers of the future and feel responsible to teach them their values, ideas and strategies.

There are thus various insecurities brought about by the state that affect the Shan community as a whole. Not accepting them as refugees but receiving them as illegal migrants or alien workers makes them vulnerable to malpractices, for there is no state security backup system. Lack of human rights causes numerous insecurities which they have to survive on a daily basis. As a young woman it
becomes complicated for they are perceived as vulnerable but have to be strong at the same time in order to cope with political and physical insecurities.

Besides insecurities instigated by the state discriminative discourses and practices of the Thai have to be dealt with as well, Shan community leaders try to overcome these insecurities by coming up with survival strategies for the community as a whole. The young are specifically targeted to carry out the conflicting strategies: adaptation within the Thai community and preservation of ethnic identity. The Shan community strategies and discourses in reaction to state insecurities lead to the question: how do Shan young women cope with the various insecurities instigated by the state itself and how do they cope with the community strategies and discourses concerning these insecurities?

“*I am not afraid*” as a way of coping

An extraordinary recurrent sentence that almost all the young women used when I asked them about their fears and the ideas that they as young women are vulnerable victims, was: “*I am not afraid, I belief that I did many good things so why would anyone harm me. I do many good things so good things will return to me* (Kham Yin).” They explained that doing good, as explained in Buddhism, was a powerful act. When they talked about this, their faces gleamed with pride and they said that in dangerous or important moments they could feel the power of this belief. Whenever this recurring idea was observed, the young women talked in powerful way. Their voice was loud and strong, their body language showing they were authoritative and in control; sitting or standing up straight and their chests forward. To illustrate this point, I will let Nang Lao tell her story of fleeing to Thailand:

*When I left Shan State, I went together with my grandma, because it is very dangerous for a girl to travel alone. The soldiers near the border separated us and I knew it would be very dangerous now. So I think about Buddhism and that I have helped many people and I believe that a good thing will return and I will be save, no one can harm me. In fact it is easy to harm me, the men who came with me, if they want to do something, they can do. At that time; I was very young you know, but in fact I was strong enough. I moved my stick, (she shows me that she moved it in an aggressive way in the air and around her) the soldier and me are on the field alone, and I know he can do very bad things with me if he wants. I behaved very manlike and aggressive because I believed that he would not harm me if I did so. And I ask them, with a loud voice; ‘where is my grandma? I came with my grandma and I want to be with her again’. And I said things that made them feel afraid for example, I told them that I knew things about the law and what will happen if they don’t bring me to my grandma again. I tell them I know how to do it, when something is wrong with me; I know where to go to (She means that*
she knows where to go when they treat her bad and that the men will get severe punishment if they hurt her). At that time I know I don’t want to lose myself and I value myself very much, and if something is wrong with me, it is all that I have, the only thing I have is me. So I know that I have to be very strong and take care of myself. Finally a few soldiers talked with each other, they seemed to be afraid of what I said, then all of a sudden it went very fast, they hurried to bring me and my grandma together again.” In this example it is seen that within dangerous and difficult situations there are powerful tactics that women can use. When Nang Lao talks about valuating herself, and that the only thing she has is herself, it shows how in such a situation there is a necessity to be strong and independent. There is a need to rely on themselves, for this is the only thing in dangerous moments that they can rely on. As an illegal refugee woman living within severe insecure circumstances there is a need to be strong and independent in order to survive daily life insecurities brought about by the State. It seems that Buddhism is used to find the necessary strength to cope within the moment. Tactics in this sense are clearly weapons of the weak as explained by de Certeau (1978). The recurrent sentence, ‘I am not afraid’ can be seen as taking control in difficult and insecure situations, wherein young women use tactics and are active agents within the given context. It is in this way that all the young women explained their coping with dangerous and insecure situations. It was a very powerful discourse.

The powerful Buddhist belief of ‘doing good’ and the strength it gives in dangerous and insecure situations is not the only way of coping with insecurities brought about by the state. The next section will highlight another significant way of coping.

**Social networks: security and belonging**

While participating in the lives of the young women, it became clear that to cope with insecurities caused by state policies and discriminative discourses, social networks consisting of family, relatives, teachers and ‘friends’ were of vital importance.

When Nang Lao lost her passport, the insecurities caused by state policies did not give her a lot of opportunities to receive a new one. With no legal rights protecting her, she was dependent on the corrupt system of the Burmese regime and she had to plead for over a week at the embassy in Bangkok. In the end she had to pay a huge fine and prove that she was accepted as a student for the coming semester at a Thai University. Her mother, stepfather and a few friends supported her financially and, through another friend, she tried to obtain entrance for the University. Without this
help it would have been impossible for Nang Lao to stay in Thailand and she would have been deported back to Burma. Horst (2003: 68) observed that social networks function as a system for the transaction of information, services and resources between individuals. In the example of Nang Lao social networks served her in recourses and services. In general they are used to achieve better jobs, work permits, to obtain an education, or to have easier access to certain resources such as, for example, healthcare or funeral support.

One day I am confronted with a huge police check in an area where many Shan people reside. Immediately I find myself calling my friends and the teachers at the Rainbow school to inform them. “Thank you for the information, I will tell the students to call their relatives and friends”. A warning system is established to protect the people out of the hands of the police. Social networks function thus as transaction of information; they are safety nets in times of trouble. It is necessary to maintain and broaden these networks for they can provide services that are denied by the state through lack of human rights and human security.

Besides providing security in resources, information and services, social networks ensure a certain sense of belonging. Denial of human rights, causing insecurities and discrimination, seemed to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the Shan community and these were often mentioned together. While having dinner at the construction site, the women ask me if I am all alone here and when I tell them yes they say: “You must feel lonely; it is not good to be with only one. What about your family, you must miss them a lot. For us it feels really good to have our family around it and it makes us feel more at home.” When other young women told others that they had no family living in the city, they were often told: “you are alone then you must feel sad and lonely very often. I feel sorry for you”.

Nang Lao told me in an interview: “The Shan community is small, and people are very loving and very good. I feel I am a part of this community it makes me happy and proud to belong to the Shan community.” Their ethnic Shan identity was often mentioned when they talked about the Thai government and how they were alienated through these policies. They felt that this caused a discriminative reaction of the Thai community in general. One evening at the construction site, the husband of Nang Noe asked me if I knew about how the Burmese regime suppressed the Shan. “Yes I know”, I told him. “The Thai do not acknowledge us as Shan people and they say that we all come from Burma, but the Burmese regime treats us very bad and we are not Burmese. I feel frustrated that Thai people say we are Burmese, they discriminate us. They do not treat us very well here, but I am a Shan and I am proud of it, the Shan are very good people.” When they talked about being part of the Shan community their faces lit up and they talked in a passionate way. This feeling seemed to strengthen them. The sense of belonging to the Shan community can also be found in future
aspirations of the young women which they expressed often while simultaneously mentioning discriminative discourses. The next section will explore future dreams as a way of coping.

**Dreaming of returning home to a free Shan State**

Securing oneself on an existential level when this is threatened by external factors is part of daily life as became clear in case of the Shan. They sought long term human fulfilment through future aspirations. Coping with insecurities instigated by the state, discrimination and community responsibilities through future dreams is a recurring phenomenon, but how are these dreams constructed within this context?

A frequently repeated dream of all the Shan is returning to Shan State to live in their village of origin together with the family. At the first construction site, all the men and women mention returning home almost every time I visit them. One night, after teaching English at the Rainbow School, it is pitch dark and the only light shining at the first construction comes from the cardboard ‘veranda’. Nang Ong, her husband and their cousin are sitting together in front of their Shack, the rest of the people are already fast asleep. Pao Naing and I are invited to sit with them and I ask what they were talking about. “We were talking about going home and how we talked about this the whole day during work. It really helps to talk about returning home to our family village, we feel less stressed, have less worries and the day seems to pass faster.” “How do you feel at the moment about being in Thailand?” I ask them. The situation is really bad we feel discriminated and harassed and besides that the prices of the rice are doubled and everything becomes more and more expensive, no one is happy anymore and the only thing we can think of to hang on, is to talk about going home and what the best ways are to return home.” “Is it safe to return to Shan state?” It is difficult to get there, we have to pay a lot of money, and many people get cheated when they want to return, but we can go home. There are still armies controlling the village and people have to do forced labour, so it is not a good situation and it is very difficult to sustain our livelihood, but if the situation gets worse here in Thailand what can we do? We really want Shan state to become free one day so that we can live together with our families in peace. This is what we talk about every day.” This example clearly shows that in order to cope with the harsh circumstances in Thailand they talk and dream about returning home to their families. Future aspirations in this sense are shaped within the context of the insecurities as described in this chapter. The Shan have no safe place to go and feel existentially
threatened on a daily basis. Longing for a place where one can be together with their family and be free from discriminative policies and discourses is a forthcoming consequence.

The young professional women adjoin the above dream with their ideal to do social work for the community. All of them talked about teaching the Shan people new knowledge once there would be a free Shan state and in the meanwhile many wanted to do social work for the Shan community right now in Thailand. Most of the women already did a job concerning social work. Nang Lao also expressed the dream to fight for a free and democratic Burma and even more, to fight for equal rights for all the poor people. “I have a very big dream, I want to change something in my country. But I still can’t find the solution, how can I do it if it is only me, I can’t do it. But I really want democracy even if I have to die for it. I want that everyone gets the same rights, all the poor people as well.” The dream of returning to their hometown, to teach and do social work and to fight for equal rights for the poor Shan people made them happy when they thought and talked about it. They were passionate about these community dreams, and it became clear that these future aspirations were brought forth by the surrounding insecurities while at the same time it made them cope actively with these insecurities brought about by the Burmese and Shan state.

**Conclusion**

The opposed stances: of young displaced women who are vulnerable victims versus young displaced women are active agents, can now be seen within the context of the Shan young illegal refugee women. Young women are vulnerable within a context of insecurities instigated by the State, though simultaneously cope actively with their situation.

State terror affects daily life in several ways; it causes political, physical, economic and existential insecurity. This multi-layered insecure situation shows how the structure of state terror captures the Shan in a firm grip. Fleeing state terror in Shan state to be received and labelled in Thailand as an illegal migrant limits agency in a tremendous way. Denial of a legal status denotes denial of basic rights like being able to travel, to own property, to use a healthcare system, and so on, -and so on-affecting basic freedoms. Labelling the Shan as illegal or alien workers instigates a discriminative reaction within the Thai community. Existential security comes under pressure and the Shan community leaders in the city try to cope with this precarious situation through encouraging the Shan youth specifically to preserve and show their ethnic identity. To cope with the insecurities brought about by state policies Shan community elderly, teachers and leaders encourage assimilation into the Thai society. The Shan youth are seen as the future leaders who have to make the change for
themselves and the Shan community as a whole. So on top of individually dealing with the insecurities brought about by the state, the community pressures the youth to deal with these communal insecurity issues. The young women interpret their situation as unequal and they know that they have to be careful not to stand out in order not to be caught by the police. The discourse on responsibilities of the young to spread messages and take care of the community as a whole is part of the young women’s daily life.

The insecurities instigated by the state and the pressure of the community on the young women do not imply that they have no ways of coping with these complicated and contradicting demands. However their ways of coping are constructed within this context. They are illegal or alien workers, they are vulnerable and victims, but at the same time they have to be strong in order to survive the numerous insecurities surrounding them every day. Besides this being young implicates responsibilities towards the community which shapes their future dreams.

Social networks are a system for the transaction of information, services and resources between individuals. They also function on an existential level as a system of belonging. The denial of human rights provokes and strengthens the feeling of belonging to the Shan community. The perception of vulnerability of young women underlines this importance of family support and protection. In dangerous and insecure situations however all the young women seem to be able to use small spaces to act within the moment. Tactics can be seen as a weapon of the Shan young women which they use to actively cope with their daily life insecurities. Buddhism is used to strengthen themselves in their beliefs that they are strong enough to rely on their own powers. It can be noted they are not mere victims of their situation as refugee debates often imply.

Future aspirations can be interpreted as a way of coping on an existential level. Dreaming of a free and federal Shan State reduces the pressure of the insecurities brought about by the state and discriminative discourses. The young professional women also seek a free Shan State in the future by becoming a social worker and teacher within the Shan region.

This chapter addressed State policies concerning labelling of the Shan ‘illegal refugees’ and the insecurities this brings about for the Shan. Later it focused on the consequences of Thai community discourses and practices on the Shan. The reactions of the Shan community to these insecurities have been highlighted followed by the coping strategies of the young women themselves with these numerous conflicting insecurities. Throughout the research discourse on being a Shan young woman resurfaced and it seems that this affects the lives of the women in Thailand in various ways. It brought different insecurities on top of the insecurities brought about by the State. Therefore the focus will turn towards the women and their feelings about being young, followed by discourses and
practices in the Shan community concerning young Shan women. This will give insight in the consequences of the multiple roles that have to be acted out by the young women.

Visiting Shan festivals with professional young women
5. Multiple roles and responsibilities of young Shan women

“My dreams are conflicting. My first dream is: I want to work for the community so that one day we can all live in a free Burma. The other dream is about me living in a very small house with a stream and very beautiful trees and fields, with my own family and children. A Long time ago I had this dream, but I know this dream will not come true. I don’t think there will a chance for me to have this. This is my personal dream but, I have commitment, to work for many people, for my community” (Nang Lao).

During the research the contradictions in the lives of the Shan young illegal refugee women became omnipresent. When interpreting coping strategies and tactics within the given context of ‘being’ a women and at the same time ‘being’ a refugee it is necessary to understand that various roles and responsibilities can cause conflicting (in)securities. This chapter will illuminate the numerous responsibilities of the Shan young women regarding the family and the community. The main goal is to analyse and expose paradoxical (in)securities related to expected gender roles within the context of ‘being’ an illegal refugee. I will argue that gender has to be taken into account when analysing ‘the refugee’, with this challenging the model of ‘the refugee’ as an adult male: The multiple gendered roles in case of the Shan young women cause conflicting (in)securities.

Do I behave like a good daughter and a good woman?

“In Shan culture your parents have to start eating a dish before you” (Noon).

To understand the specific dimension of being a Shan young woman it is crucial to look at the roles that are expected from the women. Expectations of parents, siblings, relatives and Shan community members are highlighted to get insight into the multiple roles that have to be fulfilled by the young women.

“Most of all I worry that my father might think that I am not doing good enough here in Thailand, he calls me once every two months to ask if I am doing all the things I am supposed to do as his daughter and if my study is going well. But as you know I cannot finish my study now, because they stopped the funding. My father does not know how difficult life is over here. I try to think that I do the best I can
and that I am a good daughter for my father. I try to have confidence in myself. I also have supported him and I always do donations for him and for my mother and I hope I will get that reflection: that they will also think, yes she tries to do the best she can.” Throughout the fieldwork, Pao Naing often expressed how she was afraid and stressed about the idea of not being a good daughter. Nang Lao shares this experience; at 6:30 in the morning Nang Lao and I wake up with a jolt by her phone. After she has taken a shower she tells me that it was her mum who called to ask if she had been taking a shower with certain ritual beans. This helps to bring good luck. Her mum asked her why she did not do this, she told her: “Your brother and I try everything for you and you don’t do it yourself, why?” Nang Lao tells me: “Today I will go and buy the beans even though I try not to believe in it, but it is in my culture, I was brought up with this so I still try to follow my culture. I want to be a good daughter for my mum, if I don’t follow my culture she will disapprove.” At the construction site Nang maw reveals this anxiety in an interview as well: My parents control my life. I ask her: “What do you mean when you say your parents control your life?” She says: “I had to marry my husband, but we never had been in love with each other. My parents told me to get married with him because they liked him. “So how did you feel about that?” I asked her. Nang Maw answers: “I was in love with someone else, so I was a little bit sad, because you know I never knew my husband before I got married. But if I don’t listen to my parents I am afraid that they will not love me and support me anymore. Then my life will be difficult, because they are the ones that took care of me until now.”

Through these stories of the young women, the perception of being a good daughter becomes apparent. There is a strong emphasize on ‘obeying’ your parents’ wishes in Shan society. Nancy Eberhardt (2006) in her writings on the Shan in Northwest Thailand explains that as a child of your parents you are in debt to them as they have nurtured and raised you; this is repaid by supporting the parents when you are able to earn your own money (p.95). The moral debt of young women can be sensed in the way they worry about being a good daughter: Do they follow the rules and goals that their parents set for them? Do they respect the cultural norms and values that their parents expect them to propagate? If they do not follow their parents there is a change that they will lose love and support. Losing support of the parents while living under state terror is a risk to take because they are a part of the social network which supports and protects the young women within these circumstances.

Besides being a good daughter there are other cultural values and norms that influence the lives of the young women, like for example the expectations of being a good woman.“In Shan State, the men work at farm the whole day and the women help them with this but they also have to take care of the children, fetch the water, clean the house, do the washing and the cooking. Women have long days; they even wake up before their husbands to prepare breakfast.” This is what Nang Noe tells me
when I visit her and Nang Maw while they take care of their babies. Another example is extracted from an interview with Nang Lao: “I am a lazy woman, because when I finish my work I take a rest. Someone who is active and not lazy is working all the time.” I tell her: “You lazy? In my eyes you are very active.” “But in our culture, if women don’t wake before the sun rise they are lazy. You have to wake before the sun rise and then clean the house and prepare breakfast. Everything has to be prepared for the old people and we have to do all the work ourselves with our hands. When I work here in Thailand, I never work with my hands. I need to follow our Buddhist culture and behave like a woman from my hometown. Yeah, I must do it like this, I really want to do it, but I don’t have time. That’s why I don’t do it.” “How does this make you feel?” I ask her. “I think I miss these qualities and I am not ready for marriage. I can’t do anything: I never cooked for myself; I never washed clothes for a husband. I can never do this for them. For our culture we need to wake up so early and we need to cook and prepare everything for our husband. But I don’t have this idea to do all these things for him. My idea is to work together rather then that I do everything for him… I never can get a husband, I think, I am afraid…… very afraid, because if I marry to a Shan guy, maybe he stays one month and then he disappears. Yeah, they only like a woman who follows them, who sits with them, who does everything the way they want. But I am totally different from this.”

Being a good woman is based on possessing the skills for tasks like cooking, cleaning, washing and taking care of the children and the elderly: roles traditionally expected to be filled by women. In Shan language, Khan is the opposite of Kai which means energetic in a purposeful and orderly way: productive, energetic and keen (Eberhardt 2006: 87). There is a strong emphasis on being Kai in Shan culture which is associated for a woman with fulfilling the ascribed tasks in a Kai way. In Shan state women wake up before sunrise and work with their hands, Nang Lao in the example above means to explain that the ascribed household tasks like washing, cooking and taking care of a husband in a ‘proper’ way are things she does not learn in Thailand because she has a job that expects her to work for the community through helping them with an education. Thoughts on traditional roles of women change, because these roles are not as they can be carried out in Thailand as an illegal refugee. The young professional women have to take care of themselves and the family and gain income in a ways that do not comply with the traditional image of being a good woman. It is a complex and paradoxical position for the women. They have to be strong and independent in order to gain income, but on the other hand they have to fulfill their expected gendered roles. Women negotiate gender relations apart from the value of ‘old world’ to ‘new world’, this does not necessarily becomes totally liberating (Kusakabe 2004: 7).

Gaining income for the family can be seen as an important factor in the negation of gender roles, it is part of the discourse on being a good woman. Nam Pon looks worn-out; she tells me that she has
last a lot of weight the last couple of weeks. She is so tired; the doctor told her that she has to take some rest for a while. “How can I take a rest, I have to make money for my mother, otherwise there is no one who will take care of her.” I feel very sorry for Nam Pon, she has to work seven days a week and most of the time she wakes up at six and arrives home around midnight. Normally she is very optimistic and it is seldom that she spills her energy on complaining, but today I could really tell that the responsibilities are affecting her more than she would ever admit (field notes). The economic insecurity influences the lives of the young women and their families. Shan women are responsible of caring for their family members within a hierarchical system based on age, gender and status. Older siblings, especially girls, have to take care of younger siblings, but if younger siblings grow up and have more economic means they have to make sure to take care of the one’s with the lesser position (Eberhardt 2006: 97). The fact that all of Nam Pon’s family lived back in Shan State made her particularly responsible for gaining income to contribute to her family’s economic security. Living inside Burma implies a very insecure economic situation as was explained in the introduction.

To be a good young woman, obeying elderly and teachers is as important as obeying the husband, being energetic, hard working and taking care of the family. Relationships with teachers and elderly are also hierarchical and young women are expected to express respect and politeness towards them. Nang Lao says: In fact I don’t like to be a soft and polite woman. I like to be a very strong woman; I think I can only be like this when I am outside the culture. In Thailand and other parts of Asia everyone is also polite the whole time. Maybe if I am in a different country I can be a strong woman.” In this example Nang Lao expresses the wish to be strong instead of soft and very polite, traits that are valued in Shan culture. She explains how it is almost impossible to change this. This engrained system, where cultural norms and values have to be fulfilled, restricts the young women in their ability to make individual choices. The demand to be a good daughter, a good wife and a good woman weighs on the shoulders of the young women, particularly since, given the context, these are nearly impossible to live by. The young women are in a state of ambivalence, ideologically they are tied to their cultural values and norms and expected gender roles, but the practical situation does not comply with this ideology. Sharpe (2001) in Kusakabe (2007) points out how women are used to define the collective identity and home place of a ‘migrant’ community, which puts their social behavior under scrutiny (p. 302). The Shan young women are expected to be soft and polite while the insecurity of being an illegal refugee demands the young women to be strong to survive their daily life insecurities. This paradox causes an internal struggle which cannot be escaped for there are always members of social networks checking up on the young women.
Social networks; restricting individual space

As described in the section above, there are many cultural rules to follow for the Shan young women, members of social networks tend to control the young women and their undertaken actions.

Nang Maw felt the pressure of her surrounding social networks in an intense way. One day she told me: “I want to go back to my family in Shan State, because I cannot work now. I have to take care of my baby and I use so much money for me and the baby, I feel bad about that. We cannot save any money at the moment and it makes me feel sad and lonely.” Unfortunately for Nang Maw her brother and husband decided for that she could not go back to Shan State. Kham Yin as a young educated woman reinforces this example in an interview: “Being alone is better, because I can go everywhere where I want and I can do what I want. If there is a man and I want to go somewhere he will tell me “no you can’t go to this place and you can’t go to the temple”. He tells you that you have to behave like a good Shan woman and you have to listen to what he tells you to do.”

Men in Shan culture make the final decisions within the household, traditionally occupying all leading positions in the public sphere and in family life; they are regarded as the heads of the household (SWAN 2002: 6).

At the construction site, the controlling practices of social networks can be clearly seen because they work and live at the same place and the women their individual choices and area of spatial movement is fairly small. The young professional women have more space to act within, but also face restrictions, Pao Naing explains: I have more freedom because I live alone, but my brother, my cousins and other Shan community members living in this city still try to control everything and my father back home as well and they all expect a lot from me. It is not easy to make my own choices.” The control of social networks varies in intensity depending on the size of the network surrounding them. Pao Naing had a large network living in the same city and had to explain her moves to her brother, cousins, community members and her father back in Shan State when he called her. While having social networks around is thus restricting, it is simultaneously, as was seen in chapter four, a necessity in order to safeguard security under insecurities instigated by the State. However, this security can also put pressure on people’s existential securities, tearing people in different directions when mental maps meet (Migdal 2004: 31).

In general all the young women, while moving within the Shan community boundaries (during events, meeting and festivals and in all public spaces where Shan people participated with each other), were constantly observed by relatives, community, elderly, teachers, and peers. Kham Yin and Nam Pon had no family in Thailand therefore they had more freedom to decide for themselves.
what was good for them and what not, although they were always observed within the public spaces by the community. Nang Lao had the most freedom to choose because on the one hand her close/direct family did not live within the city boundaries and on the other hand her job gave her the opportunity to earn enough money to move outside the communal living areas. This obviously had to do with her level of education (she had a University degree).

Education up to a certain level implies freedom within community and family structures, since there are various options to make one’s own choices. The educated young women for example live alone and don’t have to be married. They can blend in more with the Thai community life for they are able to move within a wider range of public spaces and have the ability to participate in public life. In general, they have more opportunities to learn, to get a job that pays them more money, to participate in communal life and to widen one’s network in order to create new chances for better jobs or education. There are various options to achieve a better future for the young educated women, therefore this prospect, next to the ability to move within a wider arena, gives more room to think about individual future aspirations. These future aspirations will be explored in the next section for this is related to how the young women reflected on the discourses about the responsibilities as daughters and women. They addressed the pressure of social networks and their ways of coping with these restricting circumstances.

**Do dreams come true?**

In the above section it becomes clear that the Shan young women were monitored strictly by members of social networks. There was however a difference in intensity; the construction workers were constantly, surrounded by community members where as the young professionals had more space to make individual decisions. When they reflected upon the community control and the differences between men and women these differences could be tracked in their ways of coping.

The young professionals expressed individual future aspiration. Nam Pon in an interview speaks very passionately, her face shines when she says: *I really want to get more education to learn many, many things.* She explains: *In Burma there is no change to learn a lot the Burmese government does not have a good education system and the curriculum only talks about Burmese ideals and does not tell anything about how it is in the rest of the world*” Nang Lao: “For example they said that ninety percent of the people in the world are Buddhist, so I believed this very much. Also how we follow the Buddhist way, our community is very lovely, very Buddhist and every week they go to the temple on
specific days and so did I. I followed the rules of Buddhism, of Shan culture and I believed that there was only one way to go, also for women they have to follow the rules and do as their parents and husbands tell them.” Kham Yin adds: “when I came to Thailand I learned about women rights and human rights. I get a lot of knowledge here and that makes me very happy, I like it a lot. I really want to learn more for myself so I can decide what is good for me and what is not. I don’t like to be told by others how I should life, but it is very difficult to do what you want and to follow your own dreams.” The professional young women often criticised the existing images of being a good women and a good daughter. They could not and did not always want to live up to these expectations, especially to the image of being a good woman. There is a longing to be independent and besides this, to be equal to others. Living up to the expectations of family and community members limits their individual choices, restricting their own free desires in life: to go where they want and to do what they want to do. They dream of education for themselves to be able to make their own choices.

However when pressure for the young professional women rose due to state insecurities related to themselves or their family and pressure of social networks became prevailing, individual future aspiration disappeared. The community sorrows relating to inequality, the fear about the health of their family, together with the responsibility to sustain their parents and siblings livelihoods, caused pressure on individual dreams and needs. These sorrows bring a lot of anxiety and stress, they expressed this often themselves when they said they were pondering, had headaches, felt weak, said that they were thinking so much that they did not catch any sleep.

For the young educated women it was evident that whenever there were family members or community members who were in trouble and needed help this was the only thing that they could think of and work on. Fieldnotes 3rd of March: Nang Lao, Kham Yin, Nam Pon and Pao Naing seem to forget about their dreams to seek education. They have too much on their minds. They talk about the problems of their families and the Shan people in the city who need help with all the problems they face. It becomes so obvious that the family is number one on their list and then the needy people within the community take a second place. Yesterday Pao Naing told me: “I cannot concentrate on anything and I do not think about my dream to study, because we have too many family problems. There is too much on my mind. This is what she tells me when I ask her if she tried other ways to apply for a scholarship. When a week later I ask Nang Lao the same question she says: “There is no time to think about that I have to make sure to take care of the work for the community”. Nam Pon works for her family and the community the whole time and in a second interview with her she tells me when I ask about her individual dreams: “Now there is no time for that I have to work and make money and take care of the Shan people and I think maybe it will never come true especially the dream of a little
house for myself”. The individual dreams are always set aside when the family demands help as soon as something is wrong with close family everything else becomes less important.

Coping within this circumstances becomes complex and is multi facetted subjugated to change which in an illegal refugee situation is continuous. Uncertainty and insecurity are part of daily life which makes it hard to survive and gives no room for extensive agency. The young women have to act within the given circumstances (see Ortner’s concept agency 1997). Future aspirations in this case can also be seen as shaped not only within the context of insecurities instigated by the state but also within these relationships. In case of the Shan women, future aspirations give way under severe insecurities, individual dreams ‘temporary’ lose meaning. When multi-layered insecurities prevailed, it was seen that the young women made use of tactics and lived their life by the day, accepting the circumstances by stating: “it is just the way it is”.

**Tactics and “it is just the way it is”**

Tactics as mentioned before are weapons of the weak and practiced in everyday life by those who are “caught in the nets of discipline” in a place of the other (De Certeau 1978). This could be clearly observed within the case of the Shan young women. One day Pao Naing told me with a smile that her cousin and her boyfriend do not live in the same apartment block. When her cousin, who did not know about the existence of her boyfriend, was looking for a cheap place to stay, she drew attention to his place of residence. After a while, Pao Naing discovered their relationship and informed her brother about it. Her brother and cousin were not very pleased with the situation, and after a while her brother decided that she had to move from her room, which was not too far from her boyfriend’s place, into her brother’s apartment. She worried about this because this apartment was surrounded with relatives from the same town who could watch her more closely now. This occurred when I left the field, but I am sure she will find a new way to deal with it for it became clear to me during the fieldwork that many of the young women were creative within the small spaces. They would panic when another restriction was issued but within a couple of days they were able to find new ways of working around it. It was however often a painful process to gain spaces for themselves.

It was not only Pao Naing who had a boyfriend; all the girls had their experiences. None of the girls had told their parents or siblings about it. The easiest way was to keep in touch with the boys was through the internet. When there was time to spend behind the computer they seemed eager to chat. During their work if they had access to computers or in some of their scarce free time they sought contact, this enabled them not only to contact boyfriends but also peers around the world.
This seemed to bring them a lot of pleasure, forgetting daily life control for a little while giggling at the same time as typing fast. Chatting was a free and uncontrolled tactic to cope with social control.

It was sometimes difficult to see how the young women at the construction site found tactics to cope with the expected gender roles, as I could not observe them at all times. Two themes struck me, the first was observable: when I came around at the first construction site the women were often chatting with each other and seemed to have fun together (they laughed a lot). At the second construction site they told me that they never really talked together, but that they liked talking to me and Pao Naing and chatting together with only women. What Mo Moon told me was that the pleasure for her and the other women came from visiting the family. Mo Moon: “I was at my aunt’s place yesterday, it was so good, and I also saw my grandmother, it makes me happy”. Every time when she knew she would be going or if she had seen her family she was very enthusiastic. It was outstanding that she always talked about the female members of her family and how she enjoyed being with them. This seemed to be pleasurable for her, something that made her happy. Talking with other women and being around them made life enjoyable for the women at both construction sites and in this way it can be seen as a way of coping with a male dominated society.

The second reoccurring theme came forth during conversations about community control and the discourses on being a good daughter and good woman was: “This is the way life is”. They accepted the situation as it was and talked more about their daily life insecurities related to state policies and income. In many ways and at many times I addressed this topic, but they never answered differently. It gives the impression that when daily life consists mainly of sustaining one’s livelihood and thinking about political and physical insecurities there is not much space to address further inequalities. It can also imply that they do not experience the gender role divisions and ‘being young’ as unequal; these things are a part of their culture, which seen in chapter five as something to be proud of, something that has to be preserved in insecure times. Acceptance of established cultural values in this case then can be experienced as a security: a safe haven in unstable times.

Although the Shan young women use coping tactics and strategies observing them gave mainly insight into their insecurities and limitations. Their lives were hectic and unpredictable and sharing their fears with me seemed to give them strength, for many of them said, “it is so nice that someone listens to our stories. Normally no one has time to listen to our worries because everyone faces their own difficulties. “Sometimes I wish I did not hear a story” Pao Naing told me one day after we talked to an older woman who faced a lot of problems in her life. “I know now about her story but I have too much trouble myself to help. I don’t know anyone else who can help her, this makes me feel so sad.” Talking with others about insecurities can be interpreted as a way of coping as well.
Conclusion

Life circumstances influenced perceptions of the Shan women living in Northern Thailand, for these differed from person to person. However all mentioned feelings of responsibility for their family were related to the fulfilment of expected gender roles of being a good daughter and a good woman.

Being a good daughter and a good woman are restricting concepts that put young women in a straight jacket. The rules, goals and perceptions that are set by the women’s parents and the community are based on firm cultural norms and values. They have to live up to the expectations of others worrying about following these norms in a correct manner; if they fail in this attempt, losing family and community support can be the consequence, which will put them at risk for there will be no social help in their insecure circumstances. In times of danger social networks are needed to survive daily life insecurities which is proven throughout refugee studies (Horst 2003). Social networks among refugees constrain the individual’s existential security in case of the Shan for “oppositions between men and women are exaggerated within insecure life circumstances” (Schrijfers 1999: 308).

Community control is imposed more tightly on those who have their family and community members living in the near vicinity as a means of reinforcing gender roles. The women on the construction sites often had big family networks surrounding them very closely; therefore there were many people who interfered with decision making processes. The young professional women lived alone implying less social control. The level of close family and community control thus explains the different ways of coping with this control on living according to cultural norms and values. Having many people controlling and deciding for you gives less space to make your own individual choices, to move around freely and to have individual dreams. Second, construction workers have no education and this determines the work circumstances; working long hours for a low salary. Existential and economic insecurity of the young women at the construction site gives less space to manoeuvre. However, the young professional women also have to deal with a huge social control from family living in the same city, family residing outside the city and country, as well as the Shan community in general, surrounding them and observing wherever they go. Even though they have more opportunities, overall they face strict family and community control on every individual move, causing pressure on their existential security.

It is important to keep in mind that ‘cultures’ and ‘discourses’ are systems of dominations and must be studied for their dominating/subjugating effects (Ortner 1997: 157). However, this does not imply that the Shan young women submit to power. They work through it and try to turn it to their
own purposes through the use of tactics, through talking with other women and through living life by the day. Daily life survival is a struggle which has to be dealt with.

Eating Shan noodles, at a Shan festival together with Pao Naing and Nam Pon and her friends. Belief it or not, Shan noodles are very tasty.

Enjoying a delicious meal: I often ate together with the construction workers. Dinner was a moment to relax during the long days of work.
6. Conclusion

This thesis has conveyed the complexity of the lives of Shan young women residing in Northern Thailand.

Young Shan illegal refugee females face numerous contradicting (in)securities. The fact that they are illegal refugees and simultaneously Shan young women exposes them to multiple conflicting positions. However they are not mere victims even though powerful mechanisms restrict their individual choices. They cope in various ways with the insecurities of everyday life and define (in)security in their own terms. This very simply put the main finding of this thesis.

Previous chapters have discussed wide ranging subjects in order to give insight into the main question of this thesis:

“How do illegal young female Shan refugees in Northern Thailand perceive their daily life (in)securities and in what ways do they cope with these (in)securities?”

Human security as an analytical ‘lens’ has been profoundly useful to uncover the thesis main question, offering understanding of the many ways in which people cope within restricting circumstances of illegality, refugeeeness and gender. The focus on the individual and the community revealed the complexity of ‘being’ a Shan illegal refugee woman in Northern Thailand. Hence as an analytical tool including agency, emic views and existential aspects, human security aids in understanding the circumstances from a people centred perspective. As a narrowly defined concept, such as used by the UN, lacking crucial elements that include the perspectives of the people it excludes the people whom the concept is made for in the first place. It is of major importance that policy makers realize the consequences of narrow definitions on human security which is proven throughout this thesis: for who’s security is protected and at who’s expense? In case of the young Shan women human security brings forth numerous contradictions limiting their individual choices. Through a people centred ‘lens’ the opposed representations of young displaced women as vulnerable victims versus young displaced women as active agents can now be reinterpreted within the context of young Shan ‘illegal’ refugee women's lived experiences. They are not mere victims of their circumstances but are vulnerable within the context of insecurities instigated by the Burmese and Thai States. Therefore I argue that labelling policies are problematic and force young Shan women to cope with several conflicting insecurities; in turn, the label of ‘illegal' or 'alien worker'
confounds and clouds their real existence as refugees, making their position very complicated. They are in a double bind of illegality and 'forcibly displaced', in between states, facing past insecurities of their home country, and present insecurities in their 'host' country. Refugee, migrant, alien worker, illegality, legality are all excluding and problematic terms and concepts which put people in a straight-jacket without looking at their real identity and contextual background. Labelling creates a stigma for people who are put into these categories; for the Shan, this means being excluded from of the refugee label which would otherwise offer some national and international protection. Being labelled 'alien worker' or 'illegal' excludes them from any kind of this protection and, on top of this, exposes them to vast social and political discrimination within the host community.

This complicated position has to be recognized and related to 'taken for granted' concepts of nation-states.

Nation states were once created to structure the world, dividing land into political entities. By doing so, people living within these structures are bound to belong in one country. Displaced people are excluded within the politics of nations for they do not fit in their structure. Concepts of nations States are at the base of the exclusive politics of labelling and denying groups of people basic human rights.

The complexity of the situation of the Shan is underlined by the reaction of the Thai community, who see them as a threat to their national security. For the Shan, this comes on top of their denial of basic human rights, they become threatened on an existential level. Taking into account that concepts of nation-states become engrained in social life and accepted on a community level opens up the possibility to recognise discriminative discourses towards a minority group as the Shan. On a political and theoretical level, it is important to point out the problematic concepts of labelling and nation states.

Within this context, young women are vulnerable, though they are no mere victims; they cope actively within the structure of insecurities instigated by the state and the pressure of communities. However their ways of coping are constructed within this context. They are illegal or alien workers, they are vulnerable and victims, but at the same time they have to be strong in order to survive the numerous insecurities surrounding them every day. The community leaders call for assimilation and preservation of the Shan ethnic identity. The young women want to fulfil the expectations of the community leaders. They feel the inequality of their position as Shan, and although they know that they have to blend in, they want to stand out and show their Shan identity. These paradoxes influence their lives enormously. Nevertheless, they are no mere victims: they cope through engaging in social networks, through the use of tactics, and through cultivating future aspirations. Therefore
refugee women can be seen as both strong and vulnerable and can be “pitied and admired at the same time” (Schrijvers 1999: 327).

The paradoxes the young Shan women live with become more apparent in light of the discourses and practices within the community concerning expected gender roles. Being a good daughter and being a good woman comes together with the responsibility to take care of the economic insecure situation of the family back in Shan State. Community members control the young women to see if they fulfill their expected gender roles.

It is important in refugee studies to see how gender affects the position and life chances of people. In case of the young Shan women, gender expectations embedded within the culture lead to the image of a soft, polite, responsible and hardworking woman. Apart from this, the wishes of parents, teachers, elderly, and Shan men have to be followed. Again a dichotomy comes into being: the necessity to be strong in order to be able to take care of the family and the expectation of a young woman to be soft and polite. Taking gender into account reveals the heterogeneity and paradoxical complexity of refugees. ‘The refugee’ does not exist and ‘the refugee’ depicted as an adult male does not consider the specific situation of (young) women. “Gender can be seen as a key relational power dimension of human activity and thought. Informed by culturally and historically specific notions of masculinity and femininity, it has far ranging consequences for the overall positioning of women, men and children in all social domains, and it determines to a great extent the way in which people experience lives” (Schrijvers 1999: 308).

Social networks within the context of insecurities instigated by the State and cultural discourses and practices can at the end of this thesis be analysed in their full potential. They are intriguing webs of possibilities and restrictions, providing security in the instability of the nation state policies, giving uncertainties within the existential realm: choices of the self and young women's struggles with the ‘old and new’ world. Individual future aspirations give way, breaking down under the complex circumstances of daily life, revealing the domination of powerful external pressure which limits agency of the young women being shaped by their shifting, contextual settings. However, agency is continuously recreated within this system through tactics that can be seen as 'weapons of the weak.' Social networks push the young women to behave according to Shan cultural norms while at the same time pulling them out of the isolation of being a Shan in Thailand, thereby offering a sense of belonging.
Executive Summary

The Shan come from Shan State in Burma, where a military regime continues to repress their people through forced relocation programs, leaving people without property and a chance to sustain their livelihood.

Young Shan 'illegal' refugee women in Northern Thailand face numerous contradicting (in)securities. Illegality excludes the Shan from basic human rights, such as the ability to access the labour market and health-care. Within a system that labels Shan as illegal 'migrants' instead affording them a more stable 'refugee' status, women specifically are vulnerable to multiple conflicting positions. The conditions of the Shan young women are problematic, for how does one survive within these circumstances?

Hence the question:

*How do 'illegal' young female Shan refugees in Northern Thailand perceive their daily life (in)securities and in what ways do they cope with these (in)securities?*

During the research the first insecurity mentioned by the Shan young women was related to their illegal position. Not being recognized by the state as a “refugee” has the consequence that there are few laws and basic human rights on which these women can depend. The Shan are labeled as ‘illegal migrant’ or ‘alien worker’ and used as a cheap labour force. While young women within this situation of illegality are perceived as vulnerable, they are forced to be strong because of the multiple insecurities that come along with this label.

The second insecurity is related to the economically insecure situation of women's families, and the multiple gender roles they have to enact in different contexts. In order to be a ‘good’ daughter they have to earn money to feed the family and behave according to Shan cultural values. In order to be a ‘good’ woman they have to be a soft and polite and serve other people; social networks therefore control whether they are behaving like good women. These positions are complex and conflicting: ‘being’ an illegal, alien worker and simultaneously having to be soft and polite.

The young women cope with these situations through their belief in Buddhism, through the use of social networks and through aspiring towards their future dreams. Social networks in specific are a necessity and a secure haven within insecure times. However, when the pressures of the State instigate high levels of insecurities, the social network control tightens the young women no longer
have room to dream. Social networks in these circumstances are intriguing webs of possibilities and restrictions; while providing security amidst the instability of ‘being’ an illegal refugee, they also present uncertainty with regard to the choices of Self and young women’s struggles with the ‘old and new’ world.

On the one hand, oppression causes Shan communities to bolster their identity and create stronger spaces for belonging, but on the other hand, it denies Shan people their basic rights. The young Shan women in specific are caught in between contradicting (in)securities. However, they should not be seen as vulnerable victims, they cope actively within given circumstances.

Recommendations:

- The terms illegality and alien worker in case of the Shan should not be taken for granted; they flee repression and should gain access to basic human rights. There are hardly any safety nets for the Shan, thus politicians and NGO’s should come in and offer sustainable aid.

- Aid should be based on inclusive and heterogeneous policies, taking into account the complexity of gender and age.

- Multiple roles of women, men and children should be highlighted in order to avoid negative gender reinforcement.

- Human security should be used to listen to the needs of the people themselves without forgetting that security always comes at the expense of someone else’s security.
Bibliography


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