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Speaking Truth for Peace:

Women's Experiences of War and Impunity in Myanmar

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Karen Women's Organization

Ta'ang Women's Organization

Vimutti Women Organization (VWO)

Foreword

This booklet captures the stories of 31 women from Myanmar – former political prisoners from Yangon, Ta'ang women who live in the conflict zones of Northern Shan State, Karen women village heads, and land rights activists. The booklet presents the key findings of AJAR's research, outlines AJAR's participatory research approach, and provides a list of recommendations for addressing truth, justice, and reparations for the women survivors of Myanmar.

AJAR would like to thank the Foundation for a Just Society, the Oak Foundation and the Open Society Foundation for their contribution to this research.

This book is dedicated to Thu Lay Paw, who courageously served as Village Head in her community in Karen State from 1997-2004. May she rest in peace. It is also dedicated to all of the women who gave a part of themselves to participate in this research.

Our Women Survivors[1]

Karen

Naw Bay Lah
Naw Dee Dee
Naw Eh Lay Moo (Daw Su)
Naw Lo Wah
Naw Moo Eh
Naw Mu Ti
Naw Poe Th'Dah
Naw Shee Ku
Thu Lay Paw
Naw Yay May

Ta'ang

Yar A Aung
Ay Poe Jaing
Ei Kyam
Ei Seng
Yar Kamae Hlan
O Khin Aye
Yar Mar Lup
Lway Poe Ki Chi
Yar Puu
Yar Seng Man

Women Political Prisoners and Land Rights Activists

Daw Aye Mi
Daw Hla Hla Myint
Daw Khin Hmat
Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing
Daw May Zun Oo (Nay Chi)
Daw Mya Sein
Daw Nyo
Daw Sein Htwe
Daw Soe Soe Oo
Daw Su Yin Yin
Daw Thet Thet Lwin

[1] For security reason, some names have been changed.

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Myanmar's Women Survivors: Speaking Out

Women survivors of conflict and oppression are often haunted by silence and invisibility—both before and after the violations they experience. They are often pushed to the fringes of society—marginalized, perhaps even demonized, and disempowered. The full truth about what happened to them and how it continues to affect their lives is erased or denied—not only by the state, local authorities, and the national elite, but often even by those in their own communities and families.

In 2016 and 2017, AJAR in collaboration with local partners conducted participative research with 31 women as part of our ongoing efforts to break the silence and amplify the voices of women survivors in Myanmar. We explored how women experience conflict and state violence, and in its aftermath struggle to survive in a system where impunity is the norm. Our research provides key lessons on how these women have helped themselves, while largely remaining invisible to those providing aid in conflict and post-conflict settings. In the rush to create peace, authorities want victims of war and repression to vanish and magically transform themselves into ordinary citizens without any specialized support. Marginalized from peace process discussions, women are unable to adequately voice their needs.

Women's unique experiences must be taken into consideration in peace discussions in order to bring positive change to their lives and communities. Meaningful peace cannot be built without including the voices and demands of survivors - women must be listened to in order to build a sustainable future. AJAR and its partners believe that our research and ongoing activities with survivors help to empower women to speak up and participate in local peace efforts. We hope that this booklet will inspire other survivors to tell their stories and thus amplify the call for truth, justice, reparations and peace.

Our Methodology

The project used AJAR's *Unlearning Impunity* methodology, which was developed in conjunction with partners and survivors in Myanmar, Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

Key to this approach is engaging women survivors as active agents for change, and not merely as vestiges of atrocities.

Unlearning Impunity uses a range of grassroots tools to document women's stories and to build trust, understanding and solidarity between survivors. The process aims to build the capacity and confidence of women as they recognize their own capacity for survival and ability to cope with trauma. By balancing individual and community experiences, focusing on both civil-political and economic-social rights, and dealing with experiences of violence both during and after conflict, attention is given to healing, empowerment and future advocacy initiatives.

01. Timeline
Women drew a timeline to understand the violence experienced before, during, and after conflict. Survivors were able to build a collective history and understand their own individual experiences within it.

02. Community Mapping
We asked women to draw a map depicting their homes, the sites where violations took place, and other important places from their life stories.

03. Resource Mapping
Together, women victims told each other about their sources of livelihood before, during, and after conflict. This process offered insight into the cycle of poverty experienced by women victims.

04. Body Mapping

Borrowing from the women's health movement, we used body mapping as an opportunity for women victims to speak about how the violence they experienced impacted their bodies. Apart from pain, we also urged them to mark sites of strength and happiness on their body map.

05. Stone and Flower

Participants were invited to choose a stone or a flower to describe whether the right to truth, justice, healing, and a life free from violence existed in their personal, family, and community life. Their reasons for choosing a stone (if negative) or a flower (if positive) were discussed in the group.

06. Taking Photos, Telling Stories

Researchers visited survivors' homes to take photos of places and items of significance to them. They then helped survivors to create photo-stories of their lives.

07. Memory Boxes

Victims were asked to fill a box with objects that hold sweet or bitter memories. They were also asked to write a story about their life experience on postcards. In the last meeting session, participants opened their boxes and shared the contents with the group.

Geographical Focus

AJAR partnered with three local organizations to conduct this research. The Vimutti Women Organization (VWO) conducted activities with ex-political prisoners in Yangon and land rights activists from central Burma. The Ta'ang Women's Organization worked with conflict-affected Ta'ang women in Northern Shan State. The Karen Women's Organization worked with former and still-serving women village heads in Karen State.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this research process was the participation of women survivors. They were able to tell their stories, articulate their needs, and engage in collective problem solving. Because the research was conducted in a context where impunity is entrenched, we ensured that the methodology was designed to have some immediate benefit for participants. Thus, researchers were trained in self-care and used facilitation tools that helped survivors obtain mutual support. Our researchers, especially those working in areas of active conflict in Northern Shan State, planned activities carefully to ensure security. Some researchers had to travel long distances to reach the remote locations where survivors live; as a result they were not always able to use all of the research tools available. As an in-depth and qualitative method, the research does not provide big-picture quantitative findings. However, in this report we have attempted to look at some of the key patterns of women survivor experiences emerging in Myanmar.

An Overview of the Situation of Karen and Ta'ang Women Affected by Conflict and Women Former Political Prisoners

Karen Women

The Karen people are one of Burma's major ethnic groups, living mostly in the mountainous eastern border region and central delta area of the country. They have their own unique language, culture and traditions. Karen people have sought political recognition and autonomy from the central Burmese government since the country gained independence from Britain in 1948. For over 60 years they have faced brutal political restrictions, economic exploitation, discrimination and cultural suppression at the hands of Burma's military regime.

Karen people have lived through decades of armed conflict between the Myanmar Army and Karen ethnic armed groups. Civilians have faced human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, torture, forced labor, and conscription as child soldiers. For the Karen women who shared their stories for this report, 1997-1999 was one of the worst periods of conflict, due to intense fighting between the Myanmar Army and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). During this time a splinter group from the KNLA broke off and joined the Myanmar Army. They leaked information about villagers who were affiliated with the Karen National Union (KNU) - the political wing of the KNLA - or had family members in the organization. As a result villages were burnt down and many people arrested, interrogated or killed.

Decades of conflict has also forced hundreds of thousands of Karen people to flee their homes and seek safety in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Over 100,000 Karen people remain in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma today; many of them have lived there for decades. In recent years there has been a drastic reduction in international aid for these camps, which has resulted in decreased food assistance and a lack of basic services. Many refugees are facing increasing pressure: many would like to go home but do not feel that current conditions allow them to make a safe, voluntary and dignified return.

The signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015 has led to a fragile peace in Karen State. While the ceasefire has opened the door to an increase in economic activity and development projects, it has also led to a heightened presence of the Myanmar Army, including increased numbers of soldiers, new military camps, and military-controlled roads. Women and girls report continued acts and threats of sexual and gender-based violence. There have been ongoing clashes, resulting in new displacements and violations.

Ta'ang Women

The Ta'ang (also sometimes referred to as Palaung) are an ethnic group living primarily in the mountainous areas of Shan State. Famous for producing tea, many Ta'ang are also involved in paddy cultivation and logging. The majority of the Ta'ang people are Buddhist and have their own language and customs.

The Ta'ang seek self-determination from the Burmese government and have been engaged in armed struggle with the Myanmar army through the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) (1963-2009), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) (2009 until now).

Since 2011, conflict has continued in Northern Shan State, where the majority of the Ta'ang people live. The conflict not only involves the Myanmar Army and the TNLA, but also other ethnic armed groups and state-aligned militias. The area has become rapidly militarized. The Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO) estimates that the number of Myanmar Army troops in Ta'ang areas has increased from 3,000 in 2011 to over 12,000 in 2016. Despite the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, there has been an escalation of conflict and 2016 saw some of the most intense fighting yet.

People in Ta'ang areas have faced human rights abuses including abduction, torture and forced labor, as well as forced recruitment into armed groups. Civilians are constantly at risk of death and injury from landmines, shelling, and gunfire. There have been many instances of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest and detention, especially of those suspected of being TNLA members. Over 15,000 people have been forced to flee their homes. Most are internally displaced, but some have fled to Thailand.

Livelihoods have been severely affected due to displacement and destruction of property. Women and young girls seeking to escape poverty are at risk of being trafficked or exploited as they seek jobs across the border in China. Shan State is a major center for opium poppy cultivation and drug abuse is a widespread problem, particularly among men and young people.

Women former political prisoners and land rights activists

Throughout decades of authoritarian rule in Burma, thousands of people were imprisoned for political reasons. Prisoners included political dissidents, journalists, human rights activists, and anyone suspected of criticizing state authorities. There was no rule of law, no access to justice and no legal protection for ordinary people. The law was in fact used as a tool to further repression and was systematically wielded against disadvantaged and marginalized populations in order to benefit the government, for example through land appropriation.

Though Burma is transitioning to democracy, these practices continue to be used by the police and military today. Over 200 political prisoners are still being detained by the State.

Many women and men were imprisoned for months or years without any judicial protection from the government, state security forces, or police. They were detained in prisons, interrogation centers, police cells, and detention facilities. Torture was widely used by the state in all of these locations, always with impunity. The purpose of torture was to extract information and false confessions, as well as to punish, degrade, humiliate, and instill fear.

During detention women prisoners faced different types of violence and abuse, such as sleep deprivation, severe beatings, solitary confinement, and sexual harassment. Even after release, women political prisoners and their families faced marginalization and mistreatment. Shunned by extended family members and neighbors, many were prohibited from opening businesses or returning to the work that they had been doing before they were detained. Denied their livelihoods and unable to complete interrupted education, many women struggle to make ends meet. Today, most are unable to access the medical, psychosocial, and rehabilitation services they need.

Despite these challenges, many women continue to work as activists after their release. This has led to ongoing monitoring and harassment from security forces and, for many of the women in this report, repeated detentions and torture.

Key Findings

1. Conflict and repression perpetuate violence and human rights violations (HRVs) against women in Myanmar

The current situation of women in Myanmar may differ among those who live in areas of active conflict, those who live in areas where ceasefires have taken hold, and those who have faced repression as a result of speaking up for their rights. However, all of the survivors AJAR worked with experienced violence and continue to be negatively impacted by it.

Ongoing conflicts continue to have a devastating impact on women

Despite the 2015 election of the NLD-led government and the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, conflict has not ceased in Myanmar. The Myanmar army continues to launch operations in ethnic areas, including in Kachin, Shan and Rakhine states, affecting the lives of thousands of civilians.

In northern Shan State, Ta'ang women face active armed conflict between the Myanmar army, militias, and ethnic armed groups such as the TNLA and the Shan State Army - South (SSA-S). 2016 saw some of the worst fighting in recent years. For Ta'ang women, conflict became part of their daily lives. It forced entire families and villages to flee from their homes to IDP camps. Some women reported that they had to walk through forests for days to reach IDP camps because soldiers were occupying the main roads. Survivors' homes were burned down or damaged by soldiers, their livestock was killed or stolen, and their property was looted. Landmines were placed in some farms and on main roads. Some survivors witnessed soldiers torturing village heads, breaking into homes, and arresting men and women to be used as porters. Two survivors' husbands were brutally tortured and killed by members of an armed group. Women felt that they were targeted and more at risk of violations because they were women.

Unaddressed past violence/HRVs continue to impact women in post-conflict settings

Women in Karen State suffered from armed conflict in the period 1997 - 2006. Survivors reported that the first two years of the conflict were the worst, to intense fighting between the Myanmar army and the KNLA. During this time a part of the KNLA (the Brigade 6 splinter group) split off from the armed group and joined the Myanmar army. They leaked information about villagers who were affiliated with the KNU - the political wing of the KNLA - or had family members in the KNU. As a result, villages were burnt down and a lot of people arrested, interrogated, and killed.

Even at the height of the conflict, villages in Karen State had village heads who were appointed to lead the village and liaise between the Myanmar army and KNLA. Many men were too scared to take on the role of village head, or even to stay in their villages. They often fled and left their families behind. In many areas people believed the military would not treat women village heads as brutally as the men and women were consequently called on to take up the post; many stepped up and took on the challenge. Their testimonies reveal that the military was not softer on them; they suffered mentally and physically and still bear the scars from those difficult times. The Myanmar army often asked women village heads to recruit people for forced labor. With many villagers fleeing, women village heads were often forced to perform the labor themselves, frequently under dangerous conditions. Some were forced to be porters, carrying military equipment on their backs or using their own carts. Others were forced to act as messengers or sent ahead to see if roads were clear for soldiers to pass through. Others were forced to help build military posts and fences, or to provide food for troops.

As a result of their liaison role between warring factions, women village heads were often placed in very difficult positions, with both the Myanmar army and the KNLA accusing them of supporting the other side. They tried to protect their people but reported witnessing fellow villagers being arbitrarily arrested, tortured, used as human shields, raped, killed, and having their houses burned down.

Even though conflict has largely ended in Karen State with the signing of the ceasefire in 2015, women continue to deal with the lasting impact of conflict. The violence between the Myanmar army and the KNLA created deep divisions and distrust among the populations affected by it. Some women who were village heads during the conflict face lingering suspicions because of the role they had to play liaising between the Myanmar army and the KNLA. Some survivors still hold the position of village head

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and continue the hard work of rebuilding trust. While some former and current village heads feel appreciated by their communities, there has been no formal acknowledgement of the difficult role they took on.

Despite the ceasefire, Karen State remains heavily militarized. Some women survivors live in the same locations as those who perpetrated violence against them. This is not only a constant reminder of their suffering, but also an ongoing risk. Entrenched impunity for both state actors and members of armed groups who perpetrated violence creates a climate where continued violence (even if not conflict-related) goes unpunished. Women continue to be at risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

Ongoing repression and land confiscation lead to violence/HRVs against women – even in non conflict-affected areas

Myanmar activists continue to face repression, harassment, and arrest. Several hundred political prisoners remain behind bars and new arrests are regularly reported. These include women activists who have been detained and imprisoned for days, months and even years in deplorable conditions. Many survivors reported that authorities used physical and psychological torture to gather information, to try and force them to cease all political activity, and to try and violate their dignity. Many women were beaten and two of the women AJAR interviewed have permanent injuries to their hands from trying to shield themselves. All of the survivors spoke about verbal abuse from prison guards and authorities.

Family members of activists have also been targeted. Some relatives told AJAR how they have experienced repression since they were children. Many faced continued surveillance and harassment from authorities; some were even detained themselves. Others reported discrimination and marginalization from their communities because of their relatives' political activities. Friends shunned them and some teachers discriminated against them and humiliated them in class.

Land confiscation also continues, begetting further violence and violations against victims. For instance, the large-scale mining copper project in Letpadaung in Sagaing Region (jointly managed by a Chinese company, the Myanmar military and national enterprises) has forcibly confiscated hundreds of acres of farmland without adequate compensation in processes lacking transparency. Many families continue to be threatened with forced evictions as expansions of the mine are planned.

Those who dare to stand up and speak out against the project and land confiscations often face repression and violence. Survivors report that authorities prohibit villagers from accessing and using their farmlands. If they protest near the mine they are accused of trespassing in a restricted area. Police often use force to break up protests. In 2014, a 56-year-old woman named Daw Khin Win was shot and killed while protesting the copper mining project. People who have conducted peaceful demonstrations have been detained and reported beatings and mistreatment by police and local authorities.

The peace process and political transition in Myanmar have brought little change for survivors. Active conflict is ongoing in several regions, resulting in a range of violations against women and their families. Violent repression continues against activists, including women protesting land rights and former political prisoners speaking out for change. In post-conflict areas, violations of the past go unaddressed, and women remain at risk of violence from thousands of soldiers still based in the area.

2. Women survivors struggle for their livelihoods as a result of armed conflict and repression

Armed conflict and repression have disrupted the livelihoods of thousands of people in Myanmar. Women have been particularly hard-hit. In ethnic areas, survivors predominantly work as farmers. Ta'ang women mainly grow rice, corn, tea and vegetables. As a result of the conflict, sustaining livelihoods has been very difficult. Soldiers monitor villagers and fighting often breaks out near farms. Caught in the crossfire, many Ta'ang women flee to nearby forests or villages until the conflict has passed. Some venture home while others move to nearby IDP camps. Many women and their families are caught in a limbo for days or even weeks as they decide whether it is safe for them to risk returning to work on their farmlands. This level of uncertainty is a great source of stress and survivors report that the security risks are often so great they are forced to miss the planting or harvesting of their crops. Landmines are also a danger.

The strain is especially great for women who have lost husbands in the conflict. Many must rely on extended family members to help them cultivate their land. Such disruption results in a dramatic loss of income. Many women look for small side jobs to supplement their earnings and when they cannot find work in their villages some go to China. There they mostly work in corn or sugarcane fields, noodle shops, or as housekeepers. Women are at great risk of exploitation and sexual violence as they seek new means of survival.

Women in post-conflict settings face challenges in rebuilding livelihoods. Like Ta'ang women, Karen women also rely on farming and cultivate a variety of crops, including betel, durian, lemon, rubber, corn, bean and chilis. They also raise animals such as goats, pigs, ducks and chickens. During the 1997

- 2006 conflict period, some Karen survivors had no time to tend to their lands because they had to work for the Myanmar army. If they wanted to go to their farm they had to get permission from the village head, and to get that permission they had to pay 1,000 kyats (approximately $ 0.77). Each permission lasted only 3 days making it very expensive to access their lands. Village heads who were forced to work for the Myanmar army had to leave their village for up to a month in order to do the work, which prevented them from looking after their farms and supporting their families.

In the majority of villages looked after by Karen women village heads, property was not completely destroyed during the conflict. Now that the situation is better and the conflict has ended, they can go back to their farms and rebuild them. However, life remains difficult. Many survivors lost their husbands and have had to take on extra responsibilities. Some have had to take on manual labor, such as farming, for the first time. Others have had to find new ways to survive or are forced to rely on extended relatives for support. Survivors whose husbands have permanent injuries have to work hard to provide for their families, and take care of husbands and children at the same time.

Violence and human rights violations also disrupted the livelihoods of women former political prisoners and land rights activists. Many feel that they have been unable to recover their pre-violation status and continue to suffer negative socio-economic after-effects.

Women who were detained and imprisoned reported that their period(s) of detention deeply disrupted their lives. During detention, families often used up their savings to support their imprisoned loved one. Harassed by police and authorities, political prisoners and their families were often forced to give up their businesses and prevented from starting new ones. After release, many women had nothing and were forced to start from scratch. Unable to rebuild or open businesses, many were pushed into poverty.

“Violence and human rights violations also disrupted the livelihoods of women former political prisoners and land rights activists. Many feel that they have been unable to recover their pre-violation status and continue to suffer negative socio-economic after-effects.”

Student activists were often unable to complete their education due to university closures and lack of funds. Having been prevented from following their chosen career paths, many were forced to take up short-term jobs to survive. Although some survivors were able to overcome the odds and complete their education, many remain trapped in poverty and the daily struggle for survival.

Many women activists continued their political activities, leading to multiple arrests and detentions. Some of the activists are beginning to age and have to rely on family members to provide for them.

Land confiscation leads to a dramatic loss of livelihoods. Many women reported that their families had been farming for generations and that they were not equipped to rapidly find a new way to earn a living. Some women and their families tried to survive by working on small parcels of land that had not been confiscated, but often this was not enough. In Letpadaung, women survivors reported that copper mining activity caused environmental damage that made it impossible to work the land that was not confiscated. Many have been pushed into poverty and procuring food, water and shelter are their priorities. Many women continue their protest activities and only wish to get back their land so they can continue farming.

3. Women survivors need assistance, support and access to basic services to address the consequences of violence

Survivors continue to face the after-effects of the violence they have endured. Some suffer from physical injuries, such as bullet wounds, broken bones, and injuries from landmines and explosives. Other common problems are headaches, hypertension, loss of appetite, knee pain, fever, joint pain, back pain, high blood pressure, and stomach problems. Women survivors and their relatives struggle to access adequate health services.

Ethnic women survivors face particular challenges in seeking health care. Government hospitals are concentrated in cities and larger towns, far from rural conflict-affected areas. Many survivors found that these public hospitals discriminate against ethnic people. As a result, many chose to seek medical care from health services run by ethnic groups, or those run by charities and non-governmental organisations. Some went to small private clinics. According to

> ***"They feel sad and angry about what they have lost or been deprived of: disrupted or lost educational opportunities, lost homes, livelihoods and careers they have been forced to abandon."***

some survivors, the government restricted certain organisations from supporting survivors in certain conflict areas. This meant that many victims had to travel far to access services, adding additional time and cost to the process. Faced with these challenges, women survivors and their families often went into debt to ensure their loved ones received the medical attention they needed. Others had to forego care and continue to live with serious injuries, including bullets or shrapnel lodged in their bodies.

While many women former political prisoners live in cities and therefore closer to government health services, costs remain a major barrier. The government has not set up any health services or programs to assist former political prisoners and their families, but some non-profit clinics and programs have been established to offer treatment at reduced cost. They are all in Yangon and none have special services for women former detainees. Many survivors, especially those who are dependent on their children or extended family members, forego all but the most urgent medical services, and live with chronic conditions resulting from abysmal prison conditions and crippling anxiety following release. These include back pain, high blood pressure and hypertension. With many survivors ageing, these chronic conditions become more severe and put some at risk of permanent disability or premature death.

In addition to physical injuries, many survivors also have to deal with the psychological consequences of the violations they have experienced. Survivors from conflict areas and women former political prisoners faced many of the same problems. Many have high levels of stress relating to their daily survival and feel anxious about the future. Some look back at their peaceful life before the violation. They feel sad and angry about what they have lost or been deprived of: disrupted or lost educational opportunities, lost homes, livelihoods and careers they have been forced to abandon. Some feel their marriages and families have been destroyed by the conflict and feel utterly hopeless. Many report sleeping problems. Some survivors continue to experience trauma and think about the torture or violent event they experienced. It is hard for them to move on, especially when those responsible for their suffering remain present in their communities.

> ***"After sharing their stories with other women who had experienced violence in conflict, political repression or land rights violations, they said they felt lighter, more supported, and respected."***

Survivors also experience the social impact of violence. Some women former political prisoners and their families continue to feel isolated and unacknowledged by their communities. Pressure to quit political activities and poverty have led to marital and family problems. For some women political prisoners, this pressure took the form of domestic violence and psychological abuse. Women in conflict and post-conflict areas also spoke of how they

felt like they had to carry their mental anguish on their own. They said they had no space to express how they felt and no one to listen to them.

Psychosocial support services in Myanmar are scarce. Many survivors said that they turned to meditation or prayers for solace. Before participating in activities with AJAR, most women survivors thought that the best way to get rid of the pain they were feeling was to force themselves to forget about everything. After sharing their stories with other women who had experienced violence in conflict, political repression or land rights violations, they said they felt lighter, more supported, and respected. Many found the confidence and strength to speak out about their suffering. It was also a space for discussion and connections between survivors, which enabled them to have a better understanding of the many different kinds of violations women survivors have experienced, and the conditions they face in their communities.

The majority of survivors also called for better infrastructures and community services to help alleviate some of the socio-economic challenges they suffer. This included better access to electricity, as well as the construction of roads, schools, vocational centers, health centers, counseling centers, community recreational centers, and social housing.

Women survivors need a range of health and psychosocial support services to deal with the multiple and ongoing impacts of violence and human rights violations. They need targeted support that recognizes and addresses their unique needs.

4. Women survivors lack access to justice and reparations

The law does not adequately protect survivors. Despite the fact that there is a government led by the NLD the rule of law still does not exist in Myanmar. This is particularly true in conflict-affected areas. Military officials are protected and do not face sanctions for actions which violate international and domestic law. They benefit from a system of entrenched impunity that does not provide any form of justice for victims.

In ethnic areas, informal and customary law are applied, sometimes alongside the state's justice system. Ethnic armed groups administer their own justice systems; the KNU, for example, deals with cases in areas under its control. However, most of the survivors we worked with had not been involved in any justice processes or received any legal assistance.

In Myanmar, most survivors have not received any compensation, reparations,

or assistance, despite having suffered physical and psychological injuries, as well as property loss and damage. Poor access to justice, weak rule of law, and a lack of awareness about their rights has meant survivors often do not dare to speak out and remain unable to tell the truth about the violence they suffered.

During research activities, many survivors said they felt they had not received any form of justice, but that they have hope, as there is political change in Myanmar. However, they also spoke about a number of issues that they believe make positive change difficult. This included continued fear because of the ongoing presence of military and other state actors in their areas; ongoing violence and human rights violations in conflict zones; continued repression of peaceful protests to protect government, military and commercial interests; and continued injustice and impunity. Survivors said that without concrete examples of change it was difficult to believe in the government's willingness to do anything to help them, their families, and their communities.

Some survivors said they might be able to forgive, but not to forget. None of the survivors spoke about seeking revenge; what they wanted instead was recognition of their suffering by state authorities. Survivors said they were seeking truth and asking for accountability for serious human rights violations. They wanted perpetrators to apologize to the thousands of individuals who have suffered at the hands of state actors as a result of conflict-related violence, political repression, and land confiscation.

"In Myanmar, most survivors have not received any compensation, reparations, or assistance, despite having suffered physical and psychological injuries, as well as property loss and damage."

Others see legislative reform as a priority. Several legal provisions (both historic and newly enacted) are not compliant with international human rights standards and serve to deprive citizens of freedom of speech and assembly. Survivors called for the removal of these laws and the enactment of new legislation to protect against corruption, to promote accountability of state actors, and to establish a process to provide redress for the violence suffered by victims of human rights violations. They also called on the government to adopt an official definition of the term 'political prisoner' in order to recognize and repair the harm done to these victims. Many survivors also said that the 2008 Constitution should be amended. According to them, only these measures could finally break the recurring cycle of violence in Myanmar and bring lasting peace.

Speaking Truth for Peace: Women's Stories

Yar A Aung

When fighting between the Myanmar Army and the TNLA erupted near her village in Kutkai Township on 10 March 2016, Yar A Aung, a 44 year-old Ta'ang woman, was forced to flee with her family. She had to hide in her farm with her husband and six children for three nights, hoping for the fighting to stop so they could return home. But the conflict worsened and it became unsafe to stay in the village. Together with the other villagers they fled to a nearby IDP camp, where they stayed for two weeks before being transferred to a more permanent camp in Kutkai Township. They have been living there ever since.

There were twelve households in her village, and Yar A Aung found out later that the Myanmar Army had burned all of them down. As well as her home, she lost four tons of paddy and all her family's belongings. Yar A Aung and her family did not have time to take anything when they escaped and were left with nothing but the clothes they were wearing at the time of the attack.

In the camp, she and her seven family members live in a small tent (15' x 12') provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). She finds it very difficult to earn money for her family as they have lost all their property, including their rice fields and tea plantations, leaving them with no income. They cannot farm at the IDP camp and have to rely on humanitarian aid, which is inadequate and irregular. For example, each person on average only receives three kilos of rice per month. Occasionally Yar A Aung and three of her children are able to work on corn and sugarcane farms around the camp, being paid a maximum of 3,000 kyats per day (approximately $2.30).

Her family members often get sick, but rarely receive medical care. When they do it is not adequate. Her husband has a stomach ulcer and one of her daughters is suffering from knee problems. Neither has received medical assistance.

Her hope is to be able to return home and work on her farmland.

> ***"They burned all the houses in my village. We lost everything: rice, clothes, animals, our house and all our belongings. We ran into the woods and slept in the bushes."***

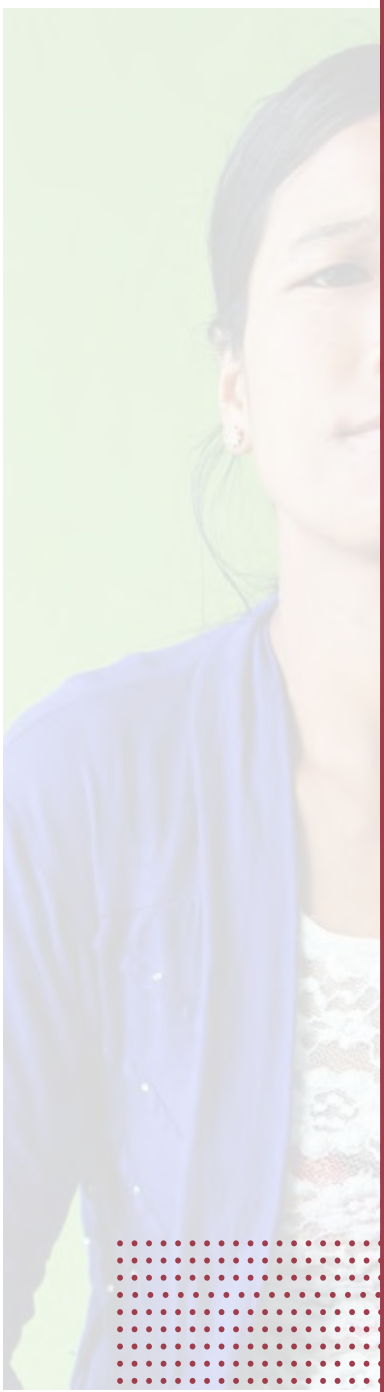
Ay Poe Jaing

On 1 June 2016, Ay Poe Jaing's husband was killed by an armed group, believed to be the RCSS/SSA. He and a friend were arrested on the way to a Dharma gathering in Namkham Township. Four days later they were found dead by locals. Ay Poe Jaing's husband's body was found on a farm and his friend's in a nearby valley. Their corpses showed evidence of torture with brutal stab wounds. Both their heads had been chopped off and their hands tied behind their backs. Their mouths had been filled with leaves. Ay Poe Jaing's husband's shoulders were also broken.

Ay Poe Jaing and her family have lived in fear ever since her husband's death. Her aging parents-in-law have been sick. Ay Poe Jaing now needs to single-handedly take care of her three children and parents-in-law. Her husband tended to their paddy farm, which was the family's main source of income. His death has affected the family deeply and impacted their ability to earn a living. 32-year-old Ay Poe Jaing will have to farm the paddy and find money to pay laborers to help her. This is their only income and her children are still at school - she is doing everything to avoid them having to drop out.

Ay Poe Jaing has been deeply traumatized by her husband's death. She cries often and finds it extremely difficult to speak about her late husband.

> ***"I have to feed 5 people in my family now: my three children and 2 elderly parents-in-law. I am the only one who works. I am responsible for looking after all of them now. I am afraid I won't be able to pay my children's school fees."***



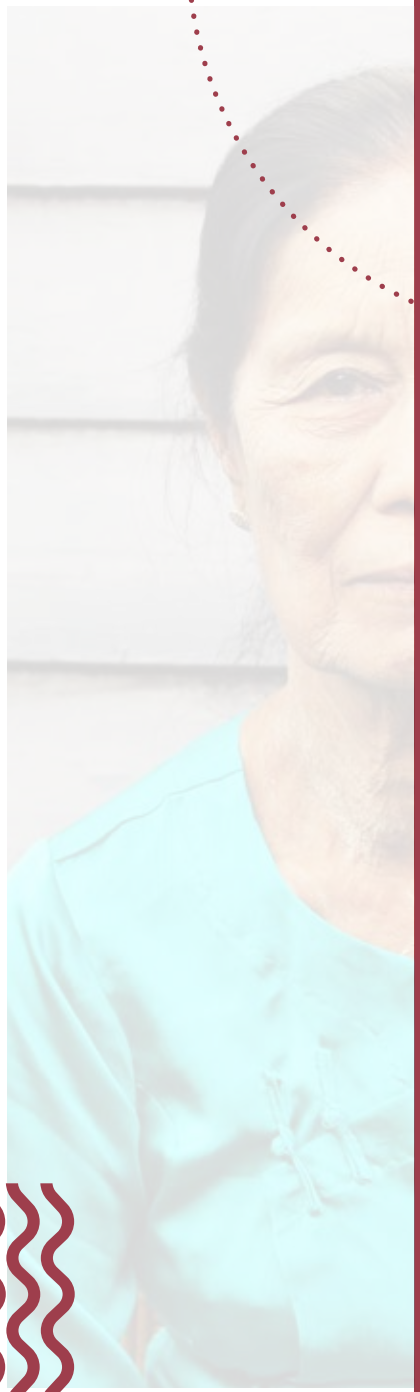
Daw Aye Mi

Daw Aye Mi is a 72-year-old Burmese widow who has been fighting for democracy in her country for the last 27 years. She was an early member of the NLD and has been jailed 1 time and arrested and interrogated 4 times between 1996 - 2010 on account of her political activism. In spite of the numerous human rights violations she has suffered, this courageous woman has never stopped fighting for what she believes.

From 1996 until 2010 Daw Aye Mi was held in five different detention centers for a total of about six and a half months. This included six months in the infamous Insein prison (with her friend Daw Mya Sein - see her story). She was repeatedly mistreated, insulted, humiliated, and verbally abused. She continues to be traumatized when she thinks back on how she was treated without dignity. Time and time again, she was warned to give up politics, but refused.

Daw Aye Mi currently lives with her family of 10 in their house in Yangon. This includes her four children and three grandchildren. She is still active in the NLD and supports local development activities such as road repair and canal building. She also helps people in her community who have been unfairly arrested.

> ***"They left me alone in the cell to frighten me. It was dark so I could see nothing. I was really scared. Later, I reminded myself that there are many political prisoners in the cell who were far worse off than me. Compared to them my situation is not that bad."***



Naw Bay Lah

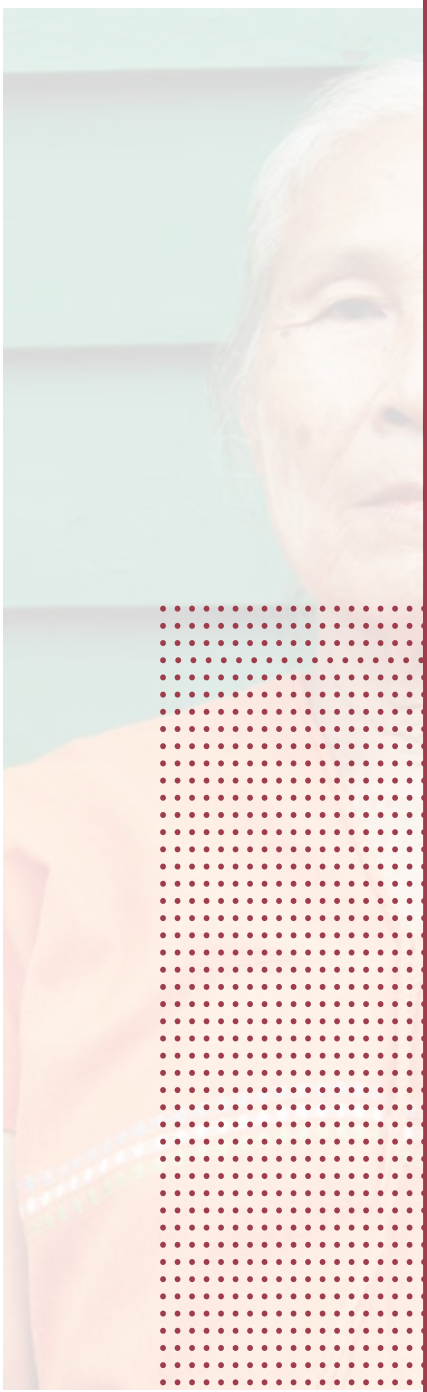
Naw Bay Lah is a 63-year-old brave and strong Karen woman who was village head from 1997 to 2004. She has been working for the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) for many years. She is educated and can speak Burmese in addition to her native Karen tongue.

She and her fellow villagers suffered a lot when the Thu Mu Heh Peace Group, a splinter group from the KNLA, joined the Myanmar Army as a result of an informal ceasefire. This armed group leaked information to the Myanmar Army about villagers who had family members in the KNLA, or who were providing support to the group. As a result, many people were arrested, tortured and killed. Those that were not caught were forced into hiding.

The Myanmar Army shot Naw Bay Lah's brother and nephew; her brother died as a result. She was herself arrested and detained by the Myanmar Army on suspicion of being a KNLA supporter. They brutally locked her foot in a hole, which traumatized her. At a later date she was arrested by the KNLA and accused of being a supporter and spy for the Myanmar Army. They put her under house arrest for six days, which caused her great anger, sadness, and exhaustion. She was angry and sad that her own people suspected her and decided to step down from her role as village head. The KNLA did not understand the difficulty of her role and that she had few options while caught between the two warring parties.

She now lives with family members and earns a living taking care of the family's fruit orchard.

> ***"I was not interested in anything after I was detained and falsely accused of being a spy for the Myanmar Army by my own people."***



Naw Dee Dee

Naw Dee Dee is a 60-year-old Karen woman who is a former village head. When she talks about the years when the Myanmar Army occupied her village, she cannot help but cry. She describes these years as the most difficult time of her life.

Naw Dee Dee remembers the Myanmar Army coming into her village, marching into her house, and asking her if she was hiding guns. She said she was not but was accused of lying after gunfire was heard nearby. In fact, it was the sound of the military firing at villagers.

In 1997, when conflict was raging in her area, Naw Dee Dee's village was set on fire. Much was burned: the school, the church, and many peoples' homes - including Naw Dee Dee's. Her possessions were looted and destroyed; the Myanmar Army even shot and killed her pig. After the attack, the only possession she was left with was a cooking pot. While the village burned, she took refuge in the pastor's house. There she saw an acquaintance quietly lying facedown on the ground; she discovered that the Myanmar Army had been beaten her.

As a village head, she had to answer to the Myanmar Army commander day and night. She was forced to work as a porter even though she was caring for her young baby at the time. She had to carry supplies for the military with her baby in her cattle cart, suffering from the heat. She was accused of being a supporter of the Myanmar Army, though she had no choice but to work for them. It was a difficult time and she had no time to rest or do any work for herself.

She is a very strong woman and along with her friends tried to assist her fellow villagers when they were arrested and tortured after being accused of supporting the KNU.

Naw Dee Dee is married with three girls and two boys. She managed to rebuild her life with the support of her family and she now lives with her children. She suffers from joint pain.

"When I was a village head, I always had to provide my own cart. I carried supplies and equipment for the military by myself if I could not find any cart or porter from the village. I remember putting my small baby on the cart and traveling to the military base to transport their supplies in the heat and for long distances. Being a village head is not easy, you always had to use your own money for all of the expenses and take all the risk for everyone. There are many things to talk about and I do not want to talk about it anymore. It is too painful to tell all the stories."

Naw Eh Lay Moo (Daw Su)

Daw Su's strength, intelligence and sense of humor have made her a skilled and well-respected leader and negotiator for over 10 years. The 55-year-old Karen woman and mother of six first worked for the KNU district headquarters in 1993 and 1994 before being appointed village head by the KNU in 1996. When no men dared to become village head in 1998-1999, she stepped up and was nominated by both the KNU and the Myanmar Army. She was able to deal with Burmese commanders even though she was not fluent in Burmese and remains a local leader until this day.

In 1996 Daw Su's husband was arrested and detained by the Myanmar Army on suspicion of being a KNLA soldier. He was tortured repeatedly and almost had his chin cut off. He still bears the scar on his face. That was a particularly difficult time for Daw Su, whose baby was only eight months old. She was worried her child might grow up without a father and that she would have to look after her family on her own.

That same year the Myanmar Army and Thu Mu Heh's Peace Group requested four cattle carts from the village to transport military supplies. Daw Su was forced to offer her cart and spent the whole night trying to find a relative or fellow villager to accompany her. Everybody was afraid and solidarity was hard to find. Most people thought: "You row your boat, I row mine". Instead of supporting her, many people began to flee from the village and go into hiding. Daw Su was not able to flee because her baby was so young and her husband was still in detention.

Eventually her nephew agreed to go with her and they went to wait at the bottom of the mountain where people from nearby villages had also been forced to bring their cattle carts. Although it was August and the height of the rainy season, they were forced to sleep outside. They were not given any food or water and drank rainwater to survive. They were hungry and prayed that the Myanmar Army would have mercy on them. She was given two biscuits by some soldiers and told not to share them, or else the army would take action against her and she would have to go back and work again. She decided to share one of her biscuits with her nephew nonetheless as she thought that whether she lived or died, she could not live alone. They were not fed the next day either, spending more than 48 hours being forced to work on an empty stomach.

This is only one of many bitter experiences Daw Su had in the late 1990s. As the village head she had to arrange cattle carts for the Myanmar Army on several more occasions. She also had to arrange food for the military, at times herself going hungry for days. She used clever tactics to win the heart of the local Myanmar Army commander, which helped her succeed in working for her community for so many years and standing strong under military rule. She has gone through difficult times and suffered a lot, but always looks for ways to solve problems. Daw Su's husband has now been released and she earns her living looking after her orchard and farm, where she grows limes, lemons and rubber. She also continues to work for her village, where she is well known and respected. The KNLA has acknowledged her hard work under such challenging circumstances. She experiences knee and joint pain.

"When my husband was arrested my child was only 8 months old and I was facing many difficulties. I worried that he would be killed and that my baby would not get to have a father. But now my children are grown up and I am not afraid to die anymore. I am coming here to tell our story and suffering so that our voice can be heard."

Ei Kyam

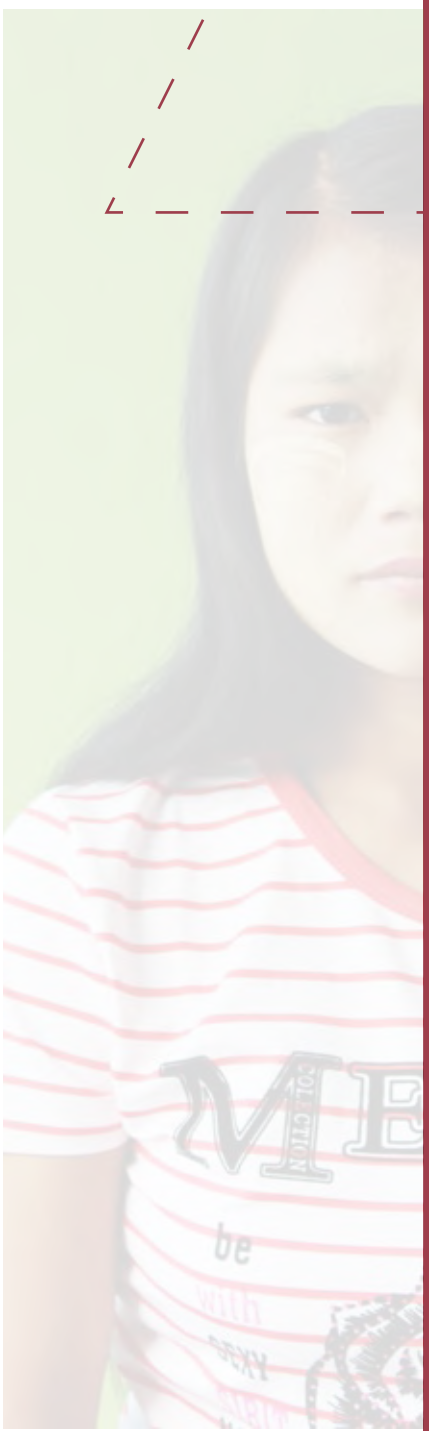
On 22 November 2015, Ei Kyam's husband and his friends were riding a motorbike to a nearby village in Muse Township when he was shot. He was hit by approximately five bullets on his elbow, thigh and lower leg.

He has become disabled since the shooting and cannot work. Instead he takes care of their one month-old baby at home. Ei Kyam, who is only 19 years old, had to leave her baby and take up farming with her mother-in-law to be able to earn money for the family. Ei Kyam's father-in-law is also disabled after falling off a building while working on a construction site. Her husband had also been injured in a car accident two years previously, making it even harder for him to recover.

Ei Kyam believes the gunmen who shot her husband belonged to a Myanmar Army -affiliated militia she saw near the village clinic her husband was being treated in.

Five months after the incident, Ei Kyam and her mother-in-law still farm their cornfields and other vegetable plantations so they can sell the produce at the local market. Ei Kyam believes a mother should be near her baby while breastfeeding, however she has no choice but to work so she can make money for her family.

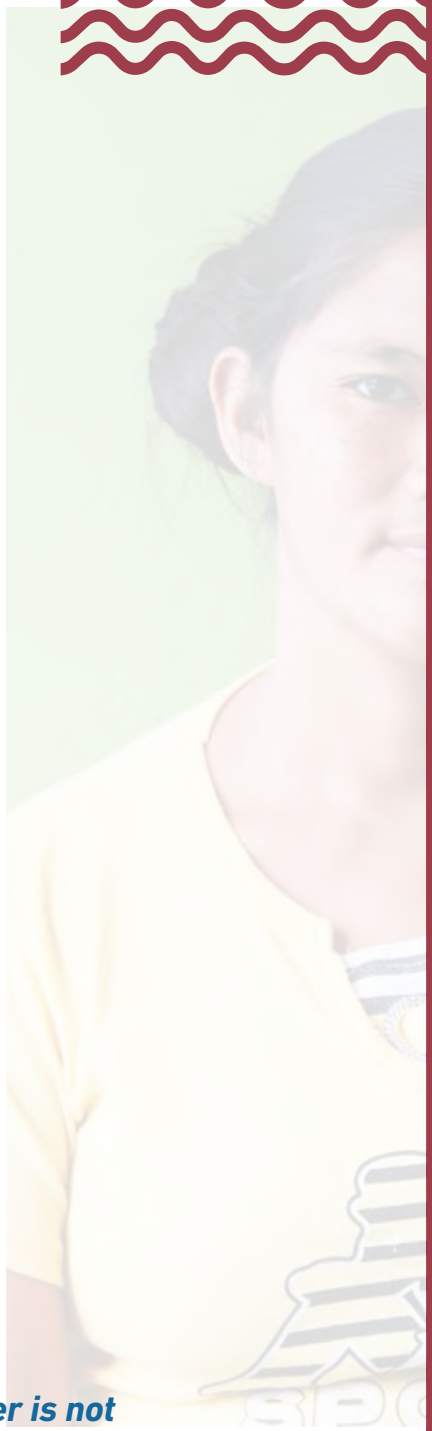
Her husband still feels pain in his leg, especially when he moves around a lot or lifts heavy loads. He can only walk for short stretches of time now.



"It was when my husband returned home to visit me as I was going to give birth to my daughter. He got shot with his three friends on the motorbike. My husband sat on the back so the bullets hit him the most. Both his leg and hand are broken now. My mother-in-law and I have to work for our family."

Ei Seng

On 14 January 2016, 27-year-old Ta'ang woman Ei Seng and her 4-year-old daughter were burning garbage in their yard when a shell exploded, injuring them both. Fragments of the shell hit Ei Seng on the waist, calf and feet; her daughter was hit on the head, calf, thigh and back. Although Ei Seng and her daughter were hospitalized, some shell fragments could not be removed and remain in their bodies. Ei Seng was 8 months pregnant at the time of the incident and had to have emergency surgery to deliver the baby. The baby is thankfully safe.



Ei Seng has no idea who fired the shell but locals suspect it was the Myanmar Army, as they had been fighting near the village, in Muse township, a few weeks earlier. Some villagers say they saw an object drop into Ei Seng's yard while the fighting was going on, though no one could find it afterwards.

Ei Seng's daughter has not been the same since she was injured. Ei Seng fears her daughter might be suffering from brain damage. She does not respond as she did before the incident. Her teacher has also reported that she is less active in school and that she sometimes cannot hear what is going on. They suspect she might be suffering from hearing loss.

Ei Seng used to farm her land but she can no longer work due to the pain she suffers. She has to depend entirely on her husband for the family's livelihood. All she can do is take care of their two children at home. Previously, Ei Seng and her husband grew paddy, groundnuts and corn. Since Ei Seng is no longer able to work, the family has had to abandon their paddy farm. They must now rely on the other two crops for their income. They are also anxious about the way their daughter has changed since she was injured.

The shell fragments in Ei Seng's body give her constant pain, which gets worse when she carries heavy things or stretches. She also sometimes feels disconcertingly hot in her waist. Her body feels strange every day. Her daughter seems to get worse every day.

"The shell pieces are still in our bodies. My daughter is not normal now. She doesn't respond to me sometimes. When I was in the hospital, doctors didn't take the shell pieces out of my body because it was risky. I was already 8 months pregnant then. I had to have a surgery to deliver my baby because my whole body was swollen. Doctors said it might harm the baby."

Daw Hla Hla Myint

Daw Hla Hla Myint is a 72-year-old Burmese woman who was harassed and imprisoned for her political activism.

She is a long-time member of the NLD. In the mid 1990s Daw Hla Hla Myint bravely opened an NLD office in her own home in the South Dagon Township of Yangon.

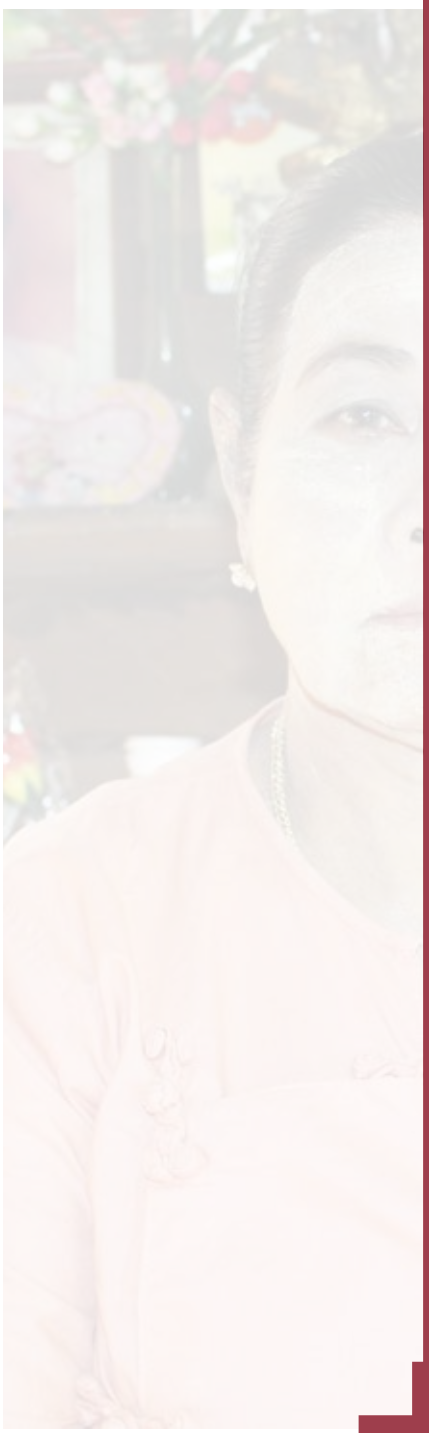
The authorities repeatedly threatened Daw Hla Hla Myint and prohibited her from opening the office and from having NLD signs and flags. Authorities searched her house every day and performed a night check for visitors at least once a week. Stones were thrown at her house and some officials threatened to seize her home if she did not stop her political activities.

Daw Hla Hla Myint continued and was arrested in 2000. She was put behind bars in Insein prison for over 10 months. There she was psychologically tortured and treated without dignity.

In spite of the authorities' threats, Daw Hla Hla Myint's NLD office has been running for more than 20 years.

Daw Hla Hla Myint has also faced economic hardship as a result of her political activities. She has been unable to open a business due to harassment by the authorities and has had to sell most of her wedding gifts in order to get by. She is a widow and lives with 11 family members, including her children and grandchildren, in their house in Yangon.

Daw Hla Hla Myint was happy to take part in the project and said she felt respected and valued when she shared her story. She says this helped remove her anxiety and suffering. She believes it is the duty of former political prisoners to fight for justice, even if this results in sacrifices.



"They told me that I could not to open the [NLD] office and that I have to take off the NLD signboards from my house. Pointing a finger at my face he said that if I don't comply my house would be seized and sealed at any time, today or tomorrow."

Yar Kamae Hlan

54-year-old Ta'ang woman Yar Kamae Hlan, a and her husband fled their village in Kutkai Township after armed conflict erupted between the Myanmar Army and TNLA in late February 2016. Along with over 700 other people, they were forced to leave their house and land behind. Yar Kamae Hlan and her husband slept in their farm for two nights, after which they fled to an IDP camp. They have been staying there since 23 February 2016. Property was destroyed and possessions looted during the conflict and there continues to be a military presence in their village.

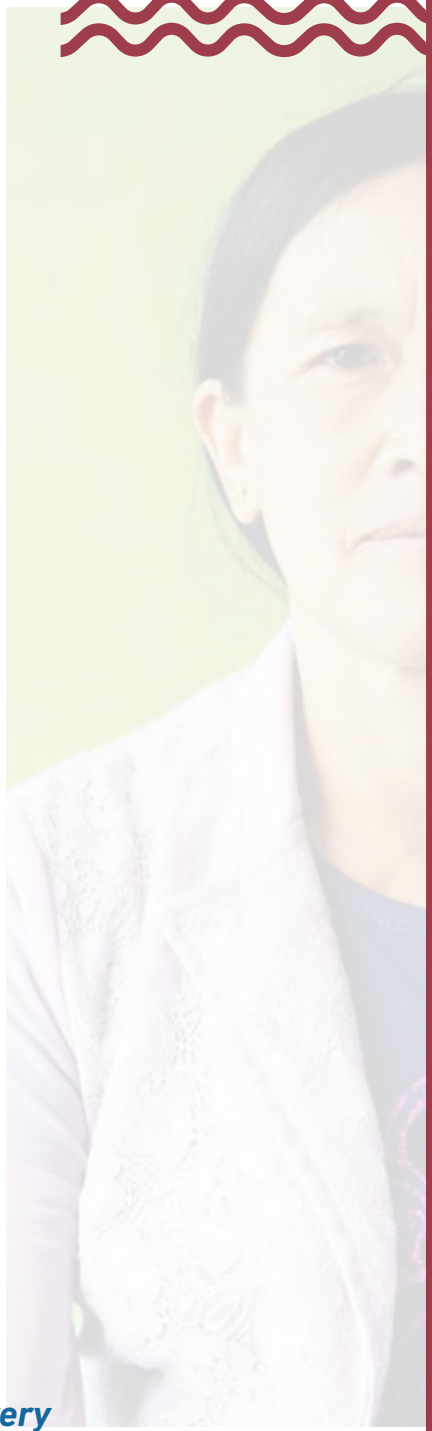
In the camp, Yar Kamae Hlan and her husband live in a (24' x 16') tent provided by the UNHCR. To keep busy and help out, Yar Kamae Hlan works as a coordinator, which involves meeting donors, keeping a register of people in the camp, and managing the distribution of food.

None of Yar Kamae Hlan's five children were living in the area at the time of the attack. Her eldest daughter is married and lives in a different town. Three of her children are working in China and one is studying in Lashio.

Yar Kamae Hlan has been deeply affected by the human rights violations and violence she has witnessed. She is always frightened. To make matters worse, her husband's health is getting worse as their tent in the IDP camp is full of holes and the family gets wet whenever it rains.

In her village, Yar Kamae Hlan was a midwife. In the camp she cannot make money as she used to. On top of her work as a coordinator she helps deliver babies when she can - both in the camp and in nearby villages - but she usually has to wait for a week or more to be paid.

Yar Kamae Hlan's health is fine. They do not receive any kind of support besides the general IDP aid in the camp, which is irregular and inadequate.



"I think what we have gained from this meeting is very important. Through sharing knowledge and ideas, we can help other women in our community. In the next step, we will find out who can help us, maybe the authorities or the local women organizations. Working together is the only way we can achieve our hope."

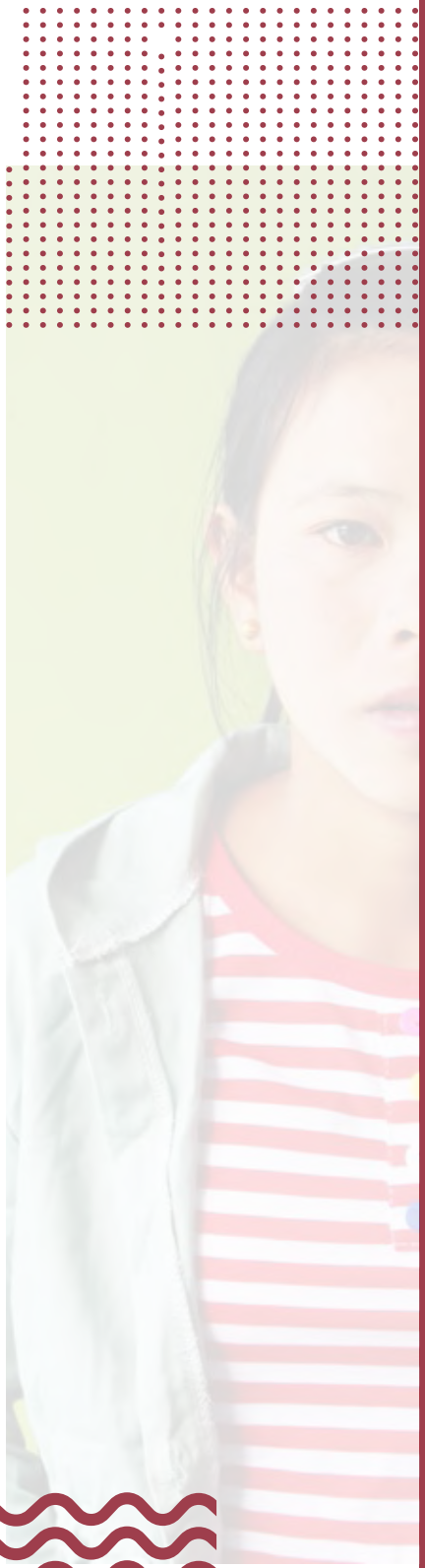
O Khin Aye

On 14 January 2016, 19- year-old Ta'ang woman O Khin Aye was forced to flee her village in Kutkai Township after fighting broke out between the Myanmar Army and the TNLA. O Khin Aye and her parents fled to an IDP camp, where they stayed until her parents decided to leave, as they were not receiving enough food in the camp. Although it is not safe in the village her parents went back to take care of their animals and land, leaving their daughter in the camp. O Khin Aye became afraid as she was alone in her tent without electricity, so she left to stay with her older brother's family in another village. O Khin Aye's parents decided to return to the camp and now only occasionally go to check on their farm and animals.

While O Khin Aye and her family were taking refuge in the camp, the Myanmar Army and Pan Say Militia seized property from their home, including their solar panel, and they have almost nothing left.

O Khin Aye is in good health. However, her parents are aging and can no longer work. O Khin Aye wants to work so she can support her parents and pay her sister's school fees. In her village, O Khin Aye worked on her family's farm. Now she makes money by working for other farmers in their corn and sugarcane fields. She does not have any kind of support aside from the irregular and insufficient aid she receives in the IDP camp.

"I can stand on my own two feet now because I was able go to school with the support of my parents. My parents' gift to me was education. I am very pleased I can read and write although I did not finish high school."



Daw Khin Hmat

Daw Khin Hmat is a 43-year-old Burmese woman who has been harassed for protesting the Letpadaung copper mining project, which she and fellow protesters accuse of jeopardizing their livelihoods and quality of life. She was one of many women arrested for peacefully protesting the project. Her story illustrates how this project has violated local people's land rights, impacted their social and economic life, and caused significant environmental damage. Peaceful protest of the project has been met with violent repression.

Previously Daw Khin Hmat enjoyed her life as a farmer in the mountainous area of Letpadaung, Monywa District. Natural resources in abundance meant she was able to make her living from the land: she had water, quality crops, and plenty of food for her cattle. Her life was peaceful.

But in October 2012, half of Daw Khin Hmat's farmland was confiscated when the copper mining project started in Letpadaung. Many other farmers and villagers in the area also had their land confiscated around this time.

With half her farmland gone and her crops destroyed, Daw Khin Hmat was compelled to sell her cattle and work for others farmers. Yet she was barely able to get by. She and the other farmers in the region no longer have access to land on Letpadaung Mountain and 33 mountains and farmland that surround it, which is now reserved for mining activities.

Villagers, farmers and monks have protested the copper mine and faced violent repression from the authorities. Daw Khin Hmat was one of them and on 13 August 2013 she joined a protest aimed at preventing further destruction of farmland and crops in Letpadaung. The protesters denounced the violation of their land rights and called for change. Daw Khin Hmat was arrested with ten other women and detained in Monywa Police Station. She was released on bail the next day.

Daw Khin Hmat continues to live on her remaining land but authorities and mining companies are trying to expel her and other villagers using threats and intimidation. She wants to stay on her land but is worried about the health risks of breathing in the polluted air from the mines. Her younger brother's family - with whom she is currently living - shares these concerns.

Daw Khin Hmat looks back sorrowfully on her life before the mining project started; she misses the land she no longer has. She wishes she could get her land back, see the copper mine closed, and go back to her traditional, rural way of life. Daw Khin Hmat feels bitter when she sees human rights violations continue under the new government. She says there is a lack of access to justice for victims of land rights violations, no protection of the environment by the authorities, and no improvement in the economy. She wants the government to do something for the victims of this project.

"Before, there was no cause for worry for living as we got crops yielded by the nature. We happily worked for our livelihood. Now not only us but also the animals we are raising cannot gather and eat the crops given by this Letpadaung Mountain. Because of this we have so many troubles."

Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing

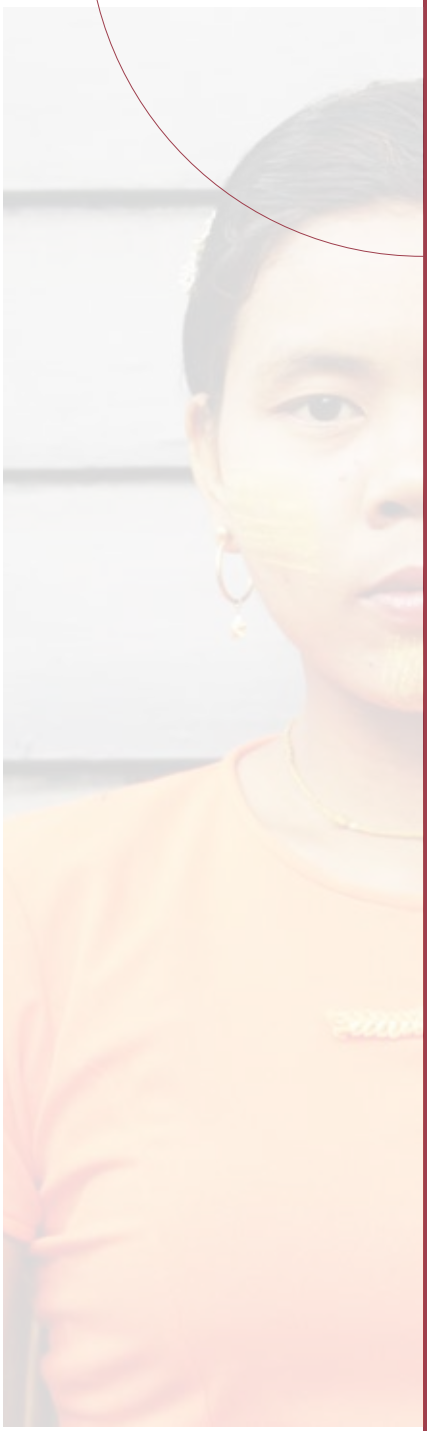
Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing is a 20-year-old Burmese woman who was arrested and mistreated for standing up against the Letpadaung copper mining project. In 2013, while still a minor, she joined a protest defending her land rights and demanding justice for victims of police violence.

Before the mining project started, Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing made a living farming. In 2011 her land was confiscated to make way for mining activities. Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing was farming her land when the police expelled her and said she had no more right to the land. She tried to argue but was beaten by the officers when she protested. The authorities were protecting the companies who made use of the land by threatening people and using force. As she was trying to argue they beat her.

The brutality of the authorities did not intimidate Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing. On 13 August 2013 she joined one of the many prayer ceremonies calling for the return of the confiscated lands. As a result she was arrested along with ten other women. She was treated violently during her arrest, but released on bail the next day.

Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing currently lives with her parents and they continue to be threatened with forced relocation by the authorities. As she lost her farmland and is forbidden from farming in the local area, she has to struggle to find food. Her environment and health have been put at risk by the ecological damage from the copper mine.

Daw Kyi Kyi Myint Khaing is worried about the life she will have when she is 40 or 50 years old, and whether she will able to hand anything down to her children. She believes the mine harms the socio-economic future of the region and she worries about the next generation, who will no longer be able to take advantage of the invaluable natural resources being destroyed.



"The security forces told us: "You have nothing to do on these farmlands; they are not yours anymore". When we argued, they beat us with batons; we were wounded and had bruises on our hands, stomach, waist and shoulders."

Naw Lo Wah

Naw Lo Wah is a 44-year-old Karen woman who has been head of her village for over ten years. Her strength of character and unique way of making light of the most dramatic events has helped her through very difficult times. Like many of her fellow women village heads she stepped up to take on the risky role in the late 1990s, at a time when men were too afraid to do so because of the Myanmar Army *operating* in the area. She is recognized as a skilled negotiator and is well respected in her village.

In 1997, the Myanmar Army marched into Naw Lo Wah's village, forcing many villagers to relocate or flee to refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. However, some people had no choice but to stay. These villagers were asked to relocate to other places for a week or two, but were then allowed to return to the village.

The men in Naw Lo Wah's village were constantly harassed by the military. They were forced to work as porters, carrying military supplies, building the military base, cutting bamboo, and building fences. They began to run away as soon as they heard the village dogs barking - a sign that strangers, always Myanmar Army soldiers at that time, had arrived in the village. Their wives and children were left behind and would sit together by candlelight, talking in soft voices so that they could listen out for the sound of dogs barking. The women were frightened to have the Myanmar Army so near by.

After the men fled, the Myanmar Army used the women as messengers, porters, and as farmers to grow rice for the soldiers.

In 2002, Naw Lo Wah's whole village was forced to clear the nearby road so that the Myanmar Army could see if the KNLA were trying to ambush them. Myanmar Army beat the man who was village head at the time and he decided to leave his post. This affected the village deeply. Without the authority and protection of their leader, people were scared and started to flee the village. None wanted to take the up the responsibility of leading the village. As a result, the village was at risk of falling under the control of the Myanmar Army, who would have felt they could do anything to the villagers. In this dreadful vacuum, Naw Lo Wah decided to take on the role of village head to restore unity and to protect her community. Even though she could not speak Burmese she agreed to take up the position for three months, agreeing to rotate after that time as everyone was too scared to take the burden on for an entire year. She continues to hold the position until now.

The Myanmar Army demanded the villagers provide carts and cattle for them, which was particularly challenging during the rainy season. Naw Lo Wah went from house to house to try and organize carts and porters for the Myanmar Army, usually at night. People were too scared to be porters so Naw Lo Wah had to promise that she would accompany them; she was too scared to go back to the Myanmar Army without having arranged what they asked. Once she promised to accompany villagers, she was able to get up to 10 carts to do the job. Naw Lo Wah and the villagers would often be forced deliver. If the cattle were unable to do it, the villagers were told to pull the cart themselves.

Naw Lo Wah was also forced to act as a messenger between the Myanmar Army and the KNLA, traveling back and forth over long distances, sometimes all by herself.

When there was fighting the military caused a lot of problems for Naw Lo Wah and the villagers. She was very scared of facing the Myanmar Army but had no choice but to defend her people. When villagers were arrested and tortured, Naw Lo Wah would go and meet the Myanmar Army commander to try to negotiate their release, pleading that they were not KNLA members. She was often accused by both sides of supporting the other. The Myanmar Army accused her of being a KNLA supporter and the KNLA accused her of being a Myanmar Army supporter.

Today, Naw Lo Wah is a hero in her community She is respected as a brave and intelligent woman. She can communicate in Burmese and her leadership skills make her a natural and trusted head of her community. She remains village head and is also an advisor to the KWO. She is also a member of the district KNU Steering Committee. Naw Lo Wah has the support of her husband, who cooks and takes care of the household - a switch in the traditional gender roles of Karen culture. Her lemon orchard provides for her family, including her four children.

> ***"We were always forced to be porters for the military to transport military supplies to their post on the top of the hills. Sometimes, if there was fighting, we were even forced to carry their soldiers' corpses. As a result, we do not want to talk about the cattle cart or look at it anymore because it reminds us of our bad experience."***

Yar Mar Lup

Yar Mar Lup is a 35-year-old Ta'ang woman and a mother of two living in Namkham Township. On 1 June 2016, her husband was killed by an armed group believed to be the RCSS/SSA. Her husband and a friend were arrested by armed soldiers on the way to a Dharma gathering. Four days later, their dead bodies were found by locals. Her husband's body was found on a farm, his friend's in a nearby valley. Their corpses showed evidence of torture and bore several brutal stab wounds. Both their heads had been chopped off and their hands tied behind their backs. Their mouths had been filled with leaves. The incident horrified and angered local villagers, as both victims had been innocent civilians.

Ever since her husband was killed, Yar Mar Lup and her family have been full of grief and living in fear. They were robbed while Yar Mar Lup was away working and lost all the money they had been keeping at home. Yar Mar Lup is worried she will not be able to sustain the family's livelihood on her own now that her husband is gone. Her husband was the main cultivator of their farm and took care of the paddies. She is worried that she will not be able to replace him and that the family will have to stop farming. It will be near impossible for her to earn enough money to cover both the cost of running a home and of sending her children to school.

Yar Mar Lup has been traumatized by the horrific circumstances of her husband's death. She is deeply unhappy and suffers from insomnia.

"I had quite a tough life when I was young. When I got married, I thought my life would be free from trouble. Now my husband was killed although he didn't do anything wrong. I think my life will always be full of troubles."

Daw May Zun Oo (Nay Chi)

Daw May Zun Oo is a 39-year-old Burmese woman who grew up in a family of political activists. Her family faced relentless repression and harassment from authorities and from the age of three Daw May Zun Oo witnessed family members being threatened, arrested, tortured and put in jail. She was separated from her parents and other family members because of their long periods of incarceration.

Daw May Zun Oo is the daughter of U Hla Shwe, a well-known political leader, activist and writer who was repeatedly arrested

and sentenced to 14 years in jail in 1998 for his writings about the student movement. He was finally released in 2005. Her mother was arrested twice and jailed for 8 years in 1990. She was psychologically and physically tortured including with electric shocks.

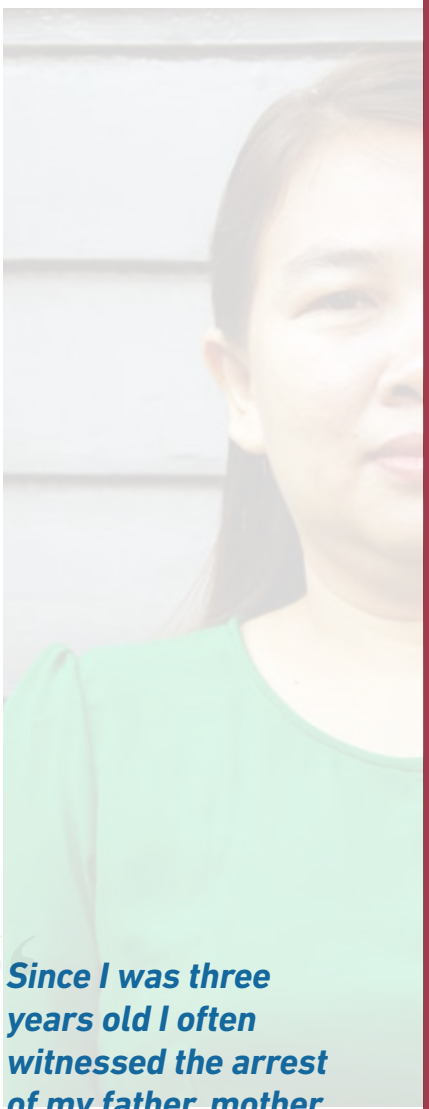
Daw May Zun Oo also experienced threats and abuse from the authorities. In 1991 she was 14 years old and had just passed her exams to enter the 8th Grade. She was planning to go to university and become a doctor. One day that year soldiers came into Daw May Zun Oo's house. They put a hood over her head and brought her to an interrogation room thirty minutes drive away. Even though she was a minor she was interrogated, threatened, deprived of food, and forced to sit on a tall brick platform for the whole night. She remains deeply traumatized by the torture she endured during this incident.

Daw May Zun Oo went through a lot and her childhood and personal life were deeply impacted. After her brother left to join an armed group at an early age, Daw May Zun Oo was often alone at home. Although she was able to continue high school, she was forced to abandon her dreams of becoming a doctor. She struggled and did odd jobs to make a living. Most of her earnings were spent on travel, and bringing food and medicine to her imprisoned relatives. The Myanmar authorities deliberately held her family members in three different prisons and moved them around to add to the family's ill-treatment. Daw May Zun Oo was forced to spend her teenage years traveling to seven different prisons across the country. Her time at school was also challenging, as no one wanted to make friends with her as a result of the political activities of her family. Even the teachers made her sit in the last row of the class.

The authorities continued to watch Daw May Zun Oo and her family for many years. After she was married, soldiers came to the family home to arrest her father again. They threatened and pointed guns at Daw May Zun Oo and her two young daughters.

Daw May Zun Oo was forced to grow up without her family due to political repression. She suffered from this and from having had to put aside her childhood and dreams in order to survive.

She found the strength to meet other survivors during the research and discovered that she was not the only one and that others are feeling the same pain. She wants to continue fighting hand in hand with them and plans to perhaps begin documenting human rights violations. She is also considering publishing a book.



"Since I was three years old I often witnessed the arrest of my father, mother and brothers. I suffered from mental pain. I still feel that pain. I meet people now who have the same feeling, the same pain. I understood that I am not the only one. I believe that we will continue fighting hand in hand."

Naw Moo Eh

In 1997, the Myanmar Army forced Naw Moo Eh's village to relocate, threatening them with death if they refused. Naw Moo Eh, a Karen woman who is now 43 years old, was village head at the time.

From 2007-2012, female village heads in the area suffered a lot. They were often called on at night to do tasks for the military and

had to be constantly ready. They could not refuse, even if they were scared.

Naw Moo Eh was accused by the KNU of being a Myanmar Army supporter and spy, and found out that they planned to kill her. She was able to escape after some KNU soldiers who trusted and loved her told her the date of her planned execution, as well as the name of the person who was supposed to kill her. The KNU district leader later clarified the situation and neither Naw Moo Eh nor the other women village heads were killed.

In April 2010 another problem surfaced when two Myanmar Army commanders were shot, one fatally, by someone posing as a Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) member. There were a lot of different armed groups in Naw Moo Eh's area at the time. She and the other five village heads were tasked with finding the shooter, whom they located after a while. However they did not dare tell the military where he was as they were afraid of him. The shooter nevertheless accused them of being spies for the Myanmar Army. After telling the Myanmar Army they could not find the shooter, they were instructed to search for him again. The women told the Myanmar Army they could not find him and were told to go and look for him again. After they were unable to deliver the shooter a second time, an angry military commander gathered all the women in front of a tree. Scared of what would happen, one of the women made the commander laugh by climbing up a tree and whistling to ease the tension.

In 2011, a new armed group calling itself the KNU/KNLA Peace Council was stationed in Naw Moo Eh's village. One of their soldiers was shot dead and the village heads were accused of killing him. The military detained them and asked them to pay a large fine, though they had not killed the soldier.

Though Naw Moo Eh has suffered a lot, she is very strong and continues to work for her community. She is chair of the KWO in her village and has influence and authority. She owns a house, an orchard, and land where she grows betel nut and rubber. She suffers from joint and back pain.

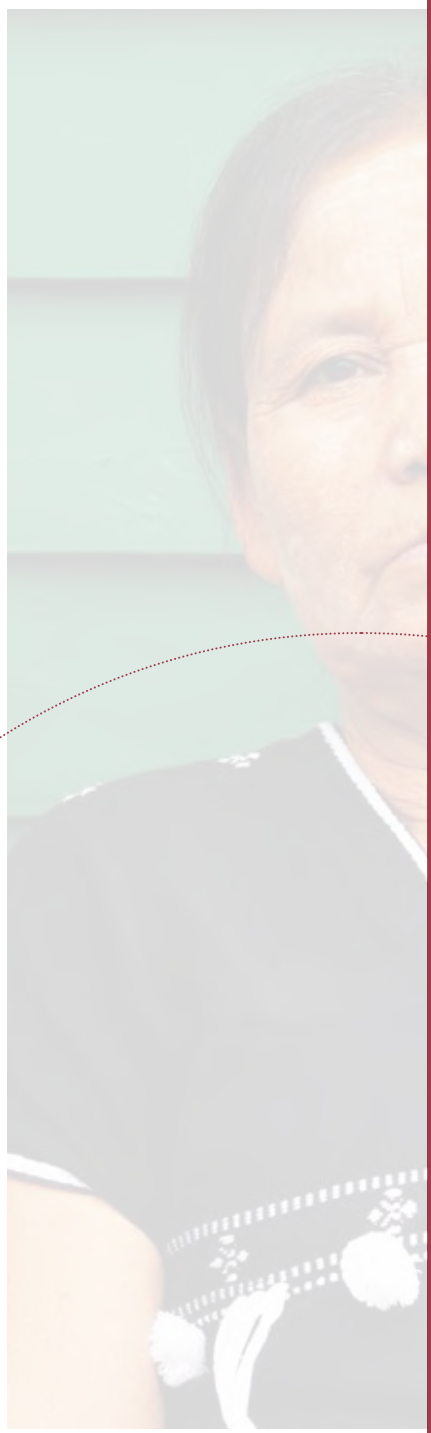
"If there is no fighting, we do not have to worry much for our living and all we need is to be left peacefully so that we can do our work."

Naw Mu Ti

Naw Mu Ti is a quiet 56-year-old Karen woman who lives with her daughter and works on a small chili farm. She also has a son. Her husband died twelve years ago and is sorely missed. Life has been a struggle for her, as she does not own any property or land.

Naw Mu Ti endured a great deal of pain during the many years of conflict in her area. She was accused of having family members in the KNU and KNLA. She was arrested twice, once being detained for three months. During her detention she was forced to work for the Myanmar Army and sometimes faced sexual harassment at night. She felt lucky that she slept in the same room as other detainees.

"They said I am having family members in the KNU, arrested me and made me follow them around for three months."



Daw Mya Sein

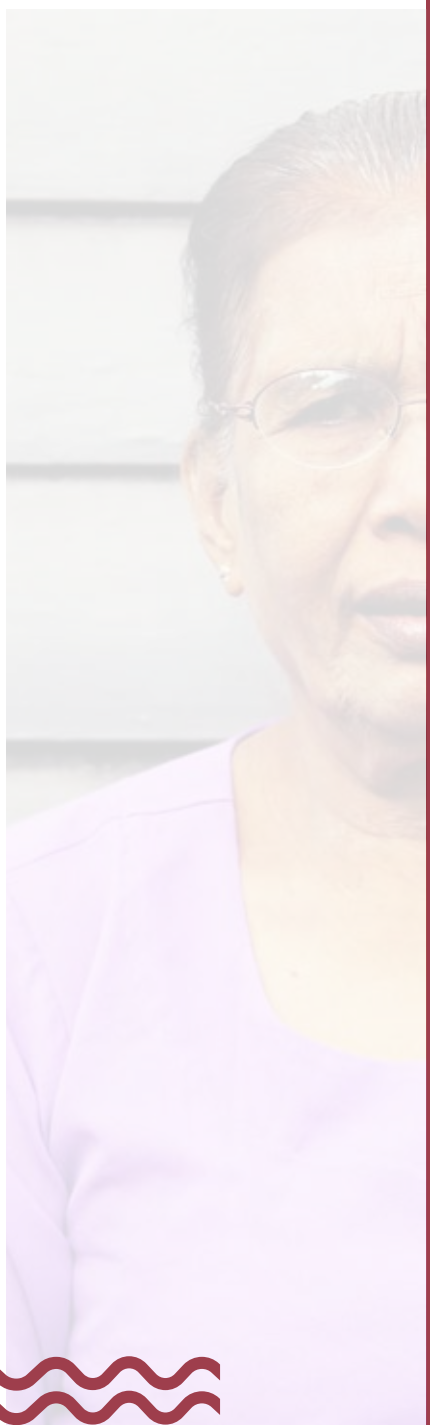
Daw Mya Sein is a 68-year-old Burmese woman who has been an active member of the NLD since 1997. She has been detained at least two times for her activism. Despite her age and the multiple challenges she has faced, Daw Mya Sein continues to be an active NLD member in her area.

Daw Mya Sein's activism led to harassment by the authorities and multiple imprisonments on false charges. This included six months in the infamous Insein prison (with her friend Daw Aye Mi - see story above). She was repeatedly mistreated, insulted, humiliated, and verbally abused.

Daw Mya Sein was repeatedly warned to give up politics, but she never did and continues to be an activist to this day. Being recognized as a political activist gives her strength. She still treasures the pin she received when she became a member of the NLD.

She lives with her 2 sons in her own house in Yangon. She was glad to take part in the research and has gained the confidence and strength to speak out about her experiences.

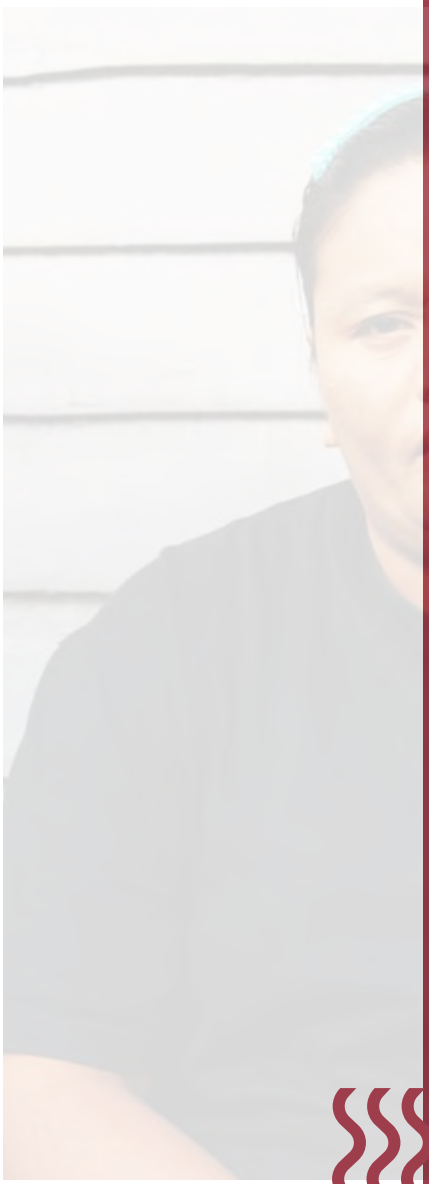
"After having attended the training [with other survivors], I was able to gather myself and to talk about my mental anguish. I could not do that before - I didn't dare to do it because I was worried that my organization's reputation would be affected. I was not confident."



Daw Nyo

Daw Nyo, a 41-year-old Burmese woman, was born into a farming family and used to live with her husband and two children in a peaceful rural area in Thae Kone Township, Bago Region. Daw Nyo remembers having a quiet and pleasant life growing crops and raising cattle. Daw Nyo's income was stable and sufficient to afford good housing and a decent quality of life. They were even able to save money and make donations.

But in 2000 her peaceful life was shattered when the authorities confiscated her 13 acres of farmland. A businessman who benefited from the confiscated lands filed a false claim against Daw Nyo, accusing her of stealing fish he had bred on his land. He filed the same claim against a number of other farmers who had had land confiscated. Daw Nyo was arrested on 13 March 2013 and detained for six months. In November 2014 she was arrested a second time for taking part in a protest to get her farmland back. She spent close to a year behind bars in Paung-deh and Pyay prisons. She has kept the clothes she was wearing on the day of her first arrest to remind her of how the authorities brutally tore her blouse and camisole.



Following the loss of her lands, without compensation and lengthy imprisonment, Daw Nyo and her family are struggling to earn a living. They farm their remaining three acres of land but the yield is not sufficient to support the whole family. They live in poverty and Daw Nyo bravely tries to support the family. Her husband struggles with alcoholism and is unable to work very much, meaning Daw Nyo must take on extra work. The economic hardship means her two children have had to drop out of school to earn a living.

Her family do every possible job they can find in order to earn money, but all their efforts bring them no more than a daily income of around, 4,000 kyats (approximately $3) - hardly enough to survive.

Like many families in the area, Daw Nyo's family members have been farmers for generations. They do not know how to do anything else and only want to get their farmland back. Though Daw Nyo's family is struggling, she will continue to fight for her lands. She is encouraged by the fact that people are interested in hearing her story and wants the whole country to know her struggle.

> ***"In 2014 after I was released from prison and our land had been confiscated, we were in very miserable plight. We faced extreme economic hardship. I worked for a daily wage and our son who excelled at school had to drop out from the ninth grade. My daughter has to collect grass for living. Now we live on 4,000 kyats per day."***

Lway Poe Ki Chi

Lway Poe Ki Chi, a 21-year-old Ta'ang woman, got married at the end of May 2016. She and her husband were earning a living making charcoal in Namkham Township. On 1 June 2016, seven days after their wedding, her husband was on his way to check their fireplace when he stepped on a landmine buried in the middle of the road. A farmer and some other locals rushed to his aid but he was badly injured and died before they managed to reach the village. Lway Poe Ki Chi and the villagers believe the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA) planted the landmine as RCSS/SSA soldiers had recently been seen in the village.

After her husband's death, Lway Poe Ki Chi went back to her parent's village, as she could not face living at her husband's house. She also felt compelled to go home and look after her ageing parents as she is their only remaining child - her 7 siblings are deceased. Her husband's elderly parents now live alone. She visits them regularly but they wish she could live with them. After her husband's death, Lway Poe Ki Chi had to stop making charcoal, as the work is impossible for one person alone. She is now farming at her parent's house to earn a living.

Lway Poe Ki Chi and her parents-in-law are deeply traumatized. The father suffered from acute shock and is now psychologically unwell. Lway Poe Ki Chi herself has lost all hope since she lost her husband.

"There is no one to feed my husband's parents. They are too old now. They were depending on us. After my husband's death, I came back to my parents. My parents are also very old and I am the only child now. I could not continue living in my husband's house without him."

Naw Poe Th'Dah

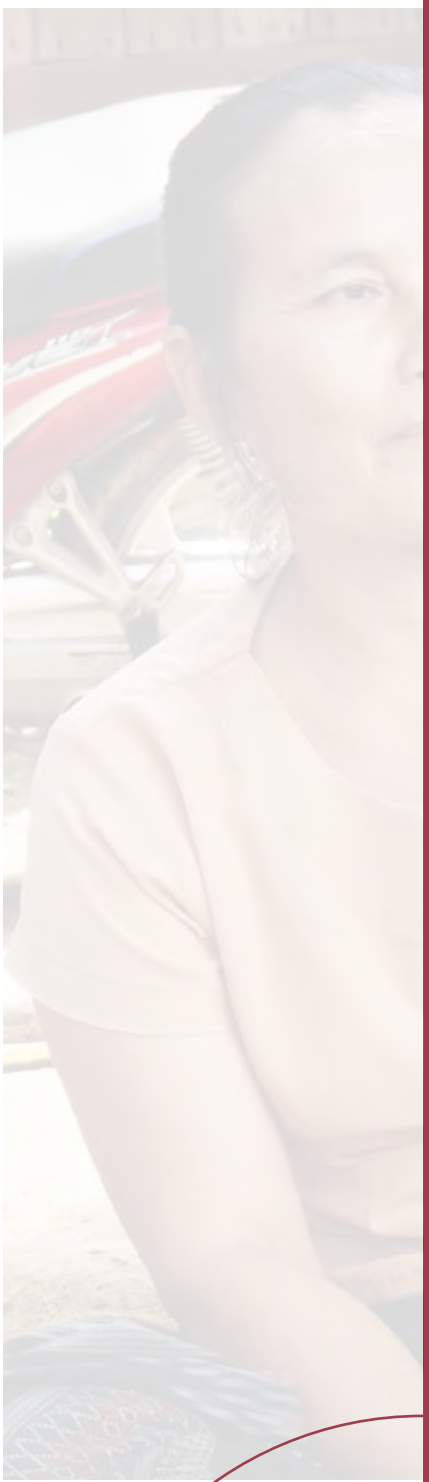
52-year-old Naw Poe Th'Dah has been a village head for decades. In the late 1990s, when no one dared volunteer themselves for the role, as armed conflict was raging, she stepped up and took on the risky position.

During the period 1997-2002, fighting repeatedly broke out in her area. Some armed groups, such as the Thu Mu Heh Peace Group, broke away from the KNLA and joined forces with the Myanmar Army as part of a so-called peace agreement. After that alliance, many people were arrested, tortured and killed. In 1997, the DKBA burned down Naw Poe Th'Dah's village. Later, the entire village was forced to relocate. As the village head, she was forced to arrange food and transportation for soldiers. She was also blamed, intimidated and forced to pay fines when the Myanmar Army was ambushed by the KNLA.

Even though Naw Poe Th'Dah was the village head, she was often powerless to assist her fellow villagers during these troubled times – she was not even allowed to visit them when they were arrested. No one supported her and she felt isolated, especially after she was accused of being affiliated with the KNU because she communicated with them and had family members serving in their forces.

At one point, the Myanmar Army took her and three others to their military base and ordered them to fire a large mortar shell on to the nearby KNLA camp. They were too scared to do it, but were forced to watch Myanmar Army soldiers fire the mortar.

Naw Poe Th'Dah is a strong and brave woman who has faced many challenges. She was caught between two warring parties while needing to serve and lead her village. She is also a single mother of six - four of her own and two adopted - and has always strived to care for her family. She proved herself to be an able leader and skilled negotiator for her community. She contributed to the struggle, but her contribution was invisible. She now looks after her elderly mother.



"We always had to lie and pretend we were telling the truth. We had to please the commander by giving them any nice food we had. If we had a fish, we gave to them, if we had fruit we gave to them so that they would be nice to us."

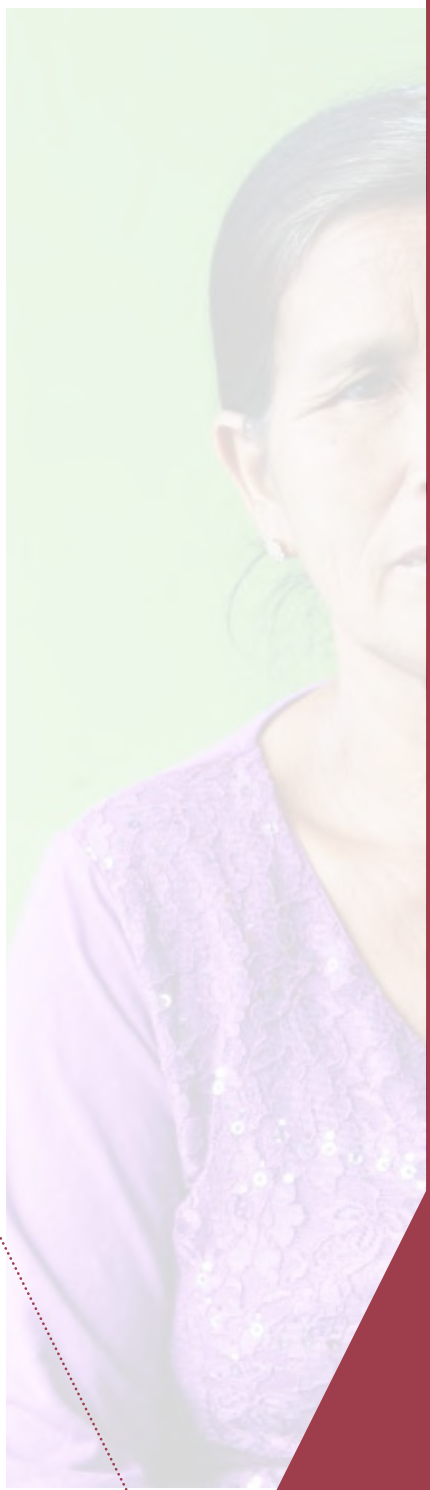
Yar Puu

On 17 October 2015, Yar Puu's husband stepped on a landmine and lost his right leg while he was working in their cornfield in Muse Township. The landmine had been placed next to his shed. Yar Puu, a 60 year-old mother of five and grandmother of seven, was on the other side of the farm when it happened and immediately called her son, who rushed him to hospital.

Yar Puu's husband is now disabled and unable to work. The artificial leg he was given does not fit well and he struggles. They have had to spend a lot of money on his medication and are finding it difficult to get by. It takes Yar Puu two hours to walk to her farm and she is worried about their future as both are ageing. She is too old to work hard and is unable to help her husband with everything he needs, as she gets very tired. Her husband has not received any compensation or apology, although the family suspects the Myanmar Army is responsible for the landmine.

Yar Puu has two sons. One has a family of his own he lives with and the other is a monk living in Mandalay. Yar Puu therefore has to earn her and her husband's livelihood singlehandedly. At her age, this is difficult. Her mental health has suffered since her husband lost his leg.

"When he came out of the shed, it exploded. He said he has just lost his leg. I couldn't believe it. I didn't run to him at once, as I was shocked. When I finally ran to the shed, his right leg had disappeared."



Daw Sein Htwe

Daw Sein Htwe is a 52-year-old Burmese woman who has been imprisoned numerous times for her activism.

Before 2006, Daw Sein Htwe's family ran a business. They had a house and her grandparents were landowners. This changed dramatically in 2006 when two businessmen assisted by a Myanmar Army commander came to her neighborhood in Mayagone Township in Yangon and informed residents that they needed to leave their properties in exchange for 1,000,000 kyats (approximately$1,000). This sum was small and completely inadequate compensation for the land seized. However, two regional judges supported the businessmen and residents were

told they would face a lawsuit and see their homes destroyed if they refused to leave. Daw Sein Htwe refused to leave and saw authorities confiscate her land, which included a watercress farm and two houses. Some of her furniture and belongings were also taken during the eviction. Daw Sein Htwe and her family did not receive any financial compensation and she was sued under Section 325 of the Criminal Code and sentenced to six months in jail. She was released in June 2007.

This detention did not stop her from continuing to raise her voice on several occasions. She was violently arrested again in 2007 while protesting over the price hikes of basic products during the Saffron Revolution. Then again in 2008, she was arrested and detained for one month with fellow colleagues for demonstrating against the Constitution.

In 2014 she was arrested again for demanding justice for Daw Khin Win, a woman farmer who was shot dead by a police officer during a demonstration against the copper mining projects in Letpadaung, which led to her detention in Insein prison. She was released under a Presidential amnesty after six months of detention. She also faced charges of defamation, but these charges were dropped in 2016.

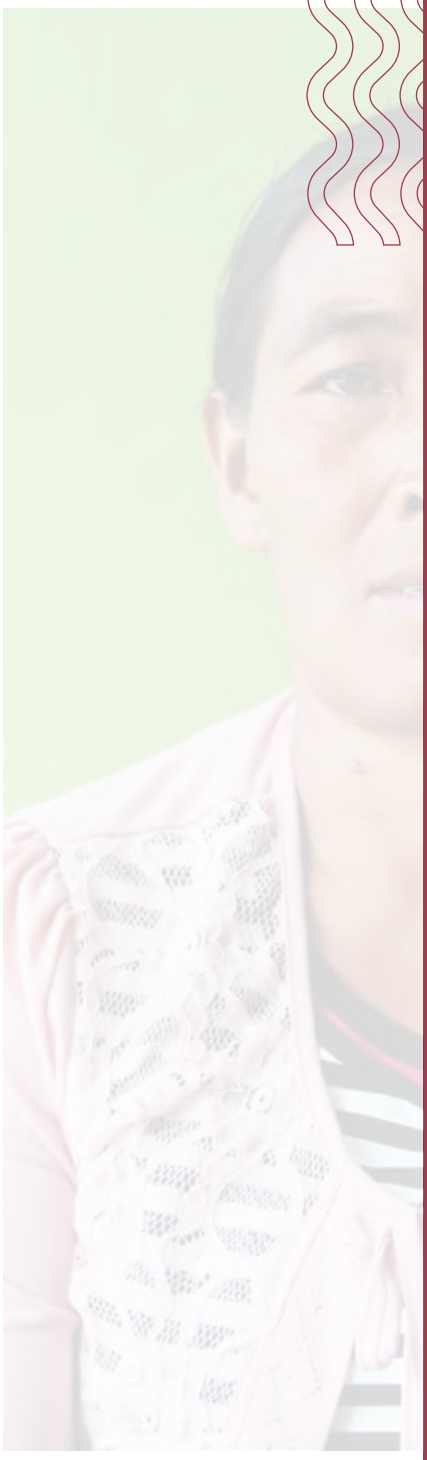
During all these years of political activism, protests and arrests, Daw Sein Htwe was also prohibited from opening any family business and threatened not to do politics.

She experienced difficult times as a detainee and was tortured physically and psychologically, suffering inhumane and degrading treatment. She was beaten repeatedly and her hands have never recovered after she used them to shield herself from beatings. She also suffered from malnutrition while detained and developed stomach diseases as a result.

"In 2006 the properties I have amassed: our family's land, my two houses and my furniture were confiscated by force [...]. We were asked to sign the document if we accepted. If not, we were told that we would have to face prosecutions. If we would not leave, our house would be to torn down."

Yar Seng Man

Yar Seng Man, her husband and their 6 children were forced to flee to an IDP camp in March 2016 after fighting broke out between a Myanmar Army affiliated militia and the TNLA in their village in Kutkai Township. The 53-year-old Ta'ang woman and her family fled the village as the conflict intensified and slept in their farm for three nights. From there, they could hear gunfire in their village. They later learned that they had witnessed their home and 8 tons of paddy being burned to the ground. 4 other houses were torched the same night. It is not known who is responsible for this. The conflict worsened and they decided to flee to a nearby village. They were eventually transferred to a more permanent IDP camp in Kutkai Township.



Yar Seng Man had been working on her farm for the whole of the past year to grow the 8 tons of paddy she lost. This would have been enough to feed her family for a full year. Yar Seng Man also lost all the property that had been in the house, as well as her six buffalos, which were stolen after she and her family fled the village. Soldiers continue to occupy Yar Seng Man's hometown, so she cannot go back to take care of her remaining animals. She does not know if they are still there, or whether they have been sold or killed. This is a big loss for Yar Seng Man as buffalos are very expensive; one buffalo is worth around 1,000,000 kyats (approximately $750).

Her family receives aid in the IDP camp but it is irregular and inadequate. She sometimes manages to make a bit of money working in nearby farms.

Yar Seng Man suffers from an acute sense of loss when she thinks about her how all her property has been destroyed and stolen. She is deeply sad when she sees her family's poor living conditions in the camp; she believes she is too old to rebuild her family's livelihood and feels powerless. She is not sure if she will ever get her land back and whether she will be able to return to her village. All this adds to her distress.

"Soldiers destroyed everything in the village. They ate and took whatever they wanted. What they didn't want, they burned and destroyed. They threw rice everywhere. They killed our animals and cooked them. There is nothing left. We escaped so that we wouldn't be killed. We couldn't even bring our children's clothes."

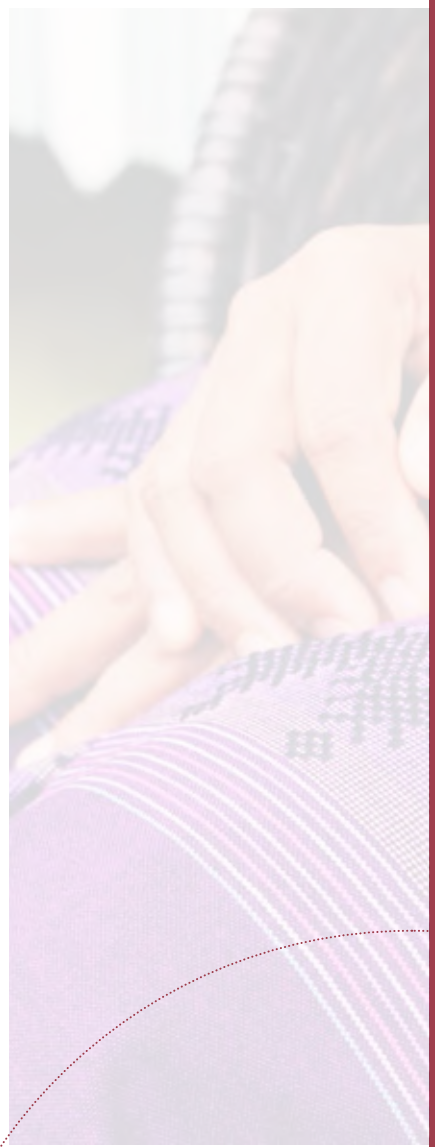
Naw Shee Ku

38-year-old Naw Shee Ku is a brave and strong Karen woman. She is a rape survivor and tells her story without fear. This is a very courageous and rare thing for women in Burma to do after they have faced sexual violence. In this way she is breaking deeply ingrained cultural taboos. She speaks out even though she is unable to write, having never had the chance to go to school.

One day, a Burmese soldier came into her house while her family was there. Her father gave the soldier a bottle of wine and a duck and asked him to leave to cook the duck somewhere else. Later that day the village head and Myanmar Army commander came to her house, which was then surrounded by soldiers. The soldier who had taken the duck grabbed Naw Shee Ku, who quickly picked up her three-month old baby. The soldier dragged them outside and threatened to kill her if anyone followed them and to kill her baby if it cried. She was very scared, fearing for her life and her baby's. Once they were outside the village, the soldier raped her. She pleaded with him to let her go and he released her. When she got home her family were anxiously waiting for her. She decided to tell the truth about the soldier raping her. The commander of the battalion found out and shot the soldier dead.

Naw Shee Ku now has four children and lives with her husband. They have a rubber plantation and a rice farm.

"I could not do anything because I feared that he would kill my baby so I had to give him what he wanted. I am the one who has to take the shame and embarrassment."



Daw Soe Soe Oo

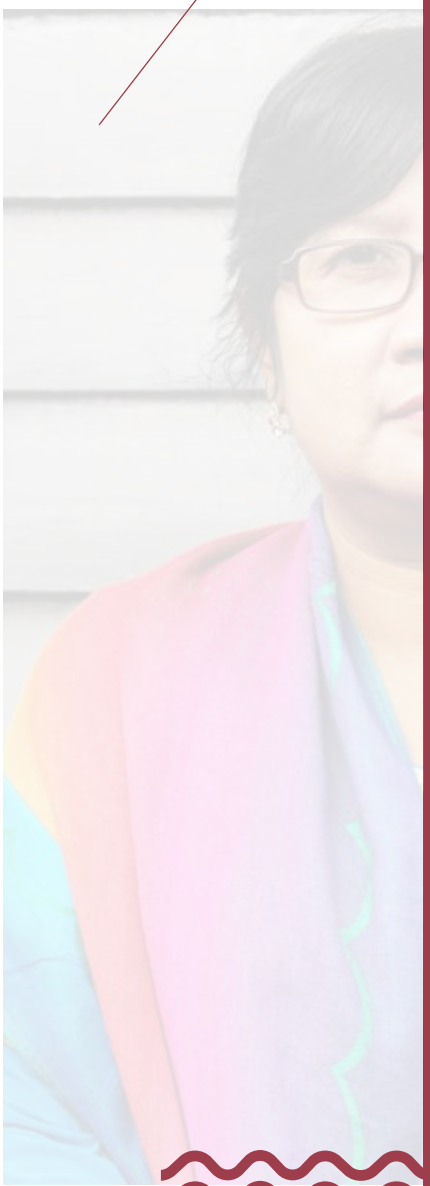
Daw Soe Soe Oo was a 19-year-old student when she left school to take part in the 1988 anti-government demonstrations. Two years later she joined the NLD and soon after she was arrested for providing support to 'insurgents'.

It is still difficult for Daw Soe Soe Oo, who is now 48 years old, to talk about the year she spent in Insein prison. While there, she was repeatedly insulted, humiliated, and verbally abused. Her dignity was constantly undermined and she felt angry that she was being treated as if she was worthless.

She was denied to attend the school after she was released from prison. She values education and looks back tearfully on the studies she had to abandon to take part in the 1988 uprising. She imagines her life would have been better if she had been able to continue her education.

She currently lives in her own house in Yangon with her mother, husband and sons.

Though she has gone through difficult times and feels frustrated at the lack of improvement under the new government, Daw Soe Soe Oo continues to fight for change. She educates people on human rights and trafficking and campaigns for transitional justice. She is not motivated by revenge and only wants recognition of political prisoners, appropriate redress for victims, and a genuine apology from perpetrators. This would show respect for victims' human dignity, she believes.



"I want this government to come up with a precise definition of what a political prisoner is as soon as possible and to arrange a remedy program where necessary. If it is taking too much time the elderly people among the former political prisoners will be deprived of this."

Daw Su Yin Yin

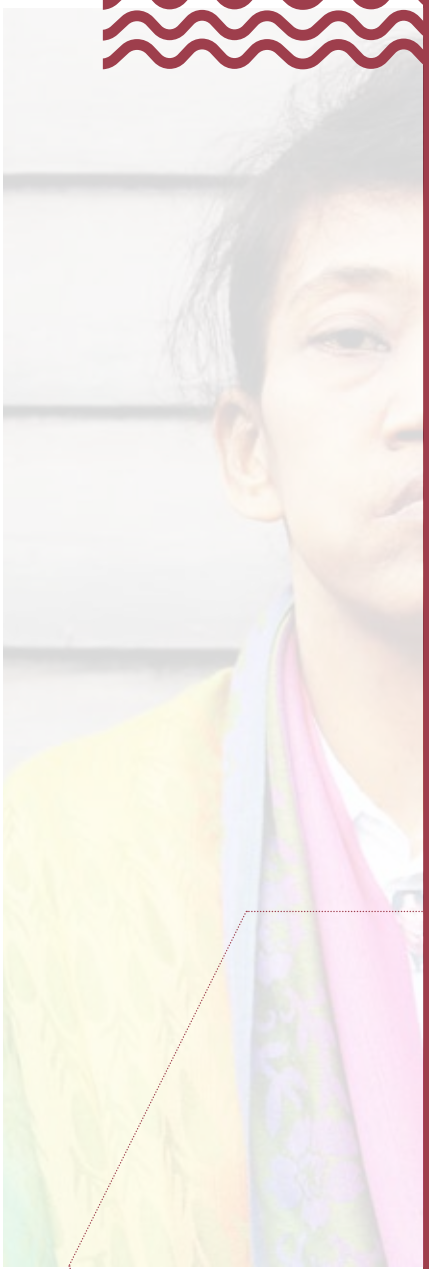
Daw Su Yin Yin is a 43-year-old Burmese woman from a family of political activists and a member of the NLD. Both she and her family have been targeted by the authorities on account of their political activities and she remains permanently physically disabled as a result of being violently interrogated by Myanmar Army intelligence.

Daw Su Yin Yin's father was arrested in 1997 for supporting the NLD. He was sentenced to seven years in jail. She barely saw him throughout this period.

Daw Su Yin Yin was also subjected to violence at the hands of the authorities. She was arrested and interrogated for 4 days by military intelligence regarding Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's travel to Mandalay on 20 October 2000. Daw Su Yin Yin was interrogated by male officers who would slap her violently when she was unable to answer their questions. She was hit at least six times, until blood started to run from her ears. They told her she had to give up politics.

The authorities also pressured Daw Su Yin Yin's family through cutting off their sources of income. They were prevented from doing any business and had their electricity cut off for the seven years the father was in jail so they were unable to get a tenant to share the rent.

Today Daw Su Yin Yin lives with her father in her own house in Yangon. She is partially deaf and suffers frequent earaches as a result of the beating she suffered at the hands of Myanmar Army intelligence. She is still a member of the NLD and does a range of community work, including helping elderly people access food and healthcare and helping poor children attain basic care and education.



"When I was interrogated by the Intelligence, they slapped me from right to left, which caused bleeding from my ears and up to now I didn't recover completely my hearing faculty."

Daw Thet Thet Lwin

49-year-old Daw Thet Thet Lwin has been imprisoned several times for her political activism. She currently lives in a small, rented house in Yangon, where she struggles to make ends meet.

In 1988 Daw Thet Thet Lwin was a brilliant student pursuing a history major at Yangon University. 21 years old, she took part in the 1988 uprising and became a member of the NLD's youth wing.

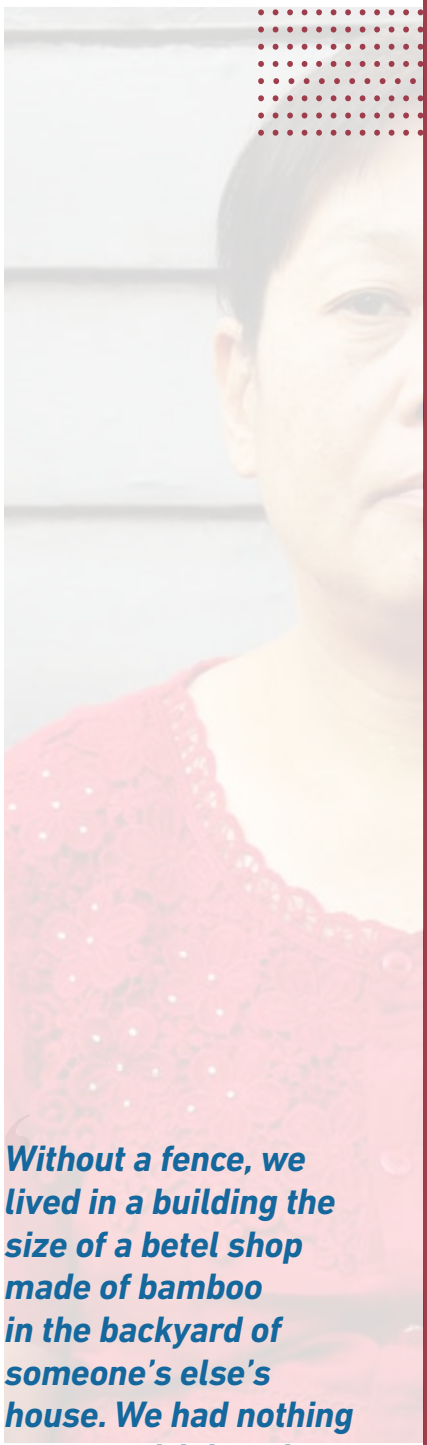
Her steadfast activism with the NLD-Youth led to multiple arrests and detentions. Between 1996 and 1998 she was arrested and detained more than five times for her political activism. She was imprisoned in a number of infamous institutions, namely: Insein prison (two days in 1996), Kyaik Ka San investigation center (one month in 1997), police station 9 (one month in 1998), Ye Mon military detention center, and Tyaing 212 Regiment (one year in 1998), and Hlaing Thar Yar Regiment 9. Daw Thet Thet Lwin, like her fellow activists, was repeatedly threatened to stop all political activity.

Daw Thet Thet Lwin continued her studies and supported herself through working as a steamed rice cake wholesaler. When she was 35 years old she married another political activist, but the marriage proved unhealthy and she decided to leave her husband after the first month. She was pregnant and expelled from her family home. She had no choice but to live on her own with her young daughter.

She lived in a very small, rented house located in a backyard in an unsafe neighborhood of Yangon. She was in debt and did not have enough money to live a decent life. Sometimes she even struggled to buy food and water.

In spite of her challenging circumstances, Daw Thet Thet Lwin opened a school for children in her community six years ago. She was able to do this with financial support from an education network.

Sharing her experience for the first time and discovering that other activists went through the same difficulties was a remarkable and comforting experience for Daw Thet Thet Lwin. Gingerly holding her NLD membership card throughout, Daw Thet Thet Lwin was happy to be able to share her story. In return she felt she was able to help others who have faced the same struggles and are having trouble reintegrating into society.



"Without a fence, we lived in a building the size of a betel shop made of bamboo in the backyard of someone's else's house. We had nothing to eat or drink and we suffered so much trouble."

Thu Lay Paw

Thu Lay Paw died at the age of 56. She was a Karen woman from Kyat Aye Township who began facing the atrocities of conflict in 1983, when the Myanmar Army marched into her village and burned it down. In the years after the army built a post in the village and regularly arrested and killed villagers.

Thu Lay Paw rose to the position of village head and served her community from 1997-2004. Her role meant that she was caught in between the two sides of the conflict: the Myanmar Army and the KNLA. She ended up being tasked with organizing transport, security and food for both sides.

She was forced to work for the Myanmar Army at their base, cutting bamboo, carrying military supplies and sweeping the road. She was not allowed to rest and was not provided with food; she often went hungry. The work was dangerous: one day when she was forced to accompany military government workers to a village by boat, it was attacked by KNLA soldiers. She heard gunfire coming from all directions and everyone jumped off the boat. Luckily no one was hurt.

As a result of the forced labor, Thu Lay Paw was accused of being a Myanmar Army supporter and the KNLA called her a "Myanmar Army wife". At other moments the Myanmar Army accused her of supporting the KNLA - she was once put under house arrest for 15 days.

Thu Lay Paw was also not spared on a personal level: her husband left her for another woman and her only child, a 3-year-old girl, passed away as a result of a sudden sickness. At the time of her death she was living with her nephew and relying on his family for support. She was struggling to make a living from farming and medical work.

Though she suffered physically and mentally, Thu Lay Paw was a brave and strong woman who worked hard to serve her village and her community. She was a member of the KWO for five years before her death.

May she rest in peace.

"When I was the village head I was caught between the two armed parties. As a village head I had no choice but to help both sides because I would get into trouble if I didn't help. Sometimes I was accused by the KNLA of being a supporter of the Myanmar Army and at other times I was accused by the Myanmar Army of being a supporter of the KNLA. I was always in trouble. Sometimes I was called a Myanmar Army wife and this was the most painful. But I could not do anything. During that time it was like living in a fire."

Daw Yay May

Daw Yay May, who is now 67 years old, is a strong Karen woman who made great sacrifices for her village, located in Kaw Kareik Township. In 1985, the Myanmar Army started operating in her area and forced her husband to work as a porter. He nearly died from the hard labor and had to leave Daw Yay May behind for over a month. She had to take care of their four children, who were still very young, and they did not have enough to eat.

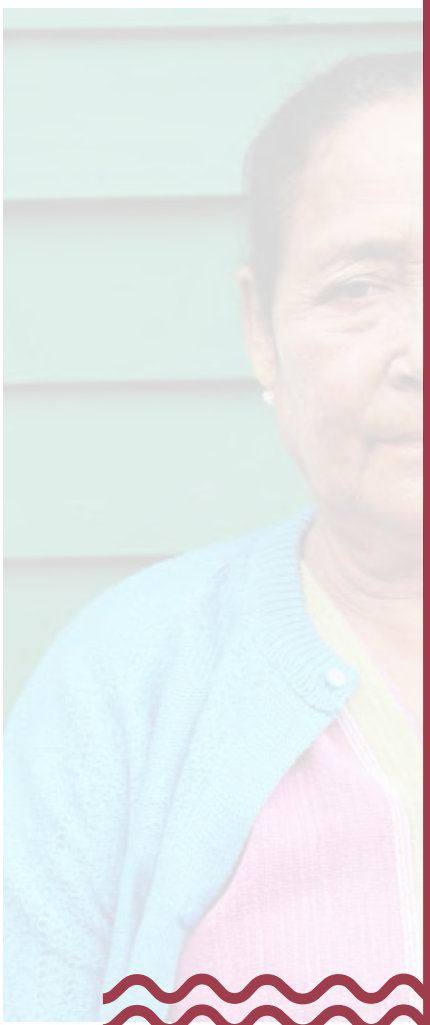
Daw Yay May was later appointed village head because her Burmese language skills were better than others'. Moreover, no one wanted to lead as they were scared of being beaten and killed

by the Myanmar Army, who were harsh and cruel. Men refused to take on this responsibility because others had been killed for being head of a village.

Daw Yay May was committed to her villagers and worked for them night and day. She also sometimes worked for the KNLA. She had no time to rest as she had to arrange porters, food and transportation for the Myanmar Army. She also accompanied villagers who were forced to work for the Myanmar Army. They treated the villagers cruelly and did not give them any time to rest.

Whenever fighting broke out between the KNLA and Myanmar Army, the Myanmar Army would put pressure on the villagers, especially the village head. One time Daw Yay May was summoned to see a Myanmar Army commander after a KNLA attack. He accused her of not telling him that they were going to be attacked and fired a gun directly next to her. She was very scared and could not sleep that night.

Daw Yay May has seen endless numbers of people killed, tortured, raped, beaten, and interrogated. The suffering became too much to bear and she decided to move to the border and rebuild her life with the children she now has. She tearfully looks back on all the heartbreaking cases she's seen and acknowledges that she has had many extremely difficult experiences, but that she never gave up. She passionately wants her story to be told and her dream is to live peacefully without war.



"I was the village head because no man dared to be the village head during that time. My husband was arrested and forced to be a porter for the Myanmar Army. My children were very small and I had to take care of them without their father. I was in a very difficult situation and it was so hard for me that words could not explain."

Recommendations

Based on our in-depth discussions with these 31 women survivors of violence related to conflicts in Ta'ang and Karen areas and women former political prisoners, we urge the Myanmar government, Myanmar military, ethnic armed organizations, and civil society to fulfill the following recommendations:

1. Immediately put an end to violence against women during conflict and political repression, in particular sexual violence against women.
2. Unconditionally release all political prisoners.
3. Change the 2008 Constitution in order to place the military under civilian control.
4. Ensure women's meaningful participation in the peace process and political dialogue and include accountability for past human rights violations in discussions.
5. Recognize survivors' right to truth and undertake independent, impartial and effective investigations into human rights violations
6. Recognize survivors' right to justice and provide them with legal assistance and access to a transparent justice system that will hold perpetrators accountable.
7. Establish effective judicial and non-judicial transitional justice mechanisms to investigate human rights abuses, particularly those related to sexual violence against women and provide effective remedies for women.
8. Recognize survivors' right to reparations and establish programs for women survivors, in particular multi-sectoral services that include healthcare, trauma support, reproductive healthcare, and assistance for ageing populations; as well as access to capital through appropriate schemes for job creation, skills training, and microfinance
9. Recognize the impact that violence in conflict, political repression and land confiscation have had on survivors' livelihoods and capacity to support themselves and their families, and provide them with financial assistance and vocational training to rebuild their lives and create more work opportunities.
10. Create conditions for the safe and dignified voluntary return of all conflict-affected displaced women and refugees to their communities, in consultation with them.
11. Ensure that Myanmar ratifies relevant international treaties and incorporates them into domestic legislation; meets its obligations to protect women under CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, and 1820, and the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict; and adopts the Anti-Violence Against Women Law.
12. Support women survivors' networks and linkages between them. Include them in consultations and meetings on peace, development, human rights, access to justice, and other relevant forums.

Research team:

Karen Women's Organization (KWO)
Naw Wah Ku Shee
Naw Thu Zar

Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO)
Lway Poe Kamaekhour
Lway Kharomi

Vimutti Women Organization (VWO)
Khin Mi Mi Khine

and Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR).

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR)

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a non-profit organization based in Jakarta, Indonesia, working to strengthen accountability and respect for human rights in the Asia Pacific region. AJAR focuses its work in countries attempting to build a stable democratic base following prolonged conflict, dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes. AJAR believes that peace and democracy can only be sustained if impunity, corruption, and human rights violations are addressed. AJAR seeks to empower those working to end human rights violations and impunity by increasing the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to be successful.

Karen Women's Organization (KWO)

The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) was formed in 1949 and has a membership of over 49,000 women. KWO is a community-based organization working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, with internally displaced persons (IDPs), and women inside Burma. Since its formation in 1949 KWO has expanded its focus from social welfare to building awareness of women's rights, and promoting women's participation in community decision-making and political processes. KWO believes that women's contribution is an essential factor in the peace-building and national reconciliation processes of Burma.

Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO)

The Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO) was established in 2000 in response to the lack of women actively participating within other Ta'ang organizations. It was perceived that the female members of such groups lacked the opportunities, skills and self-confidence necessary for direct and active participation. Cultural factors determined that men had greater access to training, better English language and computer skills, greater self-confidence and more leadership opportunities. The organization's name was originally the Palaung Women's Organization but during the group's 5th congress, which was conducted in January 2012, it was decided to change the name to the Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO) to cooperate more closely and effectively with local communities. TWO was formed with the intention of educating and empowering women so that they can develop and strengthen their own self-determination and achieve equality of participation.

Vimutti Women Organization (VWO)

The Vimutti Women Organization was established in May 2009 by a group of like-minded women activists who initially came together to organize rehabilitation activities for communities affected by Cyclone Nargis. Vimutti is a Pali (ancient Myanmar language) word that means "Liberation". VWO is an independent, community-based non-profit organization. Our members are socially minded volunteers who are active in their communities doing social work, providing humanitarian support, and fostering educational opportunities for children from poverty- stricken families. VWO directly engages with vulnerable people to create a healthy societal environment through research, advocacy, networking, and collective capacity building. VWO has a special program for strengthening women former political prisoners.

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asia justice and rights

This booklet captures the stories of 31 women from Myanmar – former political prisoners and land rights activists from Yangon, Ta'ang women from conflict – affected Northern Shan State, and women village heads from Karen State. It is based on research conducted by AJAR and its partners using participative tools. The booklet outlines AJAR's *Unlearning Impunity* methodology, presents key findings from our research, and provides a list of recommendations for obtaining truth, justice, peace and reparations for women survivors in Myanmar.

This research is a collaboration between Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Karen Women's Organization (KWO), Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO), and Vimutti Women Organization (VWO).

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