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Women's Experiences
of War, Peace,
and Impunity in Myanmar

Opening the Box:

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and Impunity in Myanmar



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Title: Opening the Box: Women's Experiences of War, Peace, and Impunity in Myanmar

First edition: September 2015

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Photography: Anne Cecile-Esteve for AJAR, and the Research Team

Cover Photo: (Front) image from AJAR's documentary film "Don't be afraid"

Location: Myanmar

Design: Zulfikar Arief

Book size: 20 X 27 cm

Published in collaboration with Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Kachin Women Association Thailand (KWAT), Karen Women's Empowerment Group (KWEG), and Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON)



Foreword

This booklet captures the stories of 29 women from Myanmar – former political prisoners from Yangon, and ethnic women from the conflict zones of Karen and Kachin State. It is based on our research with a total of 140 women victims in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar using participatory tools. The booklet presents the key findings of our research that are most relevant for Myanmar, introduces AJAR's participatory research approach, and provides a list of recommendations for addressing truth, justice, and reparations for the women survivors of Myanmar.

The research is a collaboration between Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Kachin Women Association Thailand (KWAT), Karen Women's Empowerment Group (KWEG), and Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON).

AJAR would like to thank IDRC and the European Union for their contributions to this research, as well as members of the learning collective.

This book is dedicated to Nyar Hto Tue who courageously advocated for her people and left us too early. May she rest in peace. It is also dedicated to all the women who gave a part of themselves to participate in this research

Our Women Survivors¹

Kachin

Ah Nan
Dashi Tawm
Doi Ra
Hkawn Lum
Hkawn Shawng
Htu Bu
Nu Tawng
Roi Bu
Yaw Myaw

Karen

Htay Htay
Htoo Htoo
Mu Dah
Nyar Bwe
Nyar Eh Khu
Nyar Hto Tue
Nyar Si
Paw Poe
Pi Pi
Tar Thue

Yangon

Cho Cho Aye
Hnin Hnin Hmway
Khin Mi Mi Khine
Mar Mar Oo
Ni Moe Hlaing
Ohmar
San San Maw
Thandar
Thet Thet Aung
Tin Tin Cho

¹ For security reason, some names have been changed.

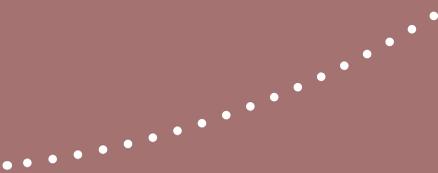


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Myanmar's Women Survivors: Invisible but Not Helpless

Around the world, the subject of war and rape continues to make headlines, but the media's attention span is typically short. Women are portrayed as victims, almost interchangeable from one conflict to another. Their stories are not contextualized within a longer timeframe, and women are mainly presented as traumatized victims, often without a voice or any kind of capacity to create change. The intense focus on rape also distorts other forms of violence and violations experienced by women, such as unlawful detention, different forms of torture and inhumane treatment, displacement, loss of livelihood, and vulnerabilities relating to the death or disappearance of a family member.

Women victims are haunted by invisibility and silence—both before and after the violations they experience. Women are most likely to be victimized precisely because they are pushed to the edge of society—marginalized, perhaps even demonized, and disempowered. Likewise, the full truth about what happened to them, and how it continues to affect their lives, is erased or denied—not only by the state, local authorities, and the national elite, but often even by those in their own communities and families.

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) conducted participatory research to explore how women experience conflict and state violence, and in its aftermath, struggle to survive in situations where impunity is the norm. Capturing in-depth stories of 140 women survivors from Myanmar, Indonesia, and Timor-Leste, our research provides key lessons on how these women have helped themselves, while largely remaining invisible to those providing aid in conflict and post-conflict settings. In the rush to create peace, authorities want victims of war to become invisible, and magically transform themselves into ordinary citizens without any specialized support. At the same time, governments and international actors fail to see the link between violence during war and violence in times of peace, providing resources to eliminate domestic violence while ignoring those victimized during conflict.

AJAR's research is relevant, as violence against women continues to impact the lives of women in Myanmar in many different forms, despite decades of activism and resources dedicated to stop it. One of the main findings of this research is that violence against women is empowered and maintained by a culture of impunity. Each of the 29 women from Myanmar who took part in this participatory research has a compelling story, but woven together they provide a stark picture about how, despite great efforts, the government, the army, non-state armed groups, the UN, and NGOs fail to pave the way for their survival. From their stories, we see how they largely had to help themselves, using their strength and tenacity and fighting for survival in grim situations.

The title of this booklet is based on the name of one of AJAR's most popular research activities: the memory box. In this activity, women survivors collect and create mementos that remind them of difficult, happy, or poignant moments in their lives. During their final meeting, survivors share the contents of their memory boxes with each other. This booklet aims to open the collective memory box of the experiences of some of the women of Myanmar. It contains the stories of 29 women – former political prisoners from Yangon, and ethnic women who have grown up in the conflict zones of Karen and Kachin State. It also provides a key summary of the findings of AJAR's research that are most relevant for Myanmar, introduces AJAR's participatory research approach, and provides a list of recommendations for addressing truth, justice, and reparations for the women survivors of Myanmar.

Our Methodology

Taking to heart the participation of women survivors, we developed grassroots tools that reflect our commitment to involve women survivors as active agents for change, and not merely as vestiges of atrocities. Thus the research team was composed of NGO workers, survivors, and their family members. As part of our methodology, we built in objectives that are beneficial to victims: to empower women survivors, to facilitate a collective healing process, and to build solidarity and networking for action.

01. Time Line

We used a time line to understand the violence experienced by women before, during, and after conflict. We were able to build a collective history with broader perspectives than the individual alone can achieve.



02. Community Mapping

Women victims were asked to draw a map that showed their homes, the sites where violations took place, and other important locations from their story.

03. Resource Mapping

Together, women victims told each other about their sources of livelihood before, during, and after conflict. This process deepened our knowledge of the cycle of poverty experienced by women victims in post-conflict situations.



04. Body Mapping

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



05. Stone and Flower

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

06. Taking Photos, Telling Stories

The researchers visited the homes of the women to create a photo story about their lives, including images of locations and objects that have particular meanings.



07. Memory Boxes

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

Geographical Focus

AJAR partnered with three local organizations to conduct this research. Women's Organizations Network (WON) conducted activities with ex-political prisoners in Yangon, while Kachin Women Association - Thailand (KWAT) and Karen Women Empowerment Group (KWEG) worked with displaced women in the Kachin and Karen communities, respectively.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this process is the participation of women survivors, in articulating their issues and engaging in their own problem solving. Working in contexts where impunity is entrenched, we were convinced that the research methodology must be designed to have some immediate benefit to the participants. Thus, researchers were trained in trauma support and used research tools that assisted victims through mutual support. Conducting the research in Kachin State was a great challenge because of ongoing conflict. Survivors and researchers were at times unable to participate because of active fighting and security risks in their areas. Activities in Yangon and with the Karen community also had to be carefully planned for security reasons. As an in-depth and qualitative method, the research does not provide big-picture quantitative findings. However, in this booklet we have attempted to look at some of the patterns emerging in Myanmar.

An Overview of the situation for Kachin and Karen Women Affected by Conflict, and Women Former Political Prisoners

Kachin Women

The Kachin started fighting for equal rights and self-determination in Myanmar more than 50 years ago. As a distinct ethnic group, they face ongoing discrimination and inequality. Their language is banned in schools, they have little opportunity for high-level government positions, and, as majority Christians, they are often persecuted as a religious minority in a Buddhist dominated State. In 1961 the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) were established. Initially wanting independence, they now seek autonomy within a federal union.

In 1994, based on promises by the Myanmar government for political reform, the KIA signed a cease-fire. This lasted 17 years, until it was breached in 2011 when the Myanmar military launched an aggressive operation in KIA territory, using heavy artillery and aircraft. Many of the human rights violations recorded in this research project took place within the ceasefire period.

The conflict has witnessed systematic human rights abuses, including forced labor, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, torture, and killings. The Myanmar army has allegedly targeted civilians in order to curtail support for resistance groups. These acts reveal a contempt for women and other survivors who are completely unprotected by the rule of law.

Over the years, Kachin men have volunteered to fight with the KIA, draining the agricultural labor force at the village level. During this conflict, hundreds of villages have been burnt down, houses and property have been ransacked, and stored food surpluses have been destroyed. Many have lost their livelihoods, and over 100,000 people have been displaced.

Considerable determination and courage was needed on the part of both field workers and the survivors to ensure that survivors' workshops (held in March and April of 2014) could take place at all. Some participants from the camps in KIO-controlled areas were prevented from attending because of active fighting. Another participant was threatened by the authorities not to attend.

At the beginning of the workshops, the survivors' faces expressed an accumulation of stress, worry, fear, and tension. But slowly their tension turned into smiles, as they encouraged one another to speak out about their pain and hopes. Gradually they built up a close, trusting relationship within the group. At first they were so used to conditions of impunity and to remaining silent about the injustices they experienced that they had difficulty applying human rights concepts to their own situations. But by the end of the sessions, they felt stronger and much better informed.

Karen Women

The Karen, one of the largest ethnic groups in Myanmar numbering around 7 million, began their armed struggle in 1949. Formed the same year, the Karen National Union (KNU) initially demanded independence, but currently seeks increased autonomy as part of a federal union. In the past three decades, hundreds of thousands of Karen have fled across the border to refugee camps in Thailand.² Many are also internally displaced within Karen state and in other parts of Myanmar. All ten Karen survivors in this booklet live as internally displaced people (IDPs) in villages inside the country.

The research found that women in the study suffered human rights violations during two main periods: the first period started in 1974, under the Burmese army's Four Cuts Policy, which aimed to deny non-state armed groups access to food, finances, intelligence, and recruits, by driving civilian populations from areas where they could offer support;³ and the second period started in the 1990s, when a commando led by the notorious Shan Pu , a Burmese-military officer of Shan origin, used brutal and public torture to create a climate of fear and repression among villagers. Women in the study said that rape was often used casually and punitively.

During both of these periods, many Karen women found themselves taking positions of village leadership as their menfolk were away fighting.⁴ In trying to earn a living in the rice fields or by trading, they faced the constant threat of sexual violence. Whenever a village was taken by the military, the men would flee, leaving the women to do forced labor on their behalf.

After 60 years of fighting, a ceasefire was signed in 2012. However, conflict has erupted again from time to time, compromising the security and disrupting the livelihood of civilians.⁵ Recent human rights abuses include forced labor, forced displacement, and looting of property, all in the context of increased militarization and restriction of movement.⁶ Participants in the study said that women are not allowed to sleep at their farm, go out at night, or use a torch.

Some of the women participating in the research heard rumors that they would suffer retaliation for attending the workshops. They were also concerned that other villagers did not support them. Showing great courage, they overcame their fears and participated in our action research. However, they were sometimes reticent to give a full account of the abuses that they had witnessed.

² <http://www.burmalink.org/background/thailand-burma-border/displaced-in-thailand/refugee-camps/>

³ "Legal Memorandum: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in Eastern Myanmar", International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, November 2014

⁴ "Walking Amongst Sharp Knives: The Unsung Courage of Karen Women Village Chiefs in Conflict Areas in Eastern Burma", Karen Women's Organization, February 2010

⁵ "Afraid to Go Home: Recent Violent Conflict and Human Rights Abuses in Karen State", Karen Rivers Watch, November 7th 2014.

⁶ *ibid.*

Women Former Political Prisoners

Strong. This is the word that always comes to mind when describing this group of women who have all been political prisoners at some point in their lives. Many were arrested as young activists during the political unrest of 1988, and some during the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Before they were detained, some of the women in this group ran businesses. Many are well educated, highly resourceful, and possess a great deal of political knowledge.

All of these women experienced arbitrary detention and some form of torture. They see these acts as retaliation by the authorities for their social or political activism. Some were summarily tried by military courts that applied treason laws indiscriminately. A number of these women were sentenced to life imprisonment, simply for being activists. Prison life was particularly difficult for those sent to remote areas, which were too distant for family members to visit or send food.

While in detention for a variety of offences, the women prisoners faced different types of violence and abuse, such as sleep deprivation, severe beatings, solitary confinement, and sexual harassment. Many continued to protest unjust treatment in prison, and sometimes received even harsher beatings as a result. The women noted that incidents of torture decreased significantly after 2009, when the transition to a new quasi-civilian government started. All the violations documented below have so far been met with impunity from the authorities.

Since being released, some of the women have suffered from trauma and stress. At the same time, they are also resilient and optimistic about the future. Some experience chronic pain or other health problems. Others feel that they have been stigmatized as a result of their habit of talking loudly (from trying to communicate with other prisoners in solitary confinement) or for sometimes talking to themselves.

The researchers noted that the women were able to find an outlet to share feelings and to form new groups, by joining this action research. They were comforted by other women who could understand what they had been through. The 'flower and stone' discussion was particularly useful in creating an atmosphere of trust, where participants could talk openly, especially those who face criticism from family members for seeming to put politics before their children. Some shared their experience that family members would shut down any talk of the past in an effort to erase painful memories.

Meeting together gave these women greater courage to maintain their political resolve. Most continue to be involved in political movements as part of the ongoing struggle for democracy and peace.

Key Findings

The following are findings that we have made based on our in-depth qualitative analysis of the stories shared by 29 women affected by violence and conflict.

Key Finding 1: Women continue to experience systematic violence during conflict despite increasing efforts to prevent it

Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in global awareness and rhetoric surrounding the prevention of systematic violence against women. Myanmar has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW), and has committed to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It also released a National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) in 2013 and signed the Declaration Of Commitment To End Sexual Violence In Conflict in June 2014. Nonetheless, the Burmese army and non-state armed groups continue to target women in conflicts waged throughout the country, and their actions are met with impunity.

The women in this study reported experiencing a wide range of sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault, threats of rape, sexual harassment, and sexualized torture in prison. Three out of the ten former political prisoners in the study spoke about sexual violence in prison. Out of a group of 19 women living in ethnic areas who participated in this research, two were grandmothers or mothers who were seeking justice for their daughters (or granddaughter) who were brutally raped and murdered, and one had experienced sexual violence herself.

It is likely that the number of cases is much higher. Experiences of sexual violence are notoriously difficult to disclose. The women expressed the shame they felt and the discrimination and stigmatization they experienced from their family and community because of their experiences of sexual violence. They also emphasized how many women are too ashamed or afraid to talk about their own personal experiences.

Women in Myanmar also experience many difficulties beyond sexual violence. They face other forms of violence that affect their civil, political, and socio-economic rights. Seven out of ten women former political prisoners had experienced torture and inhumane treatment in detention. In ethnic areas where armed conflict has been waged for decades, women experience extremely long periods of displacement, resulting in the loss of livelihood and opportunities, and exposure to new forms of violence due to renewed fighting and heavy militarization, with no prospects of safe return.

Women victims often shoulder the double burden of recovering from their own violations and caring for their families. Survival becomes more difficult when a son or husband is detained, disappeared, or killed. Ethnic women face double discrimination and challenges, as they are caught between both sides of the conflict, experiencing pressure and danger from both warring factions.

“In 1999, they developed an army unit that killed people abruptly. They did not care whether you were guilty or not, they just killed people. They drove us from our village, and then later asked us to move back. In 2004, they made us move again.”



Paw Poe
Karen



“Before sending me to prison, they interrogated me day and night without giving me a chance to sleep. I was not allowed to sleep, to take a bath, or to eat regularly. Even when they did not commit physical torture, they tortured us a lot spiritually. They used a lot of words which hurt a woman’s dignity.”

Tin Tin Cho
detained as a political prisoner



Roi Bu
Kachin

Roi Bu was displaced from her home in 2011 and has been forced to move many times since. The Burmese army still occupies her village.

“At that time, one of my children came back to me and told me that the Burmese army invaded our village. As she came back running, there was already the sound of the gun. I told my children to flee quickly. As we heard the sound of the gun, the entire village ran across the village. Some could not carry anything with them and they just ran with bare hands.”

Key Finding 2: Women in Myanmar experience an atrophy of justice

Our research found that conditions of impunity are the norm experienced by most women victims in this study, including survivors of sexual violence. Like a wasted muscle, they lose the ability to even imagine how to demand the righting of a wrong.

We found that when asked about whether they felt that “justice” had been done, the women’s answers were largely negative and revealed a concept of justice encompassing three things: a wish to see perpetrators punished and victims acknowledged; the need to be given back what was taken from them, in particular access to their land for displaced women; and the belief that the proper role of a legitimate state is to provide equally for their citizens to ensure that all can obtain a decent standard of living and basic human dignity.

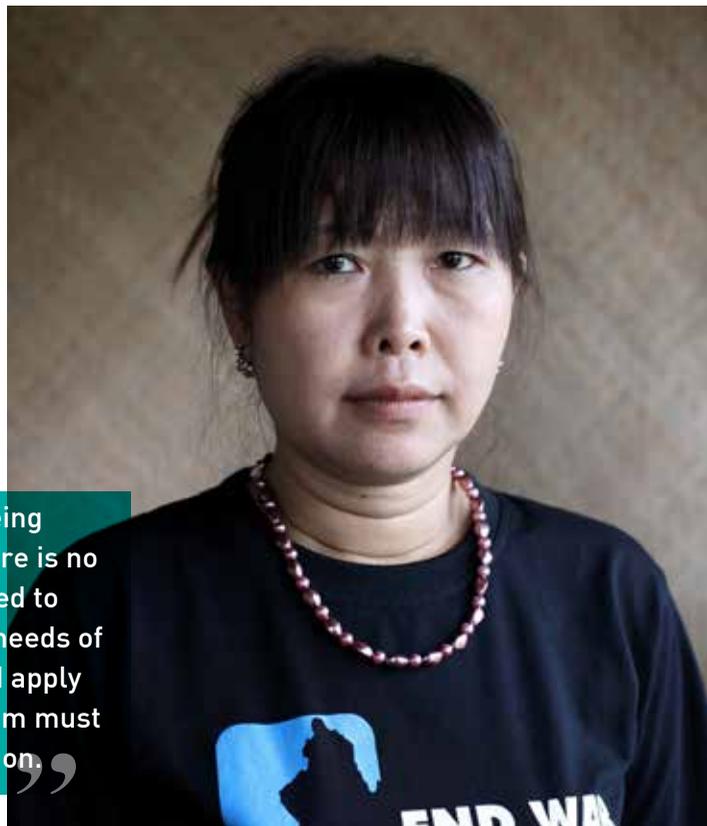
Three women (all Kachin) out of the 29 who participated in this action research project have attempted to seek justice in the courts. Two were unsuccessful, and the outcome of the third case was dissatisfying for the family. In all three cases, the process led to further harassment and problems for the victims or their families.

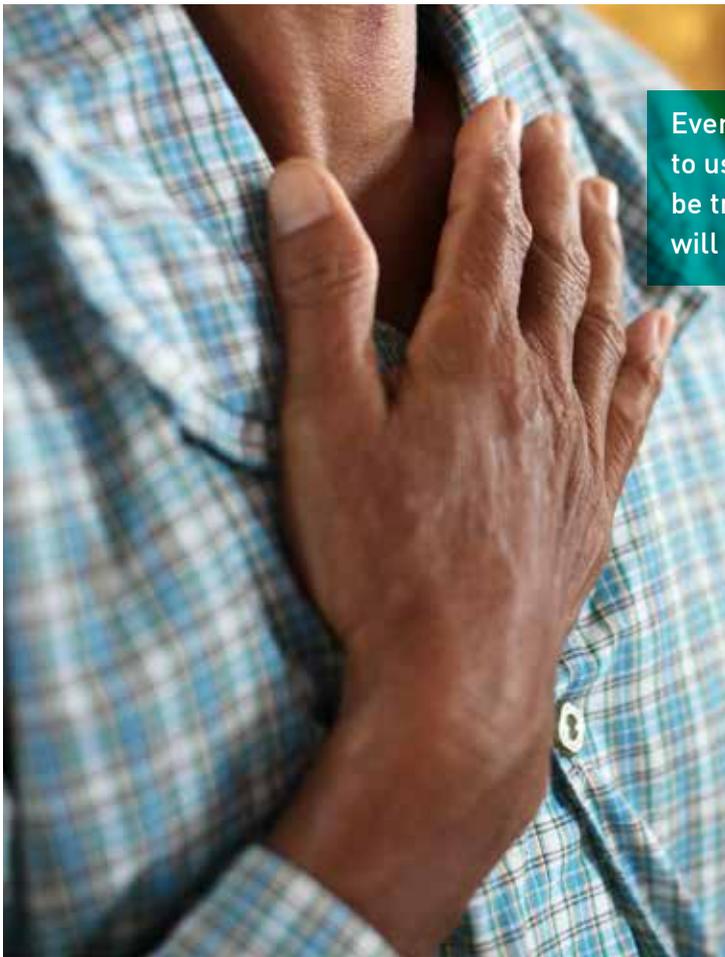
Women in Myanmar have little space to think about the concept of justice. Human rights organizations are documenting cases and collecting information, but it is next to impossible to take legal action. However, the desire for justice is strong. Many women political prisoners continue to be involved in political movements as part of the fight for democracy and peace after they are released. Although they have suffered greatly in the past, their desire for political change is undiminished, and in most cases, imprisonment has served to radicalize them further whilst strengthening their determination.

Thandar

detained as a political prisoner

“Because of my experiences being oppressed, I must say that there is no justice. To have justice, we need to have a law that will fulfill the needs of the citizens, protect them, and apply equally to everyone. The system must be free of bribery and corruption.”





Even if I die before justice comes to us, my great-grandchildren will be trying to get it and I hope they will live happily.

Hkawn Shawng

Kachin

Hkawn Shawng had to flee an attack on her village. The army burned her village and she lost everything. In the forest she was attacked and shot by the Burmese army, together with other villagers. Her granddaughter was abducted and killed. Hkawn Shawng believes that her granddaughter was sexually abused and then killed. Today Hkawn Shawng lives in an IDP village, and struggles for her survival.



Mar Mar Oo

detained as a political prisoner

“They sent me to the military tribunal with various accusations. I did not commit those actions. Even with how hard I tried to submit my argument, the one who made the decision was not a judge. They were military officers. They opened the envelope which they brought along with them, took out the letter from inside, and read the sentence: ‘Three years imprisonment with hard labor.’”

Key Finding 3: Conflict-related displacement of women victims disrupts their livelihoods, and increases their vulnerability. Long-term displacement disrupts life.

In ethnic areas where armed conflict has been waged for decades, women experience extremely long periods of displacement, resulting in a loss of livelihood and opportunities, with no prospects of safe return. All but one of the 19 women from the Kachin and Karen communities involved in the research have been displaced, and ten are currently living in IDP villages. Displaced people that are not living in formal IDP camps are not accounted for, and therefore do not have access to humanitarian assistance, increasing their vulnerability.

Forced to flee, often with little more than they could carry, many of these women reported losing their homes, land, livestock, and possessions. Some women's homes were burned by the Burmese army, while others had their homes and possessions looted by soldiers and other people taking advantage of the unstable political situation.

For women displaced in the ethnic areas, the research shows that being allowed to return to their villages of origin in safe and sustainable conditions is overwhelmingly their first demand. Living in displacement makes women feel insecure, and exposes them to further violence. Distanced from their land and sources of income, most women and their families are unable to farm or to develop businesses, and therefore often unable to provide adequate housing for their families. They are unable to travel freely, which is critical to communication and accessing social support.

There is currently little prospect of safe return for most displaced populations in Myanmar.



“We have been displaced for about 40 years. The Burmese government does not let us go back to our village. We are living on someone's land. It is very difficult for us, as we cannot earn our living. I want to go back to my village and my land and be free to earn a livelihood.”

Nyar Bwe

Karen



“It’s been 39 years. It’s been 39 years and we still hope to go back. As we had to relocate like this, our economy is not well. We have difficulties. We do not have our own house and we live on others’ compounds. Some people love us but some do not. We could not afford to buy a piece of land.”

Htoo Htoo
Karen



“As it was the cold season, we soon started feeling very cold. After we had gotten my mother-in-law settled, my son, my daughter, and I started to dig a trench for protection, when a man saw us and took pity on us. He showed us a better place to hide. We hid in the forest for one week.”

Htu Bu
Kachin

In November 2012, Htu Bu and her family were forced to flee an attack on their village by running into the woods

Key Finding 4: Women victims struggle with the socioeconomic impact of violence, which affects their ability to access justice

Alongside attacks on their personal integrity, many women victims in Myanmar also experienced violations of their social and economic rights. In some contexts, these violations are much more widespread than other forms of violations, and yet they are largely undocumented. These abuses include the loss of land and livelihoods, the destruction of homes and possessions, and having to sacrifice educational opportunities for oneself and one's children. The abuses are not only widespread, but often extend over many years, if not decades.

Almost all of the women in ethnic areas reported the loss of land, homes, and possessions as a result of ongoing conflict and displacement. This resulted in lost livelihoods, increased poverty, and women and children being forced to drop out of school. Many women former political prisoners in the study reported negative economic consequences of their imprisonment. Houses had to be mortgaged to pay legal fees. Businesses were lost because of ongoing harassment from authorities, and fear and stigma on the part of former customers.

The loss of male relatives (often the main breadwinners) compounded women's socioeconomic challenges. Nearly half of women in the study reported the loss of a husband, son, or father because of death or disappearance due to conflict. Over a quarter reported that a male relative had been detained. In many cases, women took on additional responsibilities.

These hardships undermine women's efforts to seek justice. Kachin and Karen women spoke of the primacy of the daily struggle to survive, which leaves little time and resources for legal actions such as opening cases, hiring lawyers, or submitting cases to courts, if there is even the option to do this.



Ah Nan
Kachin

Ah Nan was raped by members of the government security forces. She initiated a complaint with the relevant authorities, and has since been harassed and threatened by the security forces. She would like to defend her rights through the judicial process, but she knows it will take time and a lot of money. She cannot afford it, as she needs to work daily to survive and take care of her children. She also fears for her safety.



Yaw Myaw

Kachin

Yaw Myaw's daughter was abducted by the Burmese army and kept in their camp for a few months before she was disappeared. The family believes that she may have been raped and killed, but they do not know the truth about what happened to her. They brought the case before the Supreme Court, which rejected it without hearing the evidence. While they still hope to obtain justice one day, they struggle every day for their livelihood in the IDP camp.



Ohmar

detained as a political prisoner

“When I was released from prison, I could not successfully find projects for my embroidery work from businessmen, as they did not trust me anymore. I had to struggle a lot financially.”

Key Finding 5: Women victims are not able to access basic services, and need specialized programs to deal with health, trauma, reproductive health, and aging.

Nearly half of all the women participants have experienced trauma and physical health challenges as a result of conflict and violent oppression. Women former political prisoners reported trauma and health conditions linked to torture and inhumane prison conditions, including stomach problems, back pain, and menstrual difficulties. Women in ethnic areas talked about trauma and injuries sustained while fleeing warfare, and stress and health problems linked to long hours of arduous work and poor living conditions.

Despite the clear and urgent needs of victims, women's access to health and basic services in Myanmar is extremely poor or non-existent, especially in rural areas affected by ongoing conflict. For many displaced women there is no health care. Many people die of common and treatable diseases and health problems, such as snakebites and malaria, because of inaccessible or unaffordable services. One Karen participant in the study passed away from cancer, in part due to lack of access to proper treatment.

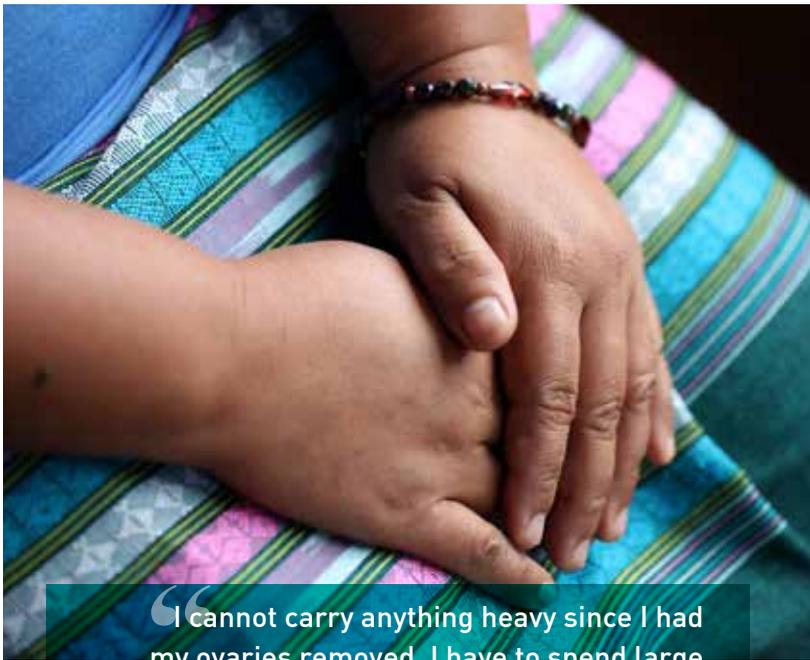
Out of the 29 women involved in the research, none have received assistance from official institutions or organizations, although one family received a small amount of financial compensation from the military for the death of their daughter. Eight received some form of small material or financial support from local organizations or from the local ethnic armed groups.



Cho Cho Aye

detained as a political prisoner

“I was beaten with a stick, so now I feel pain in my left thigh and hip. Because of that I also have a problem with my knee.”



“I cannot carry anything heavy since I had my ovaries removed. I have to spend large amounts of money when I go to the clinic. My income and expenses are not balanced. I recently had to stop taking medication for two months in order to pay for my child’s schooling.”

Nyar Eh Khu

Karen

Nyar Eh Khu was born in the jungle and had to spend most of her childhood living in difficult conditions, as her parents were rebels and in hiding. She witnessed many human rights violations. Since then, she has had difficulty surviving and paying for her medical expenses after needing surgery on her ovaries.



Hkawn Lum

Kachin

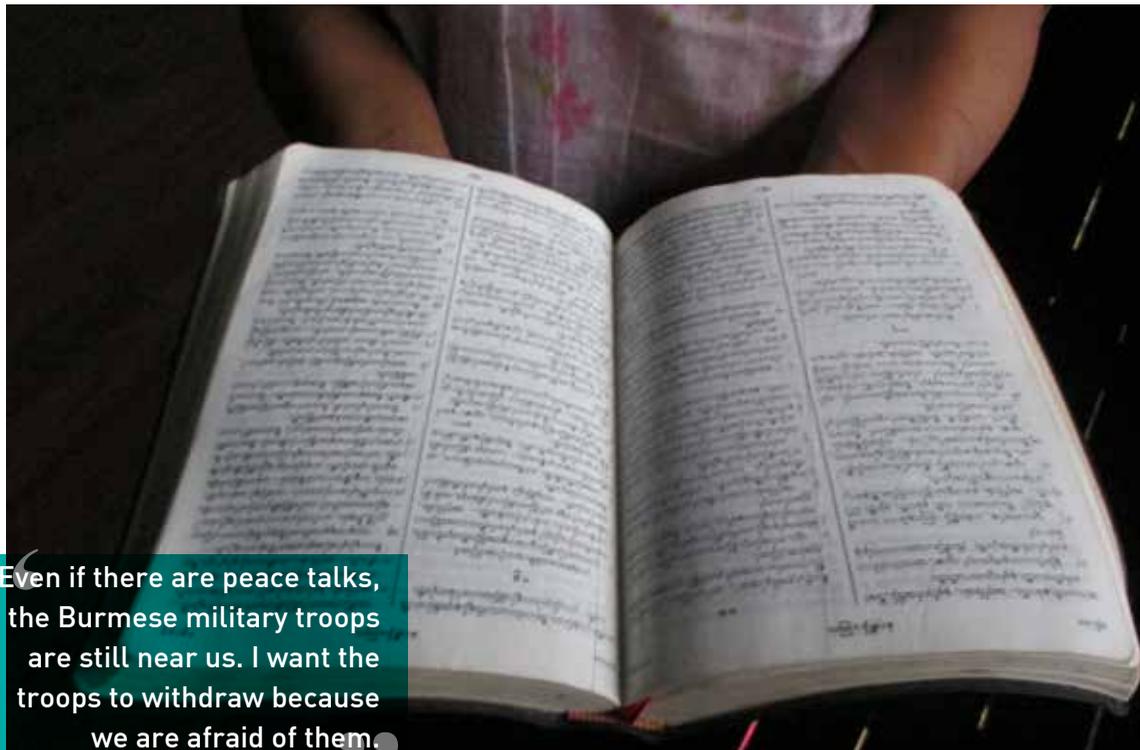
Hkawn Lum has been displaced several times because of the fighting, each time losing her possessions. The IDP camp in which she took refuge was bombed by the army, and she had to flee again. Her husband was killed during an attack on their village. She was injured while trying to flee the fighting, and never received proper medical care.

Key Finding 6: Women take actions for peace, but remain peripheral in formal negotiations and peace building

As made clear by their life stories, the impact of the conflict on women and their families is severe. Participants frequently mentioned their desire for peace, both for themselves and for future generations. Yet most women victims in ethnic rural areas, particularly the women most affected by the conflict and living in situations of displacement, do not have any substantial knowledge about the peace process. Apart from knowing that discussions are occurring between fighting factions, they have little understanding or knowledge of the discussions taking place in their name at the political level.

None of the 29 women in the study have been involved in any formal peace processes. The women who participated in the research expressed doubt, distrust, and skepticism towards the peace process. Grassroots women's organizations and civil society organizations representing women's interests are excluded from any meaningful participation or input in the peace process discussions. To date, there are almost no women at the discussion table.⁷

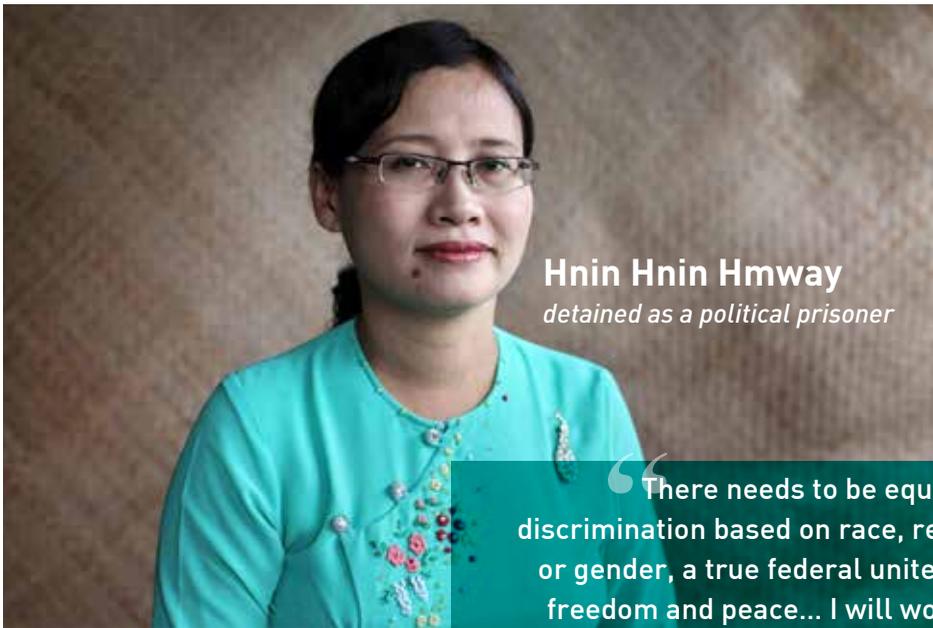
Some women, however, have taken informal action for peace at a grassroots level in their own communities. This includes community-level trauma recovery, and human rights and peace promotion work. These efforts forge a way for the suffering of women survivors to be recognized and for their communities to accept them.



Even if there are peace talks, the Burmese military troops are still near us. I want the troops to withdraw because we are afraid of them.

Htay Htay
Karen

⁷"Where Are The Women: Negotiations for Peace in Burma," Swedish Burma Committee, May 2013; "Looking at the Current Peace Process in Myanmar through a Gender Lens," Salai Isaac Khen and Muk Yin Haung Nyo, August 2014



Hnin Hnin Hmway

detained as a political prisoner

“There needs to be equality with no discrimination based on race, religion, skin, or gender, a true federal united country of freedom and peace... I will work for these things as long as I live. The government does not realize that sending us to jail only increases our motivation to be politically active.”

Tar Thue

Karen

The conflict forced Tar Thue’s family to relocate before she was born. Hence, she has lived in an IDP village her whole life, and had to drop out of school because her parents could not afford it. Her father endured severe torture by the military.



“I want durable peace. I do not want war...”

Opening the Box: Women's Stories



Ah Nan

Kachin

Ah Nan is a strong, resourceful woman who has four children, three daughters (the eldest of whom is 12) and a son who is 6. She has supported her mother and mother-in-law since her husband, a former soldier in the KIA, was arrested in 2013 for a drug-related offense. A passionate woman, she is determined to fight for justice.

Not long after her husband's arrest in 2013, two men came to Ah Nan's house and raped her. She believes they were members of the police force. The younger of the two men was barely 20 years old and wore jeans and a black shirt. The older one had a cap and blue trousers like the ones police officers usually wear.

The two men came to my house. I had closed the door with an iron bar but they pulled it with all their strength. In the past, since my husband was the village chief, I had a lot of guests. I thought they might be someone who was in trouble, so I opened the door.

I could not see them well as there wasn't much light. Once they came in, I thought they might be the police related to my husband's case. They took the knife that I keep on the wall in the corner. Then they told me to take off my longyi. I had three layers of underwear including tights. I told them, even if you want to check me, you should not do that. But they did not listen.

The older man then threatened Ah Nan with a knife. He pushed her to the ground and sexually assaulted and raped her, while his accomplice held her arms.

I tried to shout but he hit me on my mouth with his cap; the pain was still there for the next four days. I prayed to God silently. Then, the younger one, who was not more than 20, took his turn.

After they had finished, they saw the motorbike and asked whether it belonged to me and took it.

When Ah Nan complained to the authorities and attempted to identify the perpetrators, she was met with contempt, threats, and intimidation.

The [authorities] shouted "Where! Who!" But I was not scared and I tried to tell them what really happened. They were very angry.

Ah Nan was particularly anxious to reclaim the stolen motorbike, as without it, and being in poor health, the family has found it very difficult to farm the fields higher up the mountainside.

Now it is very hard for Ah Nan to look after the farm and her 4 children, with only her mother and mother-in-law to help.

She is still looking for the two perpetrators who abused her, but she has been unable to locate them. With the assistance of community-based organizations, she has sent a letter of appeal to the authorities, but there has been no positive outcome and she has only faced intimidation as a result. She would like to attempt to seek justice for her case, despite the risks and difficulties.

Ah Nan wants to tell the truth on behalf of others who have suffered from violence, and who dare not speak out.

They showed me all the motorbikes, but ours was not there. Then they told us that an officer was using our motorbike. It is still new. We have not even used it. I really feel angry and sad when I think about my motorbike. It was very difficult for us to buy it.



Cho Cho Aye
detained as a political prisoner

Cho Cho Aye is 50 years old, a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), and a women's rights activist. Married, with two daughters, three granddaughters, and one grandson, she struggles to support her family on what she earns from selling merchandise. Her father passed away in 1979.

Cho Cho Aye participated in the 1988 uprising. She explained why she first became involved in politics:

I entered into politics not because I understood politics, but because I wanted to end injustice.

In 2004, Cho Cho Aye conducted prayer ceremonies every Tuesday at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners. She also demonstrated in front of the United Nations to urge them to take concrete action, instead of simply making hollow statements in condemnation of the then Prime Minister of Burma, Soe Win, and his regime. Soe Win had been responsible for organizing the killing of dozens of innocent, unarmed members of the NLD on 30 May, 2003 at Depayin, where the prime target was Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Cho Cho Aye joined the 88 Generation when it was founded in 2005. She was arrested and detained in 2009 for participating in a march in support of Saffron Revolution monks. She was sent to prison, and while there suffered physical and psychological torture.

They brought us to the interrogation center and did not let us to sleep for three nights and one day. We had to sit on a chair for questioning.

Cho Cho Aye suffered from very harsh conditions in prison, which badly affected her health, and she had to struggle to remain strong: *I could have died, and if I had died, they would only know when they came to open the door in the morning. No one would know. So for that I could not die. I would only let them defeat me once.*

After being released from prison, Cho Cho Aye continued her political involvement. In 2012, she participated in organizing a demonstration asking for proper investigation into the Depayin massacre. She also set up the Women's Peace and Democracy Network.

She has received very little support as a former political prisoner, and she said she is not aware of any opportunities to receive assistance. Having been subject to beatings during the Saffron Revolution, she has had two operations and undergoes on-going treatment for lower back pain.

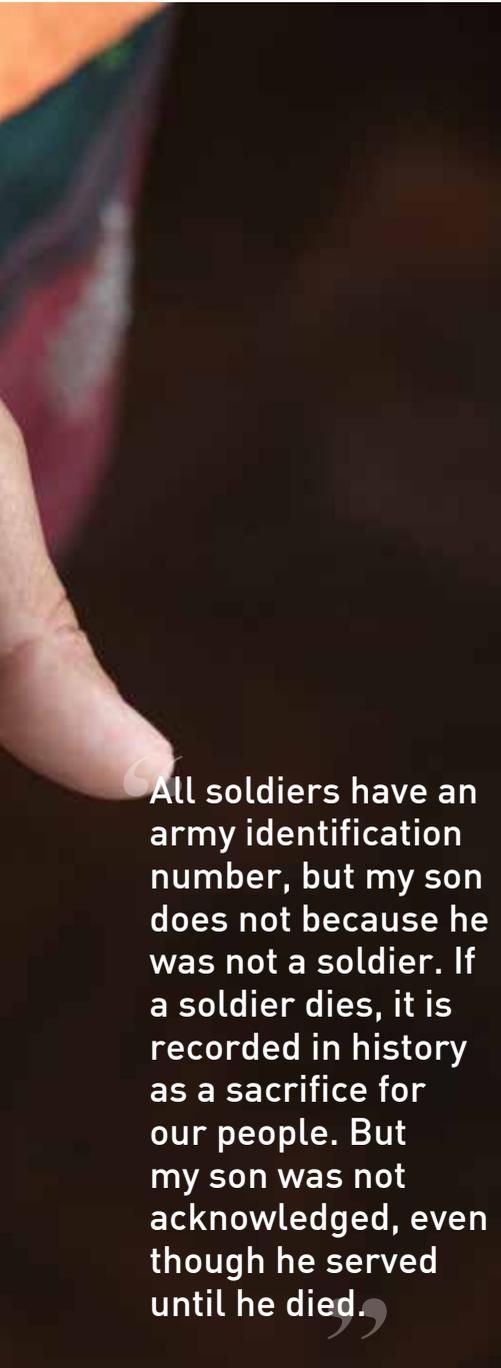
“They sent us to prison as we offered food to monks. Because of that, we assumed they were evil. These evil people treated us unfairly, and if I died because of this, I would be a loser. They would win and I would be more than a loser. I could not stand this. I controlled myself and pulled myself back together; I should not die. Being alive is a way of fighting against them. It's a kind of fighting back at them, if we stay alive.”



Dashi Tawm

Kachin

Smart, educated, and confident, Dashi Tawm used to be a teacher. Having been displaced many times, Dashi Tawm is living in an IDP camp, and is struggling to survive without the major breadwinner of the family, her eldest son, a church youth leader. He disappeared while doing some work for the KIA, although he was not a soldier.



All soldiers have an army identification number, but my son does not because he was not a soldier. If a soldier dies, it is recorded in history as a sacrifice for our people. But my son was not acknowledged, even though he served until he died.

The incident involving her son took place during chaotic events in November 2011, when the Burmese military gained control of a nearby village, which was a KIA frontline area. The next morning, the villagers of Dashi Tawm's village were asked to leave as quickly as possible. Dashi Tawm did not know where her son was and had to leave without him. She was very distressed.

On the day that he disappeared, Dashi Tawm's son was using his motorbike to assist the frontline KIA militia by transporting supplies. While riding through a very dangerous area near a jade company, he became involved in a shooting incident. Attempts to uncover the truth of what happened, or find his body, have so far yielded almost nothing.

Dashi Tawm faced many challenges when she tried to find out from the KIA militia what had happened to her son. Finally, she was told her that her son and his friend had crossed into the area that the Burmese troops had taken. The KIA had sent some soldiers, including Dashi Tawm's other son, to the place to investigate, but they had had to retreat because it was too dangerous.

There have been many stories. My son did not have an army uniform. But they said my son was killed because he was wearing an army uniform. It's impossible.

Dashi Tawm has not been able to search for her son's body. She is sad that she has not been able to learn the truth about what happened, and that her son's death has gone unrecognized.

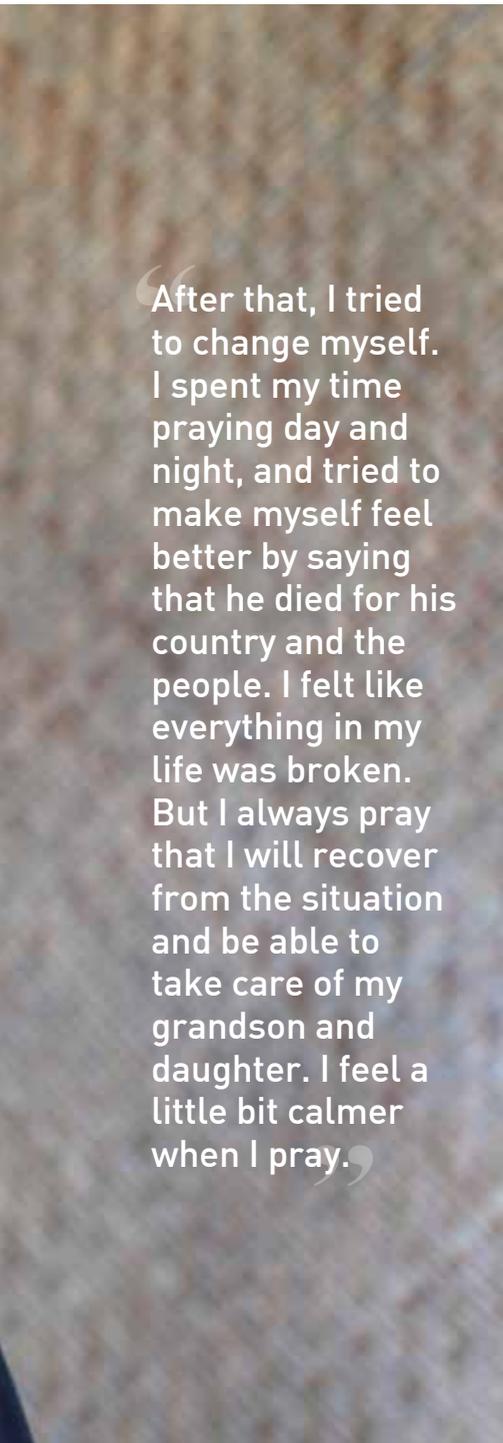
Dashi Tawm is also very sad that she was not able to get help with reimbursement for the lost motorbike. In the end, the family managed to gather some financial support from various sources. They held a small funeral service for their son and bought a motorbike to replace the one that was lost.

Recently, Dashi Tawm returned to her original home to find that all of her possessions had been lost, due to a landslide and looting. Her house had been destroyed and the furniture was gone. All of her schoolbooks and teaching materials were torn, and the family's clothes were strewn all over the floor.

Now Dashi Tawm feeds two pigs at a village close to the IDP camp and plans to grow corn at a local friend's farm on the mountainside. She thinks of herself as lucky because, although her eldest son died, her two other sons are still alive. Of her eldest she says: "I will never forget my son. He was very good, kind, and supportive to our family. He worked hard for the family and we also depended on his income."



Doi Ra
Kachin



“After that, I tried to change myself. I spent my time praying day and night, and tried to make myself feel better by saying that he died for his country and the people. I felt like everything in my life was broken. But I always pray that I will recover from the situation and be able to take care of my grandson and daughter. I feel a little bit calmer when I pray.”

Doi Ra has struggled for many years, and despite all her suffering still has a teasing sense of humor. She had three sons, all of whom were conscripted to serve in the KIA. Two of them are now dead.

Doi Ra was traumatized when her youngest son was tortured and killed by the Burmese army during a botched prisoner exchange that broke the 17-year-long ceasefire on June 9, 2011. Doi Ra's son was a KIA soldier, who was captured by the Burmese army during the ceasefire. Instead of handing him over to the KIA, they only handed over his clothes and gun, and it was later discovered that he had been tortured to death.

Doi Ra faced many difficulties in the aftermath of her son's death. Her eldest son had already died in battle in 1994, and she found it very hard to cope with her young family and maintaining the farm.

I was so sad and empty. I tried to heal my pain by drinking four or five bottles of alcohol a week. I had to drink a bottle each night to be able to sleep well. The leader of the church came to tell me not to drink alcohol because it would affect my health. She also prayed for me. Slowly, I began to realize that I should not drink, since some of my children were still very young and I knew that I needed to educate them.

In the end, the KIA gave Doi Ra's son a proper funeral, and she received 200,000 Kyat (around \$ USD 200) as recognition for his death. Yet she is very angry about the lack of justice for her son, “The Burmese army cheated us and we Kachins always have to suffer like this. Neither side would tell me exactly how he was killed, so I do not know who really killed my son. Even though I followed the news for days, I could not work out what really happened.”

Doi Ra was able to reclaim her son's body, which was already decomposing. She assumes that he had been killed days before, and that the Burmese army attempted to hide the body. Now she grows corn and raises chickens and a pig for her family's livelihood. She also has a paddy farm, but is unable to farm this since her other son has a bad leg and his wife is not strong enough to work.

Doi Ra suffers from abdominal pain and is grief stricken. Although she feels weak and cannot work as she used to, she was encouraged to carry on after meeting the other Kachin survivors.



Hkawn Lum
Kachin

Hkawn Lum lost her husband when he stayed behind to protect the village during fighting between KIA and Burmese army troops. They had been married for 40 years. Hkawn Lum was badly injured herself during this fighting.

Hkawn Lum's village is part of a township over which various sides vie for control. She has been displaced many times, and has lost all of her possessions. At present, she lives in an IDP camp.

In her home village, Hkawn Lum's family were very successful paddy farmers who lived in a teak house. It took them a long time to build the house, which they completed during the ceasefire in 2004.

After fighting broke out again, they were forced to flee and her husband was injured. They left behind their livestock and treasured belongings. When the fighting died down, she and her relatives returned to reclaim what was left of their possessions and to keep working the land. Although her KIA soldier sons were able to come home temporarily to help with the harvest, she and her husband bore the brunt of the farm work. During this time Hkawn Lum seriously injured her arm, which made it difficult for her to work. The continuing conflict meant that the area remained dangerous.

People warned us to leave, as we had heard about terrible incidents of rape and murder by the Burmese soldiers. My sons also told me to leave, and fast. But my husband and one of his younger brothers could not leave the village immediately. They remained to look after the paddy fields and cattle.

Hkawn Lum and other relatives made their way to a safe area. After eleven days there, she heard the news of her husband's death.

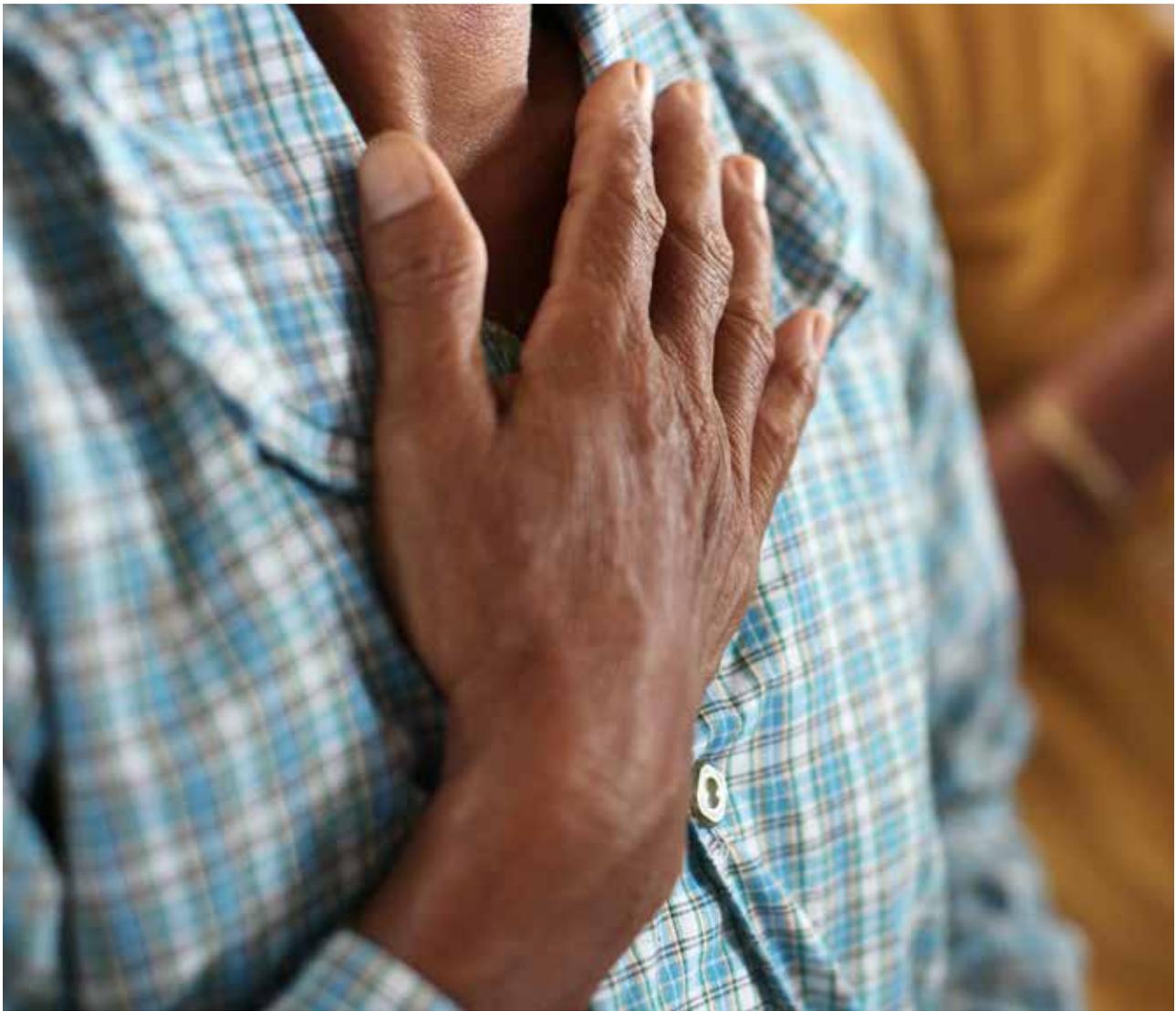
On the way back to our farm, they were ambushed by Burmese army troops... My husband was shot in the abdomen. Later, when the villagers and relatives found his body, there was only one eye and one ear. It seems the Burmese soldiers shot him first, but he did not die immediately so they used his knife to torture him. The villagers said they found my husband's knife beside the body.

I could not think anything at all for about two months. I was very shocked and I didn't want to think about work. I love him now even more than before...I don't want to go back home where my husband is no longer, and I told my brother-in-law and our relatives that I will die here in [the] IDP camp.'

Life is hard in the camp, and Hkawn Lum keeps herself busy working on another farm and caring for the pigs. She still has pain in her arm from her injury.

After participating in one of our healing workshops, she reflected:

In 2011, I was not able to talk to anyone because of the sadness, especially when I met my relatives. Now I have been able to release my sufferings a little, having heard about other friends' stories at the survivors' meeting. There are some friends who have lost two husbands after they married a second time. At least I only lost one.



Hkawn Shawng

Kachin

Hkawn Shawng is a wise woman who has experienced much in her life. She was shot and wounded when Burmese soldiers attacked a camp where she had taken refuge with other villagers. Her 22-year-old granddaughter was captured, along with her 3-year-old great-granddaughter, and another woman and her baby. It is believed that both women were raped several times before being killed.

Escaping for her life and badly injured, Grandmother Hkawn Shawng managed to stay on the run for several nights. Eventually she reached safety and was able to treat her wounds with herbs. She met some friends who shared some rice, salt, and blankets with her.



“I feel inspired and have gained the strength to survive my difficulties.”

However within a week or so, Hkawn Shawng's wound was beginning to fester. When she finally reached the government hospital in Ba Maw, a doctor refused to perform surgery on the wound. Eventually she received effective treatment at the clinic in an IDP camp.

Her son told us that due to Kachin taboos surrounding sexual assault, he feels very ashamed about what happened to his daughter. In his community there are those who say things about her that are both unkind and untrue.

Using information from a shopkeeper who overheard two Burmese soldiers bragging about raping a woman, Hkawn Shawng's son was able to locate the location where the army had buried his daughter in a makeshift grave in the forest.

We wanted to know for sure whether the body was a woman or a man so we dug it up. We could only see the bones, some hair. The clothes that she wore that night. The army tried to tell us they did not touch her, but the clothes were just thrown on her chest, she was not even wearing them. They just put a red blanket over her body. The burial place was also not that deep.

Hkawn Shawng's son asked for help from a number of people, but received little assistance. Eventually he was able to borrow some money to retrieve and rebury the body. They held a ceremony for his daughter in the village where she died.

The perpetrators' military base is known by the community. However it has been very difficult to establish their precise identity.

Fortunately Hkawn Shawng's toddler great-granddaughter was rescued. She remembers her mother being shot in the legs and crying all night. Later on she was adopted by relatives and no longer speaks of the incident.

In the IDP camp where she lives, Hkawn Shawng takes care of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her granddaughter's sarong is her most treasured possession. She told us:

I just gain strength from thinking that other people also suffer the same as me. I believe that when my children get older, everything will be better. I don't have anything now. I don't have any hopes for my property now.

Although Hkawn Shawng is worried about the future, and feels very isolated in the IDP camp. She gained much from meeting other survivors to tell her story.



Hnin Hnin Hmway

former political prisoner

A highly educated and dignified woman of 46, Hnin Hnin Hmway has been arrested twice. The first time was in August 1989, after authorities accused her of displaying a Democratic Party for New Society (DPNS) flag during the uprising. In the wake of the 88 uprisings, the prison suddenly received large numbers of women political prisoners. The facilities were inadequate and rations were insufficient.

We were only allowed three bowls of water each, so we collected used water in order to do our laundry. Often the food was more like what pigs eat – solidified, smelly with husks, larvae in the nga-pi and pests in the boiled beans.



“I will work for these things as long as I live. The government does not realize that sending us to jail only increases our motivation to be politically active.”

If the prison authorities discovered poems or letters, women political prisoners would be kept in isolation, forbidden visits, exercise, or even to wash. In September 1990, Hnin Hnin Hmway was one of five women prisoners who were tortured and moved to Tharyarwaddy prison for taking part in a prison strike.

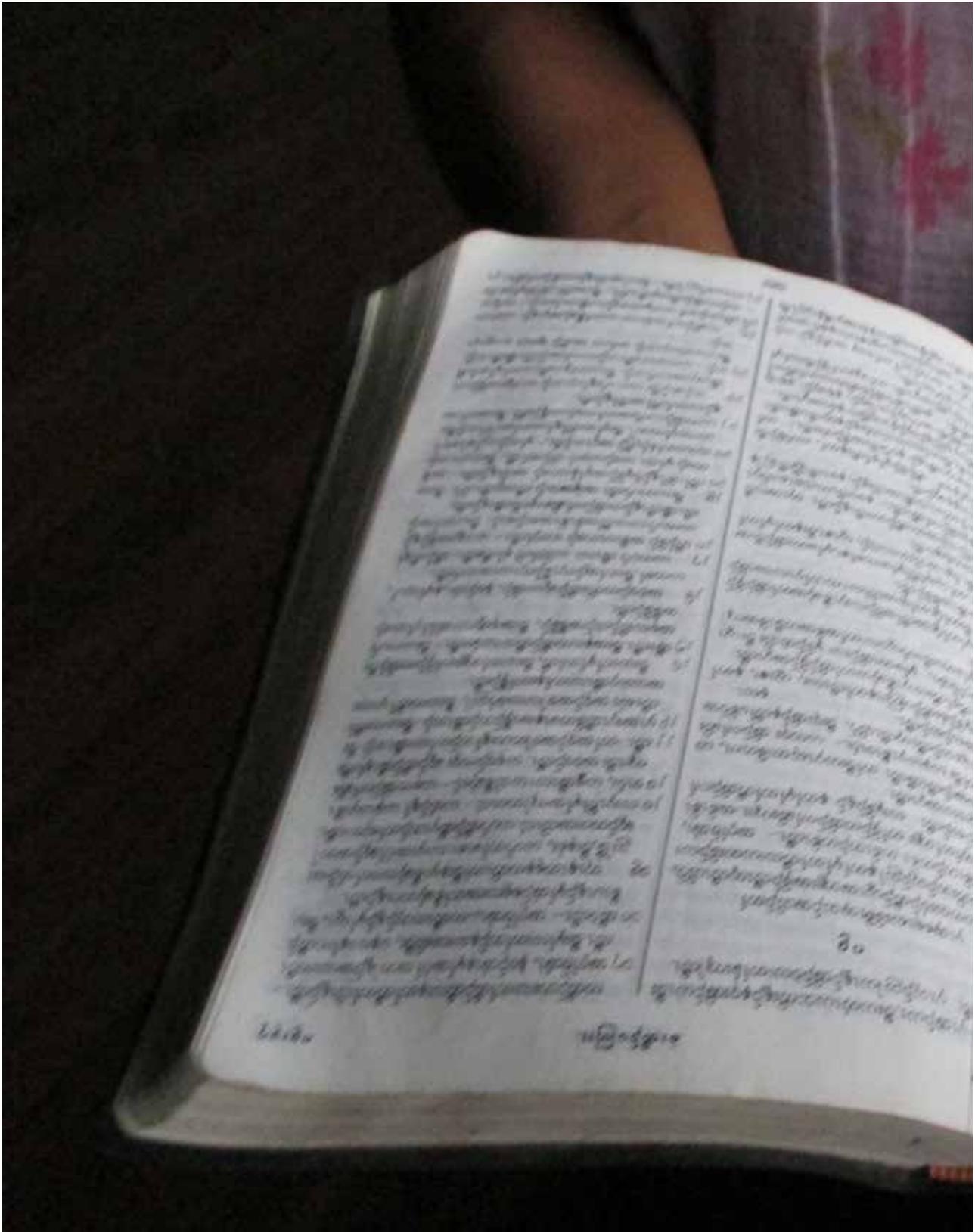
After her release in 1992, Hnin Hnin Hmway visited friends who had fled to the conflict area on the border after the DPNS was declared illegal.

We had to run away when a column of Burmese soldiers attacked us using artillery. We slept on leaves. We survived on rice, plants, and fruits that we found in the forest. I only experienced this for a month. But the villagers who had to flee experienced this kind of thing for most of their life.

In 1997, Hnin Hnin Hmway was arrested again and sentenced to three years imprisonment for contact with what the authorities deemed to be an illegal organization. Conditions were harsh. Her glasses were confiscated so she had to get through prison life without them. When she was released, she discovered that one of her pupils had become defective.

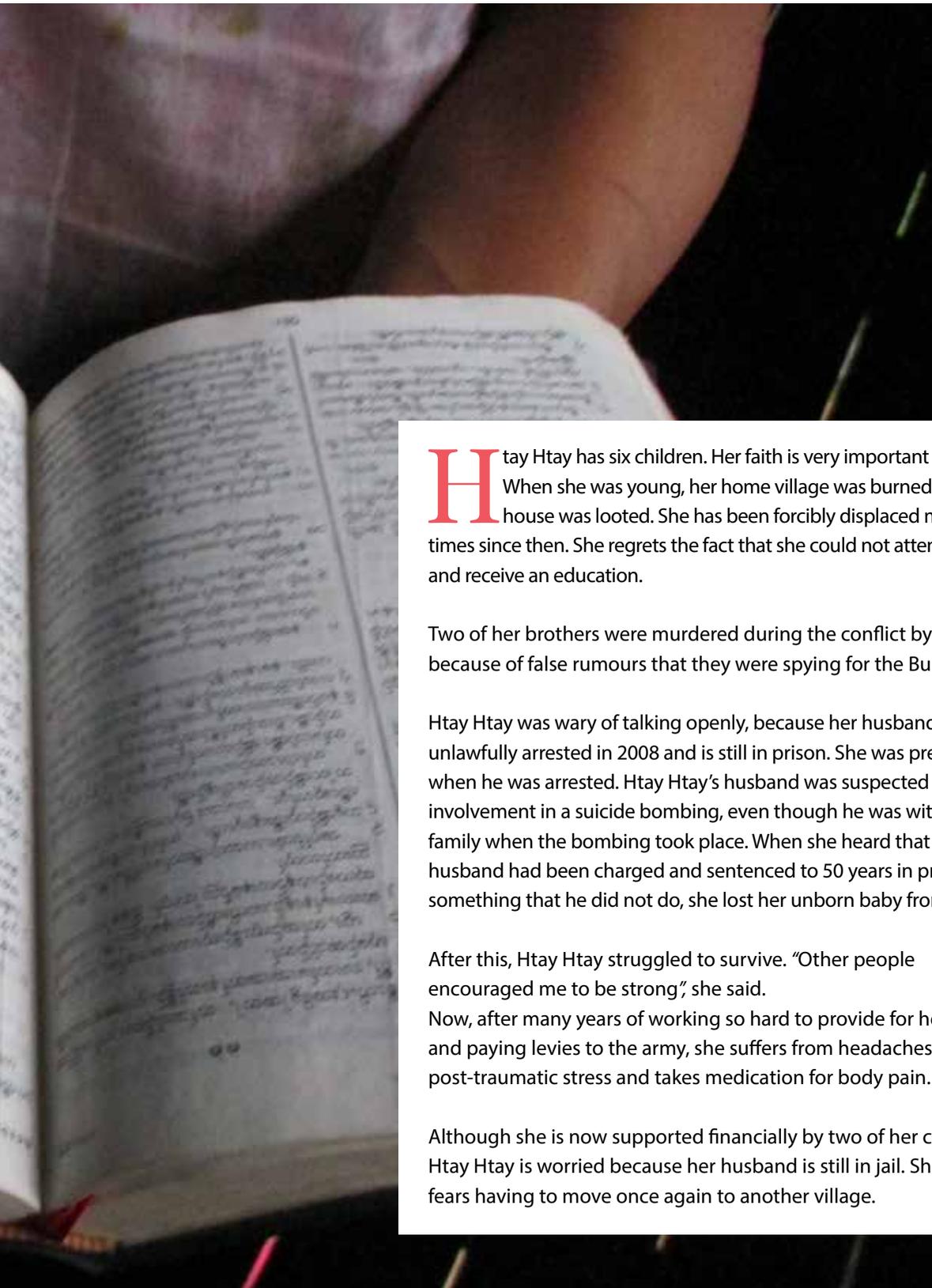
In 1999, when she was about to be released, the ICRC visited the prison. The prison servants were ordered to paint the building where the 10 women prisoners of the 5 (J) block were kept and locked in with a padlock from the outside. “They closed all the doors and windows, acting as if our building was a storehouse. As it was the hot season, we almost suffocated.”

Hnin Hnin Hmway eventually secured her release. In the past she was a lecturer and tutor, but the government did not allow her to resume her career in education. She participated in the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and continues to be engaged in political activities. She has been actively involved in setting up former political prisoner associations, and campaigning for the rights and release of all political prisoners.



Htay Htay

Karen



Htay Htay has six children. Her faith is very important to her. When she was young, her home village was burned and her house was looted. She has been forcibly displaced many times since then. She regrets the fact that she could not attend school and receive an education.

Two of her brothers were murdered during the conflict by the KNU because of false rumours that they were spying for the Burmese.

Htay Htay was wary of talking openly, because her husband was unlawfully arrested in 2008 and is still in prison. She was pregnant when he was arrested. Htay Htay's husband was suspected of involvement in a suicide bombing, even though he was with his family when the bombing took place. When she heard that her husband had been charged and sentenced to 50 years in prison for something that he did not do, she lost her unborn baby from shock.

After this, Htay Htay struggled to survive. "Other people encouraged me to be strong"; she said.

Now, after many years of working so hard to provide for her family and paying levies to the army, she suffers from headaches due to post-traumatic stress and takes medication for body pain.

Although she is now supported financially by two of her children, Htay Htay is worried because her husband is still in jail. She also fears having to move once again to another village.



Htoo Htoo
Karen



Htoo Htoo is a very friendly, community-minded member of the Karen survivors' group. She was blessed with a happy marriage and three children. Since childhood, she has been displaced several times because of the conflict.

The family had to relocate. During this time Htoo Htoo's father was tortured and died of his injuries. Her husband was tortured many times by the Burmese army, whenever they came to her village to take men as porters. She suffered from serious post-traumatic stress as a result of witnessing so much violence.

Now, Htoo Htoo and her family live in a village for internally displaced people. They earn a living by working on other people's farms. In order to get her daughter through 8th grade, Htoo Htoo had to sell the small piece of land that she had in her home village and borrow money with interest. Now they have no shop or home, and have to live in someone else's house. They face discrimination and could not afford to buy a piece of land, even if there were any for sale.

Life is very hard working on the farms. Htoo Htoo is devastated that she lost both her husband to snakebites—a menace for farmers in the area. "Every month, at least two people die from snakebites. Doctors do not pay attention to those who cannot pay the cost."

Htoo Htoo's three children are all grown up now. She is sad that they had to grow up without all of the basic things they needed. Now she hopes her grandchildren will have better opportunities in life, and that her children will be able to afford to send them to school. "In our time, almost all of us were not educated because we had to relocate so often, and our businesses weren't successful."

In the future, she hopes to run a successful business, and live in her own village once more.

“We had to leave the village when I was eight, and we lost everything – our house, cows, and buffaloes. We had to leave our churches. Since 1975 we haven't been able to go back. It's been 39 years and we still hope to go back.”



Htu Bu

Kachin

Htu Bu used to live in an IDP camp. She is 41 years old and has six children. While she was pregnant with her youngest son, she struggled to look after the paddy fields and hill farm. Then her husband fell sick, and died only 20 days after she had given birth.

After her husband died, Htu Bu encouraged her children to carry on studying for a whole year, but the eldest four had to drop out. In many regions of Myanmar, there are still taboos surrounding a woman who is bringing up her children alone.

When my child was born, my husband died. I tried to forget my husband, but I was always thinking of him. I felt like I was floating in the air. I began to understand that people look down on the family if there is no husband. Although many people find a new partner when their husband or wife dies, I made up my mind not to find another.

We still had cows to sell, even if my husband was dead. One day my baby cow died in a big hole. At that time I felt like my husband had died all over again and I was very sad. I did not even want to eat. We relied so much on this cow.

However, somehow Htu Bu found the strength to take care of her family, including her aged, almost-blind mother-in-law. She learned about farming techniques and helped the family through a great deal of hardship, making rice wine to sell.

Then, in November 2012, fighting broke out close to her village. Htu Bu was forced to flee with the family, carrying their meager belongings.

I took my son, Ma Gun, and my mother-in-law, and showed them places to hide. We hid separately in different places. I told my mother-in-law not to be afraid, but she was hyperventilating and shaking so I told her that we would all stay together.

After hiding for three days, Htu Bu tried to return to her village, but Burmese soldiers remained there. The family walked on, taking temporary shelter in other villages before eventually settling in an area where other displaced families were staying.

In 2013, the situation became more stable. Htu Bu returned to her home village in the hope of finding at least one of her cows. However, when they arrived, Burmese soldiers were still there. Htu Bu had no choice but to move to an IDP camp. There she sometimes earns money doing odd jobs such as cutting sugarcane for one or two days.

Htu Bu does not know whether she will get her land back, as others are farming it now. Her livelihood has been completely destroyed by the war. But she is proud of her children.

“My daughter is living with others, helping their family with household needs. My eldest son is a KIA soldier. My sons are still at school. One is at kindergarten and one is in Standard One. My second eldest son is 16 years old now. Most of my children have grown up; they are able to earn money themselves. I feel very happy for them. I am proud of being able to bring them up to be strong and independent.”



Khin Mi Mi Khine

former political prisoner

Mi Mi Khine is an advocate for land and farmers' rights. She has been detained four times, during which she suffered physical and mental abuse, including sleep deprivation and being forced to eat contaminated food. This resulted in hallucinations, anxiety, trauma, and a hearing problem.

A determined and resourceful person, Mi Mi Khine grew up with parents who strove to provide her with an education in the hopes



that she would become a civil servant. But all that changed in 1988. She reflects, "...all of my life purposes, goals, my lifestyle, values, and my way of thinking changed after the 1988 uprising. The only thing I wanted to do was gain as much knowledge as I could and try to be a good citizen." She became a youth leader for the NLD during the 1990 elections.

First detained in 1997 for political activities, she was arrested again in 1998 and imprisoned for nearly a year and a half. Life in Insein prison was difficult. Her father passed away when she was in detention. She also felt betrayed by fellow activists. When the NLD sent gifts to all the women in her building of Insein prison, Mi Mi Khine did not receive any. She felt she was ignored, even though she had stood firm and loyal through many difficult situations.

But this did not deter Mi Mi Khine. While she was in prison, she stood up for prisoners whose rights were being violated. She spoke out on behalf of those who were refused water, and those forced to use one bottle for both toilet and drinking. She defended the right to water for bathing, especially when women were menstruating.

After being released, Mi Mi Khine became a private teacher and pursued a Master's degree in library science. She is proud of the prize-winning essay on Sayama Tan Myint Aung, which she wrote for her degree. "It was then that I realized, just as other women can achieve things, so can I."

After Cyclone Nargis, she volunteered as a social worker and developed knowledge and skills in psychosocial support. Because authorities often harass those fighting the government, Mi Mi Khine stopped teaching. She is now involved in community development.

In 2013 she was detained again for six months for defending farmers' rights. That same year, at age 45, she received a social activist award for her work.

I feel as if my 25 years of political life were recognized for the first time through this award. Even though our families and communities wish to help us restore justice, they do not know how to go about this process. From my point of view, no systematic rehabilitation process has been carried out yet. We have begun to set up workshops to assist with the healing process for trauma.

Her main hope is to have a political system where all citizens feel secure enough to sleep well at night. Where there are no guns, and people are happy and free to sing and dance as they wish.



Mar Mar Oo

former political prisoner

Mar Mar Oo is the Deputy Coordinator of the 88 Generation's Labor Department, and a highly-respected activist who commands respect due to her strength of will and character. She has been imprisoned three times, and has spent more than 17 years in prison in all.

As a young girl, Mar Mar Oo lived in Mandalay with her parents and loved to study. Her mother passed away when she was three and her father, a playwright, did not remarry.

In 1989, Mar Mar Oo took charge of the youth propaganda division of the National Political Alliance Party, and was arrested for circulating a leaflet in Mandalay market. She was beaten and tortured while in prison.

During my three months' interrogation, they did not allow me to see my father. I was brutally beaten. One guy hit me from the front and one from the back. I had a lot of bruises and scars back then. My head was put into a bag. If I could not answer their questions, they pulled the bag so tight that I lost consciousness.

After that, Mar Mar Oo did not receive food for three days. The guards would eat their food in front of her with deliberate relish in order to torment her.

She recalls one particularly brutal beating during her imprisonment. "After being repeatedly kicked in the back, my periods stopped for six months. The intelligence agents informed my father that they had no idea who I was having relations with, to become pregnant in prison. When he told me what the prison authorities had told him, I put him straight."

With her father's help, Mar Mar Oo received treatment, but for many years after she suffered from acute period pains. She also suffers from post-traumatic stress.

When she was released, Mar Mar Oo earned a living as a tutor, and later continued her university education. However she was arrested again and sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment for her involvement in the 1996 student uprising.

Mar Mar Oo survived Insein prison for over 9.5 years, and was released during a prisoners' amnesty in 2005. She joined the White Campaign, during which supporters dressed in white, the symbol of Burma's many martyrs, to demand the release of political prisoners. She was arrested for a third time in 2008 after her email was intercepted.

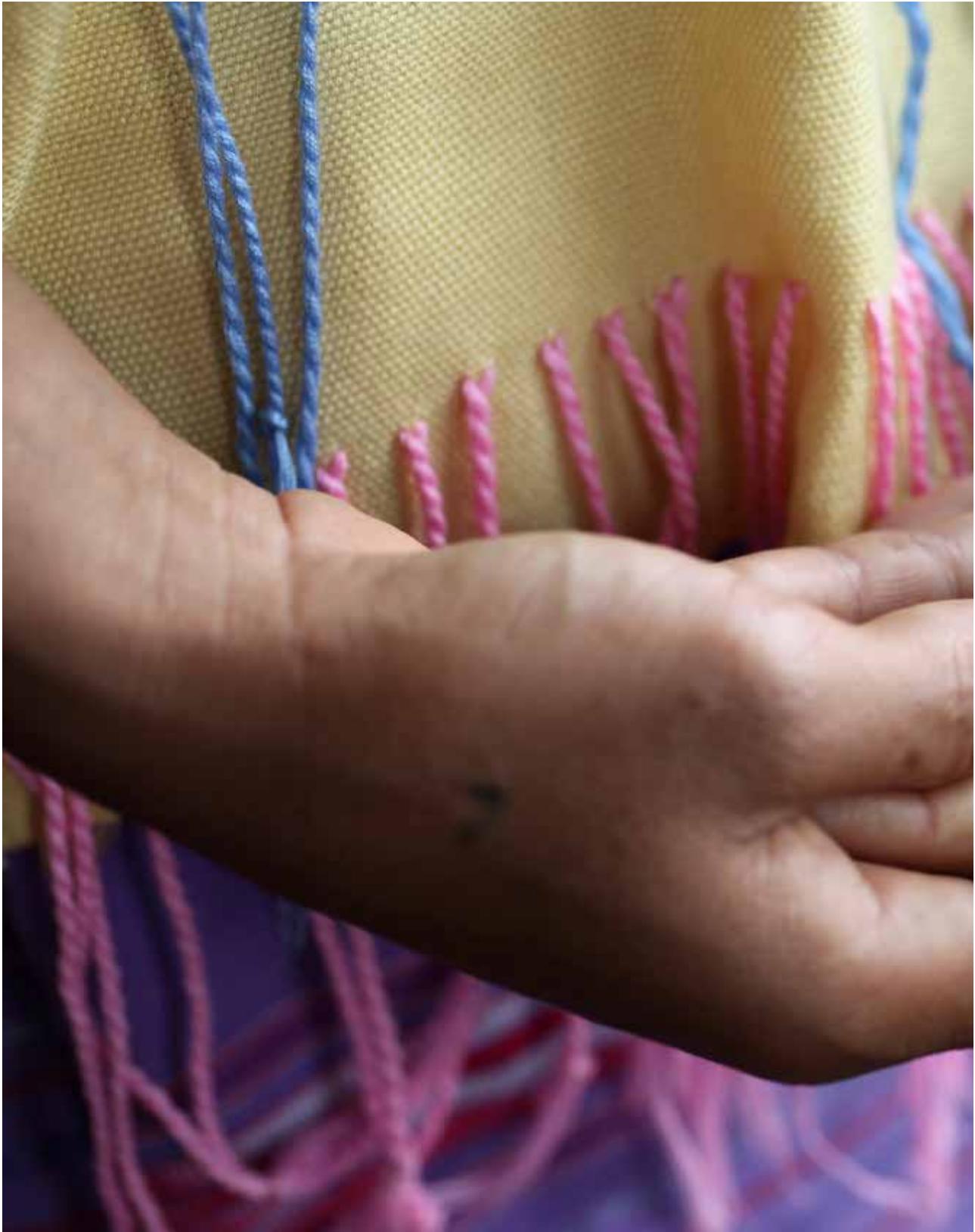
After she was moved to BaMaw prison, Mar Mar Oo heard that her father had passed away. Suffering from high blood pressure and heart disease, when he heard that Mar Mar Oo's prison sentence had been extended to 70 years, his health declined rapidly. She was unable to attend the funeral.

I feel so sad that I did not have the opportunity to take care of my father while he was ill. However, monks visited the prison so I could offer alms on the seventh day after my father's death, the same day of his ceremony in Yangon.

In 2012, Mar Mar Oo and many others from the 88 Group were released from prisons all over the country. While family members came to celebrate their release, she was alone. "I missed my father so much right then. It was hard to endure the grief. On the night of my release, my friends came to pick me up, but I just wanted to see my father's face."

At present, Mar Mar Oo is living in temporary accommodation. She trains workers from many divisions and states on labor laws and issues.

It's important for me to be instrumental in the development of our country. I can write, and I am writing articles now about my experiences in prison. I want to share my knowledge. When I am old, I can live in a shelter and write in peace.



Mu Dah

Karen



Young, playful, and diffident, 22-year-old Mu Dah was born during the war, and is the youngest daughter in her family. When she was only a baby, her family was displaced from Kyee Pin Ehi village, and lost all of their property.

Due to having to constantly move from place to place, her mother did not have access to any health care during her pregnancy. She died soon after delivering her new born. As a baby, Mu Dah almost died herself, as she grew up without milk and proper nourishment. Mu Dah was devastated when she found out that her mother passed away after giving birth to her.

When she was a young girl, Mu Dah witnessed and heard of many human rights violations, particularly during the period under Shan Pu, a Burmese-military officer of Shan origin who was leading a commando that used brutal and public torture to create a climate of fear and repression among villagers. However, Mu Dah has blocked out many memories of those times in order to survive. She does not wish to speak of them. Instead, she focuses on remembering the happy times when she was very young and a little spoiled.

Mu Dah has five family members, and works extremely hard in the fields. She is strong, but faces many difficulties in meeting her family's basic needs. She regrets that there are so few work opportunities nearby, "We need better transport so we can earn money in the mines."



Ni Moe Hlaing
former political prisoner

Playful and full of humor, Ni Moe Hlaing is an activist and journalist who has been imprisoned twice. Her political involvement started early. She joined the NLD to work on the rights of youth, workers, and farmers.

In 1998, she was charged under Article 10 of the 1975 State Protection Act (granting the government the power to imprison people for up to five years without a trial) and sentenced to two years in Insein prison. In 2008, she was arrested twice. She was then sentenced to 7 years in Tayet Prison, Magwe division. When she was arrested, Ni Moe Hlaing suffered from periods of relentless interrogation involving sleep deprivation.

Most of us were questioned one by one, changing the officer, but they continued asking questions the whole day and night. At end of the day we were tired and falling asleep, and an officer would come and say it's not time to sleep and continue to ask questions. Sometimes we were questioned non-stop for two or three days.

She also experienced sexual harassment both from guards and from a prison doctor while she was in jail.

Ni Moe Hlaing spent a total of five years in jail. During that period she also had to cope with the loss of her much-loved youngest brother, who was only two at the time, and her elder sister. Ni Moe Hlaing was finally released in 2012, at the time when many prisoners across the country were released.

She suffered greatly from her experiences, and her private life has also been difficult. She often suffers from anxiety as a result.

She feels that there is no justice, even within her family. She feels that family members judge her harshly for sticking to her principles, but this has made her even more determined to fight all kinds of injustice. "Sometimes the trauma we get from conflict with our colleagues and family can be more severe than the trauma we get from the authorities."

Ni Moe Hlaing is highly educated. Formerly a teacher, she now works as a journalist. She does not have children of her own but cares for her nieces. She has high hopes that they will be outstanding in the field of politics and good leaders of the country one day.

“I think around 100 of us were set free on that date. Nearly all who consider themselves as 88 members were released at the same time on that day, together with the Ba Ka Tha (Burma Students Union) members. Politicians from across the country were released. An event such as this had never happened in our 50-year history of struggle. We thought that all the political prisoners would be detained in prison until they died.”



Nu Tawng

Kachin

Nu Tawng comes across as a reserved but kind woman. She has found it difficult to come to terms with the death of her 16-year old daughter during the ceasefire in 2007. Burmese soldiers allegedly captured, brutally gang raped, and then killed the young girl.

Nu Tawng's husband can hardly speak of what happened. He showed us the clothes that his daughter wore on the day she was taken. He explained that soon after her death, he had a vision: *'My daughter shook a little tree. In my vision I asked if it was her. She shook the tree again. So I went up that way, past the tree.'*



First, I saw the sarong that my daughter wore. I tried to look for her in many places, all the way to N.S.P. Although I looked everywhere, I could not find her. I even tried looking in the water. Then, in my vision, she showed me the way they took her and where they hid her sarong. She tried to hold on to the tree but they pulled her too hard. I looked carefully at the trees and the footprints. It looked like she might have been dragged from there. I found her basket there, and package of rice.

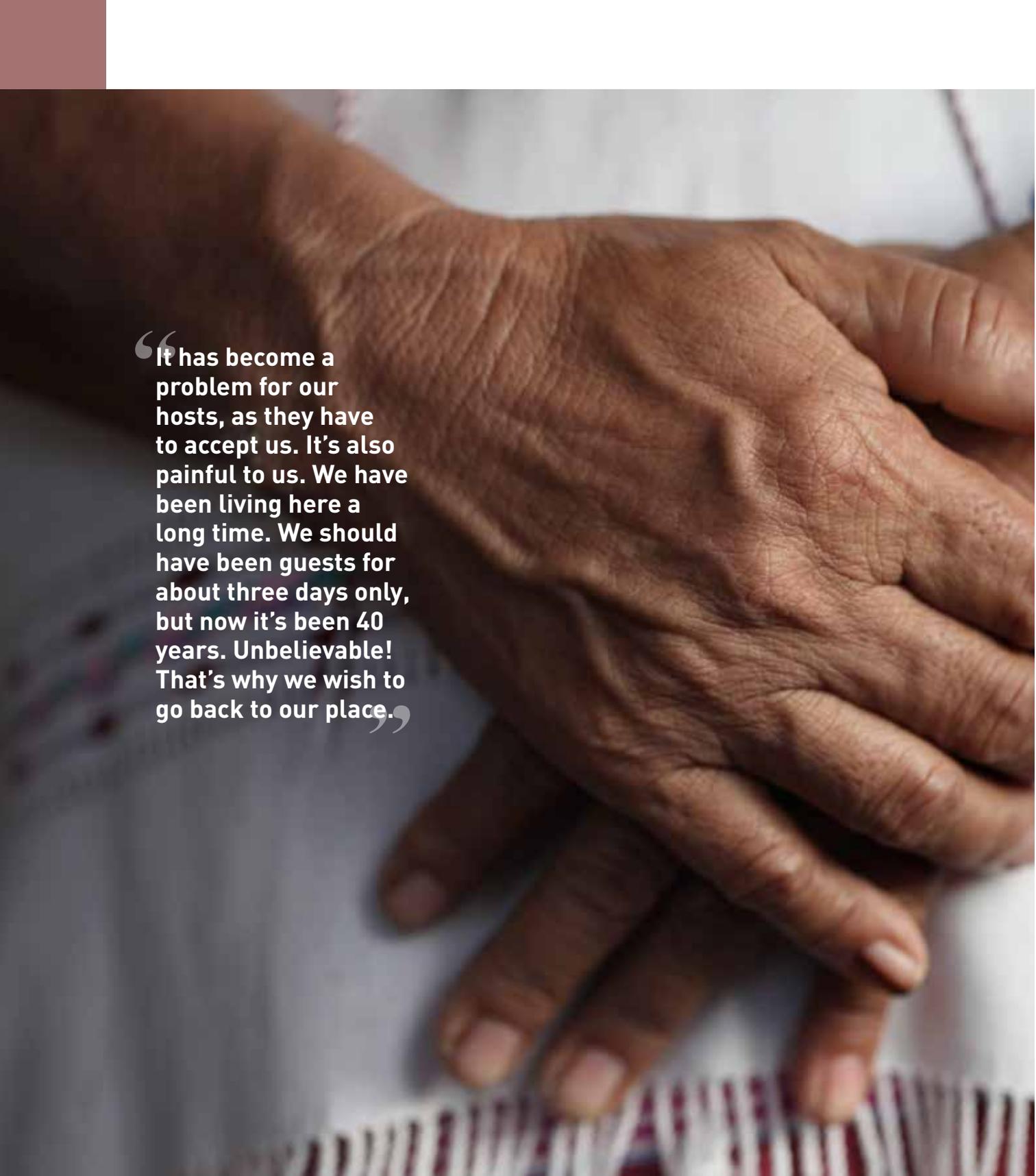
He showed researchers the place where his daughter's body was first discovered in the forest.

Nu Tawng and her husband were able to find out the name of one of the two perpetrators and reported the crime to the authorities. There was a case in the local military court. Nu Tawng and her husband were told that one of the perpetrators had been sentenced, but they do not know for sure whether he was sent to prison or not. They were made to sign an agreement and accept an informal financial compensation of 500,000 Kyats (approx. \$ USD 500). They used the money for many expenses related to the case. Nu Tawng and her husband are not satisfied. They do not feel they have obtained justice for their daughter.

Nu Tawng and her husband are currently living in an IDP camp after being forced to leave their village because of renewed fighting.

Before the survivors' meeting, Nu Tawng felt very alone. She had given up hope that anyone would be interested in her daughter's case. She appreciated the opportunity to meet new friends: "They listened to my painful memories and now I feel like telling them has halved my pain."

“They put the body here with the head facing in that direction. I showed this place to the police as well. It was raining severely at that time. People from the village helped me find her body. I first found it here because she shook the tree. I asked my son to look the other way, as I thought he would be very shocked to see his sister's body.”



“It has become a problem for our hosts, as they have to accept us. It’s also painful to us. We have been living here a long time. We should have been guests for about three days only, but now it’s been 40 years. Unbelievable! That’s why we wish to go back to our place.”

Nyar Bwe
Karen



In 1990, at the age of 27, Nyar Bwe became chief of her village, only ten days after giving birth. Now aged 58, she has two sons and two daughters. Nyar Bwe has been displaced for more than 40 years, and has lost all her property as a result of the conflict. She survived difficult times during the war, taking care of six of her siblings and some of their children.

In order to fulfil her responsibilities as village chief, she sometimes had to leave her own children and siblings at home. When the villagers had to toil in the fields as forced labor, she went to the military camp to negotiate their return home with the Burmese military officers. At one point she also was interrogated and tortured by the Burmese military. They accused her of being a rebel who supported the Karen armed group, as well as keeping a gun at home. For this, she was arrested and interrogated for 15 days in the 1990s.

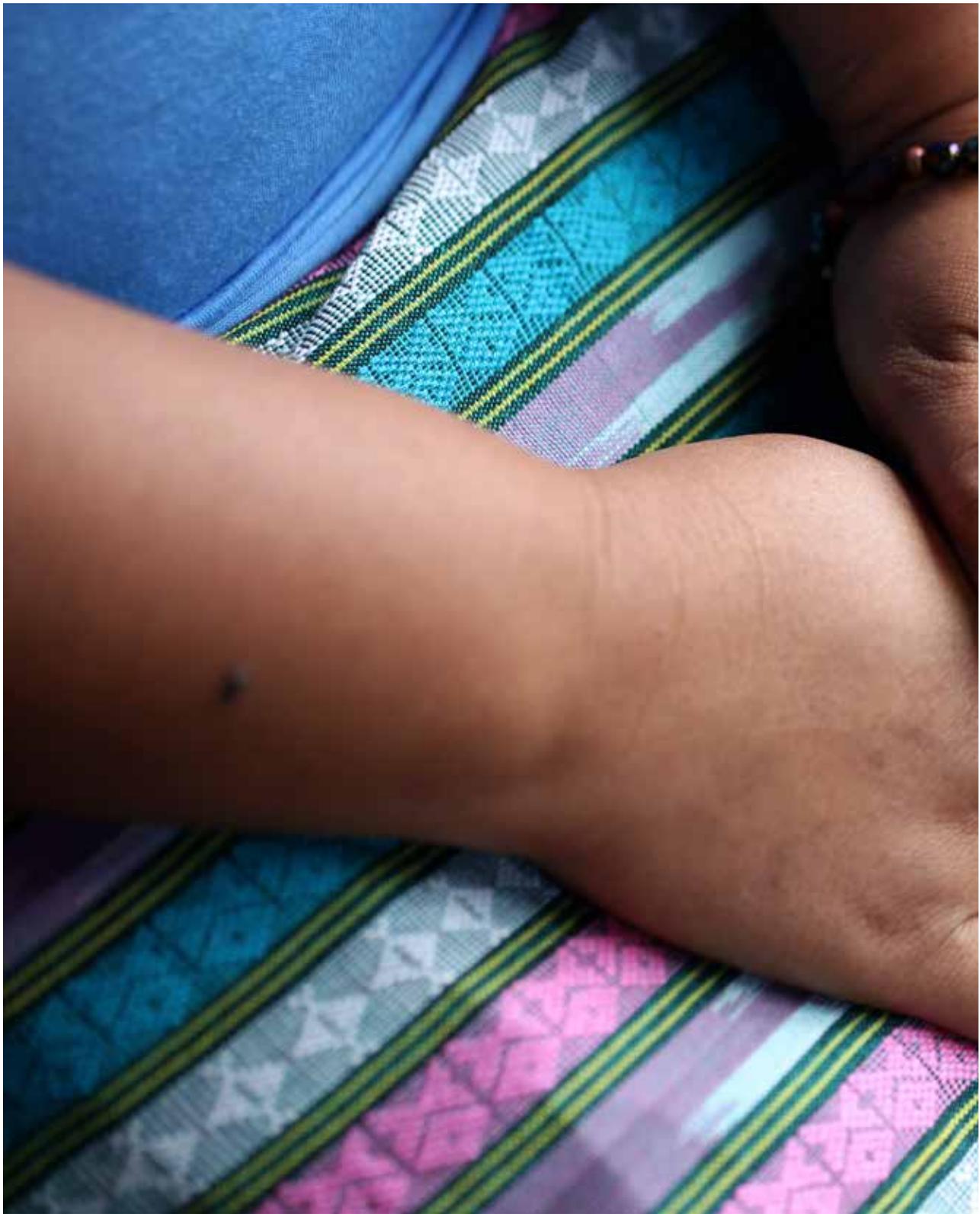
Nyar Bwe has witnessed extreme violence against her family. A cousin was shot in front her eyes. Her sister was killed by a landmine. When her sister died, Nyar Bwe looked after her sister's children as well as her own. Life was harsh. They often only had a little rice, onion, and salt to eat.

Now that the political situation is better, Nyar Bwe lives and works on a farm that is not hers. She works hard, although she suffers from a great deal of pain. So far the only financial support she has received is 30,000 kyats (around \$ USD 30) from UNICEF.

Nyar Bwe is determined to return to her birthplace and live there. She is impatient with the authorities, and feels that she has long outstayed her welcome in the IDP village that they were relocated to.

We heard the Burmese government would let us live in our village again but this has not happened yet. We are staying in another's village. We are living on others' land. It's a long time now. We were relocated when I was young and now even my children are married. We are still living on land that does not belong to us, even though we built our own small house. They did not sell us any land even though we asked them to sell it to us...

Many of Nyar Bwe's friends were afraid for her safety when she told them about attending a workshop with other survivors. They warned her, trying to scare her into not coming, but this did not dent her confidence. According to Nyar Bwe, many of her friends also want to talk about human rights but don't dare to out of fear of reprisals.



Nyar Eh Khu

Karen



The daughter of Karen resistance fighters, Nyar Eh Khu was born in the forest while her parents were running away from the Burmese army. While they were on the run, Nyar Eh Khu's mother could not breastfeed her young daughter because she was very ill. Because her mother did not have enough milk, Nyar Eh Khu remembers drinking honey as a baby instead. Childbirth during the conflict carried much risk. Later on, one of Nyar Eh Khu's older sisters also died in childbirth when she was unable to deliver her baby.

In March 1999, when Nyar Eh Khu was on her way to receive her pre-elementary teaching certificate, Shan Pu came to her village. The commandos killed many in her neighbourhood. Another sister died from a landmine during this time. These events deeply affected her. She does not like to speak of what happened to her back then. Now 39, she lives with her parents, is married, and has children. Her father was a KNU general, but is now very old. Nyar Eh Khu finds it hard to lift heavy items. She had to have an operation to remove her ovaries in April 2007. However, she still works on the farm.

Whenever she remembers the violations that took place, she suffers from headaches and pains in her joints. *"I have so many heart problems. I always hide my face."*

However, despite this, she tries to maintain a confident, positive outlook. Recently, Nyar Eh Khu stopped taking her medication so that she could pay for her child's schooling instead.



Nyar Hto Tue

Karen



Nyar Hto Tue passed away early 2015. She had suffered from ovarian cancer since 2009, but was not able to receive proper treatment. She said to her friends “I am just waiting for a call from God.”

During the war, Nyar Hto Tue’s family had to run away from their village. Their possessions were looted by the Burmese military. Around this time, her older sister was arrested, accused of being a spy, and sentenced to six years in prison. Her sister also died from ovarian cancer. Later, Nyar Hto Tue returned to her village. She was one of the few survivors who did not live in a village for internally displaced people, even though her village was within the conflict zone. She was married and lived with her husband and mother.

Nyar Hto Tue witnessed many human rights violations during her life. She saw villagers being beaten, tortured, and killed during the conflict. At one time she became a victim of forced labour. She and other villagers were forced to help build military camps and roads, and to carry food and weapons for the troops on the front line.

As a Christian missionary, Nyar Hto Tue advocated for people who had been captured and forced to do work on behalf of the Burmese army. Due to her role in the community, both the Burmese and Karen armies threatened her and accused her of spying. Soldiers from both sides often came to her house to intimidate her. She believed that “[If] there is no truth, [there is] no home to live in.” Even though she could forgive, she could not forget what happened in the past.

Nyar Hto Tue felt strongly about women’s access to healthcare: *Since 1974, the healthcare system has been very poor. There is a lack of knowledge about women and their health. People are afraid and don’t get children vaccinated. Women are scared to have contraception injections.*

In addition to having cancer, Nyar Hto Tue also suffered from a number of health issues, such as lung disease, heart problems, and digestive problems. Despite feeling that she did not have long to live, she felt that the workshop helped her to gain strength, “not to be afraid, through working together with KWEG.”

In spite of her poor health, Nyar Hto Tue continued to work hard until the very end. “My feet and hands are my strength,” she said.

May she rest in peace.

Nyar Si

Karen

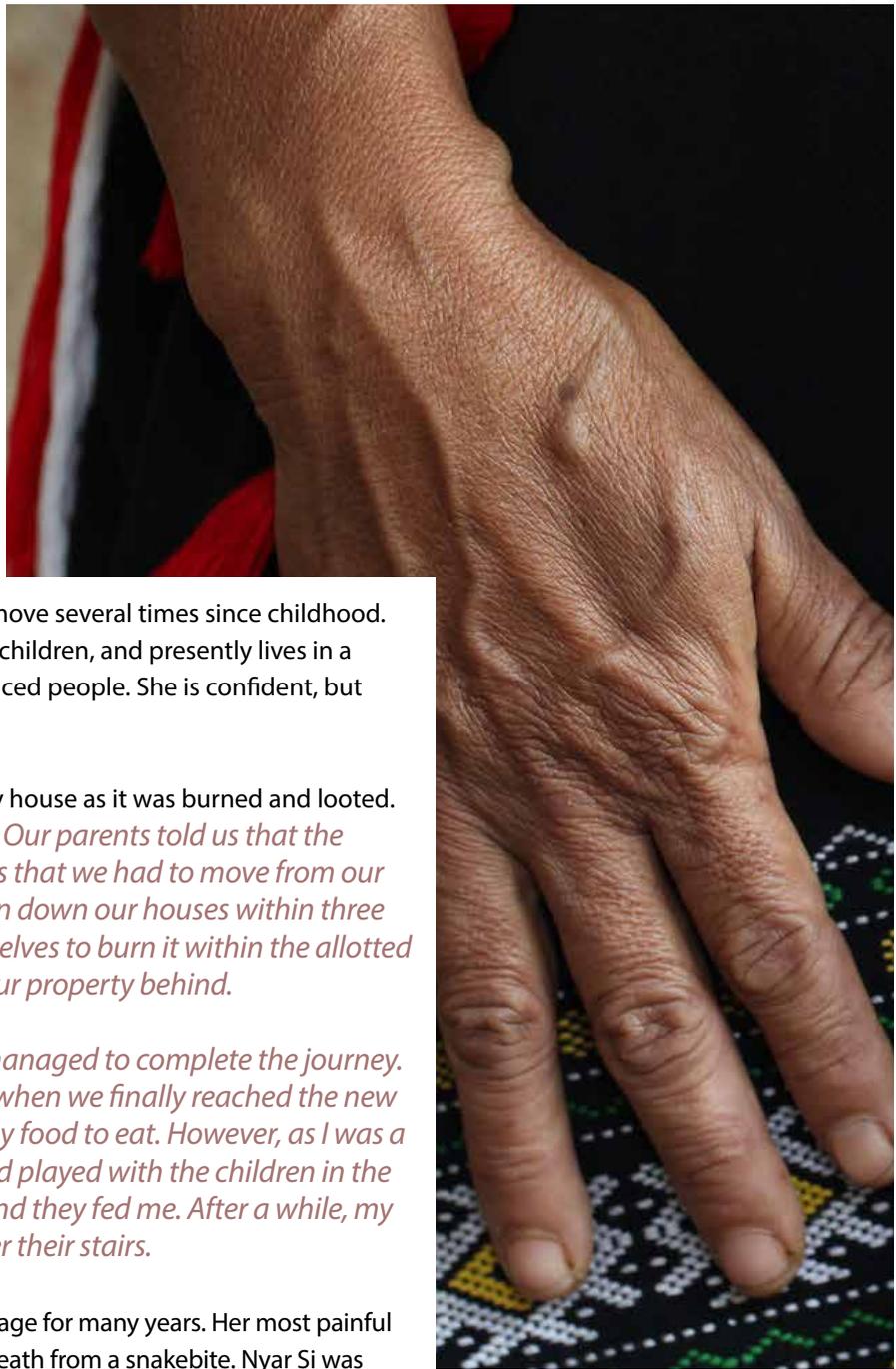
Nyar Si has been forced to move several times since childhood. She is now 50. She has six children, and presently lives in a village for internally displaced people. She is confident, but carries a deep sadness within her.

In 1974, Nyar Si watched her family house as it was burned and looted. *We were so young at that time. Our parents told us that the Burmese army had given orders that we had to move from our village. The army told us to burn down our houses within three days. If we could not bring ourselves to burn it within the allotted time, we were forced to leave our property behind.*

Three members of our family managed to complete the journey. We did not know where to live when we finally reached the new village, and we did not have any food to eat. However, as I was a child, I made friends quickly and played with the children in the village. I asked them for food and they fed me. After a while, my friend's parents let us stay under their stairs.

Nyar Si has been living in an IDP village for many years. Her most painful memory relates to her daughter's death from a snakebite. Nyar Si was unable to get her treated in time, as the clinic was 6 miles from the village. They called in a traditional medic who used a tube to suck out the venom, but her daughter did not survive. This is a very common occurrence in these villages. Even those who recover from snakebites often cannot do heavy work afterwards. Although there is an anti-venom treatment, it is very expensive and far beyond the means of most people.

Although she suffers from headaches, Nyar Si's hopes for the future lie in returning to her village. She is proud that the Karen people love justice. She says that they will gain a lot of strength from going back home to their villages





“If we can live there again, I believe we can get by. We can do anything if our health is good and the weather is good for farming...I hope those who drove us out from our village will build proper houses for us. I wish we could have our church, our school, and a hospital. We also wish for a doctor so the villagers can lead a peaceful life and be well...Due to the lack of justice, we cannot go back yet. However, as we have a modest ceasefire now, we feel that we could go back to our own villages and work there. That makes us so happy.”



Ohmar
former political prisoner

A skillful seamstress, Ohmar is 48. She has been arrested and detained twice, including time spent in solitary confinement.

In 2000, Ohmar was detained for being an NLD youth organizer. During this time, she was forbidden to see any of her family. She could not receive any parcels in prison for over ten months. Later, with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), her family was given permission to send her food in prison. However, by the time she received the food parcels they sent, all the food inside had gone bad. Conditions for all the prisoners were very harsh. Ohmar kept empty water bottles and made them into cups and bowls. She also had to use one for the bathroom.

After she was released from prison, Ohmar was unable to secure new projects for her machine-made embroidery work from former customers, as they did not trust her anymore. She struggled financially. Six months after her release, her father passed away.

Then, during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, she was detained again.

After Ohmar was released from her second stretch in prison, Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar. She travelled to the affected areas in order to help the people. However, the authorities arrested her again for her humanitarian work. She was detained three times during this period. Ohmar was taken for interrogation several times, whenever the political situation became unstable.

For me, justice is concerned with human rights. We are born with rights and according to those rights, we are free to talk, to express our thoughts, to get married, to worship, write, march, and make speeches. These are basic human rights. When we lose these rights, we lose justice.

Ohmar is the youngest daughter in her family and she likes to sing. Her favorite song is about a youngest daughter who has gone far away.

The song is about the youngest daughter who misses her mom's home after she gets married. For me, I am in politics without choice and I missed my mom's home a lot when I was in prison. I don't need to change the lyrics as it means a lot to me the way it is. I think Mom loves me more, as I am the youngest of my brothers and sisters. Even though I was a little naughty in an endearing way, under the care of my parents I did not have any worries.

At present, Ohmar is taking care of her elderly mother in Yangon.

I am looking forward to peace for our country in the future as it develops, becoming prosperous but only if at the same time there is peace. We can hope for nothing if we don't have peace. I simply want to have the chance to sleep well with my family without any worries.



Paw Poe

Karen

Paw Poe lives with her her four siblings in a village for internally displaced people in South-eastern Myanmar. Although she has suffered a great deal throughout her 52 years, she has kept her sense of humour.

Ever since she was a child, Paw Poe has been forced to flee from conflict. She has been displaced many times. Her earliest memory of the civil war is from the 1960s, when her father blew out the candles after a plane flew overhead.



In 1970, she was relocated three times to three different villages. She attended school up until the 3rd grade, but after that she had to stay with her mother and look after her siblings.

Paw Poe's family had no choice but to leave their village and hide in a cave with very little to eat. They were so hungry that they ate weeds from the river. While they fled from one hiding place to another, Paw Poe took care of her siblings and her elderly aunt, Ah Phe, who is now more than 90 years old.

During the civil war, Paw Poe worked as a trader. She maintained good relationships with army personnel from both sides. Suspecting that Paw Poe had useful information, military officers tortured her, keeping her locked up in their office for fifteen days. While she was held captive, she had only beans, rice, and fish paste to eat. "I said, 'I don't know' every time they questioned me. I was terrified that they would rape me at night."

Finally, Paw Poe was released. On another occasion, while she was on her way to sell some local goods, a member of a local armed group, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), attempted to rape her. However, she is very reluctant to speak of this, saying, "I feel so ashamed I want to die." Many sexual violations remain undocumented in this way due to strong cultural taboos.

In 2004, Paw Poe had just given birth to her youngest son and her family had to move again.

We had to walk, as we did not have a cart. I carried my child who was a week old. Both my son and I had seizures. They relocated us to a field next to the road, on the edge of a forest. That's why we moved to this village. We have never been asked to move back.

Now, Paw Poe looks after her four children. One child is mentally disabled due to a serious brain disease she developed a few months after she was born. Paw Poe suffers from low blood pressure herself. She has not been able to afford to send any of her children to school. Her hope for the future is for lasting peace, so that she can return to her village and send her youngest three children to school. "To go back to our village, we need a school, a church, and a medical centre. We badly need these things."

She enjoyed meeting the survivors and workshop facilitators, but fears most of all having to relocate yet again.



Pi Pi

Karen

Born in 1944, Pi Pi is the eldest of the Karen survivors' group. Pi Pi has a strong character and is very curious. When she was in school, she passed her school exams every year. She always wanted to continue her education, but life did not turn out that way.

The Burmese army attacked her village, Tat Kong, in 1972. Pi Pi suffered the trauma of her house being burned while she was hiding inside with her family. They escaped, but then had to witness the Burmese military looting the smouldering remains. The family was forced, along with everyone from the village, to leave within three days.

Pi Pi remembers another incident, in 1999, when soldiers from the Government Army attacked the village where she lived. She said the soldiers wanted the women to go with them. The villagers were killed and their village burned until they agreed to let some of the village women accompany the soldiers. Pi Pi witnessed the incident. *"I was afraid to talk about it at that time because we saw one of the villagers brutally killed in front of us."*

Pi Pi has been forcibly displaced many times. After her husband passed away, she faced difficulties simply surviving and protecting her children. She had to work extremely hard, farming the paddy on her own so that she could provide for them and her mother.

Now she has access to a garden and rice fields, and raises chickens and ducks, although the chickens and ducks often get sick and the food for them is very expensive. Her children have now grown up, and Pi Pi is helping raise her grandchildren. In all her time as a displaced person, she has not received any support or help from any organization whatsoever.

Due to her hard life, she has a swollen knee and suffers from persistent pain in her lower back. She does not have enough money for treatment. Villagers often have to walk long distances in order to receive treatment.

Pi Pi's dream is to return home.

I just want to go back to my village and live freely and peacefully.

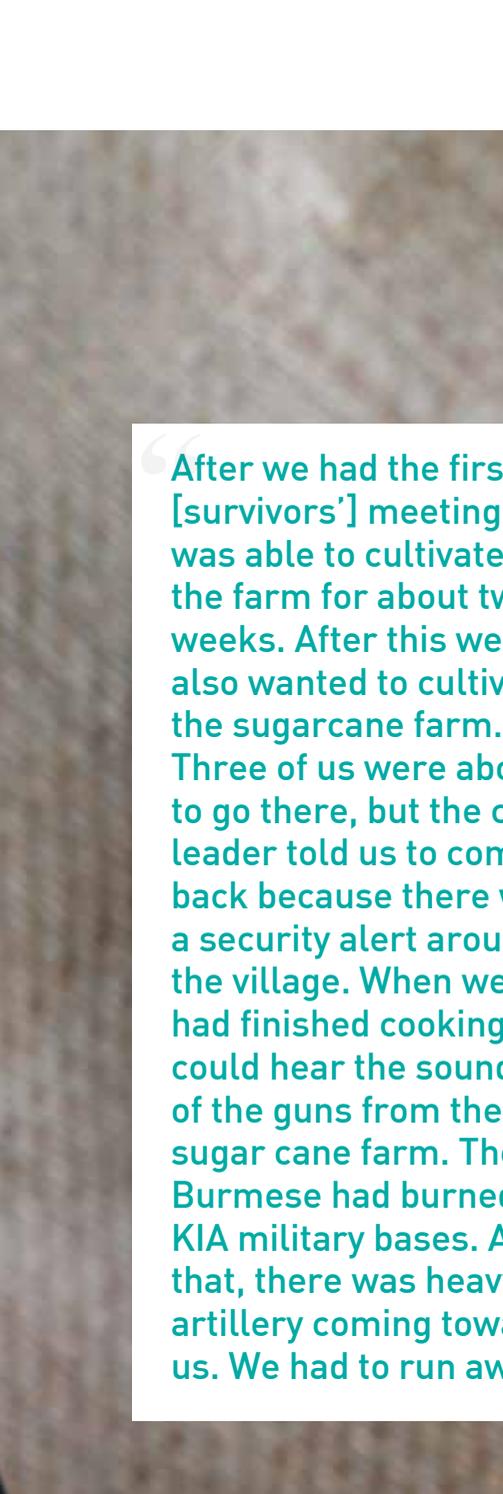


Roi Bu

Kachin

Roi Bu has survived a precarious life. She was displaced many times, lost her husband in the conflict, and is still under threat of relocation as fighting continues in her area.

She and other villagers were caught by surprise when their village was attacked in November 2011.



“After we had the first [survivors’] meeting I was able to cultivate the farm for about two weeks. After this we also wanted to cultivate the sugarcane farm. Three of us were about to go there, but the camp leader told us to come back because there was a security alert around the village. When we had finished cooking, we could hear the sounds of the guns from the sugar cane farm. The Burmese had burned the KIA military bases. After that, there was heavy artillery coming towards us. We had to run away.”

“We already heard there was an invasion of the Burmese army. But we did not expect it to be this serious war. We thought that we might have to flee one or two nights, and we would be able to return home.” But their village was caught in heavy gun fighting. The villagers were forced to flee very quickly, some empty handed. For the next three months, the villagers moved between camps in China and Kachin State. During this time Roi Bu learned that the Burmese army had killed her husband during the fighting. She was only able to return to her village to bury the remains of her husband in February of the following year.

My husband was not a soldier. He remained there because the men from the village were restricted from passing through the bridge ... Even if I took care of the body, I felt sad. I felt so small. Nobody told me what to do. I did not have any relatives as well. I told the village head to do the funeral for my husband several times and they held the funeral after that.’

After these difficult events, Roi Bu and her children survived by staying in camps along the border. The last IDP camp where she lived was attacked in April 2014, while she was taking part in this research. She describes this terrifying attack by the Burmese army and the instability that followed.

Camp leaders urged the women to stay. Some Catholic priests arrived and prayed with the people. Eventually they fled to another camp, carrying their beds on motorbikes in a terrifying convoy through heavy artillery and fighting. “We stayed in M.W. [the camp] for six days. It was very crowded with a lot of people, not enough beds, not enough water, and it was also very hot.”

Roi Bu and the others were persuaded to return to the IDP camp, but were very scared. They only stayed two nights before returning to the Chinese border. They stayed there for one day before returning again for fear of losing their places in the camp.

Roi Bu risked a great deal to attend the meetings with the other survivors, as the Burmese army and the camp leaders are seeking to restrict the movements of the displaced. Despite this, she enjoyed sharing her stories with her friends.



San San Maw

former political prisoner

Although she was born into a political family, San San Maw is uncomfortable being called a political prisoner. The wife of a politician, she was sentenced in two trials to a total of 65 years in prison. Although she was not tortured physically in prison, her family suffered greatly due to her imprisonment. San San Maw endured a great deal of trauma and stress.

When San San Maw and her husband were detained, their captors put her mother and her husband's father (then respectively 70 and 74 years old) in the lock-up as hostages. They pleaded for their parents to be freed, saying they would only answer questions once they had been. In the end, their captors took ten days to free them. Then her husband's father, her mother, and their little daughter were placed under house arrest.

My husband's father had two strokes while the authorities sealed the whole house and arrested our parents. They were very cramped in the lock-up and had almost nothing to eat. Even through this hardship, my father-in-law still found time to comfort me with a smiling face. I can still hear his voice now. My mother was the same. She calmed me. All the while both of them were still in their old, dirty clothes from the lock-up.'

Their family business rapidly disintegrated. This left their old, frail parents in a difficult situation. "Even though they were in a miserable situation with regards to food, the authorities forbade those who tried to give food to our parents from doing so. I think my mother almost starved during that time."

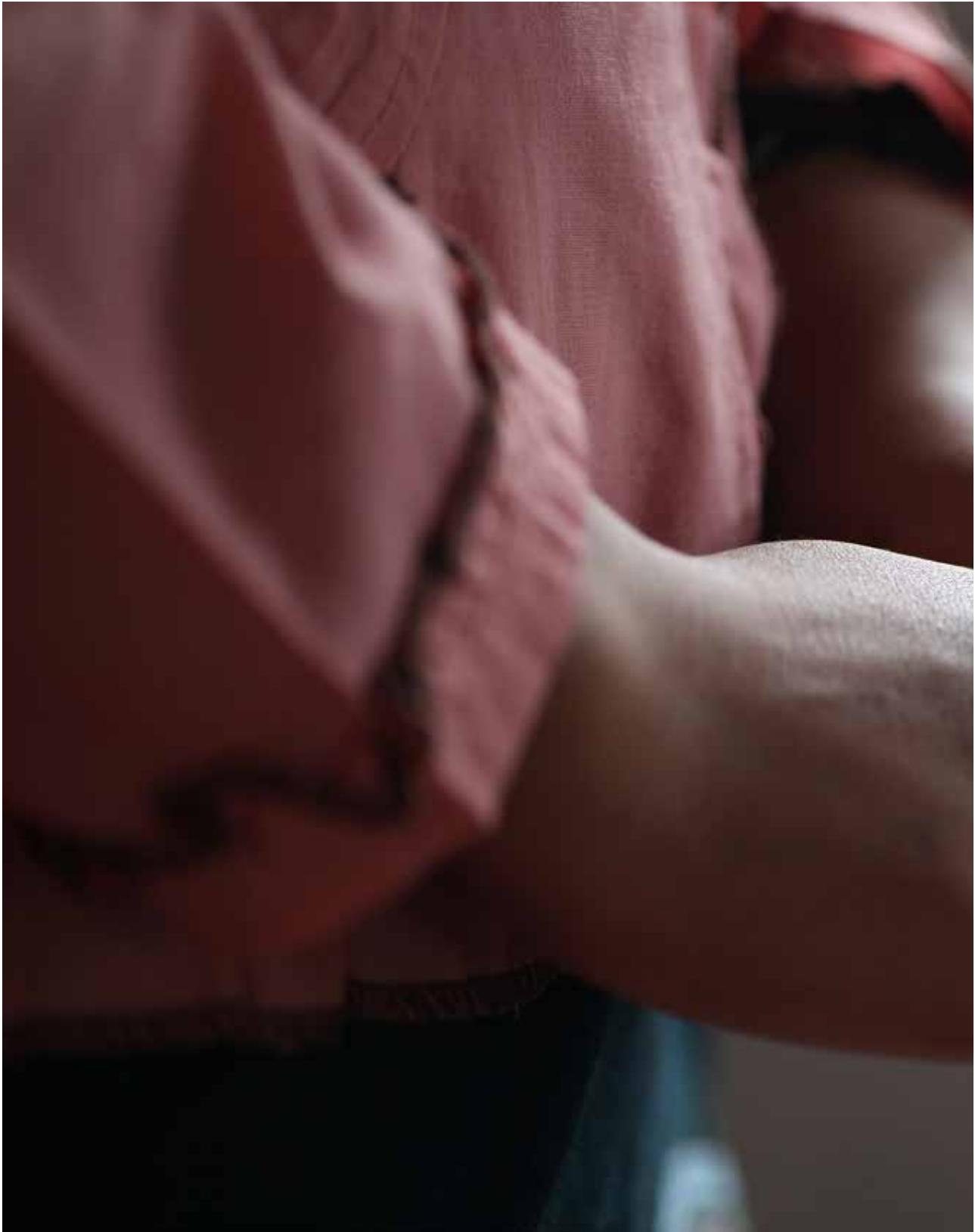
After three months of house arrest, San San Maw's father-in-law was sent to Yangon to stay with her brother-in-law. He passed away a year later, soon after her case was heard in court. As San San Maw is an only child, there was no one to take care of her mother, who was struggling to raise the couple's daughter and visiting them in prison. Later, San San Maw was transferred further away to Insein prison in Yangon.

My mother had high blood pressure. They said that when she got the news, at around eleven in the morning, that I would go to Insein, she had a stroke and passed away. It makes me so sad. Your parents are irreplaceable in life. I feel terribly sorry for them, as they had to go through this situation because of us. I feel like I failed to take responsibility for them.

When San San Maw was released from prison in 2013 she experienced mixed emotions. Some of her friends involved in the same case were left behind in prison. Out of seven friends, five were freed while two remained in captivity. After three months, San San Maw was allowed to see her daughter again.

Since her release, San San Maw has not been able to find work. She cares for her husband full-time.

“I can't do anything right now. My family life is ruined and I do not have any investment to begin a business...I can't avoid this situation, so I try to be happy while caring for my husband. We all have our own worries but we just hide them and pretend to be happy. The only thing that I ever got to help me heal was a poem my husband wrote for me in 2010. It was called, 'Don't cry, Mi Shay'.”



Tar Thue

Karen



Tar Thue is only 15 years old. She is very shy and is the youngest of the Karen survivors to participate in this study. She used to have nine family members, but one passed away.

Back in 1999, when she was just an infant, Tar Thue and her family were forced to move from her home village because of the war. As a child, she witnessed much brutality. She would like to forget how the Burmese army tortured her father. She still finds it very hard to speak about how he was cut with a knife, burned, stomped on, and almost drowned. Her father is still alive today despite the serious injuries. He suffers from serious trauma.

Thar Thue's uncle, who was a soldier in the Karen National Union (KNU), was killed during a fight between the Burmese military and the KNU. One of her aunts also died from a snakebite, as there was no access to proper medical treatment in the area during the conflict.

Now, Tar Thue works on a farm for a small daily wage. Although she is young, she complains of aches from work that is both repetitive and demanding. She also looks after her younger sibling, as her father and mother have to struggle for basic daily needs. One of the things that she regrets the most is that she was forced to drop out of school in the ninth grade because her parents could not afford to pay for her schooling. *"I am sad that I could not continue my future studies. I want durable peace. I do not want wars,"*



Ma Thandar

former political prisoner

Ma Thandar is a 45-year-old poet and writer from the Irrawaddy Region. Her pen name is Ma Ni. She is well known for her article, 'Ma Shwe Kyaw's success from the crack of the prison wall.' Active in politics since 1988, the military government banished her from her home region, forcing her to move to Yangon. While based in Yangon, she has been arrested and detained many times, over a long period of time.

In 2006, she was arrested without a warrant due to her involvement in politics. Interrogated incessantly for nine days, she was held without food and water, and deprived of sleep.

I was harshly beaten in many, many ways by men. We told them to call the women wardens to beat us because the men would hit us on all parts of our bodies, some of which were completely inappropriate. We could not endure the ferocity of the beating. When we told them ask the police women to beat us instead, they did not listen. Many men would gather round and beat a woman mercilessly.'

After interrogation, Ma Thandar was immediately sent to prison. She was denied access to a lawyer, as she was to be tried under a military tribunal. Consigned to solitary confinement in a dark cell for nine months, she was prevented from communicating with family members.

Because of her experience, Ma Thandar believes that there is no justice.

All along, I have been active in politics and remained faithful to my political beliefs. What we really and truly want is justice through democracy. The reason why I have had to suffer is because there is no justice. I, a citizen and a woman, had to suffer shame and torture through the brutal actions carried out by a group of men. I have suffered so much that I consider their actions to be sexual assault.

Now that we are no longer in prison, we need to fight for just laws that will fulfill the needs of citizens. To do this, we need a government able and sincere enough to do it. The law will be worthless if the people prescribing it are insincere, ignorant, and lacking in goodwill. Furthermore, if the law prescribed is right, we will still need honest legal procedures as well as sincere and able officers to execute law enforcement. The system must be free of bribery and corruption. We need good laws passed by a good government. We need the public to abide by the law. Only then can we have the justice that we have all been hoping for.

Ma Thandar believes the civil war has to end, replaced by a system where all nationalities and races can live together without strife.

During her time in solitary confinement, Ma Thandar was forced to spend many months alone in almost total darkness. Ma Thandar was given a longer sentence for writing poems in prison.

A day after meeting with the other survivors during a gathering in September 2014, Ma Thandar learned that her husband Ko Par Gyi, a freelance journalist, had disappeared while covering the conflict in Mon State. One week later, she discovered that he had been tortured and killed by soldiers from the Burmese Army. Ma Thandar opened a case to try to prosecute the soldiers responsible for his death, and she continues to fight for justice and to expose the truth about what happened to her husband. Her determination for justice, even in the darkest hours, is an inspiration to all of us.

“We could do nothing except make a sound by ourselves. So I sang once in a while. However, I was never able to sing the whole song through. So instead, I composed poems by speaking aloud. The charge against me is writing an article criticizing the State Peace and Development Council. Because of that I was handed a life sentence! The poems I wrote in prison were poems to encourage and lift the spirits of those who read them. When I read them, I read them with my heart and soul. When I do this, I feel the renewal of strength and spirit within myself.”

*Victory,
by Ma Thandar*

Walking bravely through the flames to uphold
our beliefs
Are we walking for justice through thorn
bushes without faltering
Are we Comrades!
Uphold the flag. Let's plant it on the prison
walls!
We who were involved in political activities
consider prison
As our mother's house.
Our lives were spent going in and coming out.
We suffered oppression of many kinds.
However, our faces showed no
discouragement in front of the prison guards.
A single teardrop never fell down.
When we wanted to cry, we waited till we got
into our mosquito nets
And only then we cried, silently.
This is our strength, our force, our power.



Thet Thet Aung

former political prisoner

Thet Thet Aung is a highly articulate activist in the labor movement. She is 38 years old, and a mother of three sons.

Raised in Yangon, her family ran a successful teashop frequented by students before being forced to close it down. Growing up in a politically active family, Thet Thet Aung witnessed abuses first hand. In

1988, when she was 11 years old, she had to cross the main street in Myaynigone on her way home from school.

I saw the bodies of many, many bloodied schoolchildren wearing white shirts and green lower garments. They were covered with tarpaulins but strong winds were blowing them aside, exposing their bodies. It was a very sorry sight and I don't think I will ever forget it in my life.

Then my brothers, aged ten and eleven, were arrested. One of them was kept in isolation for 45 days in darkness. The other was beaten until he was unconscious. When he got home, he had no idea where he was, while my other brother just gazed at the morning sun.

Being a young girl, I began to realize what it meant to be terrorized. When I was in 7th grade, my mother was arrested in front of me. Every night for a month I stayed awake waiting for my mom to come home. I will never forget the sight of my mother's homecoming. She could no longer walk. We had a hard time nursing her back to health. They had released her because they feared she would die in prison. All through this time, I suffered great pain.

After she graduated from high school, Thet Thet Aung created her own successful business selling cloth diapers with her sister-in-law. She remained active in politics. Escaping gunfire during the Saffron Revolution, she and her friends slept in safe houses. Her husband was arrested on October 8th, 2007 and her mother and mother-in-law on the 10th. Thet Thet Aung immediately went into hiding. She was told that if she gave herself up, they would release her mother and mother-in-law.

Then on October 18th, Thet Thet Aung was arrested with her aunt, her younger sister, and two comrades. Her mother-in law was released the same day, but her mother had to endure ten more days of interrogation in custody.

In 2008, Thet Thet Aung was sentenced to 65 years' imprisonment. Released in 2011, there was nothing left of her business. She was appointed as second in charge of the Labor department at the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, a prominent former students group. She is also a coordinator at a center working to defend political prisoners, the Future Light Centre.

She is determined to restart her life in Yangon but worries that there will never be peace. She wants to call attention to the fact there are still many political prisoners behind bars.

I felt so sorry for my mother, my mother-in-law, and my boys. The youngest was only a year old then. Who would look after them? It was truly a difficult time for me. I considered giving myself up, but that would have encouraged the authorities to try the same strategy with other comrades. I fled to the countryside and knew that just one small slip and I would fall into their clutches.



Tin Tin Cho

former political prisoner

Tin Tin Cho was a young woman when she was arrested in a coffee shop after the Saffron Revolution. During the four-year detention that followed, she was subjected to emotional and physical abuse. At the start, she faced harsh interrogation sessions.

There were three men on each team that questioned us and we did not have a chance to sleep or rest. We had to sit on a plastic stool under a very bright light bulb on the ceiling, enduring its heat for 24 hours without being able to wash.

Prison guards would come and go in and out of the women's cells without respect for their dignity, trying to provoke their anger with insults and insinuations. They accused her of sleeping with male students even though she was married.

When Tin Tin Cho was arrested, she lived with her husband and her young son.

I wasn't worried that I would be sent to jail but I worried about how my son could get home from school. My son was so young at that time. He was six and a half years old then and did not know how to find his way back home. The fact that I could not pick him up from school caused me great distress.

By the time she was released in 2011, her son was nearly 11 and her marriage was broken.

My mom and my elder sister told me nothing about him [my husband] getting remarried while I sat on a chair and drank water. Then my son came to welcome me at the top of the stairs. I hugged him and cried so much out of happiness.

I didn't even have 5 cents when I got back home. My ex-husband took the vehicle I owned and we had nothing that we could sell. I think if other women were in my place, they would have gone crazy. But I thought, what would happen to my son if I collapse? I cried only when my son was asleep in bed.

In prison, Tin Tin Cho met a lot of young, single women, ethnic women, and Muslim women. Her experiences prompted her to take up her present role as an activist for women's rights. "We still hear that women can achieve nothing in our community. This is discrimination and totally unfair. I experienced discrimination first-hand in my marriage."

Tin Tin Cho divides her time between her activism, running a publishing business, and caring for her mother. Now that her son is older she feels that he understands more. She wishes she didn't have to leave him, but she still has to travel a lot for work.

Right now, I feel that we are not free, even in our homes. I am treated differently because instead of doing housework and cooking, I am involved in politics. I've been criticized for being in jail and being away from my family. But on the other hand, there are also people who support me.



Yaw Myaw

Kachin

Yaw Myaw is a mother seeking the truth about her daughter. The Burmese army captured her daughter, Sumlut Roi Ja, on October 28, 2011, while she was helping her in-laws harvest corn. Yaw Myaw and her family believe that she was then raped and murdered, but they do not know for certain what happened.

Yaw Myaw's husband has pieced together the events that happened on the day that Roi Ja disappeared. He recalled:



We have heard many rumors about my daughter. Some people said she was seen washing some clothes on a rock. Some people said she had changed her clothes for an army uniform. After I heard about the gunshots, I did not believe that she was alive anymore. I believe that she was raped and killed by the Burmese army.

On the day of the incident, October 28th, my daughter Roi Ja, her husband, and her father-in-law went out to their corn farm to collect corn. Suddenly the Burmese soldiers arrived, and my daughter Roi Ja, her father in-law, and her husband were caught. Roi Ja and her husband were forced to carry corn baskets and military backpacks to their post at Mu Bum, so it was difficult for them to run quickly.

When they arrived at a ditch, Roi Ja's father-in-law and her husband (escaped by) jumping over it. Roi Ja ran after them. But the soldiers were firing a gun after them and Roi Ja was left behind a clump of bamboo. She ran for her life but could not run fast enough and the soldiers caught up with her.

Yaw Myaw confided how she worked out what had happened from different sources, including dreams. She took researchers close to the Burmese military post to point out the exact point where her daughter was captured.

On November 7, 2011, I heard the KIA soldiers from two front military posts talking on walkie-talkies. These soldiers told us that Roi Ja came out from the post with two Burmese soldiers. After that, they heard a gunshot. This was at 4:30 pm. Then, they heard a second shot, followed by the sound of a girl crying. After that they heard the sound of the gun for the last time.

The next morning, I went to see a friend who told me that on the night of 7th November 2011, he had dreamt of Roi Ja. In the dream, she told him she had escaped from the soldiers who had tied her with plastic. I also dreamt that she ran back home that same night. In the dream she asked me, "Mother, was father crying and looking after the cows?" I hugged her and woke up at the same time.

Yaw Myaw still hopes that one day her daughter will come back. She is devastated. After she had not returned for some time, the family conducted a funeral for Roi Ja, inviting local pastors to pray for her.

After Roi Ja's disappearance, the family could not bear to stay at their farm. They no longer receive any assistance. Yaw Myaw tries to make ends meet by looking after cows and doing a little farming. She is living between two villages while Sumlut Roi Ja's younger siblings do their best to survive in a camp for internally displaced people.

Recommendations

Based on our in-depth discussions with these 29 women survivors of violence related to the Kachin and Karen conflicts and women former political prisoners, we urge the Myanmar government, policy makers, ethnic leaders, and civil society to fulfill the following recommendations:

- Immediately put an end to violence against women during conflict and political repression, in particular sexual violence against women
- Change the 2008 Constitution in order to place the military under civilian control
- Ensure that Myanmar ratifies relevant international treaties and incorporates them into its domestic legislation, meets its obligations to protect women under CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, and 1820, and the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, and adopts the Anti-Violence Against Women Law
- Ensure women's meaningful participation in the peace process and political dialogue, and include accountability for past human rights violations in discussions
- Establish effective judicial and non-judicial transitional justice mechanisms to investigate human rights abuses, particularly those related to sexual violence against women, and establish programs to enable women victims' safe access to justice
- Create the conditions for the safe and dignified voluntary return of all conflict-affected displaced women and refugees to their communities, in consultation with them.
- Establish rehabilitation programs for women survivors, in particular multi-sectoral services that include healthcare, trauma support, reproductive healthcare, and assistance for aging populations, as well as access to capital through appropriate schemes for job creation, skills training, and microfinance
- Support women survivors' networks and linkages between them. Include them in consultations and meetings on peace, development, human rights, access to justice, and other relevant forums.

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Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR)

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

Women's Organizations Network Myanmar (WON)

The Women's Organizations Network Myanmar (WON) is a network of 30 organizations. It was set up to support women's community groups across Burma working to contribute to the well-being of women and men across the country. WON was established in 2008, after Cyclone Nargis. It operates in a number of conflict and post-conflict areas across Myanmar, including Karen State, Shan State, and Mon State, as well as running programs in Yangon and other major cities and towns. WON works to engage and advocate for peace, justice, and equality for women and men by working with key stakeholders at all levels towards positive social change in Myanmar

Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT)

Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) is a non-profit organization working on behalf of Kachin women. KWAT has a vision of a Kachin State where all forms of discrimination are eliminated, where all women are empowered to participate in decision making at a local, national, and international level, and where all Kachin children have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

Karen Women Empowerment Group (KWEK)

Karen Women Empowerment Group (KWEK) is one of the few CSOs in Myanmar that puts the capacity building of women at the forefront of their activities. KWEK's objective is to further strengthen the capacity of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and women and men to effectively engage and influence changes in Myanmar, working at the grassroots level. KWEK has established a good working relationship/partnership with local authorities, allowing KWEK to lobby for a stronger role for CSOs in society and legal enforcement. To be able to influence policy changes, KWEK works closely with INGOs, UN agencies, and other CSOs. KWEK is also actively participating in campaigns, policy advocacy, and lobbying movements for democracy in Myanmar, including the constitutional reform movement and movements to support ethnic rights and the release of political prisoners.



This booklet captures the stories of 29 women from Myanmar – former political prisoners from Yangon, and ethnic women from the conflict zones of Karen and Kachin State. It is based on our research with a total of 140 women victims in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar using participatory tools. The booklet presents the key findings of our research that are most relevant for Myanmar, introduces AJAR’s participatory research approach, and provides a list of recommendations for addressing truth, justice, and reparations for the women survivors of Myanmar.

The research is a collaboration between Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Kachin Women Association Thailand (KWAT), Karen Women’s Empowerment Group (KWEG), and Women’s Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON).

Supported By:

