



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

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Toungoo Interview: Naw A---, February 2017

This Interview with Naw A--- on February 5th 2017 provides an update from Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District, on issues including education, health, livelihoods, and women's opportunities in the community.

- *The deficit of education and healthcare services in Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District continues because there are still not enough teachers, schools and healthcare services. Additionally, the cost of medicine when prescribed locally is expensive.*
 - *Naw A--- also talks about the local situation for women; despite limited opportunities, she recommends all women try to learn from outside experiences instead of only staying home and doing housework.*
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Interview | Naw A--- (female, 21), B--- village, Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District (February 2017)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Toungoo District on February 5th 2017 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This interview was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including 1 other interview and 6 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian (Roman Catholic)

Marital Status: Single

Occupation: Housekeeper

Position: Civilian Ceasefire Monitoring (CCM) volunteer

What is your name?

My name is Naw A---.

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeastern Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When conducting interviews, community members are trained to use loose question guidelines, but also to encourage interviewees to speak freely about recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important and share their opinions or perspectives on abuse and other local dynamics.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeastern Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's website.

How old are you?

I am 21 years old.

What is your occupation?

I do irregular work and am also a housekeeper.

Are you studying or did you go to school?

Yes, I did.

When did you leave?

I left school after I took the Standard³ 10 exam.

Why did not you carry on further study?

I did not go on to further study because my parents had passed away.

When did your parents pass away?

They passed away in 2011.

Are you the oldest child in your family?

Yes, I am.

How many siblings do you have?

I have three siblings.

Who do you currently live with?

I live by myself [with my siblings].

Do they [siblings] go to school?

My youngest sibling is studying 7th Standard.

What is your village's name?

My village is B---

What is the maximum standard the school in your village has?

The school in our village is a sub-middle school and it has until Standard 8.

Does the school have enough teachers?

No, it does not because there is teacher turnover but no replacement for the teachers that quit the school. There have not been any teachers to replace the three teachers who taught the middle class.

How many students are there in the school?

I think there are over 200 students.

How many teachers are there?

There are 9 teachers.

You said your brother is studying here [in the village] so what do you think about his situation regarding his study? Is he trying hard or what is needed for him [to study well]?

³ A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Burma/Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school is Standard 6 to Standard 9, and upper secondary school is Standard 10 to Standard 11.

He is a little bit lazy. According to the shortage of teachers, existing teachers have to take more time in the class so teaching is sometimes confusing for them [to cover additional subjects]. So, this is one of the weaknesses for education.

Regarding healthcare, does the village have any clinics?

As I heard, there is a plan to establish a clinic and the land has already been bought to build it, only the clinic has not been established yet.

Do you know who will come to open the clinic?

I think it is NLD (National League for Democracy).

So, they [NLD] bought the land [to build the clinic]?

I am not sure whether the land was bought by the villagers or by [private or organisational] donation. However, I know that it is planned to be established.

Currently, is there a health worker in this village?

We do not have a standby health worker here. But, we have [Burma/Myanmar] government health workers who come one time every two or three months. However, we do have local villagers who are studying nursing.

Where are they studying nursing?

Some are studying in Toungoo Town and some are in Yangon.

After their nursing studies, do they go to villagers' houses to cure [treat] the local villagers?

Yes, they do but the cost of medicine [that they prescribe] is very expensive.

In case there are serious sicknesses that arise in this village, where do they mostly go to get treatment?

They mostly go to Thandaung Hospital, Toungoo Hospital and Bu Yin Naung Hospital.

How do they go to hospital from Thandaunggyi [Township] to Toungoo [Township]? Are they carried along with a local stretcher by villagers, or by motorbike, or car?

There are no cars here so they do not go with car. If they are still able to walk, they usually go with motorbike. If not, they are carried by villagers.

How long does it take from here to town by motorbike?

It takes around two hours from here to Thandaunggyi Town.

What about Toungoo Town?

It takes around three hours. I mean, if you ride slowly.

What kind of training, regarding [opportunities for] women, have you attended?

I have attended training about civilian ceasefire monitoring [CCM]. I am also volunteering there.

Are you volunteering in your village?

Yes, I am volunteering related to CCM activities in my village.

What role do you take regarding this work?

We have to monitor the [Nationwide] Ceasefire Agreement⁴ which was signed between armed groups, KNU (Karen National Union) and Tatmadaw, which is related to civilians.

⁴ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited

What do you see and think about the situation between KNU and Tatmadaw during your monitoring?

They are working towards peace but the situation is not that stable yet. There are still some conflicts in other villages but not in my village because they are building mutual understanding [and trust] in our village so the situation is in a good condition.

With your current situation, you do not have parents and only three of you are left, so what are the difficulties you face?

We have many difficulties but I don't know how I can describe them. However, we do not have to worry so much about our living [expenses] since I have my older brother.

Does your brother also live in this village?

Yes, also, he is married.

Do you live with them?

Yes.

What is your plan for the future, for yourself and your village?

I want to have a job of my own. Now, I am planning to attend nursing training. [However] CCM have extended their project [duration] so I have to be with them [until the project ends].

Which organisation does this project [CCM] connect with?

This project is related to KDN (Karen Development Network) and it is under/connected to Hsa Mu Htaw [civil society organisation] in Thandaunggyi Township.

So, you might gain lots of experience [related to this work].

I am just learning from my work now. I do not have that much experience yet.

Do you get salary from your work?

No, I do not get salary but I get the phone credit paid when I have to report the information [by phone].

Are there any Tatmadaw army camps in your village?

Yes.

How far is it between the army camp and the village?

I cannot estimate it but I am sure that the army camp is very near.

Is the camp in the village?

It is located in the upper part of the village, on a hill.

Do they [Tatmadaw] conduct any activities like patrolling around the village?

to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see "[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#)," Reuters, October 15th 2015. Despite the signing of the NCA prompting a positive response from the international community, see "[Myanmar: UN chief welcomes 'milestone' signing of ceasefire agreement](#)," *UN News Centre*, October 15th 2015, KNU Chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe's decision to sign has been met with strong opposition from other members of the Karen armed resistance and civil society groups alike, who believe the decision to be undemocratic and the NCA itself to be a superficial agreement that risks undermining a genuine peace process, see "[Without Real Political Roadmap, Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Leads Nowhere...](#)," *Karen News*, September 1st 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12th 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

They do it sometimes, especially, when authority figures are coming to the village such as [Burma/Myanmar government] officers, or organisation staff such as health workers.

What support do they provide?

Do you mean the [Tatmadaw] soldiers?

Yes.

They help with ploughing the road [to flatten it], fencing, and other things for the church. Sometimes, they also offer healthy food to us, as well as giving treatment [to sick villagers].

Have you ever experienced conflict [between armed groups] because the military camp is very near to the village?

No, I have not.

What is your perspective on the ceasefire? Do you think the situation will be better in the future?

I think they have not built full mutual understanding and trust between each other yet. As I know, KNU/KNLA can restart its military activities [against Tatmadaw] any time.

For example, as a female, do you feel safe to travel?

I think, not yet. They [Burma/Myanmar government] said that the country is peaceful; actually, it is not really peaceful yet. I don't think that there is real peace.

What about your safety? How do you feel about your safety when staying in the village and when travelling?

I feel safe.

Do you drive a motorbike on your own, or do you always travel with someone?

I cannot ride a motorbike so [I always travel with someone].

What are the local villagers mainly working on in their plantations?

They follow the seasons to grow food. For example, they work on coffee plantations in the summer, dog fruit plantations in the rainy season, and cardamom plantations in September.

How was the outcome from last year's plantations? Was the situation [harvest] good or not?

Last year, the outcome was not good.

What about the price?

The price was pretty good in Toungoo Town. The price was not good in the villages.

What about the transportation and communication?

There are more motorbikes travelling now, but there is a problem with the road during raining season.

So, how do they [villagers] carry their crops in this situation [of a bad road]?

They just carry their crops with motorbikes but it takes a lot of time for them [to reach the town].

What do you think women in your village are mostly working on? Are they mostly government staff or [do they stay at home to do] housework?

Mostly, they are doing housework. They usually get married early and they have lots of children at a young age so they usually stay in their homes and take care of the house.

You said that they get married too early. Do they choose to marry with their own decision or is it their parents' decision?

I think they mostly choose to marry with their own decision.

At what age do most women in your village start a family?

Mostly, they start a family when they are 16 or 17 years old.

What do you think about this situation where people get married at this young age? Is it good or bad in your opinion?

From being married early I think they will suffer [struggle] when they are older, because they started a family when they were not mature.

What do you want to say or what words do you want to pass down to women all around the world?

I want to share one of my experiences. Once, in the past, I attended a women rights' workshop in Hpa-an Town. All of the participants were women. In the workshop, we discussed that women did not get full rights in the past. They did not get seats in parliament, but only men [got seats in parliament]. But nowadays, many women get involved in many roles and sectors. So, I would like to recommend [all women] not to stay only in their houses and do housework. I want [women] to learn from their environment and the outside world what is going on. I cannot do anything for their destinies but what I can do is just speaking. The matter is that they [women] have to do it by themselves. I want women to be broad-minded, to learn from outside, and to know what is happening in the world. I cannot help them as I want to.

You said you cannot help them as you want to. So, do you want to open a training or a workshop regarding general knowledge for women?

Yes, I also want to do stuff like that. I am not only talking to women but also [I am] including men. Everybody should know what is happening in their village/area. We also have some men that do not care about the environment around them. I think everybody should have knowledge and know their country's political situation. I also would like them to have the capacity of broad-minded persons.

[According to what you say,] there are no workshops being conducted in your village with a focus on women. It is that right?

Yes, no workshops.

Is there any organisation exclusively working on women affairs?

No, we do not have a women's organisation. We just have a women's group organised with the church.

You said there is religious group for women. What are they doing for the village?

Mostly, they do chores and cooking [to maintain the church area]. There are fewer women who participate in this kind of workshop [KHRG's Village Agency Workshop] because they know only about working in the kitchen. In every sector, women participate less than men.

Thank you so much for taking time to answer my questions. I would like to take a couple photos of you if you agree, to keep as a record for our report. We also ask permission from you to use the information from this interview with you in order to write a report. We can only use these when you give us permission.

Can I ask you one question, please?

Yes, go ahead.

Does KHRG publish newsletters?

Yes, it does.

However, [KHRG] newsletters are not distributed to our area.

Now, we bring the newsletters with us. In the newsletters, we include mostly about incidents but not interviews with the interviewee's name.

One suggestion I would like to make is that [KHRG] also should distribute newsletters in our area.

Thank you for your suggestion. I would like to know which language are local people here stronger in reading, Burmese or Karen?

They can read Burmese too but it is better to distribute in Karen language.

Thank you for your suggestion. What else do you want to add?

No, enough.

If so, thank you very much.

Further background reading on the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, March to May 2017," (December 2017)
- "Toungoo Interview: Naw Ka---, October 2016," (June 2017)
- "Toungoo Interview: Saw A---, January 2016," (February 2017)
- "Toungoo Interview: Naw A---, November 2015," (February 2017)
- "Toungoo Field Report: Slow transitions towards real change, January to December 2015" (January 2017)

