

NARRATIVE RESPONSES TO HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

SUSTAINING WOMEN WORKERS AND HONOURING
THE SURVIVAL SKILLS OF WOMEN FROM BURMA / MYANMAR

WORKSHOPS FACILITATED BY DULWICH CENTRE FOUNDATION INTERNATIONAL
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Karen Women's Organisation, Kachin Women's Association - Thailand, Burmese Women's Union,
Lahu Women's Organisation, Tavoyan Women's Union

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Introduction

*How can we respond to women who are suffering
the effects of human rights abuses?*

And how can human rights workers be sustained in their work?

In May 2013, workshops were held in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, Thailand, with a number of women's organisations who represent different ethnic minorities from Burma/Myanmar and who respond to human rights violations. These workshops had two key purposes. Firstly, to share existing narrative ways of working and co-develop with participants new culturally resonant methods that can be used to respond to women who are struggling with the effects of human rights abuses. And secondly, to enable the women workers, who themselves are facing many obstacles, to tell their stories in ways that would sustain them in their work.

This publication describes the workshops, the methodologies that were described and originated in the process, and a number of collective documents from the words of the women participants. This publication also introduces ways in which collective narrative practices can be used to respond to women survivors of human rights abuses, and simultaneously to sustain workers in this field.



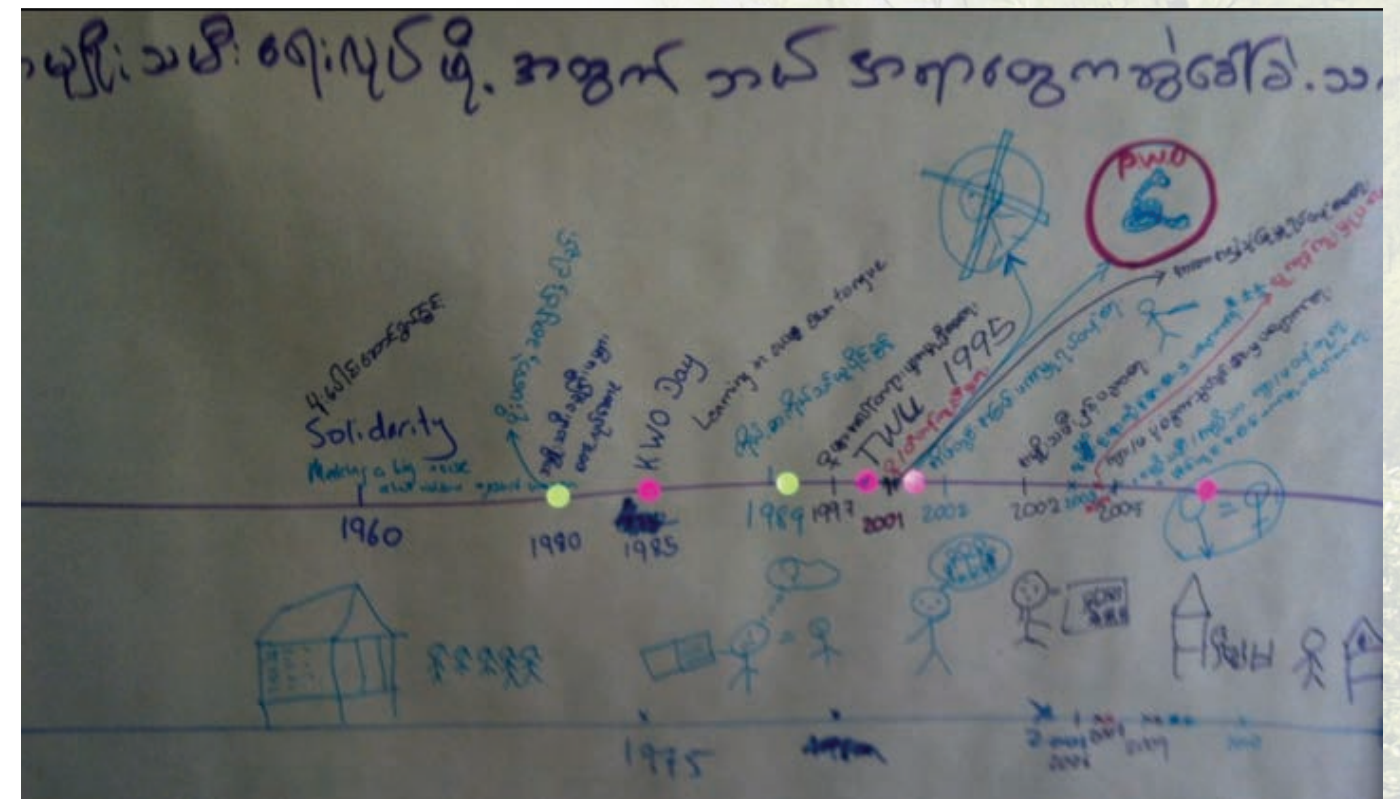
A map of history and collective timeline, Mae Sot, May 2013

Unearthing hidden histories that give us strength: Collective timelines and maps of women's history

When we are working for women, when we are working for gender justice, and when we are facing many obstacles, it can be significant to bring our histories with us. In particular, it can be significant to talk about and document women's histories that can give us strength.

Together, we created collective timelines and maps of women's history (Denborough, 2008). In pairs, we interviewed each other, asking the following questions:

1. What date did you start working for/with women?
2. At this time, what was drawing you or driving you to work with women? Was it a particular hope, commitment, dream, or value? Please come up with a name for this theme. Examples might include 'Making a big noise about violence', 'To help my neighbours', 'Justice'.
3. What is the history of this hope, commitment, dream or value? What date did this come into your life? This will be an earlier date than the one listed in #1. Please name the earliest date that you can connect your theme to. This could even be a date prior to your birth if you consider your actions are carrying on the efforts of other women who came before you. What is the story that explains your passion to work for women?
4. Who would be least surprised to know that this is important to you?
5. When you think of this theme, what is drawing you to work with women, what image comes to mind? What picture could we include on the timeline to symbolise this?



A collective timeline of hidden Burmese women's history, Mae Sot, May 2013

Each woman then listed the date they started working for women on the lower timeline (see picture). They then listed the name of their theme and its date on the upper timeline and retold their story to the group. While they were speaking, the facilitators 'rescued their words' and turned these into documents which are included below.

During this process, the facilitators also asked about other significant dates and other significant women who could be placed on this women's timeline. These included the dates that key women's organisations were formed, women chiefs of particular villages, and women who have made significant cultural contributions. International Women's Day was also acknowledged. In this way, the timeline came to represent both 'personal and women's history'.

Candlelight in the dark: A hidden history that gives us strength

Created in Mae Sot, 8 May 2013

This morning we met together. At first there was thunder and then there was conversation. Together, we created a timeline of women's history. We come from different places, different people. We have different languages and songs. But we are all working for our people, for our women. We are working for an end to violence, for gender equality, for education. We are working for the daughters who never come home.

For some of us, we started with questions. As a child, I would sit in the classroom and think, 'Why can't I learn in my own language?' As a young woman, I would ask myself 'How can I help my neighbours?' We carried these questions for many years, just waiting, looking for a chance to take action. Now we are taking action.

We carry with us our mother's stories and stories from older women. When I went to study in the city I wrote a letter home to my mother. But she could not read it. My father had to read my words to her. From that moment on, I have been determined to fight for women's education. My mother supports me in this work. She did not prohibit me. She knows I am working for my people, for women.

Some of us work to stop violence because violence was in our homes. When we were children we could not stop it. People would say, 'Men have always been doing this', but our eyes were opened. How have we kept going? Some of it is personal determination. Some of it is knowing there are other women's groups who are also taking action. And some of it is the support we have gained from the Women's League of Burma. Now there is no turning back.

We have learnt so much along the way. Some of us have been on a quest for education. This started with my parents. There were no educated people in my village in the jungle, but my parents knew it was important so they sent me to school in the city, with Burmans. I was the only one from an ethnic minority. I had very long hair, traditional clothes and a rural accent. They would push me off the edge of the long bench at lunch time, but it did not stop me seeking education. Nothing has stopped me in this quest. It is a quest that has travelled thousands of miles. My path of learning is now marked on our map of history. Another member of our group said: It was when I left high school that my eyes were opened. I started to learn about the daughters who leave our villages and never come home. Their parents expect to see them at the special festivals but they never come. Only later did I learn that these daughters have been trafficked to China. Sometimes sold and sold again and sold again; so vulnerable to abuse, so unjust. And yet it has become normal. It is not normal to us. Our eyes are open and we seek justice.

When I was 14 years old there was a domestic worker, from a jungle village, who lived in my community. She was raped by the son in the household. He violated her and then refused to marry her. This woman reported this to the head of the community. She tried to seek justice in so many ways. Every time she was knocked back she kept trying; one way, then another way, until finally she left our community. But I have never forgotten her and the way she struggled for justice. Now I am carrying on this struggle. If she knew about this, I think she would support me. I think she would be satisfied that her efforts for justice inspired a fourteen-year-old girl. I will never forget her.

We are all working for women and our histories push us forward. I remember in 2000, soldiers came into our village. These were local soldiers. There were no men in our house at that time, just my mother, my aunt and a guest. It was night and we were outside around the fire when we heard a local soldier hitting



A map of women's history

Map of women's history

Each woman was also asked to name:

6. Where did this hope, commitment, dream or value come from ... what place?

Each of these places, and each woman's theme, was then marked on a map of history. Some women's stories involved significant journeys and these were also honoured on the map.

his wife. We heard her run away, not far from us. And then we heard the soldier in his military boots running towards our place. We quickly put out the fire so he could not use its light to find his wife and we ran into the house.

This made the soldier very angry. He held his gun at us and said we must rebuild the fire. I was very scared. I did not dare to look at his face. But we did not relight the fire. Instead we stood together and shouted very loudly. When the other community soldiers heard us they shot their guns into the air. The soldier with us was frightened and he ran away. Some of us, for a long time, have been making a loud noise to stop violence.

These are our stories. This is our history. It is personal history and it is also women's history. On our timeline, we have included the dates when our organisations were founded. We have included the fact that since the 1980s, many Karen villages have women as their chiefs. When all the men had to flee from the Burmese military, Karen women remained and took charge. And we have included some of the women we most admire, including a songwriter who wrote songs that all Palaung people could understand. She sings for love and for country. She sings for us and has done so much for our people. And we have included the first time that we celebrated International Women's Day in Burma/Myanmar.

There is a force that drives us in this work – a force from history

Created in Chiang Mai, 6 May, 2013

This morning we met in the place of the hot springs and we spoke about what is important to us in our work with women. We also spoke about our histories. Some of us are trying to 'raise the voice of women' or to work for women's autonomy. We are seeking justice and equality. Or to help women escape from the boundaries of cultures and traditions. We are all working with women.

And for each of us, there is a force that drives us in this work. It is a force from history.

Some of us have lived great hardship: whether fighting for freedom in the army; living in displaced persons' camps or refugee camps; or experiencing discrimination, violence or abuse ourselves. Some of us have personal knowledge about this. Others of us have learnt from other women, from our sisters, or from our teachers.

There have been different moments that have opened the door for us to see the light and to understand women's experiences.

We heard about one such moment. After a woman had been gang-raped in a village, everyone had turned against her; but then a member of the Lahu women's organisation came to visit. This visitor didn't turn on the woman, she turned *towards* her and this made all the difference. Now, we are turning towards other women.

We heard about how one of our group joined the Shan resistance army for two reasons. To free Shan State and also to ensure that some women's names would be included in the history of the state. We must tell the world that we can do it.

Who would be least surprised to know that we care about these things? For some of us, it is our SWAN sisters. Our families may not know what we do, but our sisters understand. For others, we know our parents would not be surprised to hear about what powers us in our work.

What this process makes possible

After the creation of the timelines, maps of women's history, and collective documents, the women spoke about what it had meant to them to speak about and document what they called the 'hidden histories' of their values and commitments:

- 'This is very energising. We are not paid well and our work is difficult. Sometimes we want to give up. But this helps us to go on. It reassures us about what we are doing.'
Linking women's current actions and initiatives with the histories of what they give value to (including treasured people and places) and then interweaving individual storylines into collective tapestries, such as timelines, maps and documents, can contribute to the creation of a 'usable past' (Wertsch, 2002, p. 45), a history that can spur on current and future actions. Once a rich 'textual heritage' (Lowenthal, 1994, p. 53) and a shared heritage of achievement has been acknowledged, it can become easier to look towards the future.
- 'We only do the work, we don't see how important it is; it is good to be reminded.'
Rescuing women's words and stories, and re-telling these in the form of documents, timelines and maps, makes visible and acknowledges what often goes unseen: women's actions and achievements.
- 'Despite all the difficulties, we have accomplished a lot!'
Because the two documents are 'double-storied' (Denborough, 2008), they acknowledge hardships faced, but particularly emphasise women's acts of resistance and the significance of these.
- 'Before today, we never knew why each other was here. We are often together and we work together, but we did not know what reasons had brought us to this work.'
Enabling participants to introduce themselves through the histories of what is important to them, and enabling women to tell rich historical accounts of what they give value to, makes it much more likely for women's stories to resonate with one another. The process also makes it possible for participants to recognise and authenticate each other's activism and why they are engaged in it.
- 'It can be difficult to see each other's roles. Sometimes we fail to recognise each other's contributions to this work. This timeline makes it clear that everyone's work is important.'
The process of collectively and ritually recognising each participants' theme and history, enables an 'invention of unity in diversity' (Freire, 1994, p. 157) and the establishment of 'communitas' (Turner, 1969, 1979) – a particular sense of togetherness in which differences and individual distinctiveness remain visible and treasured. This seems particularly relevant when bringing together participants from diverse organisations and ethnic groups.

How we can use timelines and maps of history in our work

Participants spoke of different ways in which they could use timelines and maps of women's history in their work.

Strategic planning

- 'These are confusing times at the moment, with differences between organisations inside and outside of Burma/Myanmar. We can use this for strategy planning. We can look back at what has been achieved and then we can look forwards.'

Safe houses

- 'Some of us work in women's safe houses. We could create a timeline on which we mark different women's skills ... This was the date when I first sought safety ... This was the date I learnt about trust or women standing together ... When women come into the safe house they could see other women's themes and stories. And when the time is right they could add their own.'

With individual women

- 'I wonder if we could create timelines for individual women too?'

Sharing documents

- 'We can share the documents of our hidden histories with others in our organisation. And with other women.'

Listening for and documenting women's survival skills: Recipes for getting through hard times

As women's organisations respond to and document the stories of women who have endured significant human rights abuses, the second part of this workshop focused on listening for and documenting women's survival skills. Informed by considerations of double-storied testimony (Denborough, 2005), participants were invited to interview each other and document each other's 'survival skills' – the ways in which they endure hardships.

It was hoped that this would serve two purposes. Firstly, it would introduce the notion of 'double-listening': ways of listening for and acknowledging not only the injustices and effects of human rights abuses, but also the second story of women's survival and responses to injustice. Secondly, it was hoped this process would make visible participants' own 'insider knowledges' of enduring hardship. Documenting and sharing 'survival stories' between human rights workers can reduce isolation, and broaden the repertoire of ways of sustaining themselves and each other.

After a series of cultural consultations, it was decided that using a food or cooking metaphor might assist to spark conversations about survival skills (Rudland Wood, 2012). After conversations about participants' favourite dishes, ingredients and aromas, the women were invited to name three 'ingredients' that assist them to get through hard times:

Part One – Ingredients

What do you turn to in order to get through difficult times? This might be what we find important (values), what we believe to be true or just, or particular skills, knowledges or something we do. These ingredients might include Bravery, Feminism, Patience, Friendship, Solidarity, Honesty, Walking, and so on ...

- Pick out three ingredients that help you to get through hard times
- Please share a story of a time when your most important ingredient has made a difference to you or to others.

Part Two: The source of the ingredients

- Please speak about the history of your main ingredient. Please explain *how* it became your skill, value or belief.
- How long have you done this? Who did you learn it from/with? Who has recognised this / acknowledged this?
- Who would be least surprised to know about this?

Please talk about whether this ingredient or survival skill is this linked in any way to:

- Important people: family, special people who have influenced you, friends, neighbours, colleagues, children, elderly, heroes (alive or no longer alive)
- Social movements
- Cultural practices: proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, dances
- Family history: ancestry, family name, extended family
- Places: village, town, country, environment
- Spiritual beliefs: religion, meditation, prayers

As participants interviewed each other and 'rescued each other's words' in writing, they were encouraged to seek out particular details in the stories, so that the stories were told using all the senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell). The notes that participants had taken were then collected, and overnight the facilitators created from this material the following collective documents.

Reassurance: Discovering our survival skills

Created in Chiang Mai, May 7, 2013

Burmese women have had to develop so many different skills in survival. We are smart in survival skills. When I think about this, I think of my mother. Time and again she had to move us, her children. My father is fighting for our state and my mother would gather us together and we would move. We would start again, often living under only something to keep off the rain. She would raise chickens for our food. She would cook even in the rain. She would make shelter and try to keep our spirits up. I have never thought about this before, but my mother has so many survival skills. I want to talk to her about this.

Other Burmese women have had to survive in displaced persons camps and refugee camps. Some of us have had to survive men's violence. And we have had to create new lives in a different country. Burmese women, our sisters, are smart in survival. And now, as we continue to work for the rights of women, we too call upon skills in getting through hard times.

Reminding ourselves what is important

Every day, my job involves reading and editing the testimonies of human rights abuses in Kachin state. When I read over and over again the stories of terrible things, sometimes it can be hard to go on. In those moments, I remind myself, this is important work. If we do not do this, no-one will hear the stories of our people. No-one wants to hear these stories, especially now when the outside world wants to invest in Burma/Myanmar. So it is up to us to let people know what is happening. Some of us remind ourselves what is important.

To rest and sleep

Sometimes, rest can be important. One of us said, 'I am very impatient and find it easy to get angry. I am aware that if I do not go away and rest, the problem will get bigger. So in hard times, I run away from the problem first, calm down, rest, think, and find another way to solve the problem.' Others spoke of the significance of sleep. In times of hardship, sleep can be precious.

To look at the face of my child

In 2011 I was in a very hopeless situation. I lost my job and I wanted to give up. Hope was very hard to find, but then I would look at the face of my child and find new strength to overcome difficulties.

Cooking and making friends with my food

Older people in Burma/Myanmar in my area would eat fast, but I eat slowly. Whenever I was slow in eating, my grandfather used to say, there's no need to say hello to your food, or to make friends with your food ... just eat it! Now, I am studying in America and whenever I am overwhelmed and don't know what to do, I cook. In America, you can't find our food unless you cook it yourself. I bring the spices back from Thailand. Whenever I am overwhelmed, I start by chopping all the vegetables and this calms my mind. When I have finished making the meal, then I say hello to my food, I make friends with it and then I eat it! By the time I finish, my mind is calm and I have a plan as to what to do next. I first learnt to cook when I was in 5th or 6th grade. My grandmother broke her arm and couldn't cook any more. So she would stand beside me and tell me what to throw into the pan. Take this, and this. For some of us, our food is a friend, especially if we are far from home.

Patience and finding the root cause

Some time ago, I had a very big fight with my best friend. After a while we learnt it was a misunderstanding and we rebuilt our trust. It took us many months. This experience taught me to be patient and to find the root cause before making a judgement. This has become a habit of mine.

Crying and tears

As Burmese women we have shed many tears. I remember a time when I was in the ninth grade and living in boarding school. One day a child was crying because she was hungry and missing her family. Me and my friend went to support her and then we were crying too. We were all crying together and the child supported us back. Through crying together, this unhappy time turned into a good memory. Others of us cry until we fall asleep. There have been so many Burmese women's tears.

Working

For some of us, it is our work that gets us through hard times. If there is work I am happy. Even though there is very little free time, work gives me self-confidence, makes me proud and helps me to face all the difficulties. Burmese women know a lot about hard work.

Dreaming, hoping and prayer

Some of us have skills in dreaming, hoping and prayer. When I first arrived in Thailand, I had a skin disease on my legs. I had to go to the doctor for 4-5 years and every day I would dream that there would be some angel who would come and cure my disease. One day, after 5 years, I met someone who gave me the way to treat the disease. After a two-day treatment the whole disease went away. I was so thankful but I never saw this person again. I think the angel that I always dreamt about pretended to be that man and came to help me. Others of us spoke of praying to God and feeling God's love. One of us made a special prayer for a new job and then this came true. As Burmese women, some of us have skills in dreaming, imagining, hoping, and prayer.

To protect ourselves

Some of us have had to learn how to protect ourselves. When I was growing up, my parents prohibited me from going anywhere. They were afraid that I could be raped or gossiped about by other people. I didn't agree. I was angry and so I tried to find a way to protect myself. I learnt martial arts. Even though my father didn't like this, I continued and I got a black belt. Then my father got really, really angry at me. He challenged men in the community to try to rape me. Some people dared to come and as I had a black belt, so they learned the consequences. Now I use my skills in martial arts in art shows and in traditional ceremonies. And they help me to not accept what other people say, to not accept the restrictions that other people try to place on my life. I do not accept it. Some of us have learnt to protect ourselves and to not accept the restrictions of others.

Music, song and Karaoke

Music has a power and Burmese women know so many songs ... too many! We have many stories about this:

- When I didn't pass matriculation, I was in a very hopeless situation so I listened to spiritual songs and drew strength from this music.
- After I listen to other women's stories, then I listen to songs.
- And some of us go to Karaoke! We sing our troubles away.

Talking to family and those who can understand us

For some of us, it is talking to family that makes the difference:

- My mother and sisters are very important to me. In 2004-2005 I started to understand the difficulties that my family was facing. So I helped them to overcome the difficulties and until now I am still helping them. Whenever I have a problem at work I get my support from my mother and my sister.
- Whenever I am depressed I talk to my husband. This calms me down and shows me how to move forward.
- In 2011 I was facing a problem but I didn't want to ask for help. I wanted to solve the problem on my own. But unfortunately there was not only one problem but a series of problems, one after the other. At this time I didn't call my parents but then my parents called me. Their encouragement and support helped me to overcome all those problems.

We spoke of other survival skills too:

- Reading
- Watching movies or television shows where we learn from other people's lives
- To go away from people and places that make us feel sad or unhappy
- Taking a shower
- Gardening
- Or thinking of good memories.

Burmese women have had to develop so many different skills in survival. Some of these skills have been passed down the generations. We are smart in survival. When we think about this, we think of our mothers, our sisters, our colleagues and ourselves.

A second document of survival skills was created from the words of younger women meeting Mae Sot:

Finding stars to light a road full of thorns Young women who overcome many difficulties

Created in Mae Sot, May 10, 2013

We work with women who have been through great hardship. Sometimes we face many obstacles. But we keep going. Here are some of our secret ingredients that give us strength.

Taking action together

As women, there are times when we have to take action together. Some of us have known this for a long time. Back in 8th grade, my mother sent me to go to school in the city, where there is a different language and a different culture. Everything was different there from the jungle and I was very unhappy. So, with six of my friends, we snuck out of school and went home. We took action together. When we got home we were scolded by our parents, but they realised we were very unhappy so they sent us to a different school. There are times when we have to take action together.

Finding another way

There are times of hardship when we have to try many different ways to solve a problem. Eight years ago, I was living in Yangon with my uncle who is a single man. We rent a house and live together. One day I got sick and went to the clinic. A person from my village saw me there. She made a phone call to our village and told her friend that I went to the clinic to check up for my pregnancy. She said that I got pregnant because I had an affair with my uncle. My mother heard about this and called me. She said, 'You are a bad daughter. From today

on you are no longer my daughter. Don't ever come back to my house again.' Through my tears I tried to explain to my mother but my mother hung up on me. I was very embarrassed for being accused of things that I did not do. I knew everyone was talking about me. I knew I had to find another way to explain to my mother. I talked to my aunt and asked her to call my mother and explain to her, but this was not successful. I had to find another way. In Yangon there is one sister I am very close to, so I asked for her help. When that sister explained everything to my mother she finally understood. Some of us, when all looks lost, we find another way.

Working hard even if we just want to go home

Sometimes, even though we just want to go home, we know we must work harder. Ten years ago I was attending Karen young women's leadership school. All the subjects were taught in Karen, but even though I am Karen, I didn't speak the language. I missed home very much but I worked so hard to learn Karen language, very hard. And by the time I graduated I knew our language. This took strength and I learned this from one of my friends' mothers. People who know me and my family would not be surprised that I am strong and that I work hard.

In times of sorrow we find calm

Some of us have learnt to find calm, even in sorrow. Three years ago there were people in my neighbourhood who do not like the work that we do, who do not like it that we work for women's rights. They reported us to the authorities and so the authorities come and checked at our house very often. This is frightening. And I got very depressed, so very sad. In the midst of this sorrow, I offered flowers to the Buddha image. I chanted, I prayed, I meditated. And this would calm me. I learned this from my mother and my grandparents. My family would not be surprised about this. Some of us, in times of sorrow, have learnt to find calm.

Writing through hard times

Some of us write our way through hard times. One of us said, when I am struggling, I spend time alone, cry, and then write down everything I want to say in my book. My book and writing becomes my friend. Another one of our group spoke of writing to her friend. Some time ago, I opened a restaurant with four of my friends. But some of them didn't do their jobs. At first I tried to cover for them, and then I asked my friends to change. But it did not work. Finally, I wrote a note to my friend. And after she read the note things started to change. We overcame our problems. Writing is a friend to some of us in hard times.

To go out

In our work, sometimes there is a lot of pressure. When this happens, I go out with my friends or watch a comedy movie. Going to different places or laughing with my friend relieves the pressure. We have done this for a long time.

Music and song

In hard times, songs can comfort us. To lose myself in music carries me through. There is a song that is sung by Wai Wai that always gives me strength. Another one of our group also spoke about songs. Since I was young, every time I sing I feel like all my difficulties are reduced. I sing even if I don't know all the lyrics. After singing I am more able to overcome problems. Music has a power, and women in Burma/Myanmar know about this.

Facing the problem with tears until they bring a new idea

When I was young I wanted so much to go to school and would ask my mother all the time to send me to the city. So she did. But I didn't know how to speak Burmese very well and I was very unhappy living far from home with no friends. I didn't dare say that I wanted to go home because I had asked my mother again and again about wanting to go to school in the city. So I cried every night at the boarding school. I faced the problem with tears and in the end I had an idea. I realised that there were other students at school who were also like me, away from home, also ethnic minority. I realised we had to stay to pursue education. This idea encouraged me. Some of us have learnt to face the problem with tears until they bring us a new idea.

Solving the problem – not blaming the person

For me, it doesn't matter whether it was me or the other person who made the mistake, I just want to solve the problem. When I was in 10th grade I had to sit with a girl from a wealthy family. They were taking our pictures. And during this time, the girl from a wealthy family found out that her money had disappeared. She accused me of stealing her money. The head of the boarding school tried to support me by saying no I did not. But it didn't work. Finally, at the end of the lesson, the teacher asked us both to stay behind. The teacher said he had found the money and gave it back to the wealthy girl. We both apologised to each other and the problem was solved. For some of us, it doesn't matter whether it was us or the other person who made the mistake, we just want to solve the problem.

Gathering my courage: If I try hard enough everything is possible

Our work takes courage. And we know a lot about travelling through hard times. Some of us keep telling ourselves that everything is possible. I came to Mae Sot in 2013 because of my work. I have never travelled very far away before and I was not very sure how to get here. I was very worried that I would be tricked by other people, but I gathered all my strength, I held my courage around me, and I took the first step. I had to ride a car, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another from northern Shan state to Mae Sot. Each time I was worried they might charge me more because I didn't know the place. But I kept gathering my courage around me. And I kept telling myself anything is possible. If I try hard enough anything is possible. Finally I arrived in Mae Sot. Believing that anything is possible comes from my father. He wanted to become a doctor but did not graduate from high school. Even without schooling he learnt about medicine from a military doctor for 3 years and now he knows how to treat other people. My father would not be surprised that I can gather my courage in this way. There is also a saying, 'If you try you could also become a Buddha'.

Some of us, as we work for gender justice, we gather our courage around us and we remind ourselves that everything is possible.

There are other secret ingredients that give us strength:

- Some of us analyse the whole situation
- Some of us want to take revenge but don't do it
- Some of us remember our mother's love

We work with women who have been through great hardship. Sometimes we face many obstacles. But we keep going. These are some of the secret ingredients that give us strength.

What this process makes possible

This process makes no assumptions about what sustains participants through hard times, nor about what will sustain them in their work. Instead, it elicits and richly describes women's survival skills, weaves these together, and then re-tells them in written and spoken form (Denborough, 2008). After these documents had been read to participants in an informal yet ceremonial way, the women spoke about what it was like to hear back their own words and survival stories:

Gathering up courage

- 'This process was like gathering up courage.'
- 'Hearing my story read back has increased my sense of bravery. We will be more confident now in our skills.'

Renewed sense of agency

- 'Sometimes we don't have any control over the problem, but we do have power in relation to our survival skills.'
- 'This gives us the power to overcome problems in the future.'

Bringing 'secret' knowledge to light

- 'I was very happy to hear my words. They were like a secret ... but now we write it out ... they appear. This makes me feel light.'

A new relationship to the past

- 'At the time of my difficulties, I just did what I had to do. I never thought about it. But this activity has helped me to analyse past experiences. I realise now, that some of the things I did, even though they were very little, were solutions. They were survival skills.'

Facing the future

- 'This has made me feel strong. Remembering what I have been through means that in the future we will be able to overcome.'
- 'Now in hard times, we will remember that when we face difficulty, the skills come out.'

Shared experience

- 'Listening to each other's stories is like watching a movie. We can learn from each other's stories. We may have our own ingredients, our own skills, but this way we can learn others.'
- 'I wish I was a film director, I would make a film out of everyone's stories!'

How can we document survival skills and survival stories in our work?

The women's organisations represented in the workshop already document human rights abuses and circulate this documentation. Participants spoke of how, in addition to this, it may be possible to document and circulate the survival skills of ethnic minority women from Burma/Myanmar:

- 'We would be happy to share this document with others.'
- 'Survival skills vary very much. Women in refugee camps will have different skills. Maybe we can do this in the camps. If people could share their survival skills with each other, maybe problems wouldn't break out so easily.'
- 'Now I want to ask other people about their survival stories, about their ingredients'.

Preferred Identity Documents

The lives of refugees and ethnic minorities are profoundly influenced by Identity Documents issued by either the Burma/Myanmar or Thai Governments. Without appropriate documentation, traversing or avoiding checkpoints becomes an ever-common experience of degradation and danger. Refugees and members of ethnic minorities have no control or influence over the descriptions listed on their identity documentation. After a series of consultations, it was decided that creating 'Preferred Identity Documents' could be a way of reclaiming a sense of personal identity and dignity.

The following template for Preferred Identity Documents was developed:

Preferred Name:

Address 1: Favourite place:

Address 2: Places of most significant memories
(most refugees have more than one place)

ID Number: This can be your favourite number, your phone number

Who is important to me (or us):

What is important to me (or us):

Where/who I learnt this from:

Survival skills include:

Hopes and dreams include:

Theme songs / dances / rituals from my culture that are important to me:
(Optional extras are nationality and language)

Certified by:

This document will be certified by the person/group who know(s) you the best (whether you still see them or not, whether they are alive or no longer alive). In each corner, write the name of someone who is significant to you (alive or no longer alive) or a group that is significant to you, and who you would choose to 'certify' your identity.

Making Preferred Identity Documents

As the women created their Preferred Identity Documents, there was a studious silence. But every so often questions would be asked:

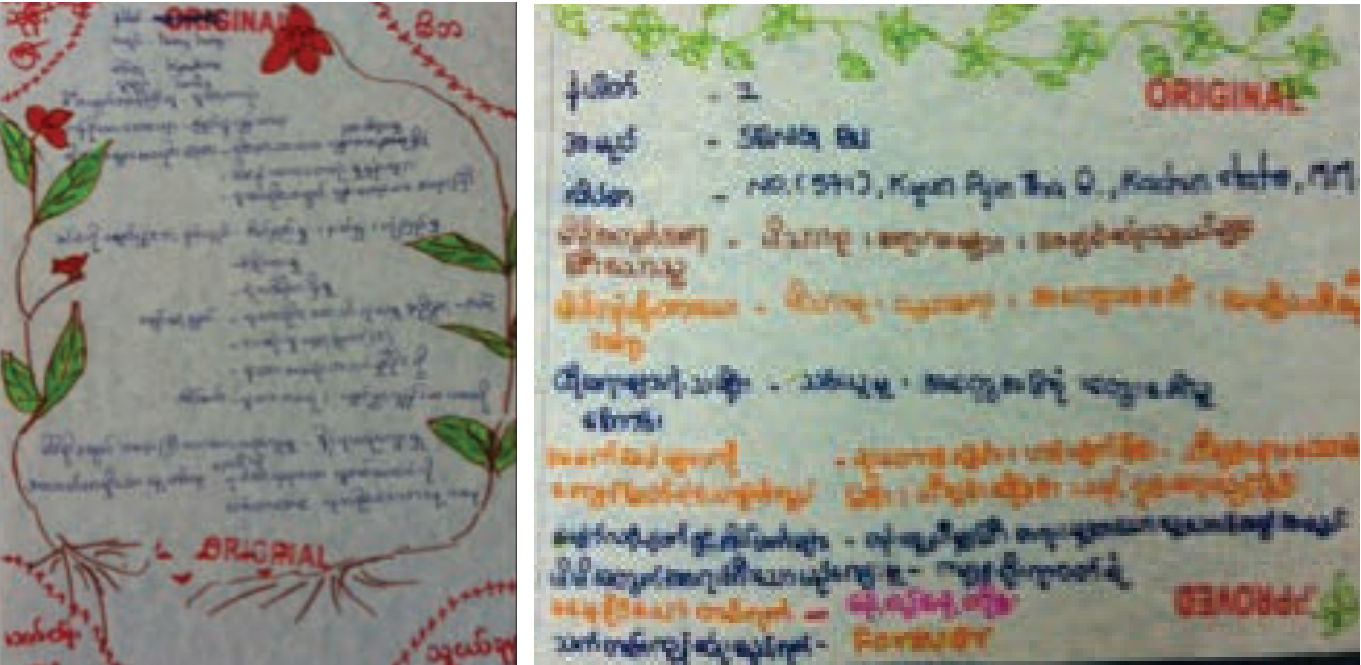
'What is the population of our country? That is what I want to write down in the space that asks who is important to me.'

'Can I have my ID certified by Buddha?'



Participants in Mae Sot working on their Preferred Identity Documents

Examples



Two examples of Preferred Identity Documents

| | |
|--|--|
| Address I: | A peaceful town |
| Date: | 8 / 8 / 88 (the date of the student uprising in Burma/Myanmar) International Women's Day |
| Who is important to me (or us) | My mother, my people and myself |
| What is important to me (or us) | Peace Valuing tradition (our own and other people's) |
| Where/who I learnt this from | I have learnt that only in peaceful times can people live a good life. And only if we value ourselves as women can we work for women. |
| Survival skills include: | Listening to song, patience |
| Hopes and dreams include: | To become a person who can help my people |
| Theme songs / dances / rituals from my culture that are important to me: | Palaung literature, water festivals |
| Certified by: | My parents, Palaung Women's Organisation, Buddha, Colleagues & Friends |
| Valid Forever | |

What does this process make possible?

'This process has made me think that every woman is the lead actress in the drama of her life.'

'These documents declare *You are worth something.*'

'There are some things in life that we cannot change, such as our date or place of birth. But we can have a say on other matters of our identity.'

So often in women's lives, other people become the authorities on their identity. This is particularly true for women who have been subjected to human rights abuses and women who are refugees or stateless. These documents are like a 'passport of preferred identity'. We can assist women to reclaim a preferred sense of identity and create forums for this to be authenticated by others.

What does this process make possible?

'I am going to put my ID document on Facebook. By posting it, other people will think about their hopes and dreams. I will tell people, "If I had a say on my identity, this is what I would put on my identity card".'

'We can use this ID to remind us of our hopes and dreams.'

'We can share our Preferred IDs with other women and, if they have similar hopes and dreams, then we can work together! It can help us bring unity between the people.'

'We can use this for women who are lost, who can't find a way to move forward to their goals.'

'We can have women help each other to make IDs. We could make a stamp from our organisation to certify them! And then have an event where we invite women to share their IDs with each other.'

'We could create a booklet of IDs and include women's stories.'

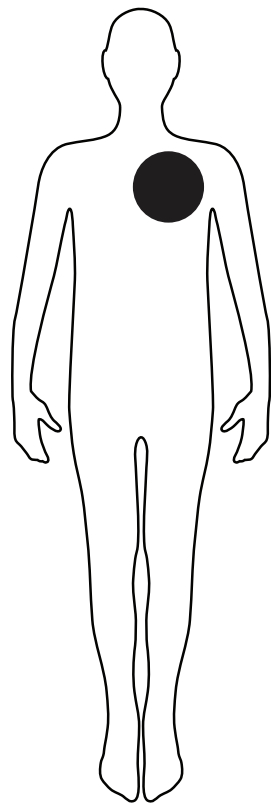
'We could use these in a campaign. Every woman could make an identity card. Each part of the cards would be different except where we get to the hopes and dreams. And in this section every woman could write a common campaign dream ... like, JUSTICE FOR WOMEN. This would show that we all have differences but there are also dreams that we share and struggle for.'

A (draft) Charter of Storytelling Rights

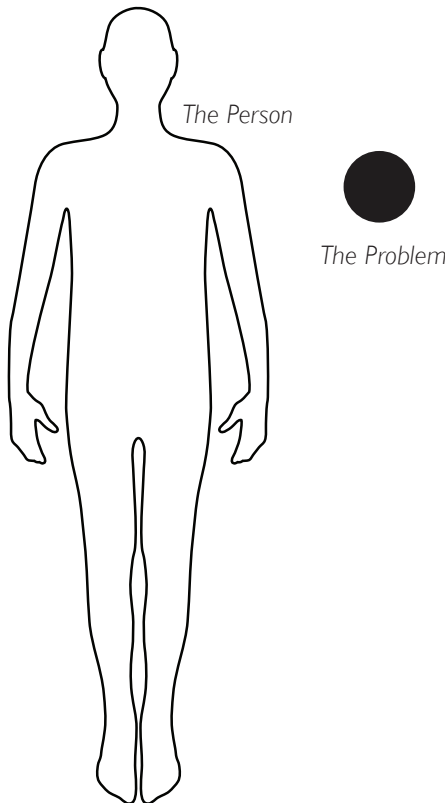
The creation of Preferred Identity Documents can be understood within a broader framework of ‘storytelling rights’. Narrative approaches to therapy and community work (White, 2007, Denborough, 2008) defend people’s rights to name their own experiences, to define their own problems, to honour their skills in survival and resistance, and to explore how their relationships, history and culture can contribute to reclaiming their lives from the effects of trauma. The following draft Charter provides a framework for understanding the storytelling rights of those who have been subjected to human rights violations (Denborough, 2011). It remains a draft so that it can be adapted for local cultural contexts. In the course of the workshop in Chiang Mai, participants decided to add a further Article (see Article 8 below).

- Article 1
- Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms.
- Article 2
- Everyone has the right for their life to be understood in the context of what they have been through and in the context of their relationships with others.
- Article 3
- Everyone has the right to include others who are important to them in the process of reclaiming their life from the effects of trauma.
- Article 4
- The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem. Everyone has the right to be free from having problems caused by trauma and injustice located inside them, internally, as if there is some deficit in them.

The person is the problem



The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem



- Article 5
- No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always respond. People always protest injustice. Everyone has the right for their responses to trauma to be acknowledged.
- Article 6
- Everyone has the right to have their skills and knowledges of survival and resistance respected, honoured and acknowledged.

Double listening: There is always more than one storyline of identity

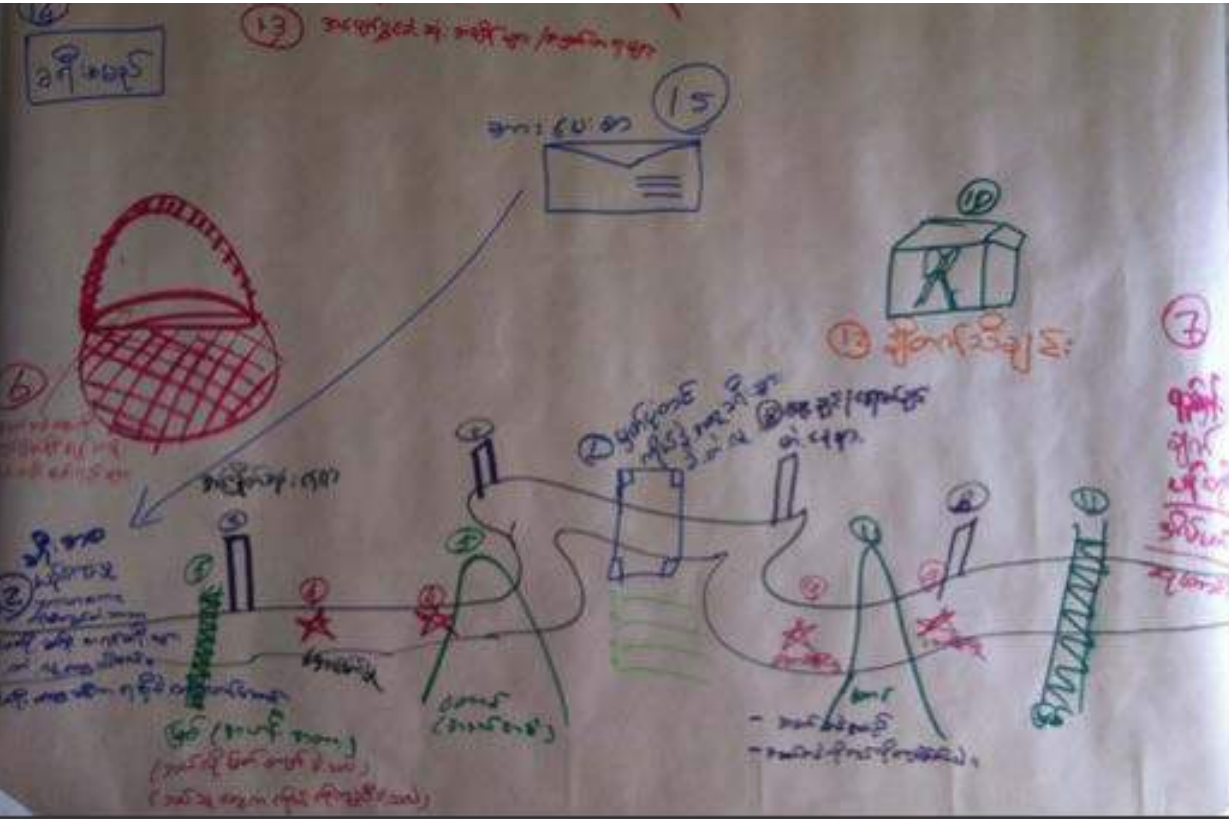
| Story 1: Story of injustice/hardship (what is being endured) | Story 2: Story of response / resistance / sustenance (what has survived) |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hardships• Losses• Injustices• Histories of these• Continuing obstacles• What effects these have on people’s lives | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responses & hidden or less visible skills• What the person/community holds precious despite hardships – beliefs, values, hopes, dreams, commitments• Social history/herstory of these• To whom these are linked |

- Article 7
- Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learnt through hardship can make a contribution to others in similar situations.
- Article 8
- Everyone has the right to remain in control of their story, who it is shared with and how. The safety of the storyteller must be the first priority. Added by Women of Burma/ Myanmar (8 May 2013)

Mapping our Journeys

The final aspect of the workshop involved women creating a Journey of their life in words and pictures.

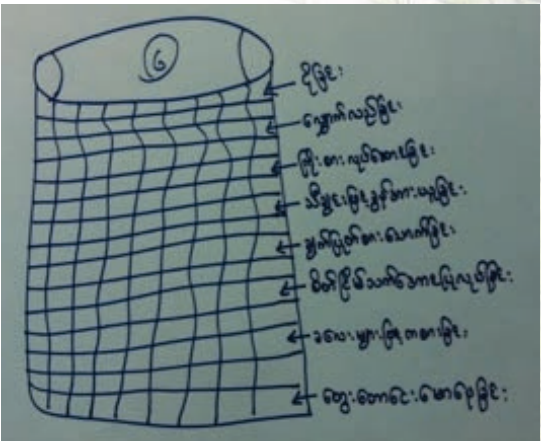
Here are the instructions in Burmese:



Part One: The Journey looking back

1. Place your *Preferred Identity Document* in the path on the middle of the journey. And write out in the four corners who is travelling with you on this journey (if only in spirit or in memory). These are the people who you chose to 'certify' your Preferred Identity Document.
2. *Where you have come from*
At the starting point of the path, note down where you have come from. Include places, ancestors, culture, language and/or spirituality. Consider the following questions and record the answers in some way at the starting point of your path:
 - Who travelled before us to make it possible for us to start this journey?
 - What are the gifts they gave you that you are carrying with you on this journey?
3. *Favourite places*
Along the road you have already travelled, draw/list some of the favourite places you have been on the journey so far.

4. *'Milestones'*
Along the road already travelled, what are some of the key things you have already accomplished on this journey? Draw two of these. How were these accomplished? Who played a part?
5. *Obstacles overcome, rivers crossed*
Along the road already travelled, draw a mountain and a river to symbolise two obstacles that you have already overcome on your Journey of Life. Please indicate how you climbed this mountain and how you crossed the river. How did you do this? Who helped?
6. *Survival basket*
Towards the top of the page, draw your survival basket. Within it, write down what helped you during the difficult times. What have you turned to that has offered you strength? These could be values, skills, people, customs, beliefs, proverbs, songs, etc. These are your survival skills.



A survival basket

Part Two: The Journey looking forwards

Now it is time to look towards the future ... 'the path yet to come'

- Where are you heading?*
Towards the end of the 'path yet to come', write down some of your hopes, dreams, wishes. These might be for yourself, your friends, your community, and/or for the next generation. How long have you had these hopes, dreams or wishes? How have you held onto them? Who has helped? Please write down some of your responses to this question.
7. *Places you wish to see*
Along the 'path yet to come', name some places you wish to see in the rest of your journey of life. These might also be places you wish to show others.
 8. *Future milestones ... things you wish to make happen*
Look back at some of the milestones you have already achieved and then, along the 'path yet to come', mark two future milestones you are aiming for. These are to be achievable steps, things you wish to make happen. Include one in relation to your own life, one for your community, one for the next generation.

9. *Gifts you wish to give others*

Look back to some of the gifts you identified that you had been given, and then mark on your future path some gifts you wish to give/share with others. Alternatively, perhaps there are things that you were not given in your life that you would like to pass on to others. Indicate these on the 'path yet to come'

10. *Mountain to climb, river to cross*

Along the 'path yet to come', draw a mountain to symbolise one obstacle that you (or others you care about) may face in the future, and one river that you may have to cross. How will you be able to tell when these are coming up? How will you and those you care about try to climb such a mountain or cross such a river? Write your response next to the mountain and river on the 'path yet to come'

How will you stay strong as you do this? Look back at your survival basket. Will you use similar things? Or different? If different things, please add these to your survival basket

11. *Travelling songs and books*

Mark along the side of your path what songs or books you will be taking with you, singing or reading, as you travel forwards. Why these particular songs? Why these particular books? What do they mean to you?

12. *Good memories*

As you move along the 'path yet to come' what are some good memories that you will take with you into the future? Draw these as stars along your Journey.

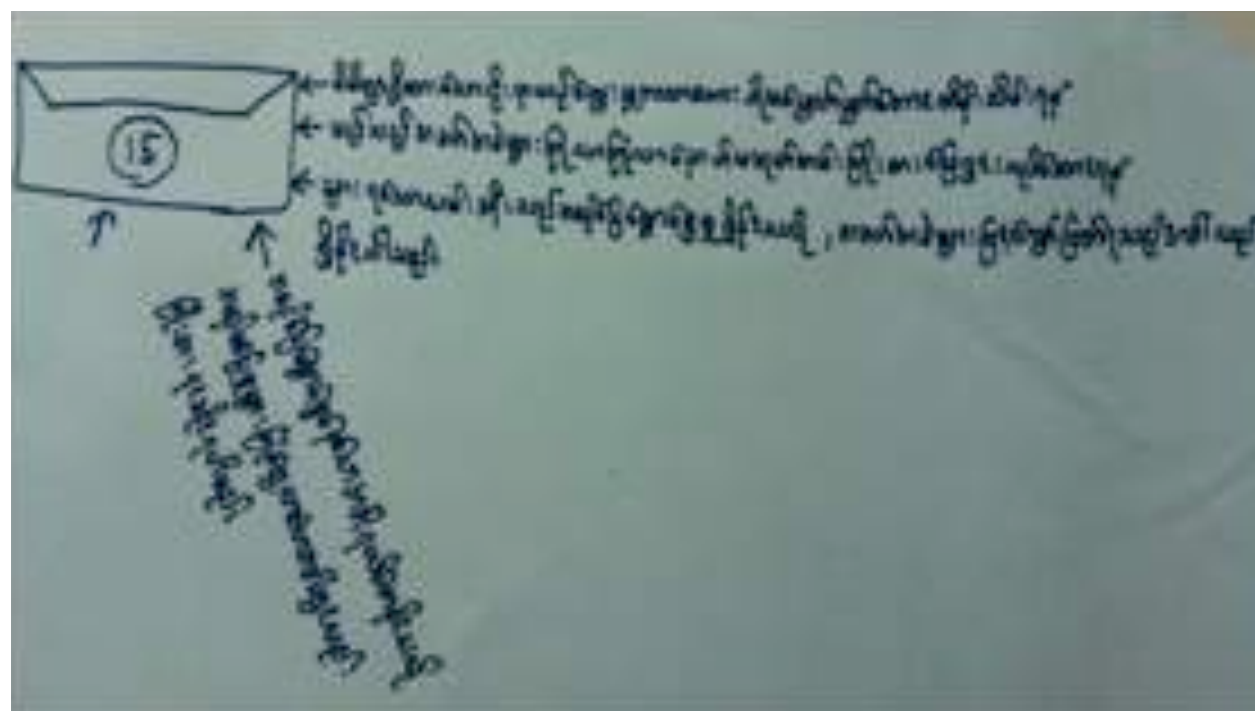
Describe these good memories – include the sounds, sights, taste, touch or smells that they are associated with. Who played a part in this memory? How and when do you remember this time? Why is it an important memory to you? What does it offer to you and those you care about? What will it continue to offer in the future? Place your responses to these questions inside or alongside the stars

13. *Naming your path, your Journey*

Give your Journey or your path a name. This is to symbolise what this Journey of Life means to you.

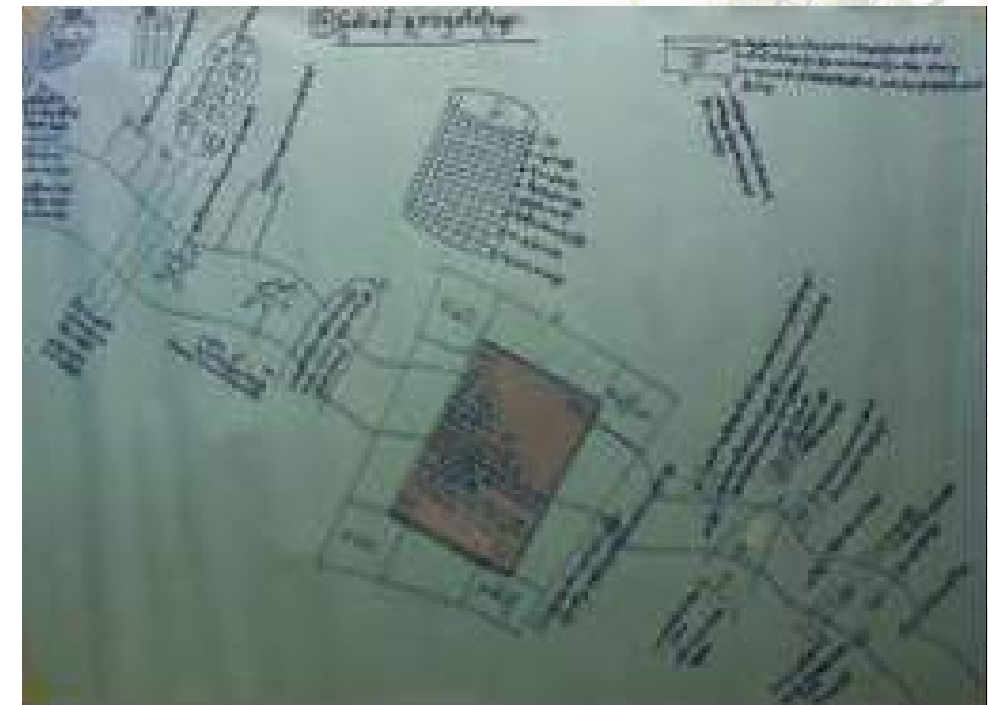
14. *A message to others*

Looking back over everything that you have spoken about, if you were to share a message, a proverb, or a story, or a song to a young woman just starting out on their Journey, what would it be? What is one lesson you have learned that you would like to pass on to others?



An example of a message to a young sister

Examples of Journeys



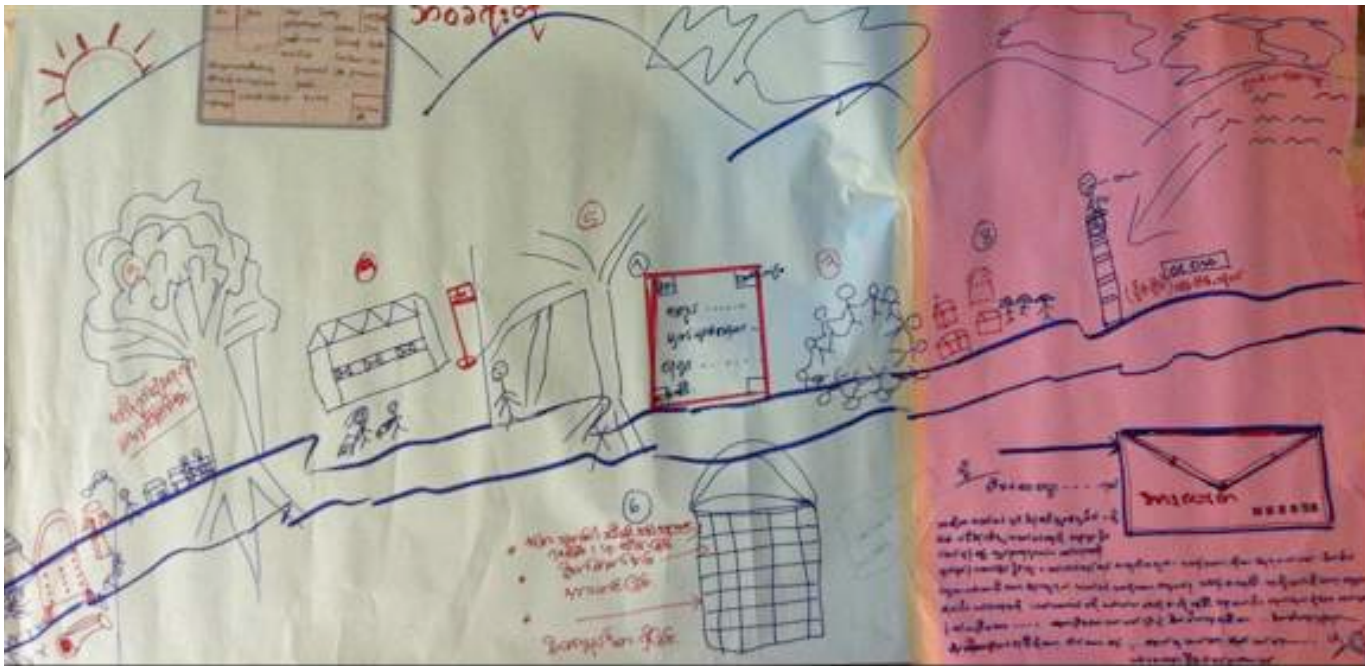
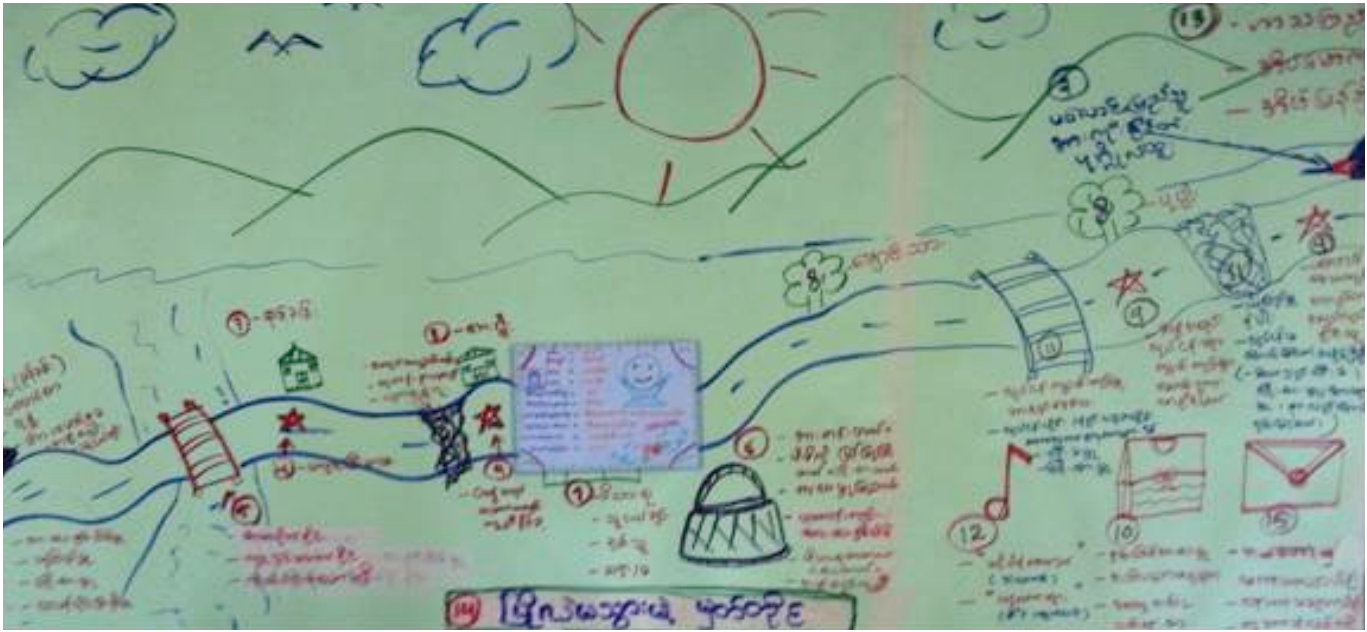
A Journey of Life created in Mae Sot, 10 May 2013



My way home: A journey created in Chiang Mai

'I called my journey, 'my way home'. When I look back, I realise that I had to climb the mountain of very limited education, and cross the river of language barriers. Other people helped me, my friends and employers. I also used survival skills of working hard and holding onto dreams and hope for my family. Now my journey is going towards genuine peace in Burma/Myanmar and more women working for development in our country.

For me, one day I would like to be a social worker and open a nursery school or establish a place to help refugees and migrant workers in Thailand. I know that in the future there will be the mountain of financial difficulties, but I will look to my survival basket, dedication, hard work, and will also seek further training. The gift I wish to give to others is the gift of knowledge. And my travelling song is the SWAN song. My good memories – these are times when I have been able to help others; the time I got my work certificate in Thailand; and good times with my boyfriend. These are stars that light my journey.



Two journeys created in Mae Sot



'I have called my journey "Lessons from the wounds". It started in northern Shan State where I grew up with Palaung language, literature, culture and religion. My favourite places are our family house, our home town, and Rangoon. My achievements so far have included learning to sew, becoming a leader in our group, and getting a job to work for the people. Along the way, I learned how to be patient and to start education from the ground up. I also learned that I had to set aside the problems my family were facing at home in order to get an education. In my survival basket is patience, to stay calm, to meditate, to confront problems, and to talk to other people. My goal now is to do something for the Palaung people and for the Palaung Women's Organisation. I would also like to visit Korea one day and visit Bagan, an ancient city in Burma/Myanmar. And I would like to give others a few of the books that have been most helpful to me. I know that there will be hardships in the future. Things will not always go as planned. There will be money and family difficulties. But I am prepared. I will use my basket. And I will march along with the song "walking with wounds". I spend a lot of time working far away from my home, so my favourite memories are seeing my parents' smiling faces whenever I return; sleeping; and times when I accomplish something. If I was to send a message to a little sister, before she took the first steps on her Journey, I would say "Dear little sister, it is normal when you are on a journey to face difficulties. There's always good luck and bad luck along the way. Whatever difficulty you are facing, please don't blame yourself. Just try your best and talk with others along the way. Don't give up ... I am waiting for you just a little but further along the path"'

'I want to be a woman that other women can look up to. This is the pathway. This is the journey I am on. In my journey, I recalled that I grew up eating rice and fish paste, betel nut and cashews. We lived in a very small house with no electricity. We were poor and I grew up in the civil war. There was no place of stability. When I look at how far I have come, I realise I am very happy here because now I can work for the women.'

What does this process make possible?

'Thank you for this exercise. It is very helpful, very good. There are things in the past ... there is nothing you can do ... you can't change them. But doing this has meant I can learn from past difficulties. So I know how to overcome them. I can look back at the past and think ... what did I do in similar difficulties in the past?'

'This activity made me realise all the work of my ancestors. People before me have given a lot so that I can be where I am today. This makes me feel responsible to work hard, to provide and give gifts to others ... to future generations.'

'I have had a difficult life and I am so happy because this process made me notice things I have not noticed before. This made me remember times when I have overcome ... and times when I was very happy. It has reminded me about where I have been, where I have come from, where I am going.'

'When we put the different milestone and achievements along the journey, I suddenly thought "I need more room on the page!" I couldn't fit all the achievements on the paper. And it helped me to remember the people who helped me ... parents, teachers and myself. This journey made me very proud.'

'This feels like a summary of my life. It was fun to draw it like this and it made me realise I have got through a lot of things. In the past there have been both difficulties and achievements. I realise this will also be true in the future and I feel I have more strength, more energy for the future.'

'When we work, we are always supporting other people. We never really have the chance to consider ourselves or our own lives. This activity is one way of supporting myself and reminding me what we have overcome.'

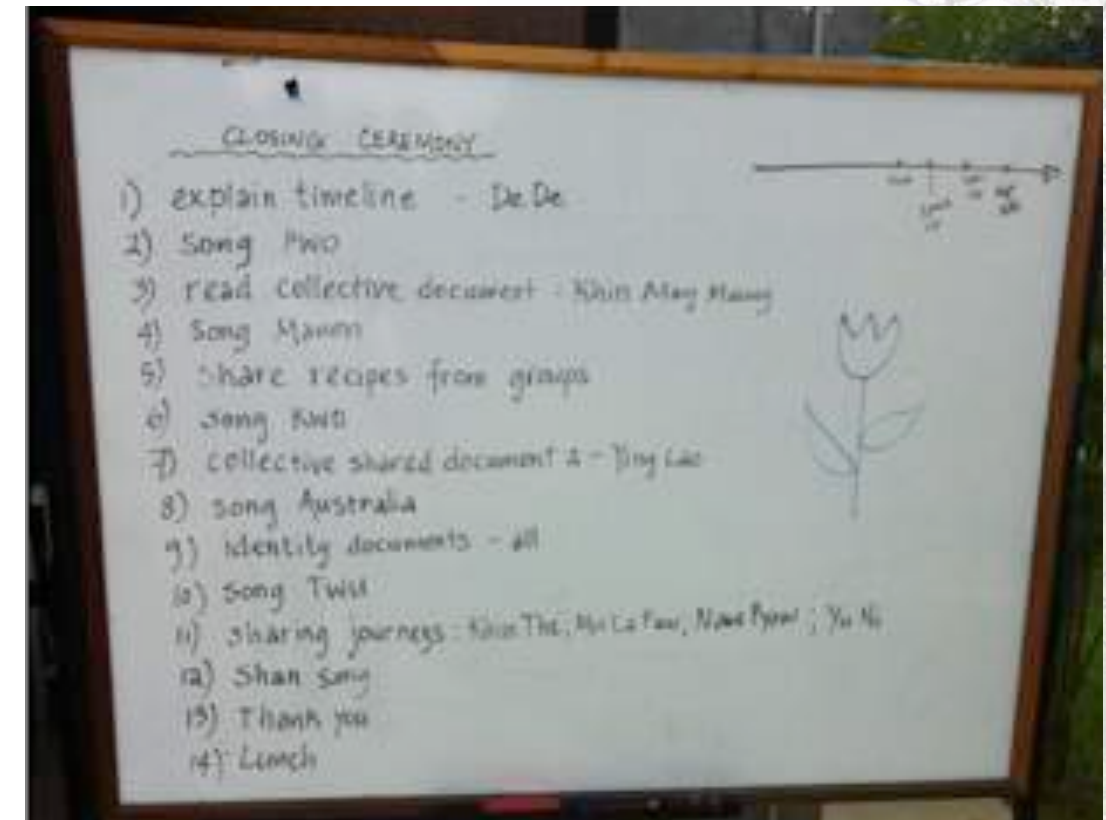
How can we use the journey in our work?

'Doing this journey has brought into the open all the survival skills I have used to get through hardships in the past. Now, when I meet women who are in difficulties, I will share my knowledge with them. I will also have new ways of learning about their journey, about their survival skills.'

'I think we could create the journey of our organisation. This would start with the founders. It would be a way of teaching new workers about the journey our organisation has been through. We can also use it for future planning. We can look back at where we have been and plan where we are now going.'

Closing ceremonies and songs

Each workshop ended with informal ceremonies in which women shared the timeline and map of history that had been created; the recipes they had made in relation to how to get through hard times; their Preferred Identity Documents; their Journeys of Life; and the various collective documents that had been written. As so much had been generated over the two days, these ceremonies had a significant agenda:



They also included a number of songs. In Chiang Mai, the words of the women were written into the lyrics of the following song:

*We are from different places
So we have different songs
We are women standing strong*

*There is a force that drives us
It's a force from history
We must wake up the world so it can see*

*We are smart in survival
We have had to be
And our mothers and sisters,
Our people will one day be free*

A number of members of the group then translated this into Burmese and re-wrote the melody. This was sung together. It is hoped this song will be recorded and played on Girlpower radio!

About collective narrative practice

The way of working shared in these workshops, and described in this publication, is known as collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008). The following assumptions guide this work:

- Our lives and identities are shaped by story or narrative. This is true for individuals, groups and communities.
- The ways in which stories of identity are told, represented, documented, and witnessed, can make a profound difference to how we understand our lives, what actions we are able to take, and how our efforts can be sustained.

These considerations are relevant not only to responding to women survivors of violence, torture and abuse, but also to those engaged in human rights work, development practice and/or social activism. Collective narrative practices are now engaged in each of these realms. For more information, see the further relevant reading list below, or contact Dulwich Centre Foundation International.

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Further relevant reading

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Web resources

www.dulwichcentre.com.au
www.narrativetherapyonline.com

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