

English Edition

BURMA~ WOMEN'S VOICES FOR PEACE

Edited by
the Thanakha Team

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BURMA

ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA

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P O Box 296

Lardprao Post Office

Bangkok 10310

Thailand

Tel: 66 1 850 9008

Fax: 66 2 227 4261

Email: altsean@altsean.org

Website: www.altsean.org

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The Thanakha Team exists solely to produce the bilingual "Women's Voices" series. It is an ad-hoc collective of women from different parts of Burma and the world. Previous editions are *Burma: Voices of Women in the Struggle* (1998), *Burma ~ More Women's Voices* (2000), *Burma ~ Women's Voices for Change* (2002), *Burma ~ Women's Voices Together* (2003), *Burma ~ Women's Voices for Freedom* (2005) and *Burma ~ Women's Voices for Hope* (2007). For this edition, the editorial team was comprised of Mee Thawdar, Khin Phyu Htway, Shwe Zin, Po Po, Janie Conway-Herron and Ma Thanda. Altsean would like to express our sincere thanks to the women in Thailand and abroad who helped with the editing and translation of the articles and poems for this edition.

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CONTENTS

- iv **MAP OF BURMA**
- v **FOREWORD**
Debbie Stothard
- vii **INTRODUCTION**
Janie Conway-Herron
- 1 **HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**
Pan Yein Nge
- 3 **A JOURNEY FOR CHANGE**
Kham Lay
- 8 **WAR**
Mi Nyo
- 10 **RUNNING TO SURVIVE**
Preh Mo
- 12 **AYESHA**
The Arakan Project
- 19 **MY EXPERIENCE OF A DIFFICULT LIFE**
Nay Chi
- 23 **UNFORGETTABLE LIFE**
Shar
- 25 **QUALITY AND STANDARD**
A Phoo
- 29 **FORCED TO CHOOSE**
Laminlay

- 33 MY MOTHERLAND AND ME**
Kay Zin Lin
- 37 WAITING TO ESCAPE THE “GOD OF THE HOUSEHOLD”**
Lway Shwe Kyae
- 40 THE DESERTED DINNER TABLE**
Kon Chan Gakao
- 44 THE RAINY SEASONS THAT PASSED**
Saung
- 47 THE LIFE OF KYAT TU RWAY**
Kyat Tu Rway
- 53 FUTURE RAY OF HOPE**
Yu Ka Lit
- 56 MY SUCCESS**
The Arakan Project
- 65 RESILIENCE**
Nay Jar Yine
- 68 SILENT TEARS, BLEEDING HEART**
Lack Son Pop Htaw
- 72 FROM LADY TO ACTIVIST**
Yaung Pyan
- 75 FOLLOWING MY MOTHER'S FOOTSTEPS**
Rakhaing Thu
- 79 DIARY OF A SUPPORTIVE WIFE**
Khayay Phyu
- 87 BROKEN BOWL**
Lae Lae

- 94 A PLACE CALLED “BURMA”**
Han Thu Lwin
- 95 PEACE IN BURMA**
Parrot
- 100 THE DISPERSION OF A PEOPLE**
Sayblumoo
- 103 LIFE = CREDIT + DEBT**
Ki Ki
- 107 RAISING THE DRAGON'S HEAD**
Ki Ki
- 111 WOMEN'S HOPE**
Soe Meh

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

Map of Burma



Foreword

DEBBIE STOTHARD

“Burma – Women’s Voices for Peace” is the Thanakha Team’s 7th compilation of writings by women of Burma. When the first bilingual compilation, “Burma: Women’s Voices from the Struggle” was published in 1998, we had no idea that the interest, energy and solidarity it generated would sustain the birth of new editions every two years.

When we set out to document the stories and thoughts of mostly first-time women writers, we had not realized how many women, struggling with oppression, conflict and displacement, were determined to speak out. In doing so, some have written in their own direct style, in a way that has moved beyond Burmese literary tradition.

Having been a Burma activist of over two decades, I continue to be amazed at the fundamental courage and generosity of women from Burma to share their stories. Their heart-breaking and moving stories have made me even more determined to support human rights, democracy and peace in Burma.

All of us, readers and members of the Thanakha team, are privileged that these women have been willing to share so many painful, suspenseful and inspiring experiences with compassion, humility and wit. They have taken time to reveal how they personally grapple with the daily consequences of the regime’s crimes against humanity, war crimes and gross economic mismanagement. Women of all ages and backgrounds continually strive against the violence, insecurity and deprivation that continue to permeate every aspect of their lives.

In 2010, as Burma faces a greater threat of war and repression because of the military regime's preparations for an election that it is determined to win at all costs, this collection has a special significance. Over 118,800 people were displaced because of military actions in Eastern Burma in the 18 months leading up to 2010. An estimated 16,800 were survivors of crimes against humanity and war crimes. In the same period, 477 activists were sentenced to jail for up to 104 years.

Women heroes like Aung San Suu Kyi, Nilar Thein and Su Su Nway remain in detention because they refuse to give up. Their uncompromising commitment to human rights, democracy and peace is testament to the hope and will that spur ever-increasing numbers of women from Burma to find ways to survive and resist.

Now, more than ever, is the time we must take on the side of women as they continue their struggle for peace in their country, in their communities, in their homes and their hearts. We must match their courage and resilience with ours.

Debbie Stothard is the Coordinator of Altsean-Burma (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma)

Introduction

JANIE CONWAY-HERRON

The *Burma – Women’s Voices for Peace* anthology focuses on the stories of women’s experiences living within Burma and as refugees. Stories come from many of the countries surrounding Burma where refugee camps swell with dispossessed peoples, as well as from countries further a field where refugees are living in exile.

Since 2007 I have been involved in running workshops on the Thai-Burma border with the amazingly brave women who have contributed to the *Burma Women’s Voices* anthologies over that time. My involvement has been life changing, bringing together my passion for human rights and my ability to teach creative writing in a way that has been awe-inspiring. I arrived at the workshops armed only with my teaching skills and a willingness to listen. I expected shyness and a certain reticence to tell stories filled with the pain of an exile’s experience and I wondered how I would handle the repercussions of the women’s storytelling. But the stories poured forth; some women told their own stories, some told the stories of family members, while others told stories about friends or events they had witnessed. All of the stories hold an undeniable power imbued with the bravery, honesty and the extraordinary spirit of survival that lies within the heart of each storyteller.

The part narrative has to play in the voicing of unheard stories is the major impetus for the *Burma Women’s Voices for Peace* anthology. The importance of telling stories in bringing agency to the storytellers through giving voice to a particular situation should never be underestimated. Stories like those in *Burma Women’s Voices for Peace* give

personal testimony to the fact that human beings are capable of treating each other abominably and underline the psychology of egos made brutal by the lure of power. They remind us also of the need for defense against such treatment and of the right of any human being to be treated fairly. The stories also give testimony to the powerful spirit of human beings in maintaining their right to voice an opinion that might go against the grain of the powers that be.

It has been such an honor to be part of the process that brings these anthologies to life and to watch the positive ways in which narrative and advocacy go hand in hand towards creating reconciliation and healing, education and freedom of information. Since working on the Thai-Burma border with the women whose stories are represented in this anthology, our lives and our stories have interconnected in ways I could not have imagined previously. It is my heart-felt wish that their hopes for a peaceful future will finally be realized in the near future.

*Janie Conway-Herron is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Southern Cross University, Lismore Australia. She regularly conducts writing workshops with Burmese refugees on the Thai-Burma border and her own work reflects this passion for human rights, exploring landscapes of identity in an historical and contemporary context. Her novel *Beneath The Grace of Clouds* is due to be published in 2010.*

Hope for the Future

PAN YEIN NGE

We are women from Burma.

We don't have the right to participate in political and public leadership.

The lack of civil and political rights has meant that women are excluded from involvement in politics. Deep in our culture, a patriarchy system and the worst kind of militarization discriminate against women.

We women of Burma suffer human rights abuses executed by the military regime, such as rape, sexual abuse, trafficking, and being taken as political prisoners. Women are the victims of civil war.

The regime uses rape of ethnic women as a political tool.

The discrimination will not end until the military rule ends.

We women need a truly democratic Burma.

We women want Burma's 25 million female population to be represented in politics.

We need our leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to be released now.

No more detention for her.

She is the star.

She is the hope.

She is everything.

2 Burma - Women's Voices for Peace

We want a guaranteed role for women in the future federal democratic government of Burma.

The sky will not be fully beautiful without a star.

A Journey for Change

KHAM LAY

My best friend and I decided to go inside Burma to provide training about peace and women's basic health, to educate minority ethnic groups in conflict areas. This meant that we needed to follow the ethnic armed group for our safety and protection. I didn't go to the frontline to fight the enemy, I was there to provide needed training and build a better relationship with the local people that we met and the democracy movement outside of Burma. On the day we started our journey from the Thai-Burma border, there were 30 people in our group including me and my friend, the only two women. The group was made up of members of the ethnic armed group and other alliances. This was my first journey with a lot of difficulties and dangers.

We knew that the trip would be rough. When we started our journey, we hiked through the jungle, climbed and passed many high mountains. It was really difficult and dangerous to walk on the small path at night without a torch. SPDC battalions were nearby so we had to be careful. We were all exhausted, especially my friend and me. At 4 am we arrived at the top of a high mountain and slept there. Unfortunately it rained heavily, so everybody got soaking wet and had to sleep in the rain. I was wet throughout my whole body and couldn't sleep.

As soon as dawn came we continued our journey because there was a SPDC battalion near by. We had to walk very quietly and fast. I could barely move my legs because they were so tired and my body was weak from the cold wet night. It was very dangerous to walk in the

jungle with the many SPDC soldiers near villages. We knew that this meant land mines had been heavily laid around villages, fields, streams, foot paths and in the jungle that are used by villagers and armed groups. The SPDC put land mines around the jungle in order to keep villagers in their village as well as to keep other armed groups from coming in.

On the fourth day of our journey we took a rest beside a stream. Suddenly a huge stone fell down towards us from the top of the mountain. One leader said it wasn't a good sign and to be careful. Then, we heard an explosion. At first we thought it might be SPDC soldiers attacking us but sadly a man who was carrying medicine for our group had stepped on a land mine. My best friend and other soldiers picked him up. One of his legs was severely injured and bleeding a lot. He was murmuring and crying. My best friend was very brave, she helped to clean and dress the wound but I was shocked and felt numb after seeing his legs blown off. I didn't know what to do and I was very scared. That night I couldn't sleep. All my thoughts at first were about my parents and if I was going to have a chance to meet them again. I worried that the SPDC heard the explosion and would follow us. How much of our journey would we have to worry about land mines? Were there a lot of land mines?

Later, the leader decided some of our soldiers would carry our injured villager back to Thailand to get medical treatment. The rest of us continued our journey deeper into Burma, frightened that we would step on a land mine or meet with SPDC army soldiers. I realized that our lives were not safe and danger was everywhere.

Even though we had ways to avoid the SPDC, we always had to be careful and ready. Sometimes the SPDC soldiers were very near us so we had to move to another place, move in the middle of the night, or keep on moving with empty stomachs. Everyone had to carry rice and salt, chili, oil, etc for seven days but we sometimes didn't have

enough food. We often had rice and boiled vegetable curry. When we stopped for lunch, we picked wild vegetables from the jungle and cooked it without oil or spices. I had little energy but I had to go on. The SPDC soldiers were always chasing us so we couldn't stay in the same place for even two days.

The surrender of ethnic armies to the SPDC has had a negative impact on communities. The SPDC has militarized Burma, creating many ethnic armed splinter groups and the people have to communicate with all the different groups of soldiers. My childhood experiences and what I have seen and heard during this trip has shown the oppression the people suffer from a militarized country. Whenever the SPDC soldiers come to villages they take villagers' chickens, pigs, cows and other things. They sometimes beat and kill the villagers and rape the women. So, the villagers are very afraid of SPDC soldiers.

When SPDC soldiers come to villages the men run far away and hide in the jungle. As for the women, they have to take care of their children so they stay at home even if they are very afraid of the SPDC soldiers. Women face many difficulties and dangers. The SPDC soldiers ask many questions. "Where are all of your men? Did you see any ethnic soldiers? Where are the ethnic soldiers?" Then the soldiers say that if they find out that they had lied to them, that they will be punished. In this situation, women and children become the victims and almost always suffer the consequences. Women have especially faced many and various forms of violence in conflict areas. When the ethnic soldiers come to the villages, the villagers are afraid of them because of the SPDC's threats. I now realize that the situation of the civilians is worse from when I was a kid.

This journey helped me better understand the situation of people living in conflict areas. During my journey I heard about many incidences of SPDC soldiers torturing and killing villagers and raping women and girls. It is a very bad situation and I heard stories about this

every day. In one case a young girl, who was 15 years old, was gang raped by 13 soldiers including a captain. For a long time since then she has received medical treatment in a hospital. In addition, the captain of the SPDC soldiers threatened her parents and villagers with a gun to not spread the news. These rape cases are happening in many ethnic areas and there are many printed reports that document the SPDC's human rights abuses, including the use of systematic rape as a weapon of war.¹

There is a great deal of hardship and misery in Burma because it is controlled by a brutal military regime that creates conflict. In conflict areas there are almost no schools or clinics. In conflict areas, like the areas I traveled, people don't have any security or guarantee for their lives. When SPDC soldiers come to their villages, they flee to the jungle to save themselves from the oppressive hands of the military. They are always busy just surviving their difficult situation and they continue to face various difficulties every day. They have a lack of food, medical care and personal hygiene. I have seen many sick villagers and children. Some worse than others but they have no options to receive medical care unless they travel the difficult journey to the border.

I also witnessed many children and youth working on farms instead of studying in schools. They need to help their families earn enough to live on. There are a few schools in cities nearby, but their parents can't afford to send their children to school. They are suffering due to the SPDC's mismanagement of their country. Males have the opportunity to access education at monasteries, but traditions and customs exclude women. As a result women face a lack of education and knowledge, along with the fear of being raped by SPDC soldiers, which leaves them with one option, to get married. Most young people that I met on my journey, who live in the rural areas, couldn't read or

¹ Cases of rape were documented in the report *License to Rape*, released in 2002 by the Shan Women's Action Network.

write in their own ethnic language or Burmese. It was horrible for me to see so many of my own people uneducated and suffering. This is painful to my heart.

During my journey I found that there are many challenges in working inside Burma. Security is one of the biggest challenges, especially for activists promoting human rights and democracy. When I visited local communities I tried to explain about democracy and human rights. In my country there is no freedom of expression. Therefore, I shared whatever I could with them even though I couldn't provide them with materials. I also encouraged them not to support the 2010 election and explained why. They live everyday in fear under the abuses of the military regime who takes porters, rapes, confiscates food and land, arrests people arbitrarily, kills and forcibly relocates people. Survival is a daily challenge for them. They encouraged me to never give up, no matter the challenge, even if our journey is full of hardship and difficulties. We must walk on, through the jungle, the mine fields, the storms and the hunger. We must continue to reach our goals of peace and democracy in our country.

The author is a young Pa-O woman who is working for peace and democracy in Burma.

War

MI NYO

When I was thinking about my childhood, the experiences I faced were all frightening. Along with this feeling of being afraid, the hatred of war and army also came to my mind. I lost all my rights as a human due to civil war and fighting.

When I was young, I wanted to go to school and study. However, I could not because my village is very close to the border area and there was often fighting between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) army troops and ethnic armed groups. I, like others, had to leave the classroom in the middle of learning when we heard that the guns were directed at our school. My friends and I were so afraid and did not know where to run. I heard the cry of young children beside me, crying for their parents, as we escaped from the fighting. We ran without knowing if the enemy was coming and did not have time to bring food with us. Some people brought small amounts of food and it was given to the younger children. The older people were waiting in hunger to be able to go back to the village when it was safe. As my village is very close to a Thai village, when we ran and hid, we hid in the deep forests of Thailand. Sometimes the Thai people of the nearby village did not allow us to enter, so we had to stay in the jungle and sleep there without shelter in all seasons. There was no medicine when people got malaria or diarrhea. Sometimes we had to stay in the jungle for a week. After the SPDC troops retreated, everybody went back to their homes. I saw that some houses were burned down and people lost everything they owned. At least five to

ten houses were burned down each time. The people who lost their houses stayed with the others.

I felt afraid that I would not be able to go to school as that happened very often. Valuable time was lost as I was hiding from the danger of war. I understand that basic education and knowledge is the key to being a human. While my friends and I were running and hiding from the war, we were learning under the shadow of bamboo plants or other trees.

Today the village I grew up in is no longer there. The place now belongs to the SPDC army troops. It has been so long that I have not been able to go back to my birthplace. All the people and children who lived in my village are now living inside a refugee camp. Similar to my childhood experience, many other people today are becoming internally displaced persons in these conflict areas. Therefore, I do not like the war. War or fighting is the last thing I want.

Running to Survive

PREH MO

My name is Ngar Myar Naing. I am a 24-year-old Karenni woman. I arrived in Thailand six years ago and would like to tell you about my life. Maybe you have had the same experience and have felt the same as me.

Twenty years ago, my family lived in a village on a mountain in Karenni State, (also called Kayah State). My family was very poor and had to work every day to have a regular meal. Sometimes we only had boiled rice to eat. There were six of us in my family. My father used to be the village headman. There was often fighting between the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) troops and Karenni troops, who were viewed as rebels by the SPDC. The SPDC troops often came to my village and asked the villagers where the Karenni troops were. They also came over to my house and asked my father about them. When the SPDC came, they took the property of the villagers such as pigs and chickens without asking permission. If they needed porters, they also took the villagers. Villagers would run and hide because they are needed by their families. If they could not get the men, they told the women to come with them. My brother was taken as a porter. One day, the Burmese troops raided my house, accused my father of contacting the Karenni rebels and then they shot him. At that time, I was only four. Even though I was very young, this experience never leaves my mind. My mother has often told me about this incident.

One year after my father's death, my family moved to another village near the Thai-Burma border to be free from oppression by the SPDC soldiers. Wherever we were we would encounter soldiers as we

were living under a military dictatorship. Military check points were placed near the village we moved to. Thai troops were deployed on the border near my village. The villagers had to get permission from the SPDC to go to their farms or their fields. The villagers could not pack extra rice for lunch because they would be accused of feeding the rebels. The SPDC soldiers always ordered the villagers to send them food rations and drinking water. They accused the villagers of having contact with the rebels and supporting them. My family was accused all the time. People's lives were deteriorating.

One day, the Burmese troops were recruiting soldiers. If a family had two men, one must join the army. As my family had two men, they came and called my brother to join. He refused to go and instead he ran away and joined the Karenni armed group. After a year, my mother was brought to the SPDC regional command office regarding my brother's case. At night SPDC Soldiers often came to my house and checked for visitors staying overnight. As my mother does not understand Burmese, they did not get information from her.

My family had fewer opportunities than others. This was especially true at school, where I was discriminated against and treated badly because I am Karenni. I was thinking that if I continued staying in Burma, my life would not progress. Therefore, I left for Thailand. Not only did my family face ill treatment and discrimination inside Burma, but so have most all of the ethnic groups. Therefore, the ethnic minority groups' greatest hope is to get human rights and develop our own legislation in our regions of Burma.

AYESHA

THE ARAKAN PROJECT

My name is Ayesha. I am 27 and a mother of six children, three sons and three daughters. My husband was a farmer in our village and I was a housewife. Our village is The Chaung in North Maungdaw. My Husband had 8 kanis [*3 acres*] of paddy land and, with other villagers, he was a shareholder in a shrimp farm collectively rented from the NaSaKa (border guard security force). When the NaSaKa seized my house, we had 700 baskets of paddy in the store as well as pigeons, chickens and ducks. We also owned eight cows and bullocks and five goats. We had a beautiful house with a yard and an orchard around it. We were not poor.

We had never been refugees, neither in 1978 nor in 1991.¹ However, we had been to Bangladesh a few times for medical treatment and to visit friends and relatives. But we never thought that one day we would be forced to flee here in this way and survive like the poorest of the poor. Unfortunately, our fate brought us to this situation.

Lots of rumours spread when the Burma Army arrived in our area with building materials for the border fence. We were frightened when we saw a sudden military deployment and we prepared ourselves mentally to give them rice, fresh vegetables and chickens according to

¹ Marks two time periods when Rohingya fled to Bangladesh to escape persecution from the SPDC and affiliated armed groups. Nearly 250,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in the early 1990s.

their demands. But we never thought that we would lose our shrimp farm, because we hired the land from the NaSaKa and paid them rent.

When the Bangladesh government protested against the border fence being erected right on the border, the Burmese authorities changed their plan and started building embankments to erect the poles at some distance from the border, but right in the middle of shrimp farms. They totally disregarded the fact that farmers had invested large amounts of money in their shrimp farms or did not care whether farmers would fall into debt. However, we thought that we were lucky because our shrimp farm was far inland and therefore we would not lose any land or shrimps. But our luck did not last long. Suddenly the situation changed for the worse and we became refugees after losing all our belongings and assets accumulated during our lifetime in our village.

Around mid-April 2009, a group of 15 soldiers came to our shrimp farm and started catching shrimps and other fish without informing or asking permission from the shareholders. However, my husband and 11 co-shareholders did not say anything or complain. The soldiers took about 75 kg of shrimps and other fish and left. This was a big loss for us: 75 kg of shrimps at 5,000 or 6,000 Kyat per kilo! Our men thought it was a one-time event and that they would not do it again.

But the next day, the same soldiers came back to our farm and again began fishing. This time too, my husband and his partners did not say anything to them and they caught as much shrimp and fish as they could, perhaps more than 100 kg.

A day later, they returned to our farm again but this time there were 25 soldiers and they carried big knives and other weapons like catapults and spikes as well as big baskets and bags to carry the shrimps and fish. The way they were equipped clearly indicated that they wanted to create problems. And they started catching shrimp and fish.

This time, our husbands, realizing there would be troubles as the soldiers were armed, went to inform other people in the village. All the villagers went in a group towards the shrimp farm. Seeing many people approaching the shrimp farm, the soldiers started shooting catapults at the villagers and shouted insults at them. Consequently, two villagers were injured when stones from the catapult hit their head, and they fell to the ground. The villagers then became angry and surrounded the soldiers. All the soldiers fled except for two. The crowd of villagers caught them and beat them up until they lost consciousness.

The soldiers who had fled informed the NaSaKa in Lake Ya and about 30 armed NaSaKa personnel rushed to the spot. The NaSaKa group fired three rounds of bullets in the air and, as a result, the villagers dispersed and the NaSaKa rescued the two unconscious soldiers.

All the villagers fled into the nearby jungle as soon as they saw the NaSaKa arrive and open fire. They thought that the two soldiers were dead. There was no man left in the village, only women and children in addition to the Village Chairman and a few others with close connections to the NaSaKa. The NaSaKa commander summoned our Village Chairman and ordered him to send the two injured soldiers to their office in Lake Ya. The Chairman immediately called six of the labourers working in his own land to carry the two injured soldiers in two hammocks.

After sending off the two injured soldiers, the NaSaKa started checking every house in the village but did not find any men. They just found a few women and children because many young women had also fled into the woods. Since they could not find any men, they picked up and beat the women. I was caught along with nine other women. I could not flee because I was five months pregnant and unable to run. The other women did not manage to flee because the NaSaKa entered our village from the side where their houses were.

The NaSaKa men beat us mercilessly. Two women among us had their elbows broken and one lost her teeth. Then they dragged us to the shrimp farm where the incident had taken place.

The NaSaKa ordered us to bring our husbands back. But we replied that we did not know where they were. They called us liars and again beat us. They then forced us to get into the water of the shrimp farm and ordered us to put our heads under the water. When we could not hold our breath, we pulled out our heads from the water and they threw clay at us so that we would immediately put our heads back into the water again. Then they ordered us to move into the deeper water and swim. From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., for about 7 hours, we 10 women had to remain in the water of the shrimp farm. The NaSaKa men waited to see if our husbands would come out of the jungle to rescue us. One woman had a 1 ½ years old baby with her and she had to carry her baby on her back while she was in the water.

The NaSaKa men had divided themselves into two groups; one group remained near the shrimp farm to torture us and the other group went into our village and looted valuables and money from our houses.

At about 5 p.m. the NaSaKa suddenly caught two youths at the other side of the village and brought them to the shrimp farm. They tied their legs with a rope and then hung them on a pole upside down. After they arrested these two young men the NaSaKa ordered us to get out of the water and to stand in a single line facing the sun. They ordered us to look at the sun. We had to stare into the sun until it set.

Then they gave us a blow on our hip with sticks and sent us home. They threatened to arrest us and put us in jail if we did not bring back our husbands by the next morning. They also untied the two boys but did not let them return home. They planned to take them with them but, just as they were climbing into the NaSaKa boat, the two youths escaped and disappeared into the jungle. The NaSaKa chased

them and fired two rounds of bullets but the boys did not stop and managed to escape.

In the night eight policemen also entered our village and again searched the houses. We were the only 10 women remaining in the village and we were scared. So, we also fled into the hills where many other villagers were hiding.

The torture in the shrimp farm water during the whole day and the running in the night had put a severe stress on me and my unborn baby. I suddenly miscarried and lost my baby. I was bleeding non-stop. Some villagers helped me and carried me to a village where there was a local doctor. The village doctor knew what had happened in our village and took the risk of taking care of me. He treated me and sheltered me for the next three days until I regained some strength. My children remained in hiding in the hills together with other villagers.

My friends told me that after we fled the police did not stay in our village for very long. As soon as they left, the women in hiding returned. But the next morning the police and the NaSaKa came back to check every house. When they did not find any men again they ordered the women and children to come out of their house. But many women refused. Then the NaSaKa and the police pulled them out of their houses and nailed planks on the doors so that no one could re-enter. They did not allow the women to take anything such as clothes for their children, cooking pots, etc. They sealed up their houses and warned them they would only allow them back into their houses once they brought their husbands back.

I only returned to my village three days later when I was again able to walk. I pulled off the boards nailed on my door and managed to take some of my children's clothes and my cooking utensils. Then I returned to hide in the hills where many villagers had taken shelter. We stayed in the jungle for about 21 days. We used to come back into the

village quietly to take some rice and food to cook when we knew that no police or NaSaKa were around.

By this time, our husbands had already fled to Bangladesh. We waited in the jungle to see if the situation would calm down and if we could return to our village safely. But, after about 3 weeks, our village Chairman met us and warned us that the NaSaKa knew that women and children were hiding in the jungle and that they would set fire to the forest if we did not come out. He advised us to leave the hills.

After this warning, we decided to flee to Bangladesh. We had mobile phone contact with our husbands in Bangladesh and kept informing them about the situation. Our husbands told us to leave everything behind and flee to Bangladesh.

We women and children of the village divided ourselves into many groups so that the NaSaKa could not arrest us together while crossing the border. After 22 nights in the jungle, my children and I and six other families reached the bank of the Naf River at night. We saw some fishermen with a fishing boat and nets. They were all aware of the incident in our village and agreed to take us across the river to Bangladesh without payment. Before we crossed, we called our husbands and they came to pick us up.

We have kept in contact with our village and learnt that our houses are still boarded up. We heard that the authorities had filed a case against 150 people and arrest warrants were issued. So far, six villagers have been arrested. There were about 250 families in our village and 150 of them are now facing charges.

Seventy-six families came to stay in this section of the Kutupalong makeshift camp. The rest went to stay in other sections or with their relatives in other places. We took shelter in this makeshift camp because it is close to our village; we have no money to rent a

house anywhere else and the proximity of the official camp and UNHCR is reassuring.

Wealthier villagers with relatives abroad or with business connections here in Bangladesh preferred to rent a house in Cox's Bazar but my husband never worked for other people and has no connections here. He was a farmer and is now looking for day labour everyday. Our life has become uncertain. We tried to stay in our village. After we learnt that the two assaulted soldiers had survived, we thought there would not be any serious action, but the arrest warrant leaves us no other option than fleeing from there. We do not know what will happen to us.

This story is an interview with a Rohingya woman among a group of 10 who fled from The Chaung village in Maungdaw Township after a serious incident. The interview was conducted on 25 July 2009 in the Kutupalong makeshift camp. The interview was submitted to Altsean-Burma by the Arakan Project on 10 December 2009.

My Experience of a Difficult Life

NAY CHI

There are about three or four villages that my father and mother called home. Actually my mother wasn't from any of those villages. I really want to know where my mother's village is. She told me that after getting married she moved to the village I grew up in. I hate that village. There were only four houses and about twenty people who lived there. The trees and bushes covered and surrounded our village. We could not get enough light even during the daytime, and at night the village would fall into deep darkness. Lots of mosquitoes and other insects are there. Mo Mo (my mother) loved to stay there because she loved Par Par (my father) so much.

Some villagers couldn't sleep in their houses so they took their raincoats and a blankets and went to the jungle to sleep. I didn't want to sleep in the jungle because we had our own house. Why couldn't we sleep in our own house? I didn't like my situation and I am sure that my friends wouldn't have liked it either.

I asked Mo Mo, "Why do we have to sleep in the jungle?". She said, "My dear, our village is not like others, when SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) soldiers come here we have to run and escape from them or they will come to shoot at us and kill us. To save our lives we have to run. I also don't want to run away. I am not afraid of them but we do not have any weapons to fight back. You might understand better when you grow up." I could not understand very well but I listened to what Mo Mo said.

Mo Mo said that my father died when my brother was one year old. I rarely got the chance to see my father. He always went out to the frontline protect the people of our ethnic group from the SPDC soldiers. I was proud of my father for taking the responsibility for our people. I still remember the day my father came back to our family. We were so happy, but soon after our family was broken by bad fortune. My father was killed by SPDC soldiers.

The problem started when my poor little brother was sick from pneumonia with a fever. My father complained to my mom that he couldn't do anything for his son. We didn't have enough medicine between the three or four homes in our village. We asked my neighbor for medicine, but they they didn't have any. My father felt sad and went back home. My mother made medicine the traditional way with leaves but my little brother still had a fever.

Our neighbors came to look at my little brother and said if we couldn't give him medicine he may get worse. Therefore my father wanted to find medicine in another village. My mom said that we could find it in another village but it was dark and if my father went he might not come back until the next morning. My mother said, "Please don't go, I will try to help our son with this medicine. Also, I heard that the situation in that village is bad, the SPDC soldiers are there." But my father wanted to try to find medicine so he took a torch and went to the other village. He didn't tell my mother where he was going because if he told her she would not allow him to go. The village where my father went was quite far from our village. My mother worried about him and she waited all night without sleeping until the next morning, but my father did not return to our village. Then we heard gunfire from the direction of the village my father went to.

When we heard the gun shots all villagers ran into the jungle to escape the gunfire. I can remember my mother saying, " My daughter, hold on to my hand and don't let go." She gave me one pack to carry

and held my younger brother. Then we ran into the jungle with the other villagers. I was running and crying. My mother told me “Please don’t cry your brother will wake up and he will cry.” So, even though I was afraid I had to keep silent because I worried my brother will cry, too. When we were hiding in the jungle my mother told our neighbors about my father and that she was worried for him. Everyone could only imagine how my mother felt.

It was difficult for my mother because we were hiding in the jungle and she was worried for her husband and her ill son. There are many insects and mosquitoes in the jungle. My foot was hurting and bleeding because I cut my foot when we were running away. I tried to tell my mother but she asked me to be quiet, so I did not tell her and I stayed silent.

I expected my father to come back like my mother wished. I will never forget sleeping in the jungle that night. The next morning we were afraid to go back to our village, it was an awful situation for us. My uncle went back first to look. After that we all went back together. The SPDC soldiers had destroyed everything in our village. We just managed to save our food which we had hidden in the jungle.

I couldn't wait to see my father so I asked my mother when he would be back. At that moment she held me and cried. Then she said, “My dear, your father was killed by the SPDC soldiers.” I was too young at the time to understand the situation but I cried because my mother cried. After my father's death my mom took responsibility of me and my little brother. She moved us to another village for my education so that I could attend a school which was bigger than the one in our village.

I saw that there were spaces under houses and the school for people to hide from SPDC soldiers. Since the village was bigger than ours I thought that they would not be afraid. I hated to go to school when I started there but my mother explained to me, “If you are not educated

you have to do everything for others, is that what you want to do?" I answered "I won't." Then she asked "Do you love your father?" "Yes" I said, "I love him very much." She replied "OK, if it is true please go to school." From that time onwards I went to school regularly. I attended until grade 4 and then my mother sent me to a refugee camp to further my education.

I came to the refugee camp in Thailand, in 2001. When I was studying I missed my mother and brother so much that I cried every night. My mother sent money to me. I felt happy and sad because I knew my family's situation very well. I decided to try hard to be an educated person as my mother desired.

The author was born in Karen state where the civil war is happening. She finished her high school education in Yaung Ni Oo High School from Mae La Oo refugee camp. She is currently working as an intern in one of the exile media groups.

Unforgettable Life

SHAR

I hate the Burmese military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). They ignore the life of the children who are innocent but already full of pain. I would like to share an experience from my childhood. We come from different places so our experiences may be different. This experience is only a small part of my life.

When I was young I was playing with my friends at school when we could hear fighting nearby. All the students and teacher had to run to the nearby forest to hide. It took about half an hour to get to the forest. We ran away as far as possible. When we passed over a stream I got hurt but did not have time to take care of myself as we had to keep on moving. At that time I was frightened because the SPDC soldiers were angry. We did not know why they shot people and animals. House owners had to leave their houses while soldiers searched inside, took the things that they liked and threw their belongings on the ground. If they could not lift something or take it, they destroyed it. The SPDC soldiers placed land mines along the roads and inside compounds and my friends was hurt by stepping on one. The soldiers left their bullets everywhere and kids would play with them without knowing it was dangerous. The soldiers arrested the men and asked the women about ethnic armed groups.

The SPDC soldiers are more like robbers. When they came, my mother was severely sick; she could not even walk to leave the house. She was lucky that nothing happened to her. However, she was worried for us as we were about to return home soon. Fortunately, my family members and I arrived home safely. Thank God for this. I try to forget

that experience but can't, it was very traumatic for me. I would like to suggest that if you have faced something similar and feel distressed, you should find a way to be freed. For me it has helped to share my stories. I hope that you can find a way to free yourself from this kind of distress.

Quality and Standard

A PHOO

I went to Kutkai, a city in northern Shan State, with four friends after the 10th standard final exam. I decided to go there because of some family problems. We got jobs within one month of arriving there. Among the five of us my cousin and I were the youngest. The rest were between the ages of 20 to 25. The oldest two friends worked different jobs while three of us rented and opened a karaoke shop beside the road. At that time singing karaoke was popular in Kutkai. This was the first time we away from home. We were very happy when we started our jobs.

Kutkai is a city where different ethnic groups live. Most people speak Burmese, however we could not speak it fluently. I was the worst of all. I grew up in a mountainous area. When I was in school my classmates and also my teachers did not speak Burmese. They spoke only the Ta'ang (Palaung) language. At that time I was afraid to speak with people even in Ta'ang so how could I speak in Burmese? I used to only listen to what other people told me. Some of my friends sometimes asked me "Hey! Don't you have a mouth to speak with?" I then realized there was nothing wrong with the way that my friends thought of me. I tried to speak more when I worked in Kutkai because I had to. I had to try to become more confident in myself.

When we first opened the shop business was not too bad. After paying rent, we made a profit of more than 10,000 kyat per month (today this is about 10 dollars) during the first two months of being open. After receiving a piece of paper from a SPDC soldier (State

Peace and Development Council, the military government army) our profits decreased and we could not save money like before.

The soldier, along with two others, handed us the piece of paper and told us to open it and if we had questions they would come back again the next day. We were so afraid as they had unexpectedly come to our shop. Only after they left, we opened the envelope that read, "We have decided to use your TV and DVD player for the upcoming Thingyan (water festival). If you are worried about your goods, you are also invited to come and stay in the army camp until the end of the festival." After reading the letter we were not sure whether they would pay or take our equipment for free. Our two older friends were also with us on that day.

The next day they came back and our oldest friend asked them clearly about the letter. They told us that they would take our equipment and we probably wouldn't get paid for it. After she heard that, she got really angry and started to yell at them saying, "What are we going to do without those things in our shop? How will we earn money to give to the shop owner? What will we eat?" The two soldiers then comforted her and said that they will ask their officer to consider paying us. They promised to reply in two days.

The soldiers came and said that their officer decided to give only 5,000 kyat (about 5 US dollars) per day. We were afraid that if we refused their offer, they would take our equipment anyway and later close down our shop. So, we agreed to stay at the army camp for 5 days and nights to look after our TV and DVD player. Since our shop was only open in the evening my friends and I worked other jobs during the day. This meant that we did not work for five days. We were just able to pay our shop rent and had very little left for food.

Those five days they treated us well. We ate in the army officer's house. He told us about his children, wife and what his wife does. He might have been between 40 to 50 years old and we trusted him. After

the water festival we asked him about the money. He only gave us 6,000 kyat (6 US dollars), although we were supposed to get 25,000 Kyat (25 US dollars) for 5 days. We asked for the rest of the money but they told us to come back the next day. Finally, we went directly to the officer and he told us to go to the general officer. When we went there he said that it was not his business. We asked for the money many times but never got it, so we decided not to ask anymore.

After re-opening our shop the SPDC soldiers would come and tease, disturb and sometimes disrespect us. Most of them spent their free time at our shop. The other customers did not dare to come and sing anymore. If they came, the soldiers would always argue with them without any reason. So, young boys and girls avoided our shop. We lost many of our customers. In the end, it was like our shop was open only for soldiers, SPDC informers and spies. Eventually we were unable to pay our bills and had to close down.

After that incident, I came to understand the importance of quality and standard. In Kutkai I met with a lot of soldiers, people with power and education. Most people assume that if others have power or education they also have the responsibility and/or the knowledge that set a standard that they should follow and live by. I believe that this is true, but through my experience with people who have power, I have learnt that if these people are not honest, abuse their power, or disrespect these standards, the quality of these standards decrease. People lose respect and do not trust them. For example, the SPDC soldiers and police who came to my shop are supposed to follow and enforce the law and protect the people. People should be able to trust that they will do their jobs at a certain standard and with a certain quality. However, they stole, lied, and treated us with no respect. So, how can we trust or respect them? What can we do about it? Guns give them their power.

This made me question the cause of this problem. Why don't people live at the standards that would give them a higher quality of life?

The author is a member of Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization (TSYO) who is living in exile and working for democracy in Burma.

Forced to Choose

LAMINLAY

I am a 20 year old Shan woman and a citizen of Burma. I love my country, my people and my religion. However, now I am staying in another country that has a different culture. Living here I am ashamed of saying that I am from Burma. Saying that, I know some people will criticize me for not loving my own nation. I wish I could say that I am proud of my nation, but people inside Burma face many difficulties in their lives as the ruling generals only care about themselves and ignore the hardships that people are facing. As a result people are forced to neighboring countries to find jobs as there are not enough or no jobs for them in Burma. Living in other countries they are sometimes treated badly and discriminated against because they are from Burma. Therefore, while I am in exile, I avoid telling others that I am originally from Burma.

I would like to share my experience living in Burma. I lived in a village in Southern Shan State with my sisters. Both of our parents died and I was raised by my sisters. We opened a dry food shop and our lives were good. When I was sixteen, there was a meeting in my village. In that meeting I was told that all boys or girls over sixteen have to be in an government civil society organization such as Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation, Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) or National Red Cross. If we are not members of these organizations, they would fine us. These organizations are all led by the military regime. I was not interested and did not want to become a member of any organization. However, I could not refuse because my village-head

forced me to be involved in the USDA. So I became a member. After one year I was told to go to training but I didn't want to. I felt angry because I was forced. On March 23, 2007, I and 11 other members of the USDA had to go to Taunggyi for the training. Over 400 people came for the training. Three people had to sleep in a room. I was separated from my friends and had to stay with girls from other cities.

The training started the day after we arrived. There were sixteen trainers. They informed us about the rules and regulations of the organization. As soon as I heard their rules, I wanted to run back to my home. I was thinking to sneak back, however, it was not possible and I had to do what they told me to. We had to get up at 4 a.m. and line up at 5 a.m. At 5:30 a.m. we started to exercise. We were not only forced to run, we had to shout the words our trainers told us. After that we had breakfast. The rice they fed us was hard and not cooked enough. After the meal, we had to join the soldier's parade. We practiced under the sun until noon. We could only bear that for one day. Later on, we could not take it anymore and some people passed out and others were crying. Like me they also wanted to go home. Not only the women, the men also could not do the activities in the training as we were fed bad food, not enough food and had to work under the hot sun everyday. After seven days I was feeling weak, so I asked permission to take a rest for a while. While I was sitting under the tree one supervisor scolded me "Why can't you work like other people, you should not come to this training if you do not want to do it." He scolded me in front of other people. I was very angry and upset because not even my sister says rude things like that to me. I was feeling angry because I did not want to come to the training. I controlled my feelings and reminded myself that I would have to bear this until I finished the training.

From 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. we had to study. They forced us to watch a video that said how bad Daw Aung San Su Kyi's principles are and how good the military dictatorship is. Whatever they said, I knew the

truth and so I was silently mocking them in my mind. The training finished after 15 days and then they gave us a certificate. We were then free to go back home. On the way back home my mind was relieved and I felt very happy to leave.

Soon after the training Buddhist monks led a protest known as the Saffron Revolution. At this time I was confronted with an issue. Five policemen and the chief came to my house and told me I was assigned to beat the Sangar (Buddhist monks) who participated in the protest. Three persons from each town had to go, if we didn't go we had to pay a large fine. I was frightened by their words, not for the fine but being told to beat monks. Understand that I am a devout Buddhist; how could I beat the monks that I pay respect to? While I was looking at the faces of the police men, I was telling myself that those dictators will go directly to hell. They told me to prepare for this travel. I refused to go and told them that I couldn't do those things, and that they could do whatever they wanted to me but I wouldn't do it. They kept pushing me to do it. As I refused, they said that I will have to pay a 30,000 kyat fine (about 30 US dollars). I did not have enough money so I had to borrow from others. After that, I felt released. However, I knew that I would face more problems.

After ten days, another issue came up. I was told to walk along the village holding the poster with a message they wanted to promote. I refused and the authorities made me pay a 50,000 kyat fine (about 50 US dollars). Again I had to borrow money. I can say that the authorities can do whatever they want. If we refuse to help them they take our money. I hate those people who exploit others. They do not care about their people and do not understand about the lives of the ordinary people. I felt that I did not want to face these problems anymore, so I decided to leave my village.

I left for Mae Sai in Thailand, where my sister stays. I stayed there for a year. I heard about women organizations in Chiang Mai that

promote women's rights. As I am also interested in women's issues, I moved to Chiang Mai and became a member of an organization. I am so happy. I gave my word that I will work hard for my people, to improve the lives of women and to gain democracy for my country. I wrote this story because I hope all those USDA members who are still under the control of authorities, will make the right decision for their lives. And to my friends, hold your beliefs tightly and let's work together to reach our goals.

My Motherland and Me

KAY ZIN LIN

It was one of the hottest days in January although it was still winter time. Under the hot shining sun a group of people were traveling full of energy and joy. They were heading to participate in the celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the Karen Revolutionary Day and I was with them. We left from Mae Sot in Thailand. Along the way there were green trees on each side of the road and they made me feel calm and excited at the same time. We had to cross the Moei River to go to the celebration (Moei River is between Thailand and Burma). We had to wait for a boat to pick us up. The sun was shining and the day was hot, but the face of every traveler showed excitement. The boat ride took only five minutes. There were many people who had arrived there before us. As soon as I got off the boat, my first feeling was that of joy for getting a chance to touch my native land again. I felt very happy and thought I was at home even though I was only at the border and not in my mother's house. I love my motherland. With that feeling, my thoughts returned to the past.

I left my home six years ago and I am now living in Thailand. When I left for Thailand I did not know the situation along the border area, such as the refugee issues. I was born before the 1988 uprising (“8888”) but started attending school soon after. Like me, other young people were indoctrinated by propaganda about how the military government is doing good things and how much they love their country. The adults in my community talked quietly about the political situation and listened to BBC, Voice of America, and exiled Burmese radio stations with the volume turned low. They also had to take notice

of the strangers who came to our village. I was not aware about these things at that time. As a child I was not allowed to be involved in the adult conversations but after I passed high school I was allowed to participate. In my culture, a child is treated as an adult when they complete high school, even if you are still under eighteen.

When I finished high school I had to wait one year to enroll at university. The universities in Burma are often closed by the junta. Therefore, the senior students have difficulty finishing their courses. There are few universities such as the Defense Service Academy or Military Engineering courses that do not close very often. In Burma, students can not make their own choice over which discipline they want to study. It all depends on the military regime. They do not want to accept many students for certain universities and they can change the entrance requirements including higher entrance marks for female applicants. The military government claims that women's rights are fully provided for, but in education women and men are not treated equally.

A student has to think about the expenses. If the place for higher education is very far from your home, you can not afford travel or pay for food or accommodations. If you chose distance education, it is even worse; you will get your certificate without getting a quality education. Moreover, the college or university close to your home might not have enough resources. The regime has extended universities and colleges across the country, mostly in larger cities. These universities were set up only to show that there are a number of universities throughout Burma, but they do not provide quality education as there is a lack of resources. Students have to buy material for practical courses or exams. The educational fees are extremely high. Students need to attend extra classes and get tutoring. If one does not get extra help, one has less chance of passing the exam.

I enrolled at the Government Technological College in 2001. I was interested in computer information technology and communications. However, I wondered how I was supposed to learn these subjects without having access to computers and resources. This is similar to the situation in my village. We had few resources but not the knowledge. Villagers had to buy two computers for the high school. Most of the students, teachers and villagers had heard about computers but had no idea what they looked like or how to use them. About ninety nine percent of people had no knowledge about computers at all. The villagers work hard and struggle in their everyday life. If they do not work, there is no food. They are just interested in their survival and they do not have the time to learn about computers. The reason I chose to study those fields is that I thought that it would help my community develop and improve people's lives. So it is not a surprise that I chose to study civil engineering and computers. Unfortunately, my family could not support me after one year of studying. Although I worked in my spare time to pay for my education expenses, I could not continue my studies. I had to quit school.

I would say that I was lucky even though I was facing this difficult situation. My friend's father, who left Burma after "8888" uprising, contacted his family. At that time, his family was under threat from the SPDC and they were going to leave to the border. They asked if I wanted to go with them. I decided to go with them to find a job or an opportunity to keep studying. I arrived in Thailand at the end of 2002. A few weeks after my arrival, I learnt a lot about the Burma democracy movement and the issues of refugees and migrant workers in Thailand. I got to know that their conditions are completely different from what I have seen in television and movies controlled by the Burmese military government. At present, those abuses are still the same as before and more and more refugees are entering Thailand every year.

I stayed at an organization in the Thai-Burma border. I learnt English, computer skills and political issues. After one year of studying at an NGO I passed the test and continued to study there. My aim is to help those who could not get a chance to learn like I did. Currently, I am working for Social Action for Women (SAW), an organization assisting displaced women and children along the Thai-Burma border. The difficulty for the people of Burma in neighboring countries can not be expressed in words. I started writing poems, short novels and articles reflecting the lives of refugees. Although I am away from my hometown, I am happy that I can help my people who have escaped to neighboring countries for different reasons. Even though my help is only a small part compared to the whole democracy movement I am glad that I can work for my own people who are in need.

Waiting to Escape from the “God of the Household”

LWAY SHWE KYAE

My family moved to a very crowded city for jobs recently. However, I wanted to find a job far away from my family, and moved to a different state to find a job. One night my father came to the place I lived. I was not expecting to see him alone. When I asked him if mother was coming with him, he answered no and said “Your mother is not here, when she is not here, you have to be the mother.” He then moved forward near me to touch me as his wife. I was shocked by his movement and cried out “Help! Help! Mother, please help me!” I ran far away from my father until I almost stopped breathing, and found a place to hide from him. I never imagined that my father would try to rape me. It really traumatized me. I hated him so much and did not want to go back to where I lived. Since then, I decided never to go home if my father, who calls himself “God of the household,” was there.

As the head of the household, my father would manipulate and abuse my family. There are seven of us siblings, four girls and three boys. Although he is our father, he always treats us and our mother violently. He would beat us and never give us any money. No one in the household including our mother dares to say a word about whatever he does, especially my sister and me, because we are girls. That is why we did not want to live at home anymore. No one wants to be at home when our father is there, but we could not escape his control. We just had to bear his abuse.

My father never did household work. When he was home, he would invite his friends over. All are drug users, and they would smoke together and play cards. My father would ask my mother to taste the opium before they smoked. Because of that, my mother became addicted and she would follow my father everywhere he went. As a result, my siblings and I never lived together.

All my siblings and I had to quit school at a young age and work outside to support ourselves and each other. We did not have any extra clothes apart from what we had on our bodies. We had to find food to feed ourselves to barely survive. I cried so many times as I was very unhappy. If my tears could become a stream, I think it would already be flooded.

Why does my father treat my family like this? I can remember that he always acted this way. Opium is very easy to find in our area. The SPDC allows people to grow it as long as they pay bribes, so there are many opium farms.¹ Opium grows faster than tea and can be sold for a higher price. When people are very poor, often they choose to grow opium instead of tea so that they will earn more money. Many workers on these farms begin to use opium, and then their families begin to use it as well. Drug addicts do not care about providing food and education for their families – they only care about buying more drugs.

I have prayed many times to not have such a cruel father in my next life. It is not only my family who is scared of our father, even our neighbors are afraid of him. Although the neighbors know everything about our family, they can't help us with anything. Sometimes my friends would suggest I should run away from home, or find someone to marry, or have a trip away from home for a while. My sister is

¹ Palaung Women's Organization released the report *Poisoned Hills* in January 2010 about opium cultivation and drug abuse.

already relieved from our daily suffering. She moved away, got married and never comes home.

It was not easy for me to take any of my friends’ suggestions. It seemed I had no way to escape. However one day, I don’t know if I could say that I became lucky or I was saved by some kind of spiritual gods, my mother found some money for me and sent me to Phakant in Kachin State, a very popular place where many people go for jobs. I was very happy and also thankful to my mother who helped me escape from home and from my father.

I traveled to Phakant with a group. All of us had to separate once we arrived depending on the jobs we got. I had a few jobs. One was to carry and sell food and the other was to collect jade stones. When I arrived in Phakant I thought I would enjoy my freedom away from my father. My freedom did not last long. My bad days began again the day my father came to Phakant. Never being able to escape from my father makes me cry. Even my mother could not help me.

My siblings and I are never together in one place. We are like a kind of mushroom that grows individually on small hills in Burma. Until now, we live in different places, and I know that my mother always grieves for her children. The days that she cries for us are uncountable. Who creates all this tragedy in our family? Our father, the “God of the household.”

This article is based on the true story of my best friend. This is exactly what my friend has been through in her life. I wrote this article because I want readers to understand about the life of women through my friend’s story and to feel sympathy to those women who have been abused by others, especially as a result of drug abuse in many communities.

The Deserted Dinner Table

KON CHAN GAKAO

I feel sad if I am not spending time and having meals with my family. I think all of you will agree that everyone in this world wishes to have a peaceful family life. However, there are many people who have lived their life without their families. How about you? Do you agree that the thing you miss the most is family dinner time? I am one of those who miss my family when I eat alone. My parent's house is small but I love to stay in that house and have dinner with my father, my mother and my sister. The thing I like the most is the family dinner table. In my mind, the dinner table is so wonderful because it brings us all together.

My father is a soldier in the New Mon State Party (NMSP) which is struggling for freedom from the SPDC military regime, the State Peace and Development Council. I was born in a resistance army camp in 1986. Barely a year later, my mother had to run away with me hidden in her clothes from a battle between the NMSP and the SPDC. My father and my mother were always thinking about me, how they could raise me amidst the war. So they decided that my mother should look after me and return to the place where there might be no war so I can get an education. When I was 3 years old my mother, pregnant with my sister, and me went back to her village to start our new life.

As I grew up, which was before the NMSP made the ceasefire agreement with the SPDC, my father was not living with us. He was never at our dinner table. One day, my father called for my mother to visit him and we went secretly to the jungle. It was very dangerous and risky to go there because SPDC soldiers followed us and questioned us

about where we were going. The way we went was not easy for us, we had to walk for two days. My mother carried my sister and it was difficult walking through the jungle, but the only thing I was thinking about was seeing my father. When we got there we had dinner on a mat on the ground. There was no table, but we were so happy to share a meal together. If people would have seen us, they would have found an expression of pure happiness on our faces.

We stayed there for a week and then returned home. On the way I was thinking and asked my mother “why did we go secretly to Dad like this?” and “why couldn’t Dad come home with us?” My mother said that my father was an enemy of the SPDC because he fought for the NMSP. At that time I did not understand exactly what my mother meant and wondered why my father wanted to fight with the SPDC soldiers.

In 1995 (the SPDC and the NMSP had declared a ceased fire), when my sister and me went back home from the school I saw my father sitting on the floor smiling at us. I was so surprised and confused. On that day I had had dinner with my father, my mother and my sister together at the family dinner table. It was the first time all of us had dinner at that table. I thought that the food was so delicious and that I had arrived in heaven. I felt that dinner table was the most valuable thing in the world and it was the most important thing in my life. I thought that my family would never be apart again.

My father usually came back home once every two months and sometimes once a month. When he came back home my mother got up early in the morning and prepared fried rice and coffee for us and she also prepared lunch and dinner. On those days, my mother cooked something special that he wanted to eat like chicken soup, spicy Mon fish curry, Thagu Ngapyaw Baung (sweet sago porridge with banana and coconut). So there was a lot of food on the dinner table.

Sometimes, my father and I helped her cook. I thought that the noises coming from the kitchen were full of sweetness.

Even though I was so busy in helping my mother, I was not exhausted. We talked a lot and laughed during dinner time. Our faces were smiling as we were enjoying ourselves. When my father left, I was so depressed and wanted to cry. When he left the house was quiet. Sometimes, I dreamt about our dinner time when we had been so happy. I was always waiting for my father to come home and missed our family dinners together. And I thought about why my family is in this situation. Why?

After I passed 10th standard and left my home to join the University of Moulmein, there were three people at the dinner table. When my father came home they had dinner together without me. I knew that they would miss me. I was so upset and felt homesick. I had dinner alone and felt like an orphan living alone. I missed my family.

In 2004, my sister transferred to a city to continue her education. So my father and my mother had dinner without their two daughters. If my father was not at home there was only my mother at the dinner table. I knew that my mother would miss us and feel so lonely. She was always alone at home. I believed that all of us were missing the family dinner table and they would feel so cheerless like me.

After I graduated from the University I went to Thai-Burma Border and now I work in an organization which is struggling for social changes in Burma. It is so rare to have dinner together with my family. I sometimes go back home and stay for a few days. When I go home my father is not there because of his work and my sister is away studying in school. Our family dinner table is different from the time when we were all together. However sometimes we can meet each other for a few days. What situation will my family face in the future due to the political situation in Burma? I do not know.

I'm still feeling homesick for the family dinner table. I often ask myself why my family is in this situation. Why can't we live together, why have we been separated? How many families have been separated because of the political, economic and social situations in Burma? How many homes have a deserted dinner table? If Burma's political situation will change and guarantee peace, liberty and justice, I will go home and work in a small business. And my father will come home and work for our family. Then we will be so happy and the dinner table will come to life again for us forever.

The author is a 24-year-old Mon woman who came to Thailand in 2005. She works in an organization fighting for a democratic peaceful Burma.

The Rainy Seasons that Passed

SAUNG

I sat in the house longing for something while it rained outside. I was not up to anything even though I still had to write an article, so I kept sitting. I was looking at the Burmese migrant workers returning from their jobs in the evening rain, and then I remembered a time in my past. While I am now able to sit in my house without having to worry about my life, I compared this with my past experience.

While the rain continued to fall I remembered past rainy seasons that my siblings and I went through. We enjoyed parts of it, but most of the time we wept while we struggled for our daily life. My siblings and I were about 11 or 12 years old when we worked along the Thai-Burma border. Our parents stayed in Burma. We were not at a working age but had to do plantation work along roads, under a program called TECH Outreach, a Thai government project for border area development. Actually, we had to plant not only along roads but also in the jungle. I just knew names of some of the plants such as teak, pi tauk (small yellow flowers that blossom only in April and used during Water festival in Burma) and mazali. Those plants are easy to grow and cultivate only in the rainy season. We had no other choice but to work.

We were the youngest ones on the work site. However, we had to do what the adults did. We had to carry the plants, cut the forest and pave the road. We were paid only 50 baht a day (today that would be about \$1.50 USD) and we had to pack our own lunch. We prepared curries, which was always bamboo shoot and vegetables that we could find in the forest. My siblings and I, along with the other workers, had

to stay with people that we did not know. We were lucky that all the other workers were good people. My aunt and I were the only women in our group and we all lived in the same house together. They took care of us as their own brothers and sisters.

Even though it was raining heavily, we had to do the planting without stopping. The roads were slippery and flooding but we had to keep working. It was more difficult to climb down from the mountain than to climb up. At that time I could not breathe well and had no idea how I could get down from the mountain. However, I had to carry the plants up the mountain. The plants were about 12 inches long and I had to be careful not to break them. We had to plant them at least six inches under the ground and then mark them with a plastic bag tied to a stick. The working supervisor watched us. If we did not do it exactly like this, our wages were cut.

When walking on the small wet road in the mountains, I had to be very careful not to fall down. If my foot slipped I would fall down to the bottom of the mountain. Workers who had long boots did not have such difficulty. I had to hold a carving knife in one hand to cut the trees in front. The person who dug the hole for the plants had to hold a carving knife and a shovel. The planter had to hold a knife and a basket of plants. We also had to carry packs of rice, water bottles, rain coats and bamboo hats. When we were fully packed, we looked like crazy people. Under those circumstances working in the rain was very dangerous.

When I came back home after working in the rain I felt sick. I wanted to fall asleep right away as I was very tired from working and very cold from the rain but I could not because I had to help with the cooking. If I did not eat I wouldn't have the energy to get up the next morning. And if I could not get up, I would miss work and not get any money for myself and my family. I wanted to weep loudly at that time as my life was full of bitterness. If I had a choice or if it were possible I

would not have done that kind of work in the cold rain. I wanted to do my own business in my village in Burma.

Now, I watched the Burmese migrants, wet from the rain, as they came back home. They were very cold and I could see their bodies shivering. They looked like they had worked hard and wanted to rest. However, they could not. They have to cook dinner and prepare for the next day of work. Since there are not too many jobs in the rainy season, they can't afford to make a mistake.

I am sure that they also hope to return home to work and live peacefully in their own villages. And that they too do not want to work under these rainy conditions. I hope and pray that good working conditions and a peaceful life will come to these poor people from Burma.

Several different thoughts ran around my mind as I gazed down at the Burmese migrant workers returning their temporary homes. I then realized I was cold and had forgotten to wear my sweater.

May you have a good and peaceful life!

Saung is a young Tavoyan woman who is doing social work in the tsunami affected areas in Southern Thailand.

The Life of Kyat Tu Rway

KYAT TU RWAY

Five years ago I moved to Mae Sot and began working in a sweater factory. I could not stand my life in Burma so I had to leave my family to survive. I decided to save some money and send it back to my family. The total amount of money I sent to my family was around 300,000 kyat (about 300 US dollars. 1,000 kyat = about 1 US dollar). The factory wasn't running well; sometimes if they didn't have the materials we needed we couldn't do anything and there was no income on those days. I worked and saved money and then lived on that as I didn't have a regular job.

I am 28 years old already. I don't think I am that good looking, but people say that I am lovely. I have somewhat fair skin, nice eye brows and I'm over 5 feet tall. I am the type of person who can work in any job and work even if I am tired. This stereotypes me as having a man's ability. I have always been a hard worker and will never turn down work as long as it is not cheating others. My mother passed away when I was eight years old. She was so important to my family.

I would like to tell you about my struggles before I arrived in Mae Sot. In February 2002, I arrived at Myawaddy town with only 50,000 kyat in my pocket. I thought that this amount would last me until I got job but it was all gone in 20 days. I was still jobless and there were no openings in any of the factories.

I asked a friend if I could stay with her for a while. We lived in the same village when we were young but then our families moved to another place. She remembered me and let me stay at her home. She

was married and had children. Her husband was a carpenter and she washed and ironed clothes. Her income was 1,000 kyat per day but sometimes she got 1,500 which was just enough for her.

I eagerly looked for work at a factory but I couldn't find any. My friend asked me to work with her washing clothes. At first I was embarrassed because I have never done this kind of job before. I remember my first experience; my friend gave me the clothes that a customer had given her to clean. She told me I could get 600 kyat for washing the clothes. I was so pleased when I found out, I went straight to the Moei River to wash them. First I put all the clothes into the bowl and then poured in the water and detergent powder. Oh, there were a lot of stains and a bad smell. I felt very disappointed but I thought that if other people could do it then why couldn't I? I tried to wash the clothes until they were spotless. If my sisters knew about this they would be sad for me because I didn't have to do this when I was living at home. Even so, I should stand alone and have confidence, so I kept this job.

Luckily I got a job as a porter carrying things across the Moei River. In Myawaddy town there is a border crossing called the Moe Gate. They charge 500 kyat to pass this gate from Thailand into Burma. The person in charge of this gate said that if I can help people cross the border I could get 100 kyat per person and even more if they had baggage. It was a better job for me. However, because I am a woman some men verbally abused me, some men grabbed my shoulders and some men pinched my hips. Most men's behavior and manners were rude but a few men were friendly and tried to help me. I had to keep working in this job, and tried to avoid the harassment because I was in a financial crisis.

There is one experience that I will never forget. One day I passed the gate with a customer and I carried her baggage. While I was crossing the river my foot was cut by glass. I couldn't stop because I

was in the middle of the river so I tried to make it to the other side. When I arrived at the river bank I apologized to the lady “Sorry my sister, please don’t be angry with me for not being able to get you there. My foot is bleeding and it’s so painful.” She said “Oh, really? Please show me.” Then she looked at me with pity and not only gave me the porter fee but also an extra 100 kyat for medical costs. I was really grateful to her.

While my foot was wounded I couldn’t work as a porter so I went to a sewing training course near the Myawaddy River. It was 3,000 kyat for training and then I could get a job at a factory. It was quite good for me. It took 2 days to be trained and on the third day I helped my trainer by training other students. In Burma this is the way to get a position.

As my foot was getting better, I wanted to apply for jobs because there were a lot of openings in the factories. I changed my kyat into Thai baht and got 200 baht. Then I crossed the border to Mae Sot. I got a job at a sweater factory. There were only five people at the same factory who weren’t experts in the job. The factory only accepted people who knew how to use the sewing machine. I only had 100 baht left to use until the end of the month, about 20 days. That means I only had 5 baht to use each day. I didn’t know how I could survive. I worried about what I would eat when the money was all gone.

An old employee recommended that we get food on credit. So I tried hard to keep my job at the factory and I attempted to make 5 dozen sweaters. 5 dozen sweaters equals 60 front pieces, 60 back pieces and 120 sets of sleeves. That takes about 3 days to do. We couldn’t work very fast because we had to concentrate and remember the pattern. We couldn’t make the slightest mistake. I worked very hard to make 5 dozen sweaters.

I was happy when I got my wage of 1,500 baht (50,000 kyat). We couldn’t make that amount in Burma within 20 days. I was able to save

1,300 baht after I had deducted some for my daily food. I treated my friends who had advised me and I gave some presents to the factory mechanic workers to show my respect. Then I sent snacks and transferred 25,000 kyat (750 Baht) to my father. This was the first time that I had transferred money since I had left my family. My father never said anything about whether the money was enough or not. I cried when I heard that my father was very sad to use the money which I had sent to him. I thought that I would try harder to send more money to my father. I didn't want him to know about my difficult situation. If I told my family I am sure they would say, "Don't do these kinds of jobs. We would rather starve."

Some people faced more difficult situations than me. People were coming to Mae Sot for many reasons. Some to get a better life, to have more independence and freedom, to take responsibility for their families, or to get an education. But their lives didn't get any better; unfortunately some had to become sex workers. At first I didn't know why people from Burma faced these kinds of problems. In all the time spent working in the factories, our lives didn't improve. Luckily, I got a chance to find out about our situation and human rights.

One man, I don't know who he was, gave me a book about human rights to read. As I was reading at my hostel I began to find out that women can do many things in this world. As soon as I found out, I asked my friends to attend a labor law training with me because we should know about labor laws. My friends and I also attended democracy and human rights training. We were often absent from our job which our employer didn't like, so he wanted to fire us.

I told the older employees, "You have all been working here for at least 3 years, why do you accept the small amount they give you? I have only worked here seven months but I can't put up with their cheating." The wages are 145 baht per working day and 25 baht for overtime, according to law. It was great if we even got 100 baht and

overtime wages. The workers didn't know what the maximum daily working hours were. It's 8 hours for one day and anything over that is overtime. It was difficult for us to get a job in Burma so we came to Thailand the illegal way so the employer pays us less. How can we survive?

Some of our own people cheat us. If he or she can speak Thai, they may favor the Thais in order to get a good and comfortable position for themselves. But they are not brave enough to face the police. This is our people's weak point and some employers know this very well. Sometimes the employer threatened us by saying they would report us to the police. We were afraid even though we had Thai labor cards. We didn't doubt their threats because in Burma we are also very afraid of the police.

We requested our employer to increase our wages but they didn't accept. They told us that we can quit our jobs if we wanted more money. There is a Burmese proverb that says "It can move if we push together at the same time." So we campaigned amongst our colleagues to demonstrate for our rights. At first the ladies joined us and then later the men also agreed and joined us, too. We had a total of 75 people out of over 300 workers. We had over 25% of the people with us and we could see our future looking brighter. We organized a union with a central committee of 10 members (i.e. the president, secretary, joint secretary, treasure and auditor).

We tried hard to get our rights but the campaign lost energy because not everyone participated fully. We weren't winning and it made us depressed. Our committee members spread out. Some people moved to Bangkok and some went to work in others factories, but we still had a good experience struggling for our rights.

I continue to discuss with my colleagues about their rights and share knowledge with them. I realized that we will face challenges in the

future, but for now I am at peace. I left my hard life behind and keep going for my future and I hope that people are encouraged by my story.

Future Ray of Hope

YU KA LIT

I am living in Southern Thailand, and I am now 15 years old. As I have tanned skin, some people say I am pretty. Holding firmly onto my hopes and my goals I am now continuing my life and approaching my destiny; though, in the past I never had these hopes and dreams.

I was born in Thailand and so were both of my brothers. We are not Thai, but migrant workers from Burma. In Thailand, the migrant workers do all the dangerous and unpleasant jobs which Thai people do not like to do because of very poor working conditions and low salaries. Both of my parents work in rubber plantations. Unless it's raining, my father and my brothers begin work at 10 p.m. every night. The rubber plantations that they work on cover the mountains. In order to get the rubber they scrape the bark of the rubber trees with a knife so the milky latex comes out. Often these knives are attached to the end of a long stick so that the workers can reach the bark that is high up in the tree. The rubber trees only produce latex at night when it is cooler; so for the whole night my father and my brothers use headlights to help them scrape the tree bark. At 5 a.m., my mother and I have to go to the rubber plantations and help them collect and pack up the rubber.

Since we are migrant workers we have never lived in a particular place permanently. We would continue to work if the employer was good but if they were not we moved to another place to work. I miss my old friends and my grandmother. I remember my grandmother's voice, but sometimes I cannot remember exactly how she looked.

Sometimes I asked my father about going back to Burma, and he would say, "If we live in Burma, we would starve because we will not be able to live on the amount of money that we would earn. People also lose their lives from the exploding land mines while they are forced to be porters for the SPDC Army. So, living in Thailand is better than starving in Burma." Since then I stopped asking.

I never attended school because we were moving around a lot and Burmese migrant children are not accepted into Thai schools. However, I can speak both Burmese and Thai very well. Sometimes, the migrant people in clinics or hospitals asked me to translate for them. I was eager to go to school and learn to read and write. I was always brought to tears whenever I passed by Thai schools and saw Thai students who were the same age as me. The life of migrant workers is dreamless and hopeless in Thailand.

Maybe being dreamless was better than living the nightmare of the 2004 tsunami. Everything was destroyed and there were naked dead bodies everywhere. We didn't know what it was, and my family hid in the jungles of the mountains for days, hungry and not knowing when help would arrive. A lot of people were dead including Thai people, foreigners, and Burmese migrant workers who were working on construction sites along the beaches. After the tsunami the destroyed areas were overwhelmed by rescue teams and organizations which were busy collecting dead bodies and helping the survivors.

Five months after the tsunami, a man came to our camp to explain that a school for Burmese migrant children would open. I could not believe the news until the school were actually opened and my father allowed me to go. I was so happy and my joy brought me to tears when my father said he would take the risk by trying to make a living in Phang Nga until I had graduated from school. At school I made a lot of friends who were in the same situation as me. Although we got up early to help our parents, we always had the energy to learn.

We learned Thai, Burmese and English, which was sometimes taught by foreign teachers. At first I was afraid of the foreign teachers who looked so big and white, but they smiled a lot and played many games with us. Now when I see a foreigner, I call out to them, “Good morning! How are you?” I have already been studying for 4 years now and I am awarded prizes every academic year for being a good student.

Now our migrant people and children are have the opportunity to get an education. I especially like to learn about Daw Aung Suu Kyi. On her birthday, I lit a candle and I prayed that my family would be together again and safe in Burma. I have decided to study hard and I have hope for the future. My goal is to work to improve the lives of people who are in the same situation as I was. Yesterday, I saw a rainbow over the pond near my house. It reminded me of my future ray of hope, which I carry with me as I continue my life.

The author is a young woman human rights activist working for Burmese Migrant Rights in Southern Thailand.

My Success

THE ARAKAN PROJECT

I am Leila and I am 46 years old. I am originally from a village in Maungdaw Township of Burma but I have now lived in Pahartali (a semi-urban slum) in Cox's Bazar for a long time. My first husband was a Rohingya but he died of cholera in the refugee camp after 5 years of being married. My second husband is a Bangladeshi and I am his second wife. But we separated after 4 years of marriage. I have five children: two daughters from my first husband and one daughter and two sons from my second husband. Two of my daughters are already married to Bangladeshi husbands. My second daughter who is a bit disabled and my eldest son are still single and they work in garment factories in Dhaka. I told them to save their wages for their own future. I only live with my youngest son who is 16. He pulls rickshaws sometimes, mainly to cover his own expenses. At present, I work in a local's house as a domestic servant and I get 600 Taka per month (less than US\$10). I have never been to school.

Flight from Burma and refugee life

I fled from Burma in 1978. There was panic among the Muslim community throughout Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships over fear that there would be mass arrests, and riots between the Maghs (Rakhine) and the Rohingya (Muslims). People started fleeing, and we also panicked and fled. My husband and I fled with our one-year old baby girl and we accompanied my parents' family. We took shelter in the refugee camp in Dechuapalong.

My husband was a 'master' (a Rohingya who has learned English and Burmese). He used to keep records of relief distributions in Dechuapalong refugee camp. He was also a supporter of Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), the then only political party of Rohingya people, and was one of their representatives in the camp. We first settled in a tiny room but, after 2 or 3 months, my husband decided to arrange a house in the nearby village for me and my daughter. He used to work the whole day in the RPF camp and in the evening he returned home. We also received rations from the camp since we were still registered refugees.

Cholera epidemic and becoming a widow

One day my husband told me that there was a severe cholera epidemic in the camp and that many people were suffering from it. The next day, he again went to the camp and returned in the afternoon telling me that my parents had died. He also said that he had been feeling ill since the morning, that he had diarrhea and had vomited many times. He looked sick and dehydrated. He lay down on the bed and could not get up. He also died.

My world became so empty then and everything was lost for me. My parents and my husband had died and I was four months pregnant. The locals buried my husband. I remained in our house for a couple of days, praying for Allah to save me and my daughter. About a week later, I went to the refugee camp and I saw that almost the entire camp had been turned into a huge graveyard. I only found one of my brothers and my only sister.

About to be trafficked by my own brother

Initially, I wanted to stay in Dechuapalong where my husband had died, but I changed my mind after I realized that my elder brother planned to

give up my daughter for adoption to a refugee family and to re-marry me to a man I didn't know who wanted to take me to Karachi, Pakistan.

A few days after my husband passed away, my brother came to my house and proposed to re-marry me. He started coming frequently with the same suggestion. He told me that I was still young and I still had an entire life ahead of me. He knew a good man who had arrived from Karachi and who had seen me while I was visiting the refugee camp after the epidemic. My brother told me that this man wanted to marry me and that he would take me to Karachi. He also told me not to worry about my daughter because there was a family in the refugee camp who had already agreed to adopt her.

I was so shocked and appalled to hear my brother saying this. He wanted to sell me to a trafficker! I was pregnant and I was so afraid of losing my daughter. I decided to flee with her but did not know where to go.

I was also afraid for my younger sister. At that time, she was still a child, maybe 10 or 11 years old, but what could I do for her since I was myself in such a vulnerable situation? I was afraid for my own safety. My own brother was basically planning to sell both of us. As my sister was so young, the trafficker was not keen on her, but he was interested in me.

However, since my brother failed to sell me, he instead sold my sister to the same man. Up to today, I do not know whether she is dead or alive. She never tried to contact me. I always pray for her well-being, wherever she is.

Escape to Cox's Bazar

I discussed my situation with a refugee woman, a distant relative. She promised to help me. She wanted to move from the refugee camp to

Cox's Bazar and said I could accompany her. So, we set off for Cox's Bazar. I wanted to bring my younger sister with me before she was sent to Karachi, but I could not because she was under the close surveillance of my brother. In Cox's Bazar, my relative arranged a small room for my daughter and I and allowed us to stay together with her husband's side of the family.

I have always been a positive thinker. I had some gold ornaments and some money that my husband had left me, but I did not depend on what I possessed. I immediately looked for work, any type of work. Within a few days, the woman of the house where we took shelter told me that there was a job available, but that it may be too difficult for me because I was pregnant and also had one baby girl. She explained that the work was taking care of an old, rich widower with three sons living with him. The old man was bed-ridden. The job was to take care of the old, sick man around the clock, tending to his clothes, changing his bed, giving him medicine on time, and nursing him with whatever he needed.

I agreed, went to the house of the sick man and started working. I was young and I had lots of energy. It did not bother me that I was pregnant. I stayed there during the night-time. They arranged for me to sleep in their kitchen with my daughter. I worked in that house for about 5 years until the old man died. They gave me a good amount of money as a salary.

After the death of the old man, I returned to the family where I had taken initial shelter and started living with them again, paying them some rent and looking for another job.

I have always been a hard working woman and found work as a housemaid, cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, and clothes in a local's house in town. I used to receive two meals a day, the leftovers of the local's evening meal, as well as 100 Taka at the end of the month. I

liked this town and its people. People were kind and showed a lot of sympathy to me as a young widow struggling for survival.

My second husband

This time I met a local man who proposed to marry me. At first, I refused but the man appeared serious and promised me that he would do his best to ensure my comfort. He told me that he already had a wife and sons but that he was terribly unhappy and often did not return home because there was no peace in his house. I was also feeling lonely and I finally agreed to marry him. He rented a small house for me, where we lived together for about one year. Eventually, his first wife learned about everything and was furious. One day, she attacked my house and used abusive words against me. She took her husband with her. But he continued to come and see me from time to time. I felt that it was shameful to live in this way. By this time, I had a third daughter with him.

One day, I decided to leave him and the house. I returned to the rich man's house where I had worked for about 5 years. I told his family about what had happened in my life. They showed me a lot of compassion and gave me shelter again in their kitchen. That was the safest place for me. I again worked for them, but I did not demand any salary. They allowed me to work outside and to sleep in their kitchen during the night.

I wanted to leave for good the local man I had married, but he did not want to leave me. Within a year, he again insisted that I should come back and live with him in another house. He rented a new house and I trusted him for the second time. Again, I became pregnant.

But I soon realized that he discriminated against my first daughter from my first, dead husband. I was hurt a lot by this and again I decided to leave him. By then, I had a son. I concentrated on working

in different houses, but the man never left me in peace. He continued to visit me under the pretext that he wanted to see his daughter and his son. And I became pregnant one more time with another son.

Gradually, I saw who he really was. He never bothered to share the expenses for his two sons and his daughter. Moreover, he started borrowing money from me. Once I was compelled to borrow 5,000 Taka to give him. He promised that he would pay me back with interest, but he never did. I had to reimburse the loan myself.

Fortunately, with the advice from the people I worked for, I had opened a bank account and deposited my money there.

In 1990, I bought a piece of land with my own money. The land was on a hill and belonged to the government but was occupied by a local man. He assured me that no one would disturb me and I paid 7,500 Taka for the hill. But later he started selling part of the same area of land to other people, and each time, I had to give up part of my land. Today, my land is reduced to 24 square feet only – just for my house.

I built my house out of bamboo with a grass roof. I did most of the construction work myself, including making the fence. I only hired laborers to make the roof. My second husband never helped me carrying a single bamboo from the market.

I brought up my five children without any help and I married off my two daughters with my own money that I earned from hard-work. My second husband did not even bother to come and see off his own daughter at her wedding.

My children

My children know me as their mother as well as their father because I did everything and played both roles. I managed to find good families for my daughters.

A rich family from this town took care of my eldest daughter until she was 10. She used to work at their house looking after their baby. She also learned how to read, write, and cook with that family and they helped her a lot with her marriage. A child specialist of Cox's Bazar hospital took care of my second daughter, who broke her leg when she was very young. My daughter also looked after the doctor's son and played with the child. The doctor gave her food, clothing, money, and a place to sleep at night. Another rich family of this town employed my third daughter after she completed her primary school. They gave her food, clothing, money, and a place to stay at night. I was free from stress about my daughters. No one ever disturbed them because they were living with powerful families. It is true that my daughters worked for them as housemaids and as nannies for their children, but they were never dishonoured by their employers, and they were paid properly, fed properly, and clothed properly. Apart from their salaries, their employers also helped them in cash and in kind for their marriages.

My two daughters married local youths. They chose local grooms because they are more responsible and more reliable than Rohingya grooms. Security was also a major issue: marrying Bangladeshis would provide more security for their future.

Hard work

I have struggled for survival, to support my family. I have never stopped for a single day. I worked in schools as a cleaner during the school hours, and again worked in locals' houses during the afternoons and the evenings. Sometimes, I even wove fishing nets during the night. I continue to struggle up to today. The man who I loved wholeheartedly died, and the man who promised to reduce my burden cheated me. The only things that never betrayed me are my own capacity, my hard work, my sincerity, and my positive thinking.

Local people treat me well and have helped me learn many things. I have had many good experiences in Bangladesh. I still receive new clothes from my former employers as well as meat during Muslim festivals. Some families even leave their house under my care when they are away from town.

In some ways, I dislike my own community because most of them are lazy and day-dreamers. They do not have clear goals and aims in their lives. They only want to get the most with minimum efforts. They always try to sell their misery to outsiders and ask for alms by talking about what happened to them in Burma. They always complain that they are not getting this, that they are deprived of that, etc. They believe that everything should be given to them and it is their right. This should change. Rohingya people must learn to think positively. They should learn how to conquer people's hearts! They must try to help themselves first. Only then there will be real changes in our community.

Vision for the future

I would like to see all my children happily married in a free country. I do not want to see them become refugees. I had a dream of becoming a nurse, but now I am too old to learn nursing. If I could, I would like very much to take care of sick people. But, I feel that there is not enough time to dream about the future. Burma is my country and I would like to go back there if we be guaranteed that we can live peacefully and that we will not need to flee again. But I am almost sure that there is no way to ever go back to Burma. I have never tried nor wanted to go anywhere else. I am fine here. I experienced refugee life and I know what it means to be a refugee. I do not want to be a refugee again, that life is miserable. Now, everyone here has become my brothers and sisters.

This story is an interview conducted by The Arakan Project in Cox's Bazar on 22 September 2007. This woman is amazing, how she struggles all by herself to overcome disaster and hardship in her life. Despite being illiterate, she has a vision for herself and her children and, little by little, she succeeds in her goals. It is very rare to find such woman among the Rohingya community. The story was submitted to ALTSEAN-BURMA by The Arakan Project on 10 December 2009.

Resilience

NAY JAR YINE

Since long ago, the people of Burma said women are weak. To express their feelings about women, people used an old saying: “If a thorn falls on a leaf, it makes a hole. If a leaf falls on a thorn, it makes a hole.” The saying views women as vulnerable people who break no matter how they are confronted with troubles. This saying is still widely used in our patriarchal communities.

In our country the key differences between men and women is in their roles in the family. To be a “perfect woman”, women are told by their families that their job is at home, to take care of children, look after the house, to cook for the family, to do all the household work and to respect men. Cultural standards also dictate that the man of the house should be a “perfect man,” strong and able to support and lead his family. Women grow up under tighter discipline and stronger family rules compared to men.

Women are pressured to live the way others tell them to. If they do not obey then their community will look down on them and exclude them from society. Some women want to break free from that pressure of trying to be a “perfect woman.” A few women have tried to stand on their own feet but most depend on men. This makes women look weak. Many women who were taught to depend on men are afraid to go outside of the house alone because they will be accused by their husband for having an affair with another man. This is one of the reasons that many women do not go out of the house to work.

Society has strong gender stereotypes and they are enforced by the families. Men are expected to get a job that provides financial support and security for the family. They believe this is their responsibility because they are the head of household. This causes several problems. First, this oppresses and places limits on women. It also puts stress on men to succeed. If the men fail, the community will spread bad rumors about them. This is often the reason that many men turn to alcohol. They try and drink their worries away, which often lead to domestic violence. We have seen from our experiences many cases of alcohol abuse and domestic violence, which has led to instability in the community and no progress. Men often face hardship in finding a job mostly because of the regime's mismanagement of our country.

In the family each person should take responsibility. We should have respect and sympathy toward each other. Some men do help their wives, but there are also many men who understand this and still avoid their tasks. Unfortunately, there are also men who want to help women with housework, but do not because they are afraid the community will tease them, saying they are afraid of their wives.

Women of Burma are working hard even while they are pregnant and vulnerable, but their work is not considered work. When we look at the housework that women do, we can see that it is very essential, basic and needed for everyday life.

It is time that the people of Burma work hand in hand with each other to destroy gender disparities. There are many women around the world who fought to get gender equality. In some countries women's rights, such as the right to vote and to own property, are protected in the constitution. If women are allowed to participate there will be more progress, development and peace. Many women in the world today are still fighting for their rights. In Burma there are increasingly more women wanting to know more about women's rights and wanting equality. Not only now but even in the past, Burma has had women

leaders who have tried to rid Burma of the patriarchal system. In the 1988 democracy uprising in Burma, many young female students participated in the protest. Along with the men some were put into prison and some fled to neighboring countries. People started to realize that to change Burma into a democratic country both women and men are needed. Some women have also become leaders and are recognized around the world, such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Dr. Cynthia Maung. Both of them struggled very hard throughout their lives. Daw Suu has dedicated her life for the people of Burma. Dr. Cynthia Maung came to Thailand after the uprising and runs a clinic named Mae Taw near the Thai-Burma border. She gives free medical check-ups for refugees and migrant workers. These hard working women are fighting to get women's rights, equality and participation in politics in a peaceful way.

Looking at the achievements women have already accomplished, we will continue working toward gender equality, women's participation in Burma's democracy movement and to change how society views women. Then women would be seen for their strengths so that, "If a leaf falls on a thorn or if a thorn falls on a leaf, it can remain whole without tearing."

The authors are a group of six women from different ethnicities of Burma: Lahu, Burmese, Mon, Karen, Rakhine, and Palaung. They are currently working for women's rights and participation for a democratic Burma.

Silent Tears, Bleeding Heart

LACK SON POP HTAW

Most of you have heard about domestic violence. Even some of you have faced this kind of violence. We can see that men have been beating women, torturing them and discriminating against them. You never wanted to shout at your husband and argue with him. Some of you have believed that you have to respect your husband. Although you wanted to speak out your feelings, you didn't dare to. You might think that if you speak your problems and feelings about you and your husband, others will look down on you and blame you. So, you keep silent and just put the blame on your fate. Domestic violence is happening in Burma not only physically but also mentally and emotionally. People can only see the physical domestic violence, but they cannot see the mental and emotional side. I want to tell you a story about this.

Her name is Proi Lon. She lives in a rural area of Mon State, Burma. After she finished university she got married to a man who came from a rich family. She has a three-year-old baby. Her face was pale when she came and visited me one day. She cried when she saw me. I knew Proi Lon's husband came from a rich family and she didn't need to work outside the home. She lived with him in his mother's house and took care of them. She never thought to interfere with her husband's job when he went to work late.

"One night," Proi Lon said, "I could not sleep, my husband didn't come back home till four a.m. That day was my 25th birthday. Something was happening in my mind. I was not sure if I was excited

or worried. I did not know that my life would change from that day on. I took a bicycle down the dark street to his work place. I thought that he was busy with his job and had to sleep at work. When I arrived I went into his office quietly. I wanted to surprise him on my birthday.

I could not believe my eyes. I saw a young girl and my husband whispering to each other on a mattress on the floor. The girl was a servant at his work. I was shocked and could not say anything. I left without my husband knowing. I felt sad all day and I spent my birthday in tears. I didn't dare talk to him about it because I was afraid he would show his anger. He kept doing this and wouldn't come back at night. Sometimes he came back at about 2 a.m. I would wait for him by candlelight to have a meal together. He never knew that I had waited to have meals with him for many days and nights. He would tell me that he already finished his dinner. And he continued to sleep with the girl every night. I didn't eat anything and I didn't even drink. I became weak and thin and could not take good care of my son.

My husband rarely came home and always stayed at work. When he came home he would stay just a few minutes. He never looked at his son. One day, he came back home and told me to give a letter to the girl. I didn't argue with him and I took the letter. When I gave the letter to the girl, she asked me to read it with her. The letter said how he loved her and wanted to take care of her. I thought I had lost my mind. Sometimes he taunted me with love letters that the young girl sent him. He told me that he wanted to support the girl because he felt pity for her when she told him about her life. He promised me that he would stop supporting her when she passed the matriculation examination. He didn't care about me and my feelings. I reluctantly let him support the girl because I had no choice. I felt very upset for myself and my young son. My son didn't know about his father and was asking for him every day and night

I didn't talk to anyone about this problem. However, my mother in law and some of our neighbors knew. They could not do anything except pity me. My mother-in-law is also afraid of my husband so she could not help me. She just tried to console me. My mother-in-law told the girl to leave her job. The girl left the job and went to work in a phone shop instead. Someone told me that my husband went into the girl's house. He hugged and kissed her in front of other people. Both of them were shameless. Now I have no more space in my heart to feel anymore. I want someone who I can open my heart to. I wanted to divorce him, but I had to think about my son's future. I didn't want my baby to grow up without a father. So I endured and accepted my situation.

I thought my husband had been bewitched by the girl. I went to the astrologer and asked for help, but it did not work. In the next few days, that girl went back to her hometown. My husband came back home and blamed me for her leaving. He shouted at me. I was still silent with tears. I just gazed at him. I had no words to say.

The next day they ran away together. He left me and my son. I also found out from my neighbors that he provided a lot of money to that girl for a long time. My heart was broken and I felt like dying. I thought that I could not stand and survive without him. Now I know it is not true, I can survive without him. I am a mother of a son; I will give all my love and care to him. I will support him to be a good man."

Now, months later, Proi Lon is working as a primary school teacher and lives peacefully with her son. This story is evidence of emotional abuse, a form of domestic violence. After I heard her story, I also felt her pain. I could not find a word to console her nor could I give any advice to her. I think there are a lot of stories about domestic violence that we don't know about. There are also a lot of women who cry silent tears. All women cannot jump out from the gender box that forces us to be "good women" who don't speak out about problems.

The culture in Burma pressures women to respect men and their husbands. Men can discriminate against women because of this. Men have to respect their wives as women respect their husbands for domestic violence to disappear. Men should not think of women as cute stuffed toys that they can do anything they like with. Women should just break the gender box. It is not easy to know about the problems and feelings of women because they don't dare to open their heart and speak out. I wanted to write this story because I want all women to share our feelings and speak the truth. Then we can put the men who discriminated and tortured women to shame.

The story was written by a 24-year-old Mon woman. She came to Thailand in 2007 to fight for the rights of Mon women and now works for a Mon youth organization.

From Lady to Activist

YAUNG PYAN

When I was young and started to become aware of my society and its people I realized that I was growing up in a society influenced by deeply rooted gender-stereotypes. Of course, at that time I didn't even know the word "gender"! I was taught the various rules that "ladies" must follow, such as to be gentle in our words and actions, and to know how to do all household chores. Actually, I didn't know where these traditional stereotypes came from. I did not see the unequal spheres of women and men nor did I understand the boundary which divided one from the other.

I still remember from my childhood the time when my sisters and I came home late from a Buddhist festival. Because we were females, our uncle beat us for staying out late. I can also remember my grandparents yelling at me for climbing trees. When my male friends were playing and going around, I had to spend my time in the kitchen because I was a girl. Every time I played with the boys, people would call me 'tomboy'. Whenever I was behaving outside the gender stereotype, I felt like I was a criminal.

In my community, if a woman is raped by a man, the woman is blamed. As a result, women are more likely to keep sexual harassment and other violence against them a secret. At the very worst, the victims are too afraid to even speak out to their closest friends. They face this all alone and accept this as their fate and their bad luck. Moreover, they consider this to be normal.

Later, I left my village to live with my family on the Thai-Burma border. I got a chance to learn about women's rights from a Burmese women's organization in the pro-democracy movement. After I learnt about women's issues, I slowly began to analyze the situation of women living under unsafe circumstances, discrimination and harassment. I started to see how I also had been discriminated against and still experience gender discrimination. Why are women suffering like this? I thought a lot about this question with unfulfilled understanding. Later I began to realize that my community's conservative and traditional beliefs and attitudes on women lead to their oppression and discrimination. This has created the unequal division between men and women, which I was taught and had accepted before. After understanding women's rights I wanted to get out from under these gender stereotypes. Even then, I sometimes get tired from defending my position in all the debates with my male friends about women-related issues.

This has changed how I see myself. Instead of being shy and feeling inferior, I am now proud of being a woman. Things that I had never thought, never considered, or never even dreamed of, have now become my goals. What I want most of all, is to become a woman activist who encourages other women to understand and fight for their rights.

I would like to tell all women not to be shy and feel sorry for being a woman. I want all women to realize that they have capacities, abilities, courage, and strong spirits. Together with all women, I want to change the deeply rooted conservative practices and traditional stereotypes that have restricted women and created challenges that we continue to face today.

For a strong, peaceful and developed community it is important for both men and women to actively work together and respect each other. If women don't have security or equal rights and opportunities

the whole community will suffer. I believe that if we work together we can easily overcome any difficult problem or challenge, and this will bring peace to our community.

I am filled with courage and energy when I can see the beginning of these changes in my community and how they will affect my country. At the same time, I think that in order to transition to a society that views women equal to men, it is important that women enjoy equal rights but also equal opportunities in leadership roles.

The writer is a young woman who is actively working on women's issues on the Thai-Burma border.

Following My Mother's Footsteps

RAKHAING THU

I was born to a poor family in a city in Arakan State. In my family there are my parents, grand-parents, and four children including me. My mother sews clothes and my father is a blacksmith. Both of my parents are involved in the political movement for democracy. My father was sent to prison for an unrelated reason, and in 1988, during the nationwide democracy uprising in Burma, he broke out of Sittwe prison with other prisoners. After that, to avoid being arrested by SPDC, my father decided to flee to a neighboring country. My mother was left alone with her four children and her parents-in-law. She had to work very hard in the house and she became very thin. She was unhealthy but still did not stop sewing clothes or taking good care of her family. My mother was also able to provide the opportunity for her children to study in school. After 8 years, all of us, including my mother, were called by my father and we went to stay with him. My mother still continued to sew clothes. This work seems to be her life partner which helps her and our family.

I was born and grew up in a society where no women were given their pride. They work and do whatever they can to help their family but are never credited, are always being neglected and seen as weak. I was also one who thought women were weak, as my society had taught me to believe.

In my family my eldest sister is a bit different from the rest of us and the rest of our society. She never knew about women's rights but she wouldn't tolerate people that spread bad rumors about women. She

used to argue seriously with them, which my mother and rest of my family never liked. I, unlike my sister, wanted to please my family and older people since I was the youngest. I would do whatever they asked me to do. That is why they loved me and I was one of their favorite kids. My sister never did what she wasn't interested in but when she did any work, she was very talented and completed the work efficiently, without taking a rest. My father used to call her "crazy girl" as she did what she wanted, talked freely and friendly with other people, not caring about their age. She sometimes disagreed with him and that's why I feel that my father does not love her as much as he loves me.

In our culture if a daughter or wife disagrees with her father or husband, she is seen as a very bad woman and it makes the family look bad. Most of the time if the man believes that the family is no longer stable he will react violently towards the family, usually the women suffer the most. That behavior is practiced in my family too. In my opinion my mother is much stronger and more mindful than my father. She spent her whole life serving her family and working very hard for our family's survival. Apart from doing house work, my mother also joined a women's organization in our community. She attended many trainings and workshops related to women rights, gender equality, health and environment. Those trainings helped her to understand herself fully and that other women had suffered as she did.

It was quite difficult for my mom to practice those rights in the family. My father was not ready to understand women's rights and he never agreed with them. However, he never stopped my mother from participating in the women's movement. Whenever my parents had an argument and if my mother argued back, he used to blame women's rights for her disrespectful behavior. Sometimes he brought up our old customs of how a wife should be silent and do whatever her husband tells her, which my mother did not follow. When she would disagree with my father, he would break things in our house and beat my

mother. I could feel my mother's sadness and desperation. She often told me that she wanted to be a nun. Oh! How I hated to see my mother in that desperate situation.

I dislike my father sometimes. He looks very ugly when he is angry and I hate to see him like this. It makes me very afraid of him. I used to love and respect my father when I was young and he was not living with us. He used to be one of the leaders in our community and has a very good name because of his honesty and hard work. Now, after seeing how he treats my mother, my love for him has changed. I still love him, but not as before. Sometimes I can hardly believe why he is not respectful to my mother. I do not want to criticize my father. I love him and want him to change. Then my family would be peaceful and my mother would be happy.

When I was 19 years old and a bit more mature than before I came to see how many women were discriminated against by men and by our community. Women were discriminated against everywhere; in the family, at school, at work, in society and in the community. And women accepted this and did nothing. I too accepted this until I got a chance to attend a women's rights training and workshop. I came to know that most women have the same stories of abuse and mistreatment as my mother had, and that they had the same feelings of sadness. Their stories gave me more courage and got me interested to know more about women's rights.

I am the third woman in my family and I want to change the atmosphere of families in my country where women are given the respect and honor they deserve, for they are the main person who provides and cares for the family. A house without a woman is like an ocean without water. Women take care of children, look after and manage all the things in the house. They are very important for a peaceful and progressive society since most children learn about their surroundings from their mothers. That is why a woman also needs to

be educated and have a deep understanding about the present situation in the world.

I want the community, men and women themselves, to understand and respect the feelings of women. We are all human beings and we all have a heart to feel with and a brain to think with, therefore we should treat each other equally. No one wants to be oppressed; therefore we should not oppress others. If we can do this, it will bring peace in our community.

My mother has devoted her life to fighting nonviolently for the recognition of women's right from my father and our community and she is still working toward getting it. She faced many problems when she tried to discuss women's rights and why women are needed to participate in social and political issues. Many men think my mother has a dangerous tongue because she stands up for herself and women. She is brave enough to confront men and because of these reasons I admire my mother very much. Admiring her does not mean that I am against men, but the way most of them view women is not good and women have suffered long enough. I like the way my mother has fought throughout her life and I strongly support her. Whenever I think of my mother I wish to be like her, a strong and stable woman without whom I could never have learnt the difficulties women face. I thank her and will always be proud of my beloved mother.

The writer is a young woman who is interested in promoting women participation in politics.

Diary of a Supportive Wife

KHAYAY PHYU

“Sigh.”

After dragging the basin into the kitchen, she took a big breath. She was so tired and had no more energy to unpack the house. There was stuff everywhere in the new house.

To let her exhausted legs rest, she sat down in an empty corner of the house, balancing her heavy body. “Mother, we are going to the teashop,” the two sons said and left together.

Her husband was still out having dinner with his friend who helped them move. Only Cho Nwe Ko (also known as Cho Cho) was left at home. Although it was time for dinner, she was not hungry. It was partly because of trapped gas inside her stomach. But it was more true to say that she was not hungry because of stress. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes for a while, but she was frightened by the sudden sound of foot steps.

The sound of knocking and footsteps at the front door had kept her in fear for the decade. The moment of silence in the house drew her back to the past. Cho Cho was a beautiful fair skinned girl from upper Burma. She recently graduated as a high school teacher with a basic education diploma. At Rangoon University, she not only learned to be a teacher, she also learned how to dress up, talk, smile, laugh, and behave in a womanly manner to attract people’s attention. Her first posting as a teacher was in Pathein (also called Bassein), a city in the Irrawaddy Delta. Pathein, which is surrounded by many rivers and close to the sea, was a strange place for Cho Cho who grew up in upper

Burma, which is dry like a desert. However, Pathein was not a remote town. It is a capital city of the delta region. So people said she was lucky to be there.

She was even luckier because she met her future husband, Ohn Khin, in Pathein. He was eight years older than her. He was a young officer at the Department of Pearl and Fisheries in Irrawaddy Division when they met each other. Just over 30 years old, he was a good looking man with sharp eyes and a square-shaped chin. He fell in love with Cho Cho and broke an engagement arranged by his parents. Since then Cho Cho has come to know what type of person he is. Ohn Khin would not listen to anyone and did what he wanted to do. She should have realized that her husband had a strong spirit and never liked to give up.

After less than a year working as a teacher, Cho Cho married Ohn Khin and became the wife of a high ranking divisional officer. Despite her parents-in-law rejection of their marriage and criticism by some people, she still could enjoy life. She could go to work in a government official vehicle, (which is a privilege in Burma). When she went to work there was always someone beside her to carry her things. The family did not even need a housemaid since there were many who wanted to do house work for them. By helping the family, those people tried to gain the favor of Ohn Khin. (It is a typical for many civil servants in Burma to take bribes from people in order for their supervisor to turn a blind eye to what they are doing. That is why lower ranking officials and their families will voluntarily serve their supervisor's family as servants so that they would be treated well in return.)

Cho Cho, who was the oldest among five siblings, could support her parents financially because of her husband's position. When her parents-in-law rejected their marriage, it was even better for Cho Cho

because she did not need to visit or think about supporting her parents-in-law.

Cho Cho and Ohn Khin had three sons: Ye Khant, Min Khant and Moe Khant. She was always proud to be a mother of three sons. Many Burmese believe that not every mother can have boys. Only those who make good merit can have boys. As a wife of a high ranking official and a proud mother of three sons, Cho Cho thought her good life would last long or at least until her husband retired. She enjoyed her glorious time with the family and many servants around while she could also support her parents. She did not even think about the future. Saving money for long-term needs of the family was not in Cho Cho's mind.

The 1988 uprising woke up Ohn Khin's political consciousness. He actively engaged in the democracy movement, leading workers at his department. Together they marched peacefully on the streets with others, while Cho Cho was doing the same thing with her teachers' organization. There was news that some people poisoned drinking water and authorities released criminals on purpose to crack down on the demonstrators. Such news was everywhere and scared the people; however it did not stop Cho Cho's political spirit. Every day she left her kids at home with a nanny, brought a lunch box and drinking water with her and went everywhere in the town marching together with others demanding the military government to restore democracy and human rights in Burma.

When they heard that elections would be held, Ohn Khin happily commented, "It's happened finally. We won. This is people's power." Cho Cho's husband later joined National League for Democracy (NLD) and she fully supported him. She would follow and listen to her husband deliver speeches during the election campaign. She was always proud to hear her husband's clear and successful voice in the crowd. She used to tell herself, "Yes, this is my husband."

Sometimes she even shed a tear of happiness from seeing her husband's success.

However, it did not last long. Although NLD won the election in a landslide, the result was not honored by the military government. Since then the whole situation has changed drastically, and so has Cho Cho's family. The Burmese authorities closed down all the offices of the Department of Pearls and Fisheries. People working under that department were assigned to new posts in the Department Waterways. However, some well-known activists who participated in the 1988 uprising were not given any new posts. They were even forced to resign from previous jobs and thus many became jobless within days. Cho Cho's husband, Ohn Khin was at the top of the list of being forced to resign. After that, the family had to endure a terrible period when the authorities would come and knock on their door to question or arrest somebody, sometimes in the middle of the night.

When Ohn Khin was hiding to escape arrest, Cho Cho was left alone to struggle for the family, taking care of her three sons. She worked at the school and raised her three sons at the same time. It was tough. All the corrupted people who used to offer assistance to the family were all gone since they did not see any benefit. The worst thing was Cho Cho's family had to return the house and the car that they were allowed to use when Ohn Khin was a government official.

Only then she felt guilty that she never tried to own a house when the family had a good income. Everything was too late by then. Although it was not very expensive to rent a house in Patheingyi, no one wanted to rent to her family because of their affiliation to NLD. Every time people would politely say, "We want to rent to you but we also don't want to be in trouble if we rent to your family."

There were a few people who were not so afraid of renting to her family, however they were often pressured from the authorities. Even before a day had passed, they would see the landlord knocking on

the door with an embarrassed look, usually accompanied by some local authorities. Then, the landlord would say that they could no longer rent the house because of the pressure from the government. Just by joining a political party Cho Cho's family could not find a place to rent. She never knew that such things would happen in Burma.

Since they could not find a house to rent, Cho Cho had to send her children to friends' houses, rotating from one friend's house to another on different nights. One night, they had to sleep on the street as they could not find a place to go. There is a Burmese saying "When poverty comes and knocks on the front door, love jumps down from the back window," which means when people face poverty, love automatically disappears from their life. Cho Cho did not know who created this saying but it was true in her life. Cho Cho could no longer think about politics or the country because her family met many obstacles and was struggling to survive.

Her sons were growing fast, and they were often looked down on by others at school, especially by other students whose parents were high ranking military officers. Sometimes, her sons and children of the military officers would start fights on the streets. Whenever she heard about such fighting, Cho Cho had to run and stop it. This made Cho Cho worry for her sons all the time.

Finally, Cho Cho was able to rent a house because the house owner and family lived in Malaysia. The owner said that they were not afraid of any pressure from the government and thus, Cho Cho's family could live in their house as long as they lived in Malaysia. Cho Cho was pleased to know that there were some nice people like her landlord. Cho Cho's three sons did not follow their father's footsteps. They were not interested in politics even though their father tried to persuade them to get involved in politics every time they were together. As a mother, Cho Cho did not want her sons to get involved in politics and

be imprisoned for that. Unlike her husband, she was happy that her sons were not interested in politics.

It was a tough time for Cho Cho when her oldest son went to Singapore. Using his certificate from the Government Technology Institute (GTI), the eldest son got in touch with a broker who was looking for workers with official permits. He decided to go and work in Singapore to support the family. However, they had to pay the broker fees and thus Cho Cho had to sell some jewelry she inherited from her parents. Everyday survival for the family was not easy. They did not have much money. Cho Cho had to ignore her youngest son when he asked her to buy him a motorcycle. Ohn Khin finally found a job after he had been rejected by many places.

He got a job as a bus driver between downtown Patheingyi and Twenty Trees, a place where the Government Technological Colleges (GTC) are located. He got the job with the help of a close friend. It was not easy to find it by himself since no one wanted to be affiliated with him due to his political involvement. When he got this driver job, he could not complain about anything. He was now over 50 years old and working as a poor driver, even though he used to work as a respected high ranking official before. Although life has been tough for the family, Ohn Khin never gave up his NLD membership even though he was pressured by authorities many times. For Cho Cho, as a wife and mother who is always concerned about the survival of her family, she needed to prioritize the family over her political beliefs. Because of that, she and her husband have argued many times.

Cho Cho's second son eloped with a girl. The girl's parents were teachers and they were also Cho Cho's friends. However, they did not want their daughter to marry him. It did not surprise Cho Cho as she understood why people didn't want to associate with her family. The youngest son was mischievous. Although he knew how the family was struggling for survival, he did not care. He only cared about what he

wanted and he would demand it constantly from his parents. This is how he takes after his father. He never gives up anything easily and he is also very stubborn.

Cho Cho sometimes met people who used to actively work with them for democracy and freedom in Burma, but many have changed. Whenever she saw them, Cho Cho would whisper to her husband how those people have changed their beliefs. Her husband would respond, "Never let me change like them." She wondered if she ever pushed her husband to change like them. Those people who easily change their mind were usually doing fine since they don't feel shameful for anything they do.

One day, Cho Cho ate her dinner early, as she had arranged to speak with her oldest son in Singapore at a private phone center. She and her husband went to the phone center and waited for their son's call. Cho Cho usually goes alone to talk with her son, but today her husband came with her as her son wanted to talk to his father.

Cho Cho picked up the phone as it rung. "Mother." The voice of her son sounded tired and weak. "Yes, Son. Are you not feeling well? Are you tired at work?" The son did not answer her questions, but asked about his father, "How is the situation there, mother? Is anyone following our father as before?" Although the situation had not changed much, Cho Cho did not want to tell her son the truth, as she did not want him to worry for the family. She just replied, "Everything is fine. We are all fine here."

And the son said, "Here in Singapore, people are protesting against the Burmese regime. Some are real activists, but some are not. Some people come to the protest just to take photos so that they can use them when they apply for refugee status at the UNHCR. They are trying to get a chance to go to the United States."

Her son sounded really disappointed with what he had seen but Cho Cho did not realize it. When she heard that some people were trying to go to U.S., she asked, "Can't you also find a way to go to the United States? If you need help to get refugee status you can use your father's name."

Ohn Khin who was sitting nearby stared at Cho Cho with sharp eyes, showing his dislike to her suggestion to their son. Cho Cho tried to ignore her husband but the response from her son was even worse.

"Mother, you can never try to force me to do such things. I will never do it." Ohn Khin heard every word his son said to Cho Cho as he was sitting very close to the phone. Then, he proudly claimed, "Yes, he is my son." Cho Cho did not know how to respond to them. She was silent, gazing at a half broken pair of rubber sandals Ohn Khin was wearing.

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Broken Bowl

LAE LAE

My parents are not very rich but they could give me everything I needed. I did not know what it was like to be poor until one day my life changed completely. My determination and my revolutionary spirit connected me to Burma's democracy movement and changed my life. In September 1998, I was arrested by Burmese military intelligence and was sentenced to 21 years imprisonment in January 1999. I want to share some of these experiences.

In 1994 I passed the university admission test to attend Hlaing College, and I began distance education in 1995. I lived in Tamwe Township. I had to take Bus No. 45 to go to Hlaing College from home and this bus route passed by the house of the Burmese democracy leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. When I went to school I saw a big crowd listening to Aunty Suu's weekly talks in front of her house.

My best friend Zin Zin and I talked about Aunty Suu sometimes and we also went to listen to Aunty Suu's speeches on some weekends. Aunty Suu always highlighted how the authorities had ruled the country without law and justice, and she encouraged the public to work together for a democratic Burma.

Although my relatives are from military backgrounds, I have always wanted the fall of the military regime in Burma. I want my beloved country to be free and democratic, and because of that I became involved in politics. I also encouraged the people in my community to fight for democracy in Burma.

I was still young when the people's uprising happened in 1988. However in 1996, when I was older, there was a fight between Yangon Institute of Technology students and ordinary civilians at a restaurant in Insein Township. Some students were beaten so they went to the local authority's office and asked to sue the civilians who hit them. But the local authorities did not take any action. That's why students from every university in Yangon started protesting for the safeguard of student rights. I was already a first year student when the 1996 student uprising broke out in Hledan Junction, Rangoon. My best friend, Zin Zin was beaten by riot police during this uprising. After that our political spirit to fight against the military regime grew. My friends and I continued organizing political discussions in the community after the uprising. We collected some political writings and poems and distributed them secretly among the people. I did everything I could, both financially and by contributing my skills in typesetting and layout for our secret publications.

During the months of June and July in 1998, a group of our friends tried to recruit the members of United Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), the Burmese military's most loyal support group in Burma. We distributed some pamphlets that advocated USDA's members not to support the Burmese military regime. Since we had to do everything in secret, it was not easy for us to print and distribute anti-government publications. At that time I was working as a computer typesetter and compositor in a company, and my job was very useful for our secret activities. I typed and copied half of our publication at my office and the other half we printed at a copying and printing shop. The owner of the printing shop was like us, she did not like the military regime, thus she supported our actions. She did not charge any fee for our printing. So my friends Zin Zin and Maung Maung gave her a 500 sheet package of A-4 size paper. We then distributed all the pamphlets in different places such as movie theaters, university compounds, teashops, and sometimes on the bus. We also

glued them on the walls of some public areas. We searched mailing addresses of the military officials in the Rangoon directory and sent our publication to them via post. We were quite successful that time because we learned that some USDA members destroyed their membership cards after reading our handouts.

However, our group was arrested by the authorities in the middle of September 1998. Zin Zin, who knows me well and thought that I would have trouble living in the poor conditions of a prison, tried to protect me from arrest. At the interrogation center she said that she was the one who typed everything at the computer center. Another friend, Maung Maung testified that I typed and printed our publication at my office as he could not stand the torture at the interrogation center.

Eventually, a group of military intelligence officers came to my company, which was located in Bogyoke Street, to arrest me. It was September 1998. They searched my desk and took some of my belongings as evidence. I did not want my parents to worry for me so I asked my co-workers not to let my parents know until they left the office in the evening.

Although I knew that those officers came to arrest me, I was a good host and offered them some drinks. However, one of the police officers rejected my offer and treated me like an enemy. I think I know why he was behaving in such a way. He might have felt shameful for arresting me, a girl of his daughter's age. He was behaving wildly to cover up his embarrassment.

I was tortured at the interrogation center. I had to stand without any water or food for more than a day until I admitted that I typed and did the layout for our publications. While I was tortured I could also hear some of my friends howling in pain and it broke my heart.

In October, a week after I was detained, an officer from the interrogation center came to me and told me that they were going to send me back home and he offered me a meal. I did not believe what he said. I knew that they would never feed someone before sending them back home. After my meal, they covered my head with a mask and took me to another place in a car. Although I could not see anything, I opened my ears wide. I could hear the noise coming from prisoners walking with shackles and sometimes the sound of doors slamming inside the prison. I knew that it was Insein Prison, the most notorious prison in Burma, known for detention and torture of political prisoners.

After keeping me in Insein Prison for three months I stood trial. It was held in the prison, definitely not the kind of court we would imagine. It was a military court formed by military officials and their supporters. I was charged under article 5 (J), which accused me of being a threat to the security and stability of the country, and section 17/20 of the Burmese Printing and Publishing Act. I was sentenced to 21 years imprisonment on January 15, 1999.

In April 1999, without notifying my family, the authorities transferred me from Insein Prison. I was first sent to Mandalay Prison and then from Mandalay Prison to Shwebo Prison in Northern Burma. Their reason for transferring me was because I was stubborn and should be punished and tortured even more. Shwebo Prison was located far away from my native city, so my parents could not visit me regularly. I became depressed from not being able to see my parents for such a long time.

After eight months the prison authorities allowed me to contact my family. My prison cellmate Moe Moe asked her mother to inform my family about my situation. I knew that my parents might not believe that I was there, so I had to do something to make them believe. I had a light green color blouse my mother bought for me and I used

Burmese Thanaka (Burmese traditional make-up to protect from sunburn) to write on the blouse. I wrote, "Mother, I am in trouble. Please come and see me."

My mother came to see me in prison as soon as she received my message. When she saw my skeletal body in the white prison uniform she was choked with tears. She brought me mosquito nets, blankets and steel plates and spoons. The prison authorities did not allow me to take them. I explained to my mother that we had to sleep on the floor without a mattress or mosquito nets. My mother, who is used to living a comfortable life, was shocked and decided to stop sleeping on a mattress and a mosquito net.

Being in prison was of course different from living in my parents' house. In prison we had to sleep on the floor in a narrow cell with many bugs, mosquitoes and flies. I came to understand what Buddhist monks preached to me when I was once at a meditation center for a retreat. I realized how things change so fast and nothing is permanent, as Buddha had taught. Being in prison for four years was like a nightmare. I could not sleep at night from mosquito bites and sometimes from rain. When it rained water came into our cells and my cellmate and I had to sit awake all night. Sometimes we had only fish paste to eat with rice, and sometimes no water to take a bath. Meanwhile, prison guards would curse at us with all the rude words. I passed those tough days sometimes by singing, reading books about Buddha, meditating or talking with my cellmates about our past lives.

Being in prison means both our mind and body are imprisoned. If we don't know how to control our mind it is easy to go crazy or commit suicide from depression. Therefore we need to know how to survive in prison. We had laugh sometimes to forget our sufferings, at least once in a while. There is one hilarious experience I can not forget.

My cellmate and I had to eat, sleep, and use the toilet in our tiny six-foot square cell. There was a prison rule that everyone used only

plastic materials which could not harm others in prison. Everything we used including our toilet bowl was plastic. One night I needed to pee so badly I looked for our toilet bowl and sat down on it. As I was a heavy sleeper, I fell asleep sitting on the fragile plastic bowl and broke it into two pieces. Suddenly all the bad smells from the toilet bowl spread out in the cell and woke my cellmate up. I broke out in loud laughter and asked my cellmate to help me. With her one hand covering her nose, she helped clean the space with the little water we had. Such a thing never happened to me before and this made me laugh loudly.

Because of my loud voice the prison guard shouted at me from far away and warned me that it was time to sleep. She was afraid of ghosts and never came to our cell at night. Forgetting I was a prisoner for a moment, I shouted back at her saying we were awake because our toilet bowl had broken. Some prisoners who hadn't gone to sleep yet heard my voice and quietly laughed and talked happily among themselves about how I shouted back to the prison guard. The guard then scolded everyone, "You all, be quiet! Whatever happened to 5 (J) prisoners is not your business."

Although we were in the women's wing, we were separated from other women prisoners. We were not even allowed to talk with other prisoners but we could hear everything people said since our cells were very close to each other. Most of the prison guards usually took pride in their job and liked scolding us.

The morning after our toilet bowl broke some people who did not really know what happened last night asked each other. One of them asked why the guard was shouting that night, while another prisoner asked me whether it was true that the toilet bowl broke. When I answered yes, she told me that if a toilet bowl broke in prison it's an omen that amnesty would be given. It was not a surprise for me to hear that. Everyone has hope and they all want to be free from a miserable life. I could not say anything to them, as I did not how to

respond and not destroy their hope about the omen. I could never forget how terrible it was to clean up our smelly cell without having enough water.

Actually, I don't believe in omens but three years after breaking the plastic toilet bowl I was released from prison even though the military government sentenced me to 21 years. I am still not sure if my release was related to the broken toilet bowl or if it was just my luck.

The author, Lae Lae was given a 21 year sentence for typing and distributing anti-government letters. Fortunately, she served only 4 years of her sentence. When released from prison she was under surveillance by military intelligence. Feeling unsafe in Burma she fled to the Thai-Burma border where she continues to work for the Burma pro-democracy movement.

Lae Lae's best friend Zin Zin spent 11 years in Mandalay Prison after being arrested in 1998. Maung Maung was released from Myingyan prison in 2005. He was later detained again for one month after the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Since then he has gotten married and resides in Burma. Moe Moe, Lae Lae's cellmate, is currently resettled in Norway.

A Place Called "Burma"

HAN THU LWIN

Prison without iron bars...
People always live in fear...
Midnight knocks you'll get used to hear...
Heavy hearts are weeping with silent tears...and
Hope is the only thing people have for years...
That's a place we call "Burma"

The author is Rakhine-Chinese working as an engineer in Singapore. She and other Burmese activists formed a group named "Oway Singapore" to raise awareness of the political situation in Burma and to support the pro-democracy movement. In 2007 they began working with "Overseas Burmese Patriots," a group formed by Burmese youth during the Saffron Revolution. As a result some of these activists were deported.

Peace in Burma

PARROT

It is a place where there are no nice, big houses and there are no mountains surrounded by fog. Elderly people and children cannot sleep calmly in the early morning like in the city. They tend to start their routine with the sound of knocking iron intermixed with the song of birds. Not only is it a place where you can hear the unfamiliar sounds of tools working but this place is not our homeland. It bothers me when I go to this place and see some people who don't have any warm clothes to wear in the cold winter season.

I went to Mae La refugee camp to help in a domestic violence training in November 2009. There are many ethnic nationalities in this camp, especially Karen. They are innocent people. Some of them cannot even speak the Burmese language. I stayed in a house near the foot of a mountain. I used to go down in the morning and climb back up in the evening. The hill is a gradual slope and was not very exhausting to climb up. The people have got used to climbing up this hill. They tend to run and climb the hill and then run back down again. Girls dance a non-traditional dance to cassette tapes playing in the dusk. I felt happy when I saw they were dancing Western dances to Thai songs.

They come from different places but are all friends here. Although they love each other, no one can predict what their destiny will be in 2010. They may or may not know. Some of them will go to other countries; United States, Norway, Canada, Sweden and so on. UNHCR feels compassion for them so they send the people of Burma

to other countries. Among them there are a small number of people who pretend to be refugees. Indeed, real refugees deserve sympathy and respect. They have had to leave their homes and struggle desperately in the jungle because of civil war. All they know is that SPDC soldiers are most likely to be violent towards them. Actually, they don't know who is oppressing them and why they are oppressed. They know that they have been separated from their families and villages and that their homes were burnt down. That's all they know.

There are a limited number of jobs in undeveloped rural areas in Burma. People have a low level of education, their lives are extremely difficult because they have to struggle to fill their stomachs. Some of them may not know that their difficult lives are a result of General Than Shwe's mismanagement of the country. People aren't even able to talk freely. As refugees people feel better and more peaceful living in the camps than they felt before when their homes were being burnt. However, there are other difficulties when living in the refugee camp. People tend to marry during adolescence and their destiny is uncertain. There are many domestic matters, husbands and wives tend to fight. There are few jobs in the camp. To get a job or leave the camp you have to secretly leave the camp. There are many seasonal jobs in close proximity to the camps such as harvesting beans and corn, and finding (sometimes stealing) bamboo shoots in Htee Law Thein village. Sometimes they have nothing to eat. There is no electricity and some days they cannot even eat by candlelight, so they have to sit and eat by the fire in the dark of night. Still, they are happy. When I asked one of the refugees, Dee Muu (sister), "Do you want to go back Burma?" She cried and said that she was afraid of the SPDC soldiers. So I asked again, "would you go back if there were no soldiers?" She said, "I want to go back because I have great desire to live in my motherland, my native village and in my own house with my family. If only I had the chance to live peacefully like that again. There is nothing that can replace that feeling. When we heard the sound of guns shooting we

used to hide. If my younger sister was frightened and cried, my mother would hold her mouth shut. We didn't dare make any noise. We used to clearly hear the footsteps of military boots and the sound of villagers being interrogated. What they were most likely to ask was where the Karen soldiers were. If they villagers said that Karen soldiers hadn't come here, they were slapped, kicked or beaten with the butt of the gun at least three or four times. Burmese soldiers used to take away domestic animals and even young girls. They didn't care whether those women had husbands or not. I was terrified of being in a situation like that. That's why I married. I feel a little more secure now."

I felt great sympathy for the refugees when I heard their stories of how they came to be at the camp. When they were telling me their experiences, it seemed from the sound of their voices that they were stepping back into time and reliving their past as they were speaking. When Dee Muu told me her experience, she was proud, full of emotion and there were tears in her eyes as she said, "Ah Naw (Sister), SPDC soldiers often came and destroyed my village. Last time they took my father as a porter to carry their rations. My younger sister, mother and I were left with downcast looks. We didn't dare shout, all we could do was cry. We were hoping our father would come back. When it was time to harvest the paddy on the outskirts of the forest we were still waiting for our father to come home."

After harvesting the crop we investigated what had happened to our father because he still had not come back. Ah Kyaw (brother) came back to the village and said he was lucky because he had had the opportunity to escape while the soldiers camped in the evening. He said that my father, one of four people taken from our village, contracted malaria in the jungle. He also said that the soldiers didn't give him any water so my father needed to drink the water from the streams. The soldiers didn't treat him as human. In the end they killed my father."

She had some water and took a rest because her voice was beginning to crack. I asked her what happened next. She continued, "I am not sure whether the next group of soldiers who came to my village was the same as the first. They were like the ones before, taking chickens and ducks and shooting pigs and cows. We were really afraid. Then they asked if Karen soldiers had come to the village. They told us to tell the truth or they would kill us. As soon as my mother heard them say that, she actually peed, she was so afraid. That's why we had to hide. After shouting a lot they went back. As soon as they had reached a point not so far from the village, we heard the sound of guns. There was a battle going on which lasted for 1 hour. After the battle was over, the SPDC soldiers came back and started burning our village. We put the bundles of goods in a Palai (basket). Then we took my younger sisters and younger brothers and ran into the jungle. We stayed in the jungle for 10 days until we got to Mae La refugee camp. Before we arrived we had run out of food in the jungle so we ate baked spawn from streams, fruits and plants. We even stripped banana trees to get soft banana pith from the bark and we ate that, Ah Naw."

I felt very sorry for the women I talked with. There was one question in my mind. If we are all women from Burma, why are our lives so different to those of the daughters of generals who are so wealthy? There are countless women who have had their lives destroyed because of the burden of the cost of living. Instead of being in classrooms, children are on the streets begging for money. We have to cross extremely harsh roads. Have a look at those sisters now, they have left their villages and homeland and now they have to live in Thailand. At some point they will go to live in other countries which are so far from their native land. They will be separated from their native village by thousands of miles. I think about how there may be so much anger and hate, and a strong longing for home because of this dictatorship. How many years do we need to live like that?

If there is civil war and no justice in society, our lives will not be saved. On whom do we have to rely? I thought about the women who have no time to enjoy the beauty of nature and I want their struggles and difficulties to end. While I was thinking, I heard Dee Mu calling, "Ah Naw, Ah Naw." I replied, "Hey." Dee Mu waved her hand and said, "Goodbye. It's getting dark. Ah Moe (my mother) will be angry with me." I watched her as she walked home in the dusk. It was cold season and my heart was heavy. I had a glass of water and the recent feelings of anxiety and bitter anger slowly edged away. I wondered how we will ever find peace in Burma. I was thinking how we could collect all the rice seeds spread out, like uniting all of our people spread out around the world. I was thinking so much I don't know when I fell asleep.

The Dispersion of a People

SAYBLUMOO

In December 2005, a resettlement program was introduced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in my camp, the Mae La Oon Burmese Refugee camp on the border between Burma and Thailand.

“Resettlement, in this context means transferring a refugee from his or her country of asylum to another country that has agreed to admit that person to grant them long-term residence rights and the opportunity to become naturalized citizens”.¹

Since that year hundreds of people, including my relatives and my friends, have already left and there are many families waiting to leave. Many more people are finding it hard to make the decision to leave. When I see my beloved relatives and friends leaving, my tears start falling and I can't control myself. I do not try to stop them from leaving because I know that I cannot help them to improve their lives here.

One morning, in July 2007, I received a phone call from my Aunt and some of my loving cousins. They told me that they were happy as they would soon be leaving to be resettled in a third country. As I listened to their happy voices, I tried to control my tears. Instead I tried making jokes even though I felt really upset to think of being so

¹ UNHCR, The state of the world's refugees, in search of solutions, Oxford university press 1995, p 90

far away from them. My Aunt said, *"I feel really pleased talking with you. When I left the camp, many of my friends including my sister (my mother) were crying and I could not control my tears too"*. But she didn't know how sad I was. My Aunt is a special person to me. She tells jokes and makes people happy with her words. So many people are good friends to her including young people from her neighborhood. I am sure that there are many people who are left behind in the refugee camps who feel the same as me. I have many thoughts and questions about going to a third country. I'm even considering the option myself. I haven't come to any decision yet.

I understand that no one wants to move far away from their family, their relatives and the friends who they really love, but when you are living in a refugee camp there is no other hope for improving your living standards and no other hope for your future. This is especially true for youth and children. There are fewer and fewer teachers and health educators left in the camp, because most of the people who have better education levels have opted for resettlement. The replacement teachers and health educators do not have a high level of education, so there can be some problems for those who are left behind.

When we hear that our friends are having fun in their new home country, many people who are left behind in the camp decide they want to apply for resettlement. For example my younger brother, now only 16 years old, wants to go to a third country. Even though no one else in our family wants to resettle and he cannot go alone, he is always thinking about going to a third country and is not interested in studying inside the refugee camp. There are many students like him who are confused.

Despite the issues I have outlined above I am pleased to hear that my friends who have been accepted into another country now have an opportunity to get better jobs and have more chances to choose

what they want to do. Being a refugee you don't have the opportunity to find jobs outside the camp or continue your education past grade ten. Now the children and youth who have arrived in third countries can continue their education and have high hopes for their future. I believe and hope that they will one day return to the Thai-Burma border and work together with us to gain democracy in Burma.

We, people from Burma, love our country, we love our people, and we love our relatives - so why do we have to move so far away from them? I deeply believe that the root cause comes from the State Peace and Development Council's brutal activities (the SPDC is the military dictatorship in Burma). Everyday our people have to flee from danger; they are always at risk from SPDC persecution. I hope that Burma will gain freedom soon and we will once again meet with our families, relatives, and our friends who have said goodbye.

The author, an ethnic Karen woman, fled her village when the SPDC troops came to destroy homes and crops. Many villagers were killed, injured and raped. At eight years old she went to live in a refugee camp. Later in life she graduated from Earth Rights School and worked for the Burmese Women's Union in Thailand. Sayblumoo submitted this story in 2007. She passed away in 2009 and is remembered for her commitment to her people.

Life = Credit + Debt

KI KI

Foreign means a country situated away from our motherland.

Why do people go to foreign lands? There are several reasons. Some people prefer to live in a foreign country while others have no choice. Some people go abroad to find a job, to study, or to find their partners. People leave their homeland for different reasons and face different experiences and fortunes.

Some people are lucky enough to have their family or relatives already living in the place they are going to. Life may be a little easier for them than for those who have no one. There are also people who take a risk by borrowing money from others to be able to afford their trip to foreign lands, and their life is a bigger struggle. Nonetheless, everyone faces different challenges in foreign countries where language and tradition are different from those in their native land. People with similar experiences will understand these challenges.

Some Burmese who never leave the country may think that living and working in a foreign country is like being in paradise. Well, how can they understand since they have never been in that situation? I won't blame them for their ignorance. I just want to share about my experience in a foreign country.

After graduating from university and when my country was in chaos, I left to a foreign country without an organized plan. It was my first time leaving my home and family. Before the trip I had to sell my mother's two 20 karat gold rings to be able to pay for a passport, travel expenses, broker fees, compensation to the government for leaving my

government job and some other fees for the trip. I cried quietly for the first time. I did not have much money in my hand when I began my first trip alone far away from home.

You can imagine how it would be to survive in a strange place with little money and no job in the beginning. How would a handful of people who live a comfortable life in Burma understand this? Sometimes, I only had an egg and instant noodle soup (Mama or Raman) for the whole day. No one knew how I passed my days like that so many times.

I worked very hard day and night in order to pay back my debt. I worked any job available but they had to be morally good. My jobs had nothing to do with the degree that I earned at school. As I did not understand the language well in the beginning, my boss would scold me and yell that I didn't do what I was told to do. No one could understand how I felt in those days but my pain and sadness is still in me today.

While I was waiting for my identification card in Taiwan, I got my first job at a beauty salon. I was living in a small room right above the salon and that was how I got the job there. One day the owner, a chubby lady who had just returned from Burma, asked me if I would want to work and help her at the salon. She always said pleasant things and pretended to be very nice. Since it was not a bad job, I decided to work there but I did not have any experience doing hair. I never do well with my own hair. So the owner trained me how to wash and massage hair. It was right before Chinese New Year, the time everyone goes to beauty salons. The salon was always crowded with people who wanted to straighten, curl, wash, or dye their hair. I was not good in the beginning, sometimes I scratched too much on someone's head or pressed too hard. Once when I was washing a customer's hair, I mistakenly pressed the wrong water tab and only hot water came out

and burned the women a little bit. She was very angry and yelled at me shaking her finger at me.

I felt so disappointed that time and I even thought about going back to my mother. However, because of the debt I had to pay to the broker and also other people, I had to control my feelings and continue my work there. I tried to encourage myself that I was working with good intentions to support my parents. They have been so good to me raising me, sending me to school and sharing everything they have. I cried quietly so many times as I did not want my other three roommates to know that I cried. My fingers were always soaked and became bigger like inflated beans from being in water all day. But I did not have any money to buy any hand lotion to treat my fingers. So, I treated them with cooking oil.

Wait! I also should tell you about the day that I received my first wage. I did not know if I should laugh or cry that day but I knew that I was exploited by my employer. She had no sympathy for us even though she also came from Burma. After working so hard for the whole week, my wage was only NTD 500 which is equal to USD 15. After she gave us the money, she took us to a movie theater and also treated us to a lunch. Nevertheless, I always remember that day since it was my first wage.

My second job was at a small garment factory. My cousin got me that job. I was not happy working there. I didn't know how to sew. I never sewed or mended my own clothes because my older sister always did that for me. However, here I had to sew with a big machine. If I didn't know how to sew or if I got sleepy while sewing it could cut my fingers. I could not sew a straight line. My lines were like two drunken men walking on the street. When the employer found out she punished me and assigned me to another job which was even harder. I had to carry huge fabric rolls and place them on the table and make them ready for cutting. The first week my whole body was aching and I had

to put on some balm all over my body. Those were very tiring times I had to overcome.

I also worked at a private clinic run by a Burmese doctor in the evenings. Since I had two jobs, I had to run back home everyday to take a shower and quickly eat my dinner before going to my other job. My dinner was usually instant noodle soup. I earned NTD 8,000 per month which is not much. That time the exchange rate for a dollar was NTD 40. Although I was working hard in two places, after paying rent, transportation, and other general costs, I could not save much. I was also paying back my debt little by little and only after working for two years in a foreign land, I could start saving small amounts of money every month.

The author is currently living in Taiwan and working to support her family in Burma. She wishes to return to Burma when there is a better opportunity. She is interested in working for social development, but until that time she will continue to earn money to send back to her family.

Raising the Dragon's Head

KI KI

'Showing off one's colors to demand respect'

(This is a translation of a Burmese proverb.)

Just like me, there are millions of Burmese migrant workers. You may also call them a class of slaves or oppressed people who are working in other countries for several reasons.

Not everyone who is working abroad finds a good job and lives well. Many people in Burma think that those who go and work in foreign countries earn a lot of money but in fact, no one knows how many tears we shed.

When I first arrived in Taiwan, I did not know how to read and write the language and life was very tough because my mind was overwhelmed with fear. The education I had in my country did not help me ease the fear from my mind. The education system in Burma is not interactive and does not prepare you for life. Teachers teach whatever is written in the curriculum and we write everything down without understanding what it means. Sometimes we might not get every word that the teacher says and if it happens we have to copy from other students. Whether it is right or wrong, we have to know all the words by heart. There are no opportunities for discussions to share ideas between the students and the teacher or among students. We don't know how to practically apply what we have learnt to our lives. As a result, we are always backward in our thinking and never give our opinion out loud. We do not think like other people whose education system is different from ours. As we do not talk or discuss in class, we

are always shy and afraid to speak or voice our opinion in front of people. As a result we are never outspoken, and we lack confidence.

I had to learn how to live like others in this strange country. Only after living here for four or five years could I gain some confidence and keep my fears away when I worked or talked with others. I became less afraid of many things. If I thought that something was right, I dared to say it or do it. This is how I benefited from living abroad.

Workers in this country enjoy their labor rights although there are also cases where employers try to cheat their workers. There are always conflicts between employers and employees (or masters and slaves) everywhere. That is no exception here. Everyone thinks of themselves first and no one wants to do things which are not fair to them. People always want to benefit from others. I have also experienced this kind of conflict.

Before I got to where I am now, I first lived in a place called Yang Mai and worked in a small private hospital. It was close to a main highway. It takes less than one minute to drive to the highway from the hospital. People who got injured in road accidents or in the factories in the nearby industrial zone would come to our hospital. The hospital was always crowded and busy. The owner had another hospital in the same small town. I sometimes had to work in both hospitals if it was needed. The working schedule rotated between day and night shift. It was a tiring job but I also received a fair amount of income so I had no complaints. I also had a good time hanging out with some of my co-workers at the hospital. However, that was for the first two years of working there. After two years, some businessmen came to the town to open a bigger hospital and my boss had to compete with them. We had to work harder everyday to persuade more patients to come to our hospitals. It is a long story to tell in detail how we marketed the hospitals. Business people will understand this. For us workers, it was

harder to work and we also lost some of our free time. However, it was still fine for me because I could earn more money from my overtime although I had less time to rest. Another year passed by and the boss was quite unhappy with his competitors but I did not have a bad time. I think rich people are more stressed than the poor as they cannot control their desire to gain more wealth.

While I was working there, on September 21, 1999, Taiwan was hit by the biggest earthquake for a hundred years. About 3,000 people died and many lost their homes and property. Both international and domestic aid immediately came to the area. As far as I remember, the first foreign aid group was from Japan and later there were also many Western aid organizations that came to help. Many donations were made by the government and also private groups. News channels were updating about the donations every minute. It was really interesting to see it.

Many hospitals sent their workers to the area affected by the earthquake to help the people there. I also wanted to go there but the hospital only allowed male workers to go and thus I was excluded. I remained working at the hospital. On the third day after the earthquake hit, I was watching TV and saw that our hospital donated 300,000 Taiwan dollars for the earthquake survivors. Bigger hospitals donated more money than our hospital. It was also mentioned in the news that our hospital donated the money after collecting it from the workers which I did not know. So I asked a nurse about it and she confirmed that the donation was made from our wages. The owner took one day's wages from every worker to make the donation but we did not know about this until after. The owner improved his image of himself with the worker's money. It was not the way it should be. In fact, the workers should be aware that their money would be taken for the donation and they should have been able to decide the amount of

money they wanted to donate. Donations should be based on one's own generosity and should not be forced.

When I figured out the whole process of the donation, I felt very unhappy. I was angry not because I did not want to donate one day of labor and wages for the victims of the earthquake. I am a generous person and I have donated larger amounts of money. But I was unhappy to know that our boss exploited us to improve his image. So I went to the office of my boss when we were less busy in the afternoon and complained about what he did to the workers. I told him that cutting the workers wages without informing them is a form of exploitation. Making a donation is to show genuineness and workers should know in advance and feel good for their generosity. In the beginning, he did not seem to understand my point. He thought I was angry because my wage was cut. It got quite loud when we were talking. Even his secretary came often to check the situation. Finally, the boss apologized to me for what had happened, and he also asked his assistant to bring a coffee and snacks for me. Then, I also controlled myself and told him that we, Burmese people are genuine Buddhists and we often make donations to help others but what the hospital did to the workers was not the right way of making a donation. He said he had not thought about it like that before and also promised me that it would never happen again.

It was my first complaint to the boss since I had been there. As I believed I was right, I was not afraid to say it. Sometimes, I have to raise my head to show who I am, just like a dragon sometimes needs to raise his head to show his power to others, so that I will not be exploited again.

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Women's Hope

SOE MEH

If you have shed tears for the freedom stolen from you
We have wept for the lives we created
Only to die before our eyes

If you show vengeance for all that you've been through
We can only aspire for a life that was once ours
To find its way back to its spirit

We are left with nothing but the courage to hope
And we hold on to this as we keep living each day
An inspiration, to gain back our freedom