

OVERCOMING SHADOWS (2)



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Women as Peacebuilders' Team
Women's League of Burma (WLB)

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Women as Peacebuilders' Team



Women's League of Burma

The Women's League of Burma (WLB) is an umbrella organisation comprising 12 women's organisations of different ethnic backgrounds from Burma. WLB was founded on 9th December, 1999. Its mission is to work for women's empowerment and advancement of the status of women, and to work for the increased participation of women in all spheres of society in the democracy movement, and in peace and national reconciliation processes through capacity building, advocacy, research and documentation.

Aims

- To work for the empowerment and advancement of the status of women
- To work for the rights of women and gender equality
- To work for the Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women
- To work for the increased participation of women in every level of decision making in all spheres of society
- To participate effectively in the movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation

By working together, and encouraging cooperation between the different groups, the Women's League of Burma hopes to build trust, solidarity and mutual understanding among women of all nationalities in Burma.

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Peacebuilders' Team

Women's League of Burma (WLB)

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Preface

Overcoming Shadows 2 is a body of work created by the Women's League of Burma (WLB) Peace Building Team where we have written down our own stories as a diary to express our experiences and daily life struggles.

As a new generation growing up under the military dictatorship, we continue to face hardships in the education, economic, social, and health sectors. These disparities are considerably more prevalent in Burma than neighboring countries and these harsh conditions we must live through are a direct result of oppression, discrimination and terror.

Our struggle to survive is the direct effect of civil war which continues to lower the moral attitude of the people. Thus, as our generation has experienced a disintegration of national unity, our country has lost its peace. And even though our nation is rich in natural resources, the military regime has forced many of us to flee the country where we are then often humiliated and looked down upon by others simply because we are from Burma.

This book is best described as the sharing of our experiences of discrimination and our way of living through these societal hardships. In the future, when we have built a new country with a new system, we are going to listen to the voices of the women which we have included in this book. We, the people who have written this book, are not professional writers but we are expressing our experiences for this purpose.

As a team dedicated to peace building and reconciliation, we have been learning ways to employ peace building strategies as we endeavor to serve our society. However, we often face great challenges in this process, so would like to share and examine the result of our learning and practice. With this, we hope to encourage our women to openly express their bitterness and suffering in all that they have been facing.

Peacebuilders' Team
Women's League of Burma (WLB)

Sometimes I felt very
confused about my life and
found it very difficult to find
my own identity.

Before I go to sleep, my dreams sometimes send me back to the place where I was born and where I grew up. Even though this place I dream about is not my own country – I am forced to remember it and simply cannot forget it.

I was born on the Thai side of the Thai-Burma border in a village call Kop Pa Klo – a village that no longer exists. In our village, we would wake up every morning to go to school with all of our friends who grew up together - none of whom ever understood the true concept of peace. Our lives were full of happiness everyday as we were able to go to the school together, play together and sing together at the church services. We never worried about our future and what was going to happen to our lives on the day we finally, officially became grown ups.

We were sometimes told that the place where we were actually living was not our true country of origin, but rather our real home country was on the other side of the border – explained to us as an elder pointed across from where we stood on the Thai side of the border to the Burma side. And because the place where I was born was just across the Salween River, we would sometimes look over from Thai side and try to force ourselves into believing Burma was our country.

Every evening with all of our friends, we would bath in the Salween River and play together. I remember once talking about how we were going to go back to our country when one of my friends said she had overheard an elder saying that we were going get our county back very soon and that we would be able to go back there to live. But none of us were very interested in going back as we felt like the country in which we were currently living was our own country because this is where we were born and grew up.

Sometimes I asked my parents why we weren't living in our original country,

but where staying in Thailand instead. My parents would always reply to me with the same answer and as a child I only understood them say, “We still cannot go back because the Burman troops won’t allow us to stay there and they kill people without any reason.” And then I started to wonder what Burman troops looked a like. Did they look like tigers that ate people or were they scary monsters? Did they not look like human beings at all? As a young girl, I still did not have the answer.

I had no idea about Burma’s politics as I had never experienced the political unrest myself. I wanted to go back to Burma to visit my parent’s relatives, but my parents dared not to go back and of course did not let me go either.

Because I grew up in a very religious family, my parents decided to send me and my older sister to missionary school. In 1993, when I was 13 years old, my parents sent me to the school called Karen Adventist Academy School (KAAS) in “Htee They Kee Village” which is situated near the Burma side of the border, close to Ma Ner Plaw - where the Karen National Union (KNU) head quarters used to be. When I reached the village we were given a dormitory room to stay in and looked after by two teachers. This is the first time I truly felt like I was totally away from my parents and in my own country.

However, this period of relative peace did not last long. In 1994 a division occurred among the Karen National Union (KNU) when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) broke away to join the Burmese army. I had no idea what was going on. We whispered among ourselves as we heard different news about fighting going in the Karen villages while our leaders were being arrested at the same time. This confused us as we were only young students who know nothing about Burmese politics. In reality, the DKBA troops had joined the Burmese junta and then came back together to attack the Karen territories. This is when the conflict grew closer and closer to us.

Our school was soon ordered to be closed because of the fighting between the junta and Karen rebels. Soon parents came and got their children to take them home. However, even though my sister and I were also away from our families, we decided to stay with our teachers instead. I could see that the whole village and even the people within the school and dormitory were becoming very frightened as things grew more unstable. I saw people gathering in groups and talking to each other while some prepared to move away. I told my sister that

I wanted to go home to stay with our family but my sister said that it was not possible at the moment.

One night I heard a noise that I had never experienced in my life. The sound was very scary, loud and occurred continuously. We did not sleep at all that night and since we were staying in the dormitory, we were not able to do anything until further instructions came to us. As the loud, frightening noises continued, I held onto my things that I had just packed to take with me in case we had to run. I did not get any rest at all that night. The next morning we were told to leave the school compound.

This is when my real experiences of the true situation in Burma started. This is when I realized there is no peace in the world. Soon, my sister, teacher, other students and villagers including myself were transferred by boat to the other side of Moi River, back to the Thai side again where we went deep into the jungle to hide. Because this place where we were hiding was just across from the army's camp, we had to be very silent and careful in everything we did. We hiked through the jungle with the elderly, children and other students and at the time, I was very sick with a high fever. It was difficult for me to run and climb up the mountains as I just wanted to lie down with my sickness. Instead, we all just had to walk in silence and nobody had time to even look after each other. We walked for a long distance and finally settled down in one place when we had gathered enough water and found a suitable area for our camp. The same day we fled, the army came into the village and we were able to see them from the other side of the mountain top. We could see that the army had built up their camp and were now patrolling our school compound.

Because our school was a Christian missionary school, we always made time to thank God and worship during our studies, but while hiding in the jungle, we did not dare to sing loudly and were not allowed to light candles at night. But we did our best to take the time to worship regularly and pray for our safety. For a couple of days there was no rice for us in the jungle and we had already eaten most of the food that we had with us - and after a while there was no food at all. We were informed that we had to go and get rice which would be about 6-7 kilometers away from our place of hiding and that on our way we could not make any noise nor go in a big group as the soldiers might see us from their side.

I was very scared and exhausted from climbing up and down mountain sides. During each day and all throughout the night we were afraid of being seen and discovered by troops - the only thing I wanted to do was to get back to my family. But no one could help us to find our family as everyone was fleeing to the jungle. The only thing we could do was just pray and have faith. I started to wonder why my parents sent me to this place to experience this terrible situation when both my body and heart could not stop worrying - it wasn't even the same as the place where I was born.

Back home my parents were very worry about me and my sister as they had no idea where we were. Fortunately, my parents eventually managed to find out where we were and asked my brother in law to come and get us. In short, through many difficulties, we were finally able to reach our home and see our family.

My expectations in returning back home were very different from reality. I thought that when we reached home our worries would come to an end since I would be with my family and back in the safe place where I was born. Here, we knew we would never have to experience the terrible fear we had just escaped from. But this was not to be true. When we reached home, the same, horrible thing was happening. Fighting was happening almost everywhere in Karen villages and since our village is very close to the border where the Burmese troops based their camp, I witnessed Karen people from the other side of the border fleeing to our village everyday. I now began to understand the true situation of Burma as I was experiencing the tumult myself, as well witnessing all the people escaping - some of whom had nothing left. I saw people fleeing and crying and some of them had only one leg left - and some were carrying newborn babies who had no clothes. I felt much sympathy for them.

Our house was built right next to the Salween River on the Thai side so we were ordered to move deeper into the village. Finally, our village was full of people fleeing from inside Burma and those who had been living there for more than 20 years. Eventually, our village was declared as a refugee camp. But I didn't want to be called a refugee because I was not fleeing from Burma. This I was where I was born and where I had been living for the entire 15 years of my life.

But I knew the situation could not create a division between those who had just fled Burma from those who had living in the village for a long time. I had no

choice even though I wanted to be a Thai citizen, however even though I was born in Thailand; I was never issued a Thai Identity Card. I started to blame my parents for not helping me to become an official Thai citizen so I wouldn't have to be a refugee and I could go to a real Thai school and continue on to a university. I didn't want to go back to Burma after witnessing the terrible experiences of the Karen people. We used to travel and work for our survival freely along the Salween River but as the fighting grew closer to us and we became 'refugees' we lost this freedom. Almost every basic human right seemed lost, but I still dreamed of going to a university to gain a higher education and live a peaceful life.

In the past, I told my parents that since I was born in Thailand I was Thai and should therefore be allowed to go to a proper Thai school. But when I realized how my whole family ended up in Thailand I saw that there was no way I could ever be Thai, but I that was, in fact, Karen. Sometimes I felt very confused about my life and found it very difficult to find my own identity. When I told my story to others and when they asked me who I considered myself to be, I would always say, "My parents are from Burma, but I am Karen and was born in Thailand." This was always my answer to all who ever asked me. I felt very bad when I watched a movie and saw animals, so called pets, that had identities, names and actually belonged to someone, but would be safe and returned to their rightful owner if they got lost because of their official identity tags. But for us we did not have official identification to show who we are.

I tried to think of many ways to become "legal" in Thailand, but I could not come up with a solution. In staying in Thailand, I was not recognize as being Thai and to go back to Burma was not an option under the current regime - and of course there was no place to stay in Burma as my parents has been living in Thailand for more than 30 years and all their property inside was gone. But I know I have to be always happy and proud of myself for who I am and never be shy to tell others that I am a refugee.

I wrote this article to express my feelings as well as those of friends who grew up together and experienced similar situations of unrest in losing peace and justice. They lost these freedoms just as I did as a young woman who grew up in Thailand and also eventually became a refugee.

But I believe that for all human beings and not only for people from Burma

alone, peace is very difficult to hold on to, but easier to experience for a short period of time. I hope during my lifetime the day will come again when we can all talk, laugh, go to school and bathe in the Salween River together without any worries and that we will again feel that same sense of peace we experienced during that beautiful time.

Nid Hset Hser



Naw Laydee

Victim of Ego

I myself can be a victim
of the ego.
I am able to build peace
with others when I am less
engulfed in the ego.

My name is Naw Laydee. I am working as an educator and trainer within the Peace Building Project of Women's League of Burma (WLB).

I strongly identify myself as a peace builder. I have analyzed and re-evaluated myself on my abilities to cultivate inner peace from the time I started this peace building work in 2002 to the year 2005. What I know is that all people, including myself, have an ego. I try to be aware of this ego within. How big is my ego and how much have I tried to work on building peace and being beneficial to others?

When we have to work with many others, particularly with our colleagues and co-workers who are both women and men, we would like them to believe as we believe; we would like them to see what we see; and we would like them to listen to and accept the same ideas and perceptions that we hold. I have seen many people become intolerant and even get offensive when others discuss, debate, and disagree with their views and ideas. Sometimes, I have seen people who claim to be working for others become entirely engulfed in their own ego. This can happen due to their desire to have power and influence over others. If this desire for power and influence gets bigger, usually it does not lead to peace.

I believe when one cannot talk and discuss issues peacefully it is because they are overwhelmed with their own egos. And when one cannot accept the reality that others have different ideas and views, one can be swallowed up in their own pride, competitiveness and be unable to acknowledge others, only wishing to be acknowledged while oppressing others. They may be unable to respect others, have no empathy towards others or wish to hurt others. They may have the need to test others and feel as though they should judge and test others solely their

abilities and skills. My personal opinion is that this mostly happens in those who believe that they are the beholders of power.

I myself can be a victim of the ego. I am able to build peace with others when I am less engulfed in the ego, but am less able to when absorbed in my own ego as it affects my ability to tell the truth and I am more prone to become aggressive.

It is easier to say build peace but practically it is even challenging to look at oneself whether we do really have inner peace or not. If I look back to the basic facts and requisites of how a peace builder should be I have to say I am not always hundred percent on the track at all time. Basic requisites that we, as peace builders, should have are: to not taking others' life, to tell the truth, to take the right action, to have the right thought, and to effort ourselves in right earning. Thus we can think before we take action

Everyone has not only peaceful mind but also of aggressive or violent mind. When one is in no peace and has aggressive or violent mind, it is because one is greedy, envious, angry, look down on others, over confidence, not open, and vengeful. When one is able to work for the benefit of many others, have empathy, able to guide others in right direction, and is able to admit one's own fault, one would be led to more peaceful mind. Likewise one has peace within when one can learn from one's own mistake, has just mind, non-exploitative, loves justice and hates injustice, has contentment, and practices open communication.

Based on these abilities and inabilities, there we behave and communicate with others. If we have aggressive and lack peace we react verbally abusive and physically violent. When we are in that situation, our body is like that on fire, unable to see things clearly as we are consumed with anger, sadness and intolerance then we surely react and respond violently. If we are at peace or have peace within we are able to be happy, have satisfaction, trust, respect and value in ourselves. If one is able to maintain all these peaceful acts and mind, one is trusted by many others. In Buddhism, we admit ourselves in front of the Buddha and say that we will not act or behave towards others with physical, verbal and mental wrong-doing. By remembering this, we are taught and directed to be correctly analyze ourselves, not to commit any injustice and to live a peaceful life.

Therefore, building peace is easier said then done. Even when we are once

able to build peace, being mindful to maintain peace within is our daily effort continuously. We need to be daring when we evaluate and analyze ourselves. Only when one can do that to oneself, one will be able to see others justly, positively, and be able to avoid biasness. In return, one will be able to cooperate with others peacefully. As all human beings are egoistic we need to be mindful of this in our daily work and communication with others. Only then, we will be able to build a genuine peaceful society. These are my thoughts and I try to share all my views while wishing more people will join in to build peaceful society.

At personal level, I am able to understand and accept women issue and become active in this field. I wish to give understanding and see empathetically towards other women's life and experience and am interested in improving their skills and empowering them by educating and raising awareness of women and gender issue.

Naw Laydee



Dee Dan Ke Chai **Poisoned Flower**

I do not want to hear the murmuring,
screaming, and fighting noises of
opium users at midnight ever again.

(1)

I grew up in an area where drug and addiction is normal. My father smoked cheroot and drank alcohol every day. My older brother was never a drunkard but was once addicted to opium. The old man who lived next to our house was also smoke cheroot and drank alcohol regularly.

I remembered my father drinking since I was young, however he did not drink alcohol at other people's houses or at bars. If he wanted to drink he would ask me to go and buy it. Even though I was ashamed to buy alcohol for my father, I had to do until I reached age 20. I was so ashamed among my friends when I had to do it and I sometimes even refused to make the purchases.

(2)

It wasn't just my father, my brother also started to drink when he got a bit older. They didn't want to go and buy the alcohol themselves so they would ask, "Little sis... please go and buy alcohol for me. And you can buy a pack of snacks for yourself, too." My brother would always ask me like that and my neighbor, an old man, even began asking me to buy for him, too. I was certainly popular as a booze buyer for my relatives and close family members. There was no type of alcohol or booze shop that I did not know of in my village. Daily, I was there in one of the booze shops with my sling bag. It stopped being strange for me to be in that kind of environment.

Although my father drank, he was good at household chores. My mother was not so good at keeping up with household chores so she made a life on our plantation and in gardening. Father took care of all the seedlings until they grew. He would also prepare fermented and dried mustard, beans and other foods in time for Shwe Phe. He also worked as a carpenter at home and in other people's homes. When it came to working, I was quite impressed by my father. There was almost no job that my father hadn't done. He was very good in both handy

and technical work - he was very creative with handy craft repair almost any kind of machine. Villagers relied upon my father for that sort of service and we depended on him for our household chores.

But my father liked alcohol too much and when he drank he didn't work as hard. And since he wasn't in the habit of drinking at other people's places, other people came to drink at our place. My mother and I were upset every time that happened. But he was a generous man so our family never had any good curry just to ourselves. If we cooked something good his friends, old and young, would come to eat and drink at our house. When they came they would stay on beyond midnight. We reared chicken at home but they all were for the visitors, not the family. Sometimes, they even asked him for money to buy alcohol for them. So many times my mother or I had to clean up all their mess in the early morning. We had to please all the visitors - if not our father would scold us.

(3)

Sometimes, could I say, he had bad blood when he was drunk? When he was in a bad mood or not satisfied with something he would break plates, dishes, bowls, or throw anything in sight. But he did not touch my mother and our mother would not say anything. She was like a doll and lived at my father's wishes. I was so scared when he got violent like that.

All of us lived within the community. When I reached puberty, I began to get very shy and never told my father not to drink because I knew how much he liked it. But the community started talking and sometimes they would say to me, "Why don't you tell your father not to drink. Tell him that it is a waste of money and your mother can't be happy because of it." I wanted to say that to my father, too, but I did not dare. Would I be insulting him if I said something like that since he was my father who raised us since we were young? Father loved me more than my brother and would always put me first. I did tell him to drink less for his health, but only occasionally.

(4)

My brother was the only male child in our family so he was spoiled by my parents. No matter how much money he needed our parents would give it to him. He then became friends with a drug user, an opium eater. My father sent my brother off to work at a Chinese man's house so that he could earn some extra spending money. But the employer did not give him a salary - instead he paid

my brother in the form of drugs (opium). My brother was hooked on that and began stealing by selling lots of tea without my parents' knowledge. Although I knew about this, I did not dare to say anything as my brother threatened me. "You'll be in trouble if you tell them," he'd say.

It got to the point where my brother started doing drugs at home and I wanted to tell my father about it. I found out about his drug use by just casually looking around his bedroom. Sometimes I discovered that my brother even brought Heroin No. 4 back home. However, drug use was so popular at that time that no villager came to tell my parents about his addiction. Parents needed to be on top of everything with their own children and my parents were not very happy.

(5)

Finally, I could not bear it anymore so I handed all of his paraphernalia to my father. Father threw it all into the toilet. But my brother would just go and find more from somewhere else. One day, the Palaung Army (PA) came to take down the list of drug users in our village and my brother was in that list. The PA arrested all the drug users together and put them on a *Zayat**. They were not allowed to come into the village and the families had to go and deliver meals to them. It was very hard for those who had been smoking opium to break their habit. They could not just go off the drugs cold turkey, so were given a little at a time to reduce the intake and then totally come off. But the problem was that that *Zayat* was just three houses apart from our house.

Older addicts could not cope well in the *Zayat* and would make trouble and end up in the *Htait Tone* (stocks or a device used to punish prisoners). However, I was not aware of all of these events as I was away attending school in the town but was teased by my friends when I came back to our village who would chide, "Oh... it's a good timing that you are here. Your brother has entered monkhood, but you'll have to go and give him a lunch box every day." I couldn't figure out what my brother being a monk had to do with me having to send him lunchboxes every day. I only found out later that it was solely drug addicts who were put in the *Zayat*. I did not want my parents to deliver his lunch everyday so I took over the duty. But as I got older, I found this task to be quite shameful. My father was so angry at my brother that he refused to visit him at all. Other parents would even ask him, in addition to their sons, what he needed and wanted to eat. Father was inconsolable as he believed he brought on this trouble by spoiling him too

* *Zayat* is a wayside public rest house or open air building.

much. I pitied many of the others in the Zayat too as some of them were locked-up in the stocks, some could not bare the life there and just laid there, while some simply sat in the pond. I could hear their voices of murmur and some died.

(6)

One night, they split into two groups and got into a huge fight. Everyone in the village was armed with sticks and knives and tried to get at one another. I got so panicked when I heard their shouting and yelling because I knew my brother was included in the fighting. I asked my father to go and check on the situation but he refused to do so - saying 'let him die.' My mother was also very sick. I did not know who to turn to and I did not dare to go to my uncle's either. That night I was so worried. The next day, we found out that seven of them including my brother were arrested and the ward chairperson came to tell my father that they would all be sent away. Father was adamant and would not budge an inch. It was my mother who tried to get money to bail my brother out by begging the chairperson of our village. During that time, drug users went underground for a while, but I heard that the whole village now was on drug.

These were all of my own experiences. I lived among white and black opium smokers and drunkards on the daily basis. As time went by, addiction became just part of normal life. There was nothing happening within the development of our village and for the progress of the youth. At this very moment, all of the men in our village are hooked on either alcohol or drugs. "If we looked and went around with a pack of meal to find for a man with no drug or alcohol habit in our village, our meal would get rotten but would not find any man in that matter".

(7)

A family struggling with drug addiction could not be a happy one and would have not seen any improvement. Previously, I could safely say that my family was quite well-off, but gradually our family business deteriorated. My brother was also unable to provide for his own drug habit, let alone provide for the family. Poor mother, she was not granted any moments of happiness because of my father and brother. I could say the whole family was under pressure and problems further increased as financial matters deteriorated. It was my own family that lost face within the community and we were no longer respected by the community.

One of my neighbors died while shooting up heroin. Drug users or addicts had

to pay fines to the arresting authorities and some went into the forest to hide. There were the consequences of drug habit. By evaluating all these factors, it was obvious that drugs give nothing but suffering to the people. Drugs are a dangerous enemy that a family, a suburb, a town, a village and even the nation were unable to face.

(8)

Thus, serious action and punishment needs to be taken for those growing opium, producing and selling drugs. Strong action needs to be taken to prevent people from taking drug. It is the duty of a nation to eradicate this drug problem.

Although the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is claiming that the rate of opium growing has decreased, the rate of smoking and selling opium is definitely not going down. Just arresting opium smokers will not stop the problem. The growers and the sellers need to be stopped as well and only then we can own a happy future.

I do not want to hear the murmuring, screaming, and fighting noises of opium users at midnight ever again. I would like to live in a happy family. Just as I am drug-free, I do not want anyone to be affected and poisoned by the drugs and I would like to urge and plead to everyone to take action to prevent this problem on an individual level.

Dee Dan Ke Chai
22/02/2007



Shayi Ningja

A Change at a Corner of My Life

We cannot be successful
in changing other people's attitudes
for a peaceful society
if we do not change ourselves.

I was a person who did not wish to hear the word 'peace.' Because in our country, a cease fire agreements between the military government and the armed ethnic groups were referred to as 'peace'.

I knew for sure that a cease fire did not mean peace at all. At a time, I was not able to answer what the meaning of peace really was. However, a friend of mine and I had a chance to attend the 'Women as Peace Builders' training organized by the Women's League of Burma (WLB) in 2002 as two of us were selected by our organization.

We met other ethnic sisters from eleven different organizations and I have to say it was a time when nearly all ethnic groups of Burma came together. It was the very first time that I had a chance meet, talk, discuss and become close friends with sisters from other ethnic groups. I was very happy as this would be a rare opportunity or would never have happened if I was in Burma. The training period was a month long and at the beginning of that training, I was not able to really sense what peace was truly about. But after one week, two weeks, and then in three weeks time, I realized that the true meaning of peace was not the 'peace' that I had previously believed.

What surprised me most was that I, who hated the word 'peace' from my guts, now wished to become a peace builder. After undergoing a month long training, I could see several changes in myself. Firstly, my view on the Burman (Bamar) people changed. My previous view was due to the several decades-long problem or conflict between the Bamars and the other ethnic nationalities. Time after time, military dictators ruled our country with their "Great Bamar Policy," which involved 'Burmanization' – a practice that looks down on and discriminates against ethnic nationalities. No one could really deny the fact that the military dictators used discriminatory and oppressive policies toward ethnic nationalities. That was why ethnic nationalities held the view that all *Bamars**

* *The majority ethnic group of Burma.*

are bad and this view is still embedded in our mind. I myself was not steered clear of this view either. Before we got to know other perspectives better, we had our own fixed presumption and prejudgment about all Bamars. Our distrust and suspicion of them were deeply rooted in us. However, in this training, I came to see clearly that it was not all Bamars that had Great (Maha) Bamarclade in or Burmanization tactic in their minds. It was the dictators who used this policy and this had created the animosity and divided among us.

The reason I could see this point of view now was that there were also sisters of ethnic Bamar in the training. As diverse ethnic nationalities, we were able to share our stories and feelings and had a chance to listen to what our Bamar sisters' feelings and experiences were, as well. They said that although they were not the ones with the Maha Bamar mindset and intention to discriminate, they were uncomfortable living among us as they were of Bamar ethnicity. I had a chance to listen their feelings and views and was also able to share their feelings now that I better understood them. Since this experience of sharing, I do not hold any presumption and prejudgment over any ethnic group.

I am now out of my usual, own ethnic box and able to see everyone just as human beings. From this one month long training, I learned that if we do not discriminate against one another based on race, nationality, religion, view, ideology, place, belief, color, class and education, we will be able to live in peace and harmony. I also learned that if we respect one another and if we have justice in this world, we will be able to live in peace and harmony as well. But I know with this new understanding we will live in peace without conflict. Yet, we are able to solve problems together as we have trust, understanding, respect, and can acknowledge differences in and amongst each other. From my own experiences, I can say that we can work together even though we have differences.

Another thing to examine is the 'win/lose' concept. We are led to believe in this win/lose situation and to always be competitive. If we compete, there will be a winner and a loser, as well. We are used to the conviction that the loser lost because she or he is stupid, naive, not clever or not good enough. However, just because we lose, it does not necessarily mean we are stupid. What I became to understand is that there are norms and standards that society places upon us and this is why we only see ourselves in a certain ways. I am therefore determined that I will never ever encourage any sort of competitiveness in the future during

the rest of my life. Even before, I was never impressed by or encouraged to take part in competitions like soccer, wrestling and boxing matches. I have never been able take delight and smile at someone who has lost and suffered. Therefore, I am even more confident now that I will not encourage such competition.

However, one exception to this rule is that I used to love watching war movies. I would always be on the main character's side. When I was young, I liked movies like Rambo and actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. These movies made me feel like I had to fight the injustices done after the 'cease fire' agreements between my own ethnic group and the military dictatorship. I used to think that it would be good to have weapons and human power to fight back the military government. However, I do not even watch war movies any more. From these movies, we only learn to rely on physical violence and power in the face of conflict. From these movies, we do not learn to solve problems with wisdom. Using violent means may have solved some problems in an immediate time frame, but I now clearly understand that the circle of violence will never end.

Building peace is not about taking in and swallowing everything that others tell us to say or do. It is about being able to express our feelings, our views and how and the having the ability to discuss the impact the actions of others have on us. We should then be able to openly discuss what we would like a situation to be and try our best explain to our perspectives to others. These are all ways of building peace through non-violent means.

We are now better at deeply listening to others and in expressing our feelings and views. Previously, we would just confront whatever problem we faced when we were still very angry without giving any thought to the other side and not considering whether they were ready to talk or not. All we wanted was to confront and solve the problem right there, right now. However, we now understand that whether we are right or wrong, we should wait for others to be prepared to interact. I believe I have matured a lot since the peace building training.

Previously, I only considered that peace could be made possible by someone else and that building peace was possible only at the state or national level. I thought that only the government, revolutionary groups, political organizations and politicians were able to work to achieve peace and that it was primarily their responsibility. This view caused me to hold grudge over others and since I put

all responsibilities on them I became very frustrated when there was no peace. I suffered with that frustration. However, I realize now that instead of getting frustrated by others I must change myself and build peace within. Instead of worrying over the big things, I understand now that it is better to start small ways, individually. And it is important not to be just an audience member, but to participate, be part of things and create change within myself. I recognize now that we should start changing small things, one at a time, in our own capacity and then do our best to convince others to make changes for the betterment for our society.

We do not have to wait to build peace as we can start within ourselves on an individual level and then within our own family – stretching out to the community, wider society and then to a national level. I see that as the years pass by and as we try to get rid of this military dictatorship, we turn into those exact people we would like to go away. We can observe dictator-like people in our society, and even in our own political and women's organizations, as well as in the armed groups. If this mindset of dictatorship is rooted in all of us then how can we get rid of those military dictators ruling our country? Perhaps, we may be able to bring down one dictator but there will always be more to come. That is why it is important to make changes within ourselves if we want genuine and long lasting peace. We cannot be successful in changing other people's attitudes for a peaceful society if we do not change ourselves. Without this inner change we will never be able to taste the real peace. I am determined to continue working as a peace builder in effort to convince others to become more peaceful in our society.

It has been four years now since I joined the Women as Peace Builders group and joined the other sisters to work for peace building. There is nothing in my life that is more fulfilling or makes me happier than working with these sisters. We are able to sense and achieve peace within ourselves and among us because we work together with love, kindness, respect and understanding. All of these changes took place in my life after that training. I cannot compare the value of understanding peace and working for peace with others to anything in this world. I am determined to continue to work with others to achieve a future, peaceful Burma.

Shayi Ningja

peace building is not only very useful
for us on the individual level,
but also for the society as a whole.

My name is Nann Zune Moe and I am a Pa'O woman. In 2002, my dream to get a taste of university life and education was realized after graduating from high school (grade 10).

I have two friends who also finished secondary school and chose to study the same major I did at our university. One of them is my childhood friend who was like a sister of my own while growing up and we have never parted since we were born. I also got to know another friend who I met after graduation. We got to know each other much better after our high school years - she is a nice, good hearted person. We are quite like-minded and get on pretty well with one another, so I love her the same way I love my childhood friend. I have no problem dealing with the give and take of friendship and all three of us love each other as we are always together wherever we go. It was very happy time for all of us.

As we enjoyed our friendship, examination time of our first year soon approached and all three of us passed the exam satisfactorily. But before the exam results were out I heard the news about my post-matriculation friend. The news was that she had left for Thailand. She did not tell us she would be going to Thailand in person, but instead she left a letter for us. We were a bit sad since we were now short of one friend to go to school with.

In the last semester of our first year at university, only my childhood friend and I were left to spend time together. Even then we were not as so close as we used to be as she moved out to stay in a dormitory which was a bit of a distance from my house. During that time, I was also busy with both work and school, so I could not even go to school full time and regularly. I would only go to school when I had to attend the tutorials. I became better acquainted to friends who lived near my house but who were studying a different major. During this time, my childhood friend and I met only in the university on rare occasion. When out

of school, I was busy and now had new friends to go around with. As a result, distance between my old friend and I grew.

It was soon time for us to sit for last of our first year exams. Although we saw each other in the exam together at the beginning of the test sessions, my childhood friend did not complete all of the exams. She left campus for Thailand secretly. She did not tell me anything and nor leave a letter for me specifically. I only found out only when some of her friends who lived with her in the same dormitory told me about her departure. I found it very hard to let go of, but felt very sad that she left me without saying anything - not even leaving a letter for me. However, I continued to sit and complete the exams even though I had to constantly control myself from crying, as she was my childhood friend and did not have guts not to tell me about her plans. Later, I found out that my childhood friend actually left for Thailand to study at a better university with the other friend we used to spend a lot with.

I assumed that all my friends took their own path and as I branched out, I got to know what a being university student was really like. I have to say I quite enjoyed the university life. However, I started to wonder whether the university was able to offer me anything more valuable than having fun and I felt a bit like I was wasting my time. So, I rarely went to school during my second year of university education and spent more time working at home. My attendance became worse than that of my first year, but I also wanted to obtain a valuable education and knowledge just like my other friends who left for Thailand.

I sat through the second year's first semester exams with my mind wondering. Suddenly, I got the good news that my post-matriculation friend came back for a visit. I missed both of them terribly and wanted to see her badly. I also wanted to find out about my childhood friend. I visited her and asked her why she left without saying anything, but soon began to understand the reason she could not tell anyone of her plans. After that, my other friends and I also decided to go to Thailand together.

I reached to Thailand in July 2004. I was amazed to hear and learn about all this new information that I had never anticipated discovering. For the first time, I became a part of Pa'O Women's Union (PWU) as an intern. I am now a member of PWU. I was eager to reunite with my childhood and other close friend who had previously left me. At that time, she was attending a training a month long

training on 'Women as Peace Builders,' sponsored and held by the Women's League of Burma (WLB).

The word 'peace' intrigued me because for me 'peace' meant armed groups surrendering their weapons. That was how I understood the meaning of peace. I then wondered what a peace building training would be like. I tried to reason and find relevance to that training with the meaning I knew, but to no avail I could not find an answer. I became more eager to find out about this training as the time approached and began asking many questions. I eagerly waited for my friend who was in that training to come back from the session so that I could ask her my questions. And when my friend came back to the PWU office, I was extremely happy to meet her again - as well as being pleased to finally have the opportunity to ask her all about the peace training.

I asked my friend, "What is peace building training, really?" My friend, recalling her feelings said, "This training is like none other I have been to. It is full of warmth, openness and understanding, shared among one another. We also learned many lessons that inspired us so much that we were moved to share our own experiences." And she also briefly explained "In this training, we learned about building inner peace, about three different types of powers, conflict resolution and many other issues." She did not tell me many details, but I became even more intrigued about peace building after hearing of these topics that were taught in the training. I asked no further questions but contemplated the topics and the meaning of peace. Unclear about it at all, I wondered why these specific topics were taught in the peace building training. I wanted to find out more about peace building.

I soon became very lucky as I had a chance to attend a week-long basic training on peace building in Mae Hong Son during October, 2006. I was so happy to be able to attend the training and very interested in learning everything. I was also able to finally find out more about the peace and its true meaning.

I have to say I was lucky twice. I learned good news after that first week of peace building training that I would be able to attend another month long training in November and it would be the best, as it was 'Training for Trainers for Peace Building.'

During that one month long training, trainers were not only excellent at

facilitating and leading discussions, but were also great at brain storming and provoking us to think. I had a chance to meet more experienced participants from previous trainings - as well as the opportunity to meet new participants, just like me. I was surprised to find out that the WLB has a 'Women as Peace Builders Team within the organization. During the training period, I learned in-depth about peace building and other related topics. I learned, and now believe, that peace building is not only very useful for us on the individual level, but also for the society as a whole.

This is why I love and enjoy peace building even more so. And this is the reason that I am now involved in the Peace Team which gives trainings, workshops and provides discussion groups on peace building.

I believe that our Women as Peace Builders Team can be part of the greater effort to bring the peace, which is desired by so many people, to our society. I am very satisfied and proud to be a part of this team.

Nann Zune Moe



Shayi Ningja

Innocent Victims of Fight

“Do we really have to be parted
this way? Is there anyone
who can help us?”
They called out like that ...

I get so exhausted when I try and count the years that our country has been fighting its civil wars as this number often even exceeds the years of a person's life expectancy. If we look into the root causes of the civil wars we can see ethnic nationalities being discriminated against, disrespected, unacknowledged and denied equal rights. The result of these injustices is that ethnic nationalities take up armed struggles in effort to obtain basic freedoms and rights.

After forcing colonies out, many new nations appeared after the Second World War (WW II). At this time, our country Burma was a new nation state that just obtained independence. During the national liberation movement, nationalism was devised and after independence it was designed to ensure the rights and freedoms of the ethnic people. Thus, nationalism, patriotism and unity among nationalities became generated within. However, radical or extreme patriotism can be formed when people become obsessed with loving one's own nationality. My mother retold some stories on how radical people can get. At the beginning of the revolution, both men and women of ethnic nationalities were only allowed to wear traditional dress. They were not allowed to wear contemporary Burman dress, and if they were caught wearing it the rebel soldiers would ask them to take off. One time, my mother and her friends were walking along the jungle pathway coming home from the market when they bumped into a group of rebel soldiers. One of her friends was wearing Batik sarong and was asked to take this off by the rebel soldiers. She was terrified and was so humiliated that she cried all the way home as her friends tried to cover her up with their blouses and tops. This is when the idea and mindset to hate and not to trust other nationalities became ingrained in the name of loving one's own nationality or ethnic group.

During this time, those who married into a different nationality were considered to be unpatriotic, traitors and untrustworthy. Women who married Burmans faced many problems and were shunned by the community. Some strongly patriotic fathers took extreme measure by kicking out or even killing their son-in-laws who were of a different ethnic group. Finally, due to long civil wars,

ethnic groups no longer trusted one another. They became suspicious of one another as well.

Even though our country is populated by many different ethnic groups, diversity stopped being respected, appreciated and acknowledged. There was no equality. If people were discriminated against and oppressed, there were deep, root causes of problem and conflict. Our country's armed conflict is very complicated.

I would like to share my life experiences regarding the affects on women due to armed conflict in our country. As women, we became *Myayzar Pin** during this civil war. As women, we not only became the targets of the military government's attempt to avenge the armed rebel soldiers, but we also became mere objects for entertainment or wives of armed rebel soldiers. There are many women who were killed due to suspicion from both sides of the conflict, but it is not possible to know exactly how many of these women were murdered due to lack of record keeping and documentation.

I am a woman who was born into a family belonging to an armed rebel group. My mother was summoned with a letter to join the armed rebel group while she was still attending school. If she chose to refuse, she would be arrested, tied-up with rope and forced against her will to join the group. So my own grandmother had to accompany her to the jungle where the group lived. My mother got married to my father as she worked as a teacher for the armed rebels. However, there are many other women who faced worse situations than my mother.

One of my current friends was also a revolutionary. There was an officer in her group who had a wife, but who was allowed to marry another woman because his wife was not in good health. One day, his senior officer summoned all women in the group and made them to line up for him. He was given chance to choose one woman from that line to be his new wife. It was my friend who was chosen and she began to cry uncontrollably as he pointed his finger to her. She was forced to obey the order and forced to marry this man. She is with this man to this day and there are many more stories like this.

My mother told me another story about a woman from her village whose life

* *Myayzar Pin* is used and described in Burmese to imply women as innocent victims. This usage comes from Burmese saying and rooted from the story of "Only *Myayzar Pin* are destroyed in the two buffaloes fight." *Myayzar Pin* means *Bermuda grass*.

ended sadly. This woman was a school teacher and very intelligent. She was beautiful and sociable, as well. Military government troops came in and out of my mother's village, as well as rebel soldiers who secretly entered the village from time to time. Sometimes, there was fighting between these two groups. The stationed officers from government troops courted the teacher. Although the teacher would not accept anyone's proposal, they did stop trying to woo her. Soon rebel soldiers in the jungle from her own ethnic group became suspicious of her. They came to arrest her and then killed her. There are many other women who have been killed by the government troops.

A friend of my mother's was also cruelly killed by the troops. Her father was a soldier from a revolutionary group. One day, her mother went to another village, but when as she was coming back she heard that government troops had entered and looted the village. As she entered the village, the government soldiers arrested her. They then gang-raped her before killing her and finally hung her by a rope on a tree. This was all done by the government troops. Even pregnant women would not be spared if troops bumped into them. They would spear or shoot to kill the women after raping them. I had seen from my father's photos newly born babies who were pounded to death in the rice-pounding motor.

I witnessed another sad story and get goose bumps each time I recall it because I cannot forget the vivid scene in my eyes. A man and a woman from an armed group became lovers and they loved each other very much. During those days, any deserters would be killed if they were caught escaping. I did not know exactly what the problem was, but the two lovers tried to run away from the group. They were caught by the group and sentenced to death. I was so upset upon hearing this news because the hill where the group lived was not so far from our own house. The two lovers were blind-folded with red cloth and were brought to the 'killing slope' by the other soldiers. All along the way, they shouted and screamed one another's name and asked for help saying "Do we really have to be parted this way? Is there anyone who can help us?" They called out like that all the way to the slope until I could no longer see them.

Women in Burma face violence from both sides – from both rebel groups and the government troops within this armed conflict. Ultimately, the root causes of this violence are due to the vast political problems in our country.

Shayi Ningja

The government is responsible for his death. And those who planted the landmines are as guilty as the government.

By writing an article for this book, I would like to share one of my life experiences that I believe is filled with the most difficult, rough and scary of situations and also full of sadness. These events took place in 2002, in a small village within the Tavoyan area. It is a true story about six young people who only wanted for a better future.

Thailand has become one the most popular tourist destinations and as a result human smugglers have mushroomed everywhere. One day, a smuggler came to our village and persuaded several youth to go and work in Thailand. He said that there was a pineapple factory which needed as many workers as possible and that it paid well while providing a regular standard of living, gave medical care, and would arrange for workers card to get legal work permits. He also said that the employer was quite nice and took responsibility for all his workers. He added that those who got a chance to work in Thailand would gain both valuable experience and knowledge.

One of my friends told us the news of this opportunity. We eagerly gathered around and discussed it. All my friends had already passed the high school level education, but our parents faced too much economic difficulty to send us on to further education. Since we did not have chance to continue our education, our thoughts went to earning money and decided it would be a good idea to go along with the smuggler into Thailand. We imagined that we would work for about two years in Thailand. Our aim was simply to work there, earn some money and then to come back to Burma to later study. Thus, we left for Thailand.

At the time, we were quite happy with the thought and prospect of the next two years. Although we did not know how we would go about our journey, we were simply happy and built a dream home in air. There was six of us all together – Yay Chan, Soe Soe, Kyi Thein, Than Than and Muu Muu. We had to pay the smuggler 70,000 Kyat for the trip. He said we also had to pay another 4,000

Baht on arrival in Thailand. However, one member of our group, Yay Chan, had no parents and only two brothers to look toward for support. He lived with his mother's sister and did not have money to go to Thailand. So I was the one who guaranteed a loan for him. He, too, planned to go back and study after working for two years in Thailand – we both had the same aim.

When we started our journey there was twenty-six people all together in our group. We started our journey in the very early morning and walked through the forest for two days straight. In our group, Yay Chan was the youngest and was also very good at teasing people. But everyone was happy and did not get tired of his teasing as he joked with others all along the way. The next day that we continued our walk through the forest five people from another group of Chin ethnic joined us. Along the way, Yay Chan followed the group while teasing a young Chin girl.

As we climbed up another hill, we heard a strange noise around eleven o'clock in the morning. We thought that it must have been a wild pig, however, when we arrived on top of that hill we saw Yay Chan lying on the ground with a landmine-inflicted injury. Yay Chan urged, "Please come and help me. Please get me up!" He looked at his wounded leg and frenziedly said, "Our group is very unlucky. Our hopes are all destroyed now. It's all gone and now I am crippled!" He then pleaded for us not to go ahead with our journey, but to instead head back to our village as it was still not too far off. I did not know what to do as I was overwhelmed with fear while looking at the now legless Yay Chan. All I knew to do was to cry and cry. Soon the people lagging behind us caught up and the smuggler asked unsympathetically what we wanted to do next. He continued on to say that we did not have much time and that we had to make a decision immediately. And then he asked, "What are you going to do with this patient? Will you leave him behind or will you bring him back home?" But I wondered how we could possibly leave him behind in this state? How could he ask such a question?

I got irritated and taunted him by brusquely asking, "What about you? What would you like to do?" He replied, "We'll go ahead of course." We all said, "Never mind, we won't go ahead, we'll bring this patient back home and send him to whatever clinic is nearest - but we need money for that so give us our money back."

The smuggler gave 30,000 Kyat to us by saying “Here, this is all for you six people.” However, we had each handed him 70,000 Kyat, but he would only return to us this small amount.

On the way back, we were very afraid of both Burmese and Karen armies. However, we decided that whoever we bumped into we would surrender to and that we would beg them to provide treatment for Yay Chan. We assumed that every troop must have at least one medic and whoever they were they would not just ignore us.

Yay Chan stepped on a land mine around ten o’clock in the morning. We carried him all the way back by taking turns in supporting all of his weight. Along the entire the way, he just talked and talked saying, “I feel so bad for you guys. You cannot end your journey just because of me.” He was in so much pain that the five of us had to rotate in carefully carrying him on a blanket we made into hammock which was completely soaked in blood. All along the way, flies hovered around us because of this blood. We had very little water and only dared to drink it when we become extremely thirsty. Muu Muu asked me to give some water to Yay Chan, but he refused to take it saying we needed it as we were the exhausted ones for carrying him.

We decided to rest for a while when we spotted a small hut in the field. It was about six o’clock in the evening and dusk was approaching in the forest. Sadly, Yay Chan finally gave in and died there. But before he died he said to me, “I cannot pay you back for things that you’ve done for me and I won’t be able to take care of my brothers too.”

I felt both sad and bitter as the thought of the smuggler crossed my mind. There was only the sound of all of us crying and we did not stop for quite some time. Then someone reminded us that we should bury the body. We only had a small knife, so were only able to burrow out about a six to ten inch-deep spot to place his body in. At this point, around nine o’clock in the evening, our bodies were totally smeared with blood. We cleaned up at a small stream nearby and left our soiled belongings there before beginning our walk back home. No one talked on the way. There was no more energy in us.

We reached a village around midnight and requested to spend the night at a house located near village entrance. The old man who was a house owner asked

us where we were going. We did not dare to say the whole truth so we just said we took off from home to go to Thailand, but had to turn around after realizing we had no money left and that we had been duped. The old man cooked for us and it was about two in the morning before we finished dinner. We were able to take the first bus back home which was at four in the morning, so no one thought of going to sleep. At 4 in the morning, all of us took the bus to get back home and since we had very little money, we did not eat anything else during the long ride back home.

All five of us reached the village around nine in the evening the next day. We all dispersed and went back to our respective homes. We told our families that the situation en route to Thailand was not good, therefore we returned home, so our families did not ask much. However, we wondered how long could we hide the truth about our situation?

Soon, Yay Chan's aunty came around to ask me of his whereabouts since he had not come home with the rest us. I stood speechless before her and did not know how to tell her of the truth. The other four tried to avoid revealing the situation, as they did not want to tell his aunt by themselves. I was upset at them for leaving this matter with me. Finally, I told my mother about the tragedy so that I would be better prepared and able to convey the truth to his aunt. But his aunt only blamed me for his death and said she wanted to get his body back.

She demanded that I bring her to where his body was buried. "Why did you bury him? My nephew really wanted to study and that was why he went to Thailand. I allowed him to go because of that reason!" She kept on blaming me but I did not say anything back to her. I let her talk and mourn as I understood what she was feeling.

Despite the tragedy, we still wanted to work, save up money and then to come back to Burma to continue our education. But if we had an alternate way to pay for our studies or if there were ways for us to continue our education by government support, we would not have chosen to go to Thailand at all. At the time, I had no idea we could get support or financial aid to continue our education by applying for scholarships or getting involved in the government's education program. I only learned about this only when I discovered the Tovayan Women's Union (TWU) and became a member of the organization.

Readers of this article may be very familiar with how severely information is blocked from people in our country. If we were able to gain access on information about other educational opportunities and if our own government tried to provide an education for us, I am sure my friend Yay Chan would not have had to die. But I would not put these events on Karma. Even though Yay Chan was badly injured, if he would have received some form of treatment he would still be alive. He died from extreme loss of blood. Therefore, his death is not due to Karma but because of bad system that our country has.

The government is responsible for his death. And those who planted the landmines are as guilty as the government. The number of deaths due to landmines is not few and all of these bad and unfortunate things have happened because of a bad system. Our country fails in so many ways. We must save our own country from falling deep into more troubles and I would like to remind each and every one of us that we are all responsible for saving our own country. I would like to call on everyone to participate in and work toward bringing down this bad system.

This article is about my own experience and I hope that some readers understand and share my feelings. Shouldn't we be able to read and write if a country's development relies upon the literacy and abilities of each one of us?

Pearl



Naw Zipporah Sein

A Dream of a Life without War

Power, pride, and hatred
will never create
a world or a country
that lives in peace and justice.

I grew up in Burma, so-called Myanmar, a country ruled by one of the world's cruelest and longest-lasting dictatorships. I am Karen, the second largest ethnic nationality in Burma with a population of about 8 to 10 million. Like other ethnic nationalities in Burma, the Karen have been fighting for their rights, freedom, self-determination, and democracy for more than fifty years.

The Karen live mostly in the mountainous eastern border region of Burma and the central delta areas. We are simple people, with strong families, who place a high value on hospitality and desire to live peacefully. But we have suffered systematic persecution, torture, exploitation, displacement, and death, including the death of our culture, the most vital part of our daily lives. Our Karen schools have been taken from us, controlled by force and destroyed, and we are not allowed to learn our own language in Burmese schools, because of the national policy of "Burmanisation."

The Burmese army is present throughout our land and controls our people through forced labor, forced relocation, rape, torture, killing, looting, and destruction of property. Our fields, crops, and rice barns are burned down and our villages as well. Our villagers are deliberately starved and regularly beaten, and the women raped and killed with impunity. Rape by the Burmese army, or SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) officers and troops is such a popular weapon in these violent encounters that, as women, we have become the target of the war

We Karen women have lost all our rights—the right to an education, the right to health and food, even the right to live. Our children are born under attack; small babies do not have the right to cry, because they might reveal the whereabouts of their family

I grew up in a rural area, a war zone, and I have never felt secure. All my life I

have been an internally displaced person; even now, living in a refugee camp, I still don't feel safe. My family had to move from place to place all the time; we could not settle anywhere for more than two years. We had to keep moving until finally we got to the refugee camp on the Thai–Burma border in February 1995.

My mother was responsible for the survival of her eight children, while my father traveled in the struggle for freedom. My mother is a strong woman. She kept us alive through her knowledge of traditional herbal medicines, because we had no clinic or hospital, health workers, doctors or nurses, even medicines. We were lucky that my mother knew so much, for her skill prevented us from dying; many other children did die.

My mother always explained why we had to live a life of terror and fear. She said the day would come when "Peace and Justice" would be achieved and we would live peacefully and happily ever after. We children strongly believed this; we waited for the day when "Peace and Justice" would come to our country. And we are still longing and waiting for it.

I was born in the area of the widest and most serious armed conflicts, an area where thousands of women still suffer everyday. I was a schoolteacher in this war zone for twenty years. As a schoolteacher, what I found most difficult to talk about with my students was peace and security. It sounded unrealistic to them as well as to me, when war was all we knew. In the middle of almost every academic term, we had to close down the school when the Burmese government sent its troops to attack our areas. My schoolboys had to go to the front lines to defend the women, children, and elderly in the villages. Not only have I witnessed war against civilians, but, as a teacher, I lost many students to it.

All these years I have dreamed about a life without war, a life that would be secure and safe. I think this must be very pleasant. I have already tried to bury many wounds inside me and I now look forward only to what may happen next. It is my sincere and heartfelt wish that my people and I will be able to live a life without war, a life of peace and security. I feel we have a long way to go; peace is still a very distant dream for us.

Women's definition of peace goes beyond the mere end of war and fighting. We want a genuine peace, a peace with justice, a peace where there is no violence

or domestic violence. Even if there is no war, if there is still domestic violence, women cannot be happy with this kind of peace.

I believe that unless we can increase the participation of our women in the current political movement at the decision making level, we will not be able to contribute our best capabilities toward our peace building process. Because during all these long years of civil war, we have been vulnerable, we have suffered, and we have never been the cause of war. We women have the skills to work with men for peace and to make plans to bring it about.

I personally believe that all parties involved are responsible to bring the terror to an end through forgiveness. I strongly support the words of Desmond Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1984, who said there can be "No future without forgiveness." Power, pride, and hatred will never create a world or a country that lives in peace and justice. We need solidarity from all our sisters in the world; we need support for our women's efforts at co-operation, reconciliation, and peace building.

Naw Zipporah Sein



Nang Shwe Ain

Life of River Current

When I saw my classmates
playing and skipping rope,
I too wanted to join in, but I could
only be part of audience.

Our family is one of the many families in Burma who are extremely poor. I have six siblings all together. My brothers could not continue their education as school fees and costs are too high and they have had to help my parents to earn a living.

When I was in 5th grade a railway track in Southern Shan State was being built and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) called upon people to work as laborers. Because we had to give our time to the government project we faced the problem of not being able to eat regularly. We also had to pay a ‘forced taxation’ for land that we didn’t even own. Although we did not have enough rice to consume for ourselves, we still had to buy rice from others to sell back to the government. Besides, commodity prices got so high that our family situation got worse day by day. Thus, we were not able to buy rice which is our staple food let alone have furniture in our home. You would probably ask what did we eat and how did we survive? Well, I will explain how we ate and what we did to survive.

Traditionally, we use wheat for making snacks. Everyone knows that to make wheat edible one must first mill it into a powder. At this time, we had to cook wheat to eat instead of rice. But the difference between rice and wheat is that wheat cannot be prepared as readily as rice. It is a very time consuming process. Because you have to pound it first, it takes a long time to cook, therefore I had to get up quite early. Even then it was not always fully prepared by the first light of the morning.

At first, I could not eat the wheat at all because it was so hard to swallow. My youngest brother was only three-years old and he could not eat it so we had to buy rice for him. Sometimes, I could not cope anymore so I stole my brother’s rice. The feeling that I had when I ate rice was like eating “gold and silver powder” because it was so delicious. Although I did not like eating wheat, life

taught me to get used to it.

What I still remember to this day, is that I would always be late for school as I had to partake in the time consuming task of cooking wheat. Teachers would scold me for being late. So later, I did not even eat my breakfast and instead just ran to school.

In our society and communities, although we are the same human beings, we have always faced discrimination due to our social status. At school, I suffered discrimination from teachers because I did not have money to buy gifts for them or bring them tuition money. For all those various reasons, the teachers ignored me and did they care much about me.

But that's not all. As a school rule, we had to wear school uniforms (green and white) every day. If we did not wear them we had to pay a fine. So I had to wear my brother's old school sarong. Since it was really old its fabric became weak and developed holes everywhere. And since we did not have enough money to buy a new school green sarong, I had to tie it on with a rubber band and walk carefully (just like the way a prim and proper woman walks). Furthermore, as a rule, students had to participate in the school's sport activities. When I saw my classmates playing and skipping rope, I too wanted to join in, but I could only be part of audience. Things just were not on my side in this situation. Since our father had to struggle so much to put meals in our stomach I did not have the heart to ask for a new sarong.

In our country, you can go to school and study only if you have enough money to pay for everything - so I had to be very careful. During school semesters, there were other fees in addition to tuition fees, such as honorarium fees for teachers. But I was not able to pay all those fees on time so the teachers would scold me and my parents were called upon to give reason why we were late for the payments. But I did not give up. I went to school regularly. My mother at that time had a young child and would sometimes ask me to take care of my brother. Sometimes, she would ask me to take days off from school to take care of him so she could work more. However, I refused to miss classes and my mother did not push me to miss them either.

I was not the cleverest at school, but I studied hard and regularly passed each grade, every year. But my parents took to suffering in life and worked hard to

send me to school. I understand very well that I will never be able to pay back to my parents all that they have done – their loving-kindness, their love and their love for me in this life.

Now I am happy. I cannot thank the Pa’O Women’s Union (PWU) enough for giving me the education I have always wanted and knowledge that I have always yearned for. I am also determined to pass on this education and knowledge to my fellow Pa’O sisters. I have pledged to myself that I will work hard to bring peace into the lives of all my sisters and brothers who have not had the opportunity experience what have been able to find in this little peaceful world of my own.

Nang Shwe Ain



Noung Naung **Thing That I Want and Need**

Before I could change the whole country,
I began to realize that
what needed to be changed
was myself.

It can be said that I got involved in this peace building work because I used to get so upset, angry and bitter every time I got to hear the word “peace”.

While I wanted to do something to change bad system of Burma I was contacted to attend training by the Kachin Women’s Association (KWA). It suited me best as the requirement was to be able to share this training back in Burma. However, I almost felt like wanting to turn back when I saw the title of training as “Women as Peace Builders”.

During that time, my understanding of peace and peace organizations meant a cease fire agreement between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the revolutionary groups. By claiming peace and tranquility of the state, these groups would still stop anyone on the streets, roads or checkpoints and abuse their power and they would sell our country’s natural resources as if it their own private business. So I did not wish to hear ‘peace’ as I understood the meaning of it in that light.

However, the meaning of peace that I learned in the training was nothing like the way I understood it previously. Each day of the training I became more interested in the topic. First, I could see myself clearly as well as the changes of my mind and attitude. Before I could change the whole country, I began to realize that what needed to be changed was myself. I realized clearly that if I did not like injustice, oppression and discrimination against me then I should not do this to others or should be mindful of this. I began to feel satisfied and pleased with myself when I could learn about methods and ways of how to build peace within ourselves, within our own family and within our community and society. I appreciate and understand that this learning is beneficial not only for myself but also for my family, my community and my country.

After the training, I went back to my county and gave a training as a means of disseminating what I had learned about peace. Then I recognized that I needed

to know more about this. I became very keen to learn more about peace building and to be able to work for it.

Then I received a second peace building training. I was able to fully appreciate 'peace' as I went on receiving as well as giving back to young students and people. I wanted to learn more and more. I could fully understand that it is very important to have peace within or inner peace if we are to work for other people and for our country. We would not be able to give peace building training to others if we do not have peace within us. I began to possess the ability of looking and observing at the root cause of a problem or conflict when I faced it. The day that I practiced peace building was the most invaluable and beautiful day of my life's events.

As a working peace builder I observed and examined every thing that I went through and experienced and I began to realize the growth and improvement in my mental ability, intellectual ability and morals. With that, I could appreciate that peace is the thing I wanted and needed most for myself and my community. What I wanted most was also happiness and peace.

I continue to work on peace building because I understand that to be mindful of a peaceful existence it is and on-going endeavor and it is not enough to build peace only one time in our life. This understanding gives me the desire and the strength to work towards peace for my country and my world no matter how challenging and difficult it is.

Noung Naung



She missed the medicine, porridge
that her mom gave her and
longed for her kindness.

The whole sky was clear and bright, after the rain had stopped. The ridge of Dawna was covered in a light mist and it was beautiful, like wearing a thin scarf. A pickup truck loaded full of passengers, was speeding by so I didn't notice the natural beauty.

"Ha! It is convenient now," she whispers because the rain had finally stopped.

It was continuously raining during the journey which started in Paan, but stopped after passing Kawkarate, in the middle of the ridge of Dawna. Even though the truck was covered with a Tarpaulin, all of the passengers including Chanmyae were suffering, due to the rain.

"Aunty, could you please move a little bit because my feet are tingling?" Her feet were tingling because of the cold and sitting tightly in the truck, so she requests to a lady to move a little. She feels bad for the lady because she is hugging herself, resting her chin on her knees and sitting decorously.

The lady glances at her and moves but it does not make any difference. She thanks her anyway because she does not want to be scolded.

The road from Kawkarate to Myawaddy is really rough except for the short distance that Thamanya Sayadaw had repaired. All of the passengers are rolling around like balls in the truck when it turns sharp curves. Fortunately, the crowded passengers sit tightly together so that it is a little bit easier.

The rough journey makes her whole body ache and the wet rain makes her feel depressed. She is also hungry because it has already passed her lunch time. However, she is excited for the long journey to be over.

"At present, how is my mom fairing? What are my sister and brother doing?"

She thinks about her mother, sister and brother and her mind returns to the past.

On a winter day the breeze makes her cold.

She walked for nearly a mile from her school to her village. She was eager to meet her mom and did not feel her fatigue.

"Oh!" she cried when she came hurriedly and stepped on cow's shit. She cleaned her feet on the grass and moaned, "Why does this always happen when I am in a hurry?" and kept hurrying to the place where her mother was waiting for the bus.

When she reached her mom, her mom expressed with compassion, "It is too hot! Why didn't you ask your friends to borrow a bicycle?" She did not want her mother to say that because when her mom would leave, her love and compassion would give her pain.

"They are doing their homework. I was worried - I thought you had gone."

She glanced at her and saw sorrow, worry and compassion on her mothers' face. She knew that her mom did not want to leave her.

Her sister and brother also encouraged her with a faint smile, when they were waiting for the bus. "I will send you some pocket money", said her brother. Her sister agreed with him. They seemed very excited to go abroad and work but somehow they were worried to leave her alone with her aunty.

Her mom briefed her on how to behave with her aunty, how to speak politely and to study hard. If someone were to ask about her, she was to tell them that she had gone to work and did not give any money when someone asked her for some.

Then, they saw a bus coming to go to Myawaddy. She brought her mom's pack to the bus. Her mom gave her a 500 kyats note before the bus left and told her to use it when her aunty did not give her pocket money. Then the bus started to

leave. She was looking up at her mom, sister and brother sitting tightly among the passengers on the Datsun pickup truck. She saw that tears were rolling down her mother's and her brother's sorrowful faces.

Her cheek was also wet with tears as the bus left. Actually, she had always wanted a lot of pocket money and she had never received 500 kyats before! Now she realized that she could not exchange a family's love with money. Anyhow her mom had comforted her with 500 kyats and left out how she felt. She swayed her hand and prayed to earn a lot of money for her mom. At the same time, she tried to convert her tears into strength to help pass the days without her mom.

She was holding a 500 kyats note and prepared to face all of the difficulties alone because her mom had left.

From that time, she began to understand that her childhood was over.

A week after her mom had left, her struggle had started.

One evening, she asked for the tuition fee from her aunty, but her aunty did not respond. She wondered if she did not hear her request or if it was being neglected, she was not sure. Her aunty did not pay her any attention. The next morning, she asked again. At that time her aunty said that her mother had not left any money for her and cursed her. She cried but before she left for school and her aunty gave her the 600 kyats for the tuition fee unwillingly. She remembered her mom a lot and she felt sad for her life. But she took the 600 kyats.

The 500 kyats that her mother had given her was really useful because she had n't had lunch since her mom left, but she kept that money and resisted spending it.

One day before her examinations, she unfortunately fell sick. Her aunty knew she was ill but did not send her to the local clinic and gave her only Paracetamol and left her alone at the home. When she was hungry, there was no rice in the kitchen. She was weak, dizzy and her knees were trembling. She remembered the money that her mom had given her. She tried to go to the nearest shop and bought two pieces of very cheap cake. That cake was very delicious because she was so hungry. While eating, she thanked her mother and tears ran down in

remembrance. She missed the medicine and porridge that her mom gave her and longed for her kindness. When her aunty found out that she had bought some snacks, she didn't want to give her aunty the rest of her money. She felt so sad.

At the time, the prices of basic goods were hiked up and the villagers were facing financial crisis. Some people were starving.

My aunt's daily survival was also hurting and she scolded me more and more.

Moreover, the students' parents were facing difficulties because the school admission fee, stationary fee and tuition fee were increasing.

That commodity price hike affected her education.

"Do you want to follow your mom?" her aunty asked her softly. The thought excited her. She wanted to meet with her mom again. She wanted to stay under her protection. So she replied to her aunty that she did not want to go school anymore and wanted to follow her mom. As soon as she replied, her aunty arranged to send her to her mom. She was happy to meet her mother, sister and brother. She did not regret leaving school. In her village, all of the people were working hard to survive, so education seemed meaningless for her.

Her aunty then said there was a broker who would send her to her mom. Her aunty did not know the broker but the broker said she knew her mother, so her aunty pushed her to go with her. She was not afraid because she wanted to meet her family. So she went to Bangkok with the broker.

"Come down. You have to show your ID card to the gate." She heard the conductor shout, as she returned from the gate.

Some passengers said that sometimes the police at the gate won't allow people who are under aged to proceed. The lady who brought her urged, "If the police officer asks, tell them that you are going to your mom and I (the lady) am your aunty." She said exactly what she was told to say. Then, they were checked-in and proceed on their journey.

When she had arrived in Myawaddy, she was really excited. The broker lady said that her mom might come to take her from Myawaddy to Bangkok, but it was not sure. She thanked the lady because she had looked after her all the way to Myawaddy. Anyhow she had dreamt of what she would say to her mom when they would meet. She also dreamt that she would ask for a doll when she would meet with her sister and brother because she could not play with dolls for a long time. All of her dreams were rushing back and forth. All her happiness and excitement were reflected on her face.

"My dear Chan Myae , come here!" called the broker lady.

She was not able to walk on the border road in Myawaddy because there were so many motorcycles, cars and people.

Then she and the lady entered a restaurant for a meal. She was tired from traveling and ate a lot of chicken curry. While she was eating, the lady was looking away as if she was looking for someone. After sometime, a lady called Daw Khin Nu came to join them.

"Dear, finish your meal and go with aunty, she will bring you to your mom. The journey is only a little bit farther from here," the broker lady said.

"Ma Tin May you brought only her? We need three young girls! The price is really good. Okay, let's discuss the payment for her in awhile. I will enlist her and come back to you," Daw Khin Nu said to Daw Tin May very softly.

Daw Tin May, the broker lady, nodded and talked about something that she could not understand.

"What is the name of that girl? Hey, finish your meal, and let's go! We have no time." Daw Tin May was gentle but this new lady was very shrewed. She wanted to eat more of her meal but stopped eating. Then she said thanks to Daw Tin May repeatedly and hurriedly left with Daw Tin Nu.

"Mom, you gave me the name Chan Myae (Peace) but my life is not at peace till now. I do not want to be rich but I want to live in peace. I feel secure and at peace when I live near your bosom. Now I am coming to you!" My dear sister and brother also, she whispered quietly in her mind.

"Aunty, is it very far to my mother?"

"Keep quiet, don't speak anymore. When you reach the house, they will bring you to your mom. You can ask them."

"Mom I have to go on a journey to meet you, now I am proceeding," she whispered again in her mind.

The under aged girl Chan Myae was only 12 years old.

She believed that only her mother could create safety and peace for her. So she followed her mother and passed all difficulties. She believed that she would meet her mom soon and that all of these difficulties would end. But the next place she arrived was not her mom's bosom.

If she had known about it, who could she blame?

How could she find a peaceful and secure place?

How could she end this future life?

But she didn't have any answers to these questions...

Mee Lyan



The community also started to worry for Naw Paw too, for her future and in finding peace in her life.

Naw Paw lived with her widow mother in a village in Karen State. All of her siblings were married. On day, their village was attacked by the State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) troops and before this they often came to take villagers as porters. Their mother brought everyone and fled to the Thai-Burma border area to take refuge at the Mae La Refugee Camp in 1996.

At that time, Naw Paw was only 13-years old and was suffering from mental problems as her life had been destroyed by a man from their village who had raped her. Her mother reported this crime to the leader of their village; however, instead of getting justice for her loss, Naw Paw was branded as sloppy girl who was of loose character by the community. After living at the refugee camp for about three years, her widow mother remarried a man who was also widower. However, if her mother was not around, the new stepfather usually tried to touch her here and there.

One night, when her mother was out to fetch leaves in the forest, her stepfather pulled a knife on her and raped her. He threatened to kill her if she told others. With that fear, Naw Paw did not dare tell her siblings either and swallowed the pain. But Naw Paw did tell her mother of the rape upon her return from the forest. Her mother just rejected her words saying, "You crazy girl! You're just lying to destroy my husband's dignity." She then beat her up. Naw Paw could not do anything but cry and kept very quiet after that.

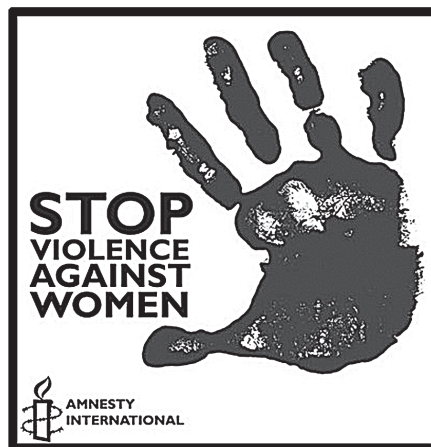
Eventually, Naw Paw's mother became both suspicious and scared of her husband. But she still continued to do whatever she could to please her husband. Soon, she married Naw Paw off to a young man. When Naw Paw was nearly eight months pregnant, her husband needed to go out and find work for more money to pay for the cost of giving birth. Her mother also went out to seek for work with her son-in-law. Again, the step-father took advantage of this situation and raped Naw Paw. He also threatened to kill her if she ever told any one again. This time she learned from her first experience and did not tell her mother about

being raped second time. However, only after about fifteen days of giving birth to her child, the step-father became so bold and daring that he tried to rape Naw Paw again when her husband went out to work. This time, she could not bear it any longer and Naw Paw screamed for help. Her mother caught the whole saga and only after this did her mother believe her.

Finally, this situation was brought in front of the judge within the refugee camp and Naw Paw was compensated with only 4,000 Baht and the judge sentenced her stepfather with a mere three months of imprisonment. However, within a month of getting the compensation, Naw Paw's husband took the money and married another woman. At this time, Naw Paw went to stay with her mother who had just divorced her second husband. Naw Paw's mother was worried sick for her daughter, hoping that she will be safe in the community in the future. The community also started to worry for Naw Paw too, for her future and in finding peace in her life.

When her case was brought in front of the camp's court, a representative from a women's organization was allowed to be present, but she had no rights or and was denied the chance to speak on the matter. And because Naw Paw was a refugee, her case was put on trial at the refugee camp where the sentence was determined by the laws set up in the camp. Therefore, the women's organization representative had no say in her case. The judge and the law enforcers themselves did not stand on Naw Paw's side. Thus, Naw Paw did not get any justice.

Thuu Lay Bo



Noung Naung

Once Were the Words of Father

“It is better to fail an exam
even if you studied hard
than to pass the exam by having
to cheating.”

Whether it is good or bad, an action can become a practice as it is being taken or spoken as time passes. Then it becomes a bit like a custom or culture. The society in which I live practices discrimination and uses discriminatory rebukes, handed down to the younger generation as if the acts are customs or traditions of their own. For example, my father admonished me with discriminatory words and our society told us “a girl should not go out at night time,” the victim, who was woman, was more of a sinner than the one who perpetrated the crime.

My father told us that all criminal activities like theft, robbery and looting usually took place during nighttime. He said the nature of a human being is that the wild and wicked behavior comes out during the nighttime rather than the daytime. Therefore, anything unlawful and illegal would be translated as “hmouse kho,” which in Burmese means “taking the shelter of the darkness.” We were always reminded that everybody should not go out at nighttime unless it was absolutely necessary as they could face more danger.

These days among the young people, young women prioritize becoming more and more beautiful. Just like supermodels and fashion models, they wear modern clothing competitively. Rather than being a good and smart people, looking like models has become more important to them. Since parents cannot afford to give them much of anything, they end up becoming immoral due to hunting for more money to get what they want.

However, my father told me that in times like these we need to know the difference between what we want and what we need, as well as who we want to be and who we should be. When I was a grade 2 student I destroyed my durable slippers so that I might get a new, beautiful pair of slippers. A week passed but I didn't get new, beautiful slippers so I went on strike, against my father, by not going to school. Then my father said to me, “Even if I buy you a 100,000 kyat-worth pair of slippers it will still be embarrassing if you cannot

pass your exams. You will be very happy indeed if you pass your exams with many distinctions even if you were wearing slippers only worth 2-kyat. You will still be very proud. It is very important that during the years of being a student you know what is more important.” Because of these words from my father I am now able to choose what is more important in life. I can control my mind carefully by thinking about whether I really need something versus just needing something.

In a society, where young women who travel a lot are disparagingly looked down upon, my father never stopped me from traveling but instead taught me how to build a confidence of my own and how to protect myself.

In a society where people believe that young women do not need to be educated, people feel that it is enough for a woman as long as she can read and write. People also deeply value obtaining their material inheritance and grab at it with vigor. But my father gave me words of wisdom, saying, “I will not be able to leave you with anything. All I can leave for you is an education. Try harder and be honest. If you become a good-hearted person, you will become a successful person”.

Since our country’s education system teaches us only to become thieves, corrupted, and at best cronies, anyone who talks about being honest and working hard becomes the enemy of the state. But my father said, “It is better to fail an exam even if you studied hard than to pass the exam by having to cheating. Just study hard and be honest. I do not want to see a “pass” on your certificate as a result of cheating.” With these words, although our country is in ruin, I know will not become an immoral person.

It is very important that the words and admonishment of our parents and our guardians are true and correct - as these words will one day become the customs and culture of our society.

This story is in honor of my father who had passed away...

Noung Naung

Her life was one severely
affected by domestic violence
within the family.

Unexpectedly, I was both astonished and saddened by a story told me by a fellow woman who I used to work with. Let's say her name is Naw. The story was about how she was raped by an old man who was also her employer. After hearing about the incident, I tried to meet with and talk to her, as I wanted to get more information about this crime and find out how she was now feeling.

Naw retold her story about how she had been working at her employer's house and how one day the old man entered her room and raped her while his wife was not at home. She said that she then left her employer's home to stay with a friend. But in the beginning, she was so ashamed of the rape that she didn't tell any one about it and suffered alone. She said that only during the morning we had met did she tell one of her teachers about it.

When I asked what she now wanted to do, she said she wanted to report it to the zone council's office. So, we reported her case to the office. Although the perpetrator or defendant was asked to come into the zone office to address the crime, Naw, the plaintiff, wished to see him punished. Therefore, the case was transferred and brought to the camp's office. At the camp office, Naw was compensated 5,000 Baht.

However, it was not what Naw wanted. She wanted the perpetrator to be punished, but this was not possible under the camp's laws. Therefore, Naw demanded that the case be brought before the Thai police. However, the Thai police would not do anything for Naw because according to Thai law any plaintiff age 15 and above needed to report and sue the defendant within three months of the event taking place. If the plaintiff could not do this, the case would automatically be closed. At the time of the rape, Naw was 17 and needed to file the report within three months. But Naw suffered a huge loss as the camp office took too long to come up with the verdict. Therefore, the Thai court could not do anything.

Naw had four siblings - two boys and two girls. Her mother escaped to Bangkok

to work, as she had suffered from domestic violence in her marriage. When living together, Naw and her siblings were very afraid of their father everyday as he put all of his anger on them when their mother went away. Sometimes, they hid under the houses of their neighbors out of fear and sometimes they did not even have regular meals. One of her younger brothers left the house to stay with their grandmother and another one, the youngest, went to stay with a monk. Only Naw and her younger sister were left behind with their father. As their father beat them up often, they finally moved into the dormitory run by the Karen Women's Organization (KWO).

After about three months, Naw got to know an old man who said that he would like to adopt Naw and would pay to send her to school. Naw believed this good fortune and left the dormitory to go and stay with the old man. But after only six months of being there, Naw's life was destroyed once again, but this time by the old man. Her life was one severely affected by domestic violence within the family. All family members – the children, the wife and Naw – will surely be affected by these events and the break down of the family for their entire lives.

Women's Rights are Human Rights

Thuu Lay Bo



Before he left, he stared at me
again like his father had.
I was now waiting from him also.

On the first day of the “Peace Building and Conflict Resolution” training, I noticed that an older woman enthusiastically supported with our activities. When we were playing a game to begin the afternoon session, I noticed again that she was smiling and watching us. In the evening, when we had finished our training, Maw Sue Mae, a school teacher and I were sitting and chatting in front of the hut which I had put up. I saw that she was sweeping her house which was situated near our training hall. At night, she was weaving with some leaves in the dim light of a lamp. She was smoking her pipe. When I looked at her face, it gave me peace of mind. She was slim, tall and had fair skin. I immediately fell in love with her, then I asked Sue Mae about that lonely lady.

"Sue Mae, look at that lady! When I see her, I have peace of mind. She reminds me of my mother. If you know anything about her, please tell me."

"Rose if you are interested in her, you should be. We all would like to know more about her, but nobody has asked. I think she loves you and if you would like to know more about her you should ask her. The only thing that we know is that she has been here for 10 years."

When I heard that, I wanted to know more. So I decided to speak with her during the last day of training.

"Sue Mae I would like to go to the shop to buy some presents for our mother (the lady)."

"That's okay. Let's go to the shop near by because there have a large variety of items."

I purchased two longyis (sarongs), some candles, incense sticks and a bottle of Ovaltine for her. We approached her house we saw that she was sipping Chinese

tea and when she saw us she seemed glad and welcoming.

"Oh Misses! You are welcoming me, I am really happy. Come in, Come my daughters!"

Then we smiled at her and walked towards her, Sue Mae said quietly, "Rose I have never seen her as happy as this. Whenever I saw her face it was gloomy and other times she looked away. When I see her so happy, I am really glad and I thank you for that."

"No, it is not because of me. Anyway, I am happy too."

Then we entered her home, she offered us Chinese tea and we talked about our training. We answered her questions. I was really eager to ask her about her past but I did not know how to ask. I did not want to burden her with painful memories. She continuously praised our activities.

When she paused and sipped some tea, I asked her some questions.

"Mom! Let me call you mom. When I saw you I was reminded of my mom. You look like my mom, so I loved you right when I first saw you. Then I heard about you from some elders from a refugee camp. I would like to know about your past and would like to share your grief. Please tell us about yourself."

When I asked her, her face became faint, her eyes were gloomy and she looked towards the flame of lamp. She slowly let out a sigh of relief, deciding to share her story and she nodded. I was pleased to learn about her.

"I have decided to share my past with you. I want to relieve myself of this pain. I tried so hard to forget my past. I am now 65 years old. Why have I lived for so long? ...Because I have always hoped for a daughter."

Then she lit her pipe and puffed. Gloomy eyed she watched the smoke hanging in the air and kept her pipe beside her.

"I lived in Naung Pale village in the Demoreso township, Karenni state with my family members; my husband, son and daughter. We cultivated a small farm as

our living. My son was 21 years old and my daughter was 18 at that time. My son passed class 10 but we could not provide him further education, so he worked with his dad on the farm. My daughter was waiting for class 10 examination results. One night someone kept knocking on the door. My husband rushed and opened the door. I followed him. When we opened the door we saw our village chief and a Burmese army officer with two soldiers. They arrested my husband and tied him up with rope. I was surprised at first and then I asked why they arrested my husband. The village chief replied with a long face that my husband had contacted an insurgent; he had supplied rice to them. I could not believe my ears. I told him it was not right. I held onto the army officer's feet, begged him to release my husband. My husband also begged the officer to be released, the officer who was my son's age, kicked him. When I saw that it broke my heart. Two soldiers dragged my husband away. Before they left, my husband stared at me, meaning that he would return. I will never forget that look; it left me with so many expectations."

She paused her story, wiping away a tear with a shaky hand.

"I waited for him (husband) under the mango tree in front of my home and looked in the direction, where he'd come from. Why? If he came back, I would see him. Time kept passing, days to months, months to years, but he never came back. I am still waiting. After two years, the village chief ordered us to go and work for a man, one in each family. If the family had no men, they had to pay money to hire a worker. My son had to go to work in a place so far away that we did not know of it. Before he left, he stared at me again like his father had. I was now waiting for him also. I became old and my daughter was too young to work on our farm. So our farm was handed over to another family. My daughter worked on other farms and earned money. She worked hard and was tired. I was very unhappy. One day a young man who was very close to us came to our home and told us that he would like to help us because he knew that we were struggling a lot. He said that he had some contacts in Thailand and he could find a good job for my daughter. I could not decide whether she should go or not. The only thing I knew was I did not want my beloved daughter to leave my side. However, she was eager to go because some girls who were the same age as her were also going. She requested me for my permission over and over again. So I allowed her to go. Before she went she gave me 50000 kyats which she had received in advance. Then she stared at me again. I was really afraid of that familiar look. I tried to survive alone and hoped for the return of my beloved three family members. At last, I moved to a refugee camp with other villagers.

Every day that I am alive, I expect them. Sometimes, I think that expectation makes me live longer.”

After telling her long story, she was exhausted. Then she sipped her tea and puffed her pipe, looking away. I gave her the presents to her and told her that I’d come back.

When I had returned to my room, I could not sleep. I tossed and turned in my bed. I imagined her and the many other mothers who live with such hope. I suffered from insomnia and could not sleep at all.

I prayed for her and all mothers to get over their nightmares and to meet their loved ones and that all of our people will pass over the shadow of this dictatorship. I promise that I will struggle to remove the shadow.

-Praying that all moms can meet their children.

-Dedicated to my late mom.

Mya Khurnyo
18th April, 2008
1:05 am.



Shayi Ningja

Hope for Genuine Peace

Lack of fighting and wars
does not necessarily mean
actual peace
as been achieved.

Since 1989, ethnic armed groups have been working on cease fire agreements with the military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in Burma. In Kachin State, our ethnic armed group the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) also made a cease fire agreement with the SPDC in 1994. They even called it “peace.” And what I mean by “they” is both the SPDC and the ethnic cease fire groups. However, it doesn’t make a difference what name we give it, the suffering of people has certainly lessened as there is more fighting between the two groups.

For example, people are no longer being taken as porters; money is no longer being extorted as ‘tax’ for ethnic revolutionary armed group; there are no more land mines; and some land that was previously wasting away is now capable of being cultivated again. Traveling is much easier as restriction and checkpoints have been lifted, creating a bit more ease for the public. However, just as it seems people’s lives are about to get easier, it is sad to see new problems enter their lives. Look at it! An incredible number of trees are being cut down to be used for development projects during this time of peace. Everyday, tens of thousands of tons worth of logs are transported into China and I feel like my heart is being taken away with it. Everyday, different types and sizes of tree logs are being transported into China.

Since our ancestors’ time, we have preserved these trees without cutting them down. But today, we are selling them at cheap prices to the Chinese. When I look at those logs, I feel as though they are saying, “Please help us. We don’t want to go with these strangers. We don’t want to go. We don’t want to go with them.” I feel as though these logs are crying out. Once full of “virgin forests,” the quickly disappearing trees and drastic deforestation in Kachin State during this past decade of cease fire, has become a major concern with international environmental organizations. But the KIO has aimed to open up this logging trade to make money for the purpose of going back to the public, family and

community development projects and to rebuild a community that has been destroyed and suffered greatly during the fighting.

Now, we just end up having to buy back and pay expensive prices for all that furniture from China that has been made with our own trees and our rattan and cane which Chinese got them from us with low prices. It is very saddening if we think about it. Not only logging, but also many forest-products like medicinal roots, plants, nuts, orchids, aromatic tubers, tusks, fangs, horns of wild animals, various kinds of snake, turtles, tortoises, and even monkeys are not spared by the Chinese. They buy almost anything and everything. But our people are extremely poor, so whatever price they can get they take and will sell anything to the Chinese who are buying.

Both Chinese business people and our own Burmese business people not only trade forest products, but also extract gold with huge machinery. Untouched for thousands of years, the untouched confluence area of the Maykha and Malikha Rivers has been turned upside down by these people in search of gold. Once remote, this area where the two rivers meet is now swarming with Chinese gold miners and migrant workers. And in the areas where logging and mining are heavily practiced, not only are we starting to see environmental problems, but other social problems are occurring, as well. People have started to lose their morality and are behaving badly. Conflicts among friends and families are negative consequence resulting from bad deals within logging business. Using and selling drugs also brought on negative consequences, inviting HIV/AIDS to the area. Human trafficking has become one of the many ways for those who will do anything to make some money. They trade women from Burma to Chinese men who want to get married. Chinese will buy anything, including human beings.

Even the money we make by selling our trees goes back to the Chinese because everything we use and eat ends up being product from China. Villages, big and small, are selling out their forest or wooded areas for building schools, churches and monasteries. Loggers buy all these forested areas to build schools and churches, reaping huge profits. So for our next generation, all we will be leaving is buildings and more buildings in and around our villages.

Authorities continue to give out permits to those companies who perform the logging and gold mining. But the problem is; these permitted areas happen to

be where villagers are still living and cultivating their own produce. But with the permit in their hands, business owners forcibly evict the villagers to occupy their land. The villagers do not even know who to report or complain to about this - instead they just take it as it is and swallow it. These are only some of many problems that our people have been facing since the cease fire agreements.

In 2007, a huge dam was being built to transmit electricity to China exactly where the “*Myit Sone*”^{*} was located. Here, you could hear songs and poems of beauty and tranquility, where every person of Kachin State who visited would not go home without experiencing it. What are we going to do? We do not want to see that ruined. Why are they so ruthless and reckless? Our lives would have been better under the British colony. Now we are left with nothing but skeletons under the Chinese economic colonizer.

That’s not all. Even during this period of cease fire and agreed upon peace, violence against our ethnic women has not stopped. There are incidents where we, as women, do not know who to report to or who to file our complaints with after being sexually assaulted or raped. We have tried to put some cases before the ethnic revolutionary group to take action against perpetrators. However, our demands and cries for help have been considered too small a problem in the face of the peace agreement between the rebels and the SPDC. If they take action, they are afraid that the cases will negatively impact this agreement. So what we do is to swallow it hard. There are many more stories like this.

I am not saying the cease fire is no good at all. I am just trying to share experiences of being abused, encountering loss and what it is like to lack peace in general during this so-called cease fire and peace period. Can we really say we are at peace in the face of all these hardships we endure? Lack of fighting and wars does not necessarily mean actual peace as been achieved. This is only the outset or opening of talks, negotiations or discussions that can lead toward peace. We should not be mistaken about this. But what I am certain about is that we still need to march forward and work towards genuine peace.

Shayi Ningja

* “*Myit Sone*” means confluence of River where Rivers of Maykha and Malikha meet.

Khaing Zin Kyaw (May Yu Thu)

About the People affected by the Disastrous Cyclone Nargis

Although Nargis victims have
nowhere to live; nothing to wear
and nothing to eat,
the military leaders are still lying.

While poverty inside of Burma continues to increase for the people who were severely affected by the disastrous cyclone Nargis have lost their futures. Nargis was the tropical cyclone which created a massive landfall on May the 2nd at 10:00 a.m, lasting until May the 3rd 11:00 a.m. in the Irrawaddy and Yangon regions. Nargis left the people with awful and sorrowful lives.

The Nargis affected the kindhearted people of Burma, leaving their hearts filled with grief and sorrow- which will stay with them forever. I was also one of those who's soul was affected by Nargis. My heart and soul will be with them till they recover from their sadness.

I had passed several nights lacking sound sleep and I longed to help those affected in whatever way I could. All my thoughts were, at first, like dreams and seemed unreal - like my imagination. I eventually reached out to those affected and caught sight of their sufferings. I was really sympathetic towards them. What I thought was that if I could reach out and help the affected people, I expected to be able comfort myself but more so the severe sufferings. I could not get a sound sleep for several nights because I could not drive their sufferings out of my head.

To reach the affected people was very difficult but my companions and I tried to reach them by every possible mean. Our aid was prioritized the people those never had aid from SPDC, approved humanitarian organizations and private donors.

Along our way we saw many victims from remote areas that we could not help. We saw a lot of affected people, who were waiting for aid in any shape or form. It was impossible to stop our car and help them because of security risks. As we were not approved by the authority and our goal was to reach people from

the furthest and most remote areas, we drove our car very quickly. But we were frequently interrogated by authorities at check points along the way. We threw some money to people, as we drove by, in order to help them. We were not satisfied with what we did – we felt like we could have done even more.

Their hardships were significantly greater than what we had thought. Who would help us and how could we find them? It was so difficult because we were overcome with grief.

To “comfort and help” the severe hardships in Burma, the leaders of our country ignored the pleas and they took the domestic and international aid and put it in their pockets. Their reactions are still unbelievable to everyone. The power hungry leaders of Burma do not care about our peoples’ tears – they even pretended to donate money to monks. Under the terrible military leadership, peoples’ quality of lives will get worse and worse. Where is the peace in Myanmar, our beautiful country?

Although Nargis victims have nowhere to live; nothing to wear and nothing to eat, the military leaders are still lying, saying that they are distributing relief aid to victims in order for them to survive. Are the military leaders’ human beings? They don’t know what compassion, love and humanity mean and they don’t care about the hardships of their people. They treat people’s tears as falling rain. The more people who turn poor the richer they become.

Their facade is false and behind it there must be the truth. When the truth will be unveiled the people of the whole nation will get what they deserve - their rights and lives will be full of happiness.

But at this moment, the future of Nargis victims, who are still waiting for aid, is dim and uncertain.

Kids: their lives are uncertain but they are still striving:

The Burmese kids, the future generation of Burma, are unable to go to school because they have to find jobs, by any possible mean, in order to support their families. This is one of the main evidences that proves the Burmese political and economic crisis. Their parents cannot afford to send their children to school, so how they can learn knowledge. If all those children can be trained in a suitable classroom, under an advanced education system our country will become a peaceful and developed country.

All of these children should be trained to be the future leaders of our country but unfortunately under the military rule, they all are away from their schools and lack basic child rights, so their futures are uncertain. Some of the children do not finish primary education because they are working to support their families. I feel like we are losing precious stones. I would like to describe the children who line our roads.

The living conditions of children were bad even before Nargis created the massive landfall. However, since then the uncertainty of their futures has doubled. As for children who have lost their lives and parents during Nargis' landfall, the prospect of attending school becomes impossible. In the aftermath of Nargis, there were many children who have lost their lives because of a lack of help. Thankfully, there are children who are still striving to survive.

When we were driving to reach the furthest Nargis victims, we saw several children among those in need, waving their hands on the side of the roads. Smiles could be seen on their faces and we murmured to one another how beautiful and sincere they were. We thought that every time that they saw people wearing good clothes they must have thought that those people were coming to them. Even though they knew we were not coming to them, they were waving their hands anyway.

In reality those children were starving and have nothing to eat and live because of Nargis. Some of them lost their parents so they all are heartsick. Anyway when I saw them I concluded that they understood the natural disaster and they afraid of to face the coming future and tried to strive. I hope that they all can do their best forever.

After we had decided where we would go, we sent some of our team in advance to organize people for the distribution of aid relief. People from that community did not believe that our group would come until we were actually there for distributing the aid relief. When they received it, they muttered as frogs shout in the early raining season that we were really coming. We went to the area where no relief aids were reachable. To be honest, we got there several days after the Nargis landfall. The Nargis survivors had only received 16 cans of rice per family from the SPDC as their aid relief. Trying to survive on only 16 cans of rice many people passed away. In the community which we visited, 50 percent of the population had lost their lives and many were missing. The Nargis

survivors were just over 40 percent of total population. Some survivors lost their whole families, some lost every piece property that they had and they had nothing to eat and nowhere to live. They all were using the same contaminated water and breathing polluted air. They had lost their dignity.

But in conversations with them, their honesty and sincerity could be seen through their tragedy.

Below are some of their descriptions of our conversations:

- ❖ Nargis was nature's punishment.
- ❖ One has one's own fortune.
- ❖ No one can escape natural disaster.
- ❖ If we get heartsick because of loss of property and suffer because of a natural disaster we can not understand nature and we do not want to blame nature.

One of them began speaking; "I had 9 family members and now only 2 are left."

Another one told me that they had 7 family members and now only 4 are left.

Another one expressed their experience by explaining that they could not able keep their youngest son and had released him along the torrent.

Even though they were grieving and heartsick, they did not cry and tried to hold back their tears and shared their experiences. What a pity it was! They do not know that the SPDC is to blame, that they are responsible for what happened and that they did not take measure of relief efforts. They comforted themselves from what happened by telling themselves that it was only because of natural disaster.

They did not know that relief aid and funds from international community, domestic social organizations and private donors were given to them via the SPDC and those aids did not reach them. What they wanted was just a suitable shelter and some particular instruments to help them earn for their living. If those instruments were not available without charge they would like the government to lend them by the installment of a payment plan.

Those who are kind hearted and sympathetic can share their sufferings and when the power hungry and irresponsible government gets into trouble they will be looking at them with smiles.

I hope that the honest and sincere people can avoid danger and catastrophic natural disaster.

Khaing Zin Kyaw (May Yu Thu)



