

UNRAVELLED:
A CONTEXTUAL EXPLORATION INTO THE WEAVING OF
KAREN REFUGEE WOMEN

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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Most women are natural weavers of stories, not only those who have the good fortune to be published, but all those who perpetuate the oral tradition – mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers who share their secrets while stirring soup, sowing fields, or mending fishing nets. They record the truths of history – not the struggles for power or the vanity of emperors, but the pains and hopes of everyday life – Isabel Allende

To the weavers

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ABSTRACT

Despite a thirty year protracted refugee situation in Thailand, little data exists regarding the traditional weaving of the Karen refugee women from Burma. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and photography, this study explores the meaning of weaving for Karen refugee women as they transition from their villages in Burma to Thai refugee camps and eventually into resettlement in Canada. The analysis stresses the importance of context in the formation of meaning and purpose from weaving. The findings suggest interdependency between weaver, the weaving and context. As the weavers leave Burma, the purpose for weaving is transitioned from the making of clothing for community belonging, self-sufficiency, and cultural identification, into a means of generating income and filling time in Thailand. Third country resettlement continues the story of weaving further still, suggesting diminished purpose and meaning, leaving the future of Karen weaving uncertain in Canada.

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CHAPTER 1

PART 1. INTRODUCTION

In this study I employ critical feminist ethnographic qualitative research to explore the practice of weaving in the lives of Karen refugee women in Burma, Thailand and Canada. Through the methods of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and photography I document the role of weaving in the social, economic, political and cultural activities of Karen women weavers. I explore the meaning of weaving from the perspectives of the Karen women weavers and connect their weaving to the social contexts in which it takes place. In constructing this qualitative study from tenets of multiple disciplines, including gender studies, anthropology, international development, visual studies and social work, I attempt to provide the reader with rich, detailed and contextualized data situated in the framework of social justice. I have drawn on methods from various methodologies, including ethnographic field notes and visual imagery through photography, with the hopes of engaging the reader throughout the following 7 chapters.

PART 2. OVERVIEW

I first learned about Burma in 2006. It was at a small event when a speaker began to talk about her experience working with journalists on the Thai-Burma border forced to work in secrecy because of the oppression in their country. I listened to her talk about the human rights violations committed by the military junta of Burma that had led to the protracted refugee situation in Thailand. This was just months before the first group of Karen refugees were resettled in Regina. Shortly after this event, I took a job with Regina Open Door Society Inc., a local immigrant and refugee settlement agency. It was in this position that I came to learn about the Karen people. As a social worker, I was

completing settlement assessments with all families in their first year of resettlement, and as a result I had the opportunity to meet many of the Karen people making Regina their new home. I was immediately taken with the kindness, strength and generosity exhibited by so many of the people I met. It was at this time that I also began to learn about the weaving of the Karen women. I was instantly interested in supporting a small group of women endeavoring to market their products in Canada. That summer I drove my car on prairie roads packed with weaving and women trying to sell their handmade products at small town Saskatchewan craft sales.

From my experience of meeting and working with the Karen people in Regina, I knew entering my master of social work studies that I wanted to use my field placement as an opportunity to visit refugee camps in Thailand and understand firsthand the pre-resettlement situation for the refugees from Burma. I also decided that I wanted to explore and highlight the weaving of the Karen women for my thesis work. From September to December 2011, I had the opportunity to work in Thailand at the Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp in fulfillment of my graduate field placement. Additionally I was able to visit Ma La refugee camp and Umpiem Mai refugee camp for the purpose of completing research for this project.

My time working in the refugee camps in Thailand only strengthened my resolve that the stories of the Karen people need to be told and due to the suppression of journalism and free speech in Burma, require the support of allies to help tell them. The human rights violations in Burma, the undisclosed number of political prisoners, the ethnic villagers living in constant fear and movement in internally displaced person (IDP) camps and the protracted refugee situation in Thailand are all in need of increased

attention and action. Despite recent reforms by Burmese president Thein Sein, including electoral improvement, the situation for millions of people in Burma remains precarious. And yet, I didn't want to write a story of only pain and suffering. Although I wanted to raise awareness to the horrors occurring inside Burma, I wanted to ensure that the strength, kindness and beauty of the people were present to oppose the pain and suffering inflicted by the military junta. In speaking with the women, the ideas of creation and beauty were so evident when they spoke about their weaving, that I wanted to ensure that my project not only spoke to the struggles but highlighted the resiliency to create and recreate for beauty, pleasure and love.

Subsequently, I have chosen to include photography as part of the ethnographic component of this research for three reasons. Firstly, I chose to use photos of the women's weaving because I wanted the women I interviewed to enjoy their work and stories in the document. For many of the women I interviewed, the opportunity to attend school has never been an option, and as such many of the women are unable to read or write in not only English, but also Karen. By including photos, I hope the women will be able to understand the story I have written, without the need for words. I hope they are able to explore my interpretation of their stories through the photos I took of their weaving and their communities. Secondly, as so many women talked about weaving as a means to create beauty, I felt compelled to "create" as well. Ethnography allows the researcher to become part of the "doing" as it happens and because of this, the researcher becomes an important part of the process (Riley, 2008). I unfortunately cannot weave. I considered attempting to learn during the research period in order to add my own experiences of weaving but I inevitably decided that learning to weave was not my focus,

and I didn't want my own process to distract from the stories of the women I interviewed. Instead I decided to photograph the weaving of the women, both products that are finished, the contexts in which the weaving happens and in some cases the women actually weaving. I am also not a photographer, but I felt that in taking photos, I was participating in the creation of something for the purpose of adding beauty. I believe the photos, although not of any exceptional quality, add to the beauty, depth and context of a traditional document consisting of simply words and paper. Lastly, the use of non-traditional writing techniques, can give the voices of women, often silenced in traditional discourse, the space to tell different stories in experimental ways (Ball, 1999). I hope that in choosing to use the method of photography in this research, I have helped to make visible what is often rendered invisible in dominant discourse (Ball, 1999).

In an attempt to uncover further the often invisible stories of refugee women, I decided to use a female interpreter in conducting all ten interviews. Although interviewing with an interpreter can, at times, be quite challenging, I felt strongly that I wanted to ensure that the voices of women had equal opportunity to be heard, and not only those who could speak English. I felt this was especially important for the women living in Canada, as being in a new country with new languages often leaves many immigrant and refugee women silenced. It is important to note that the women's stories have been relayed through interpreters and have, by nature of the work, been translated through the interpreters own social and cultural lens. The exact influence of the interpreter on the story cannot be known, but because of the inevitability of this, I wanted to ensure that the story was shared through a female lens and as a result used only Karen refugee women as interpreters.

Although there are many names for the country: the Union of Myanmar; Myanmar; Burma; I have chosen to use Burma in writing this document. The Republic of Burma is the name that was chosen for the country after gaining independence from Great Britain in 1948 (Lehan, 2007). In 1974, as a result of the military coup in 1962, the country's name was changed to the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma (Lehan, 2007). In 1988, after failed pro-democracy protests, the military dictatorship changed the country's name once again to the Union of Myanmar (Lehan, 2007). While the United Nations accepts this as the official name of the country, many other countries, including Canada, do not (Lehan, 2007; Phan & Lewis, 2009). In addition, many ethnic groups within Burma do not recognize the name change (Phan & Lewis, 2009). In solidarity with the resistance against the military junta, I will use Burma to name the country of origin of the Karen people.

In the remaining chapters of this study the reader will find a discussion of the phenomena of Karen weaving in the contexts of persecution, displacement and resettlement. Chapter 2, *Where We Were, Where We Are*, provides an overview of the Karen people in various stages of migration in the contexts of Burma, Thailand and Canada. I have included my own ethnographic field notes and photographs at the end of each section of this chapter to both place my experience in the research and provide the reader with a broader contextual understanding of the ideas I speak about throughout the chapter. The chapter, *It's Something Between Them*, discusses the reasons I choose to explore weaving as a means of storytelling in feminist research with Karen refugee women. In Chapter 4, *Methods*, I discuss my use of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and photography as research methods in this qualitative study.

Chapter 5, *The Women and Their Weaving*, provides a short biography of each interview participant and the photographs I took of her weaving and weaving materials. This chapter is meant to both tell individual and collective stories and exhibit the weaving art of the women weavers participating in the study. The two final chapters, *The Findings* and *The Discussion* present and discuss the findings of the research from a critical feminist ethnographic framework. Finally, the *Conclusion* will summarize the study and provide recommendations for program development and further research.

It is important to mention that the reader will not find a chapter dedicated to a literature review. Rather than decontextualizing my discussion of the literature into a separate chapter, I have included it as foundational discussion throughout the text. Although the reader will find the use of photography in Chapters 2 and 5, I have also included images throughout the study to enrich discussions and stories that would benefit from visual imagery, such as in the description of a particular weaving pattern or in highlighting the role of photography in relationship building through visual communication.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE WE WERE, WHERE WE ARE

PART 1. THE KAREN PEOPLE: BURMA

Historical migration of populations originating from many diverse locations has made Burma one of the richest countries in the world for cultural and ethnic diversity (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994; Lwin, 2012). Numerous minority groups make up the social and cultural fabric of the population with the Burmans forming the largest ethnic division. Although the exact number of ethnic minorities is disputed, the main ethnic minority groups to call Burma home include the Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karennis), Mons, Chins, Shans, Arakans, and Wa (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994; Lwin, 2012). There are also many smaller ethnic groups and subgroupings, each with their own unique languages and traditions (Phan & Lewis, 2009). Despite the lack of accurate census data from within Burma, the Karen are thought to be the second largest ethnic population (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994). Anthropologists estimate that the Burmese-Karen population is around four million people (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994; Barron, Okell, Yin, VanBik, Swain, Larkin, Allot, Ewers, 2007). In addition there are between 200,000 and 400,000 Thai-Karen living in Thailand and almost 150,000 Karen people living in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994; Barron et al., 2007; Thai Burma Border Consortium, 2011).

Although there are over 20 subgroupings, 70 percent of Karen people come from two main subgroups, the S'gaw Karen and the Pwo Karen (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994). The Karenni people are also included in the grouping of Karen people (Barron et al., 2007); however the Karenni are a highly diverse grouping of people with unique ethnicities and languages (Dudley, 2007). The Karenni people have derived from the

regions of Kayah state and are grouped together under the movement of the Karenni National Progressive Party (Dudley, 2007). As such, they are culturally diverse and distinct from the Karen people. In my own experience working with Karenni people in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp Thailand, strong cultural identity distinctions between the Karen and Karenni people were often discussed and established.

The Karen known as *P'gha K'Nyaw*, or “the people” in S'gaw Karen, are believed to have migrated from Indo-China southward into Yunnan China and eventually into the regions of lower Burma and the mountain region on what is now the Thai-Burma border (Marshall, 1922; Barron et al., 2007; Phan & Lewis, 2012). In the earliest recorded documentations of the Karen, they are described as “forest people” and are regarded highly for their knowledge and respect of nature (Barron et al., 2007). Agriculture and hunting have been the primary sources of economic activity of the Karen people in both the regions of the plains and the hills (Barron et al., 2007). In addition, the Karen are also known for their highly skilled weaving and as such, the dyeing of thread and fabric weaving by women and basket weaving by men are important activities that have contributed to their self-sufficiency in remote locations (Barron et al., 2007).

Traditional Karen communities are based on the values of cooperation, belonging and peacefulness (Barron et al., 2007). In these communities it is not uncommon for entire villages to work together to harvest the rice crop or help each other in needed activities such as replacing the roof of a house (Phan & Lewis, 2009). As well, husbands and wives often work together as partners running the household, caring for the children and working in the fields (Barron et al., 2007). Families typically live in houses made of

bamboo and wood, raised on stilts with a covered front porch intended for socializing (Barron et al., 2007).

Although the majority of Karen people identify as Theravada Buddhist, Buddhist-animist, or animist there remains a significant Christian influence within the population (Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994; Barron et al., 2007). Many Karen converted to Christianity under British colonization which saw missionaries moving into the ethnic regions of Burma with the goal of conversion and the education of minority populations (Marshall, 1922; Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994; Barron et al., 2007). Many of the Karen welcomed the presence of the British in fulfillment of a traditional foretelling which prophesied the coming of a “white brother” to return the sacred teachings previously stolen from the Karen people known as the “Lost Book” (Marshall, 1922; Lwin, 2012). Additionally, the British offered to the Karen people comfort and security from the persecution previously executed by former Burmese rulers (Marshall, 1922; Lwin, 2012). As a result of the symbolic returning of sacred teachings, now present in the Christian bible, and in response to the relationships formed between the British and the Karen, many Karen people were converted to Christianity during this period (Marshall, 1922; Lwin, 2012).

As the majority of Burma’s urban population remained Buddhist, the conversion of rural minority groups to Christianity by the colonizing British emphasized divisions within Burma’s ethnic populations, leading to distrust and the formation of allegiances (Lwin, 2012). As General Aung San sought to free Burma from the hands of the British with the aid of the Japanese, the pro-British ethnic minorities, including many Karen soldiers, were deemed traitors (Lwin, 2012). As a result of their status within the independence movement, many Karen people were massacred during this time (Lwin,

2012). Learning of the bloodshed, General Aung San attempted to reconcile with the Karen; however, much of the damage had been done and many ethnic minorities remained loyal to the British hoping for a constitution that would grant them independence from the Burmese (Lwin, 2012). The British promised the Karen, that in exchange for their allegiance, they would ensure that the Karen people were awarded an independent state free from Burma when the British withdrew (Phan & Lewis, 2009). Contradictive to this agreement, the British broke their promise, withdrew from Burma and left the Karen to struggle for independence on their own (Phan & Lewis, 2009). In 1947, when many other ethnic minorities were invited to sign the Panglong agreement, indicating their interest in working with the newly formed Burmese government in forming the Union of Myanmar, the Karen were left without a voice (Phan & Lewis, 2009; Lwin, 2012). This was the start of over sixty years of oppression, persecution and war for the Karen people.

In 1949 the Karen National Union (KNU), an armed organization at war with the newly formed Burmese government, declared the formation of the Karen Free State known as “Kawthoolei” (Smith & Allsebrooke, 1994). For the last sixty-three years, the KNU has waged war with the Burmese military, renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in attempt to gain independence and recognition of Kawthoolei as the free state of the Karen people (Lwin, 2012). Despite some early successes by the KNU, the seizure of power by Ne Win in 1962 introduced the strategy known as “Four Cuts” (Smith & Allsbroke, 1994). Under these policies the military was commanded to conduct non-stop harassment of civilians, aiming to cut off the sharing of

food, finance, intelligence and recruits, or the four main links, between citizens and the ethnic armed forces. (Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994).

In 1988, a failed democratic uprising in the urban areas of Burma, saw the movement of 10,000 activists, demonstrators and students into Karen state and KNU territory, seeking shelter and training (Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994). Although this number bolstered the KNU's position temporarily, the Burmese military responded with a sustained attack against the KNU and ultimately the Karen people. (Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994). Between January and April 1992 alone, over 4,000 casualties in KNU territory were reported (Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994). Since then, protracted conflict has raged on. Splinter groups within the KNU, including the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DBKA), have collaborated with the SPDC resulting in the massacre of thousands of civilians and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Karen villagers (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010).

Civilian reports of horrific human rights violations and demands by the SPDC, the DBKA and even within the armed branch of the KNU have been extensively documented and include such abuses ranging from the demand of food, shelter and information to the horrors of crucifixion, beating deaths, arbitrary executions, being burned alive, rape including gang rape, forced portering and slaved labour unto death, the use of women and children as land mine sweeps, the recruitment of child soldiers and amputations including penises and breasts (Thanakha Team, 2003; Phan & Lewis, 2009; TBBC, 2009; Connelly, 2010; Kenny, 2010; KWO, 2010a). The villagers living under Four Cuts policies and within war zones experience persecution, fear, intimidation and uncertainty on a daily basis and as such, hundreds of thousands have been forced to seek

safety hiding in the jungles as internally displaced persons or in refugee camps across the border in Thailand (Smith & Allsbrooke, 1994; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). The Thailand Burma Border Consortium estimates the number of IDPs moving among temporary sites in the jungles of Burma to be well over 500,000 and the number of those seeking refuge in Thai camps to be close to 150,000 (TBBC, 2011).

ETHNOGRAPHY

The day starts early among the Karen – as early as 4:30 a.m. for some farmers and mountain people. In this peaceful time before dawn, a slow, leisurely waking-up period includes the simple jobs of making a fire, brewing tea, and preparing the first rice meal of the day (Barron et al., 2007).

During my three month experience working in Mae Hong Son, Thailand and Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp I had brief glimpses into what life may have been like for Karen villagers in Burma, should their lives be free from fear and persecution. Although I did not have the experience of visiting Karen villages in Burma, I did have the opportunity to stay with two Karen families in two separate Thai villages on the Thai-Burma border. What struck me during this experience was the cooperation between the husbands and wives to care for their children, prepare the food and take care of the chores that needed to be done. In the morning, I loved the experience of waking up to low hum of village life and on October 22, 2011, I wrote in my journal,

In this village we stayed with a lovely Karen family; a mother, father and three children (boys), the daughter was studying in Mae Hong Son. This village is Christian and had about 25 houses. It was so wonderful waking up in the morning to the sound of church bells ringing, calling the villagers to church. This was soon followed by singing coming from the church and soft sweet murmurs from the family. I enjoyed so much listening to the family start their day.

Although many of the ethnic minorities living in Thailand struggle for recognized citizenship within their own country, they do have, in comparison to those from Burma, relative freedom, peace, safety and access to services such as education and employment. My visit to Karen villages helped put into perspective for me, the stark contrasts of life within a refugee camp versus the former life of freedom in a self-sustaining village in the mountains of Burma.

In the Thai Karen villages I saw communities of people caring for and helping one another, not unlike in the camps, but I also experienced a sense of individual choice and the freedom to live as one wanted, which is in complete contrast to the reality of life in the camp. Villagers have the freedom to raise animals as they please and the village was full of ducks, pigs and chickens raised freely and at the will of each individual family. Each household had yards full of vegetation; trees full of flowers and ripe fruits for sale or to give away to friends and neighbours. It was cucumber season and everywhere I went I was offered a large slice of the vegetable that had been grown in someone's yard. Children ran and played among the green vegetation growing everywhere. A keen knowledge of nature was evident and as we walked freely in the jungle around the village, the villagers pointed out interesting flora that could be eaten or used for other purposes in their daily lives.

The families I stayed with also talked about the city and their plan to make enough money to build a house outside of the village. Both families already had children studying and living in the nearest city, Mae Hong Son, and they too had plans to move there in the future. These families have the freedom to plan, hope, dream, move freely, educate their children and build a home outside the confines of their village if they choose. This representation of village life helped to clarify for me, the oppressive nature of life inside a refugee camp.



This is a Karen village in Thailand close to the Thai-Burma border. I had the opportunity to stay with a family in this village and took the photo on October 22, 2011.



The house of the Karen family I had the opportunity to stay with on the Thai-Burma border. I have been told that this is a typical style of house for Karen people living in the mountain regions and would be similar to those found in Karen villages in Burma.

PART 2. THE KAREN PEOPLE: THAILAND

The 1951 Convention regarding the Status of Refugees is the internationally recognized legal document by which a refugee is defined, their rights outlined and the legal obligations of states presented (UNHCR, 2005). The definition afforded to a refugee remains,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him [or her]self of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [or her] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2005)

If identified by this protocol, a “refugee” is entitled to many important rights and benefits, as well as assistance and protection known collectively as “international refugee protection” (UNHCR, 2005). One hundred and forty-six nations have become Party to this agreement or its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2005). Thailand is not one of them (HRW, 1998). Alternatively, Thailand has allowed displaced persons from Burma to make “temporary shelters” along its Western border for the last twenty-eight years without the status or legality accepted by the international community (Barron et al., 2007). As a non-signatory, Thailand is not bound by the obligations of refugee protection and assistance that are outlined in 1951 Convention and as such chooses to define a refugee as someone fleeing from direct fighting rather than the Convention definition which would place more emphasis on the need for protection arising out of the current political, social and economic situation in Burma (Human Rights Watch, 1998). Consequently, the lives of those seeking refuge from ongoing human rights violations in Burma is in the discretionary hands of the Royal Thai Government and is subject to change at any time.

There have been numerous large waves of ethnic refugees flood into Thailand during times of increased military offensive by the Burmese junta in Karen and other ethnic territories (Barron et al., 2007). The first large movement of Karen refugees into Thailand was January 1984 as the Burmese army, then known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), took over an important Karen military base (Barron et al., 2007). Two additional waves of refugees came in 1988 following the failed democratic protests in interior Burma and also in 1995 when the political exiles and Karen military still stationed in Karen state were attacked by SLORC and the DKBA (Barron, et al., 2007). In addition to large scale movements during increased fighting, a continuous trickle of people move into the camps on a daily basis seeking refuge from persecution and fear and in some cases, seeking better opportunities (TBBC, 2011). After almost 30 years, the refugee condition in Thailand is considered a protracted situation. The UNHCR defines this to mean;

A protracted refugee situation is one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile (cited in CIC, 2008).

There are currently nine camps dotted along the Thai-Burma border housing around 150,000 refugees, of whom 90 percent are ethnic Karen (Barron et al., 2007). Over the years, there have been many smaller encampments that have now been closed, moved or combined with other camps resulting in much larger settlements (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). The Thai government has often moved Burmese refugees from camp to camp in the attempt to both offer better protection from Burmese military attacks, and to control the flow of refugees in and out of the camp (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). The scale and density of these jungle cities or camps, is often very foreign

to the people from hill villages where a large settling would consist of a few hundred families (Barron et al., 2007; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). Today the camps range in population from 2,094 residents in Ban Mae Surin camp to 28,493 in Mae La camp (TBBC, 2011). The camps remain highly diverse with 54 languages or dialects being spoken by the occupants (Barron et al., 2007).

Thai refugee camps are bustling communities with tightly packed one or two story rambling bamboo structures built precariously on hillsides and around river banks (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). Provisions such as food rations, medical care, basic shelter and clothing are provided with the support of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), including the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) (TBBC 2011; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). Buildings within the camps consist of, among other things, houses, elementary and high schools, NGO and Community Based Organization (CBO) offices, medical clinics, labs and churches, and mosques and temples (Barron et al., 2007; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). In addition, the entrepreneurial spirit within the camps has seen small stores, beauty salons, motorbike repair shops, tea stalls and noodle restaurants spring up (James, 2011). As Thai authorities have insisted settlements are temporary, infrastructure remains basic consisting of dirt paths and impermanent buildings (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). Despite minimal infrastructure, refugee communities have set up committees to provide services in education, women's programming, youth services, justice issues and social welfare (Barron, et al., 2007). With the help of NGOs, camp committees have been able to also provide needed water and sanitation services (Barron et al., 2007).

Education remains extremely important for many refugees living in the camps. With the help of NGOs many women's organizations are able to offer nursery school programs to small children within their camp community (author interviews, 2011; Karen Women's Organization, 2011; WEAVE, 2012). Primary school is offered in all of the camps and most youth have access to a grade 10 education (Barron et al., 2007; Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). There is a significant portion of children and youth sent by their parents from inside Burma to attend school within the camp as little opportunity for education exists in their home communities (author interviews; Kenny & Kenny-Lockwood, 2010). Despite restrictions on further education and vocational training by the Thai Government, some improvement to the regulations in recent years have allowed for a small portion of youth to attend continuing education courses inside the camp and a very small number of others to opportunities outside of the camp (Phan & Lewis, 2010; Barron et al., 2007).

Further restrictions for camp residents include the inability to leave camp perimeters in order to collect fire wood or other plants from the forest, seek employment outside of the camp or grow gardens and raise animals to supplement and increase the nutritional value of the food rations provided (Barron et al., 2007). Despite the restrictions on employment, some camp residents do obtain seasonal employment on Thai farms, working for very minimal wages (Barron et al., 2007). Although this practice is tolerated in some locations, the risks remain high in that refugees could be arrested by Thai authorities and sent back to Burma (WEAVE, 2009; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). In addition to illegal farm work, some women forage for wild plants in the areas around the camps, especially for bamboo shoots, which they sell inside the camp

boundaries. The majority of paid employment positions within the camp are generally limited to medics, teachers and camp committee members (WEAVE, 2009). In recent years, with lobbying from NGOs, the Thai government has approved small scale income generation projects allowing individuals, most often women, the opportunity to apply for small scale business development in the areas of animal husbandry and the running of small shops (WEAVE, 2012). In addition, NGOs and women's organizations run economic projects in many camps that seek to capitalize on the weaving skills of many of the ethnic groups by selling their products to Thai and foreign buyers (WEAVE, 2009; KWO, 2011). These types of employment opportunities remain very minimal and many individuals are left with little to do but stay home while they wait for opportunities to arise (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). With precious few options, many families have chosen resettlement to a third country as the only durable solution available to them.

Many recent reports circulating in the media speak of significant reforms taking place inside Burma, including the release of thousands of political prisoners, the election of leader Aung Sun Sui Kyi, and 42 other National League for Democracy (NLD) party members in the recent election, ceasefire agreements with The Karen National Union and invitations to the international community to hold negotiations and talks with Burmese president Thein Sein (IRIN, 2011). In response, Thailand has announced it is considering the closure of all nine refugee camps inside its borders and is in discussion with the ruling government of Burma for the repatriation of nearly 150,000 displaced persons (IRIN, 2011). In April 2011 Thailand's National Security Council chief is quoted stating,

They [the Burmese refugees] have been in Thailand for more than 20 years and it became our burden to take care of them ... I cannot say when we will close down the camps but we intend to do it (IRIN, 2011; James, 2011).

By the end of 2012, the remaining 10,000 refugees registered and waiting for resettlement will have left Thailand (TBBC, 2011). Current restrictions by the Thai government on further refugee registration by the UNHCR, means thousands of people will remain in Thailand with no status, no hope for resettlement and a tentative future in Burma (TBBC, 2011). What will happen to the nine camps on Thailand's Western border and the people that reside in them remains to be seen.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Small paths – little more than muddy slides in monsoon season – snake between the wooden-stilted huts. Drying clothes hang from the windows and litter covers the ground (Kenny & Lockwood – Kenny, 2010, p. 221).

In the fall of 2011, I had the opportunity to visit three different refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, these being Ban Mai Nai Soi, Mae La and Umpiem Mai. Although I have many more experiences and memories of Ban Mai Nai Soi, having worked in this camp for three months, the contrasts of each camp to one another made my briefer visits to Umpiem Mai and Mae La extremely memorable in and of themselves. Each camp offered different perspectives and glimpses into the lives of the residents, determined by the geographical location of the camp, the proximity of it to larger Thai towns and cities, the access within it to trees, bamboo and other natural resources and the impact of local Thai camp operations and management.

Ban Mai Nai Soi is a northern refugee camp bordering the Kayah state and with the majority of the 11,000 residents identifying as Karenni. Although this camp was situated in the deepest jungle location of the three, it was the most strict and required official and tightly regulated access into and out of the camp. Each day I would hand over my camp pass issued by the Thai authorities with a copy of my passport photo page, and in return receive a laminated square of coloured paper to safety pin onto myself. The presence of foreign volunteers is accepted, if requested by the NGOs operating in the camps, but not entirely welcomed by Thai authorities. It was suggested that I should not take photos of the camp if Thai officials were present as they do not strive to make public images of the camps situated on their border. Not wanting to cause problems for myself

and my organization, I never photographed the entrance of the camp or the areas where Thai soldiers were present.

After being accepted into the camp and receiving the passes, our driver would drive down a very narrow and extremely rugged road, literally “hacked” out of the jungle to insure its impermanency, until we arrived at the entrance of the camp. To get to the office where we worked, the driver had to cross many rivers and at times, drive in the water, following the river until we reached another high point to climb up to a hill top packed with houses and buildings. As we bounced around in the back of the truck, our driver maneuvered around numerous dogs and chickens, motorcycles and school children sharing the road. And all the other people on the path as well, including grandma’s carrying baskets of bamboo shoots from the jungle, mothers with babies strapped to their backs and men loaded down with bamboo poles and banana tree trunks.

I found it surprising that there was so much movement in and around the camp. Always there were people walking up the steep hilly paths, on the rough jungle roads and through the river crossings and I often wondered where everyone was going. I learned that people were leaving the camp for illegal migrant work on Thai farms; or staying within camp boundaries foraging for bamboo and plants in the jungle; or walking back and forth to school and work. But even knowing this, I found it so difficult to comprehend that besides the illegal migrants, residents were not leaving the confines of the camp and all movement was happening around and around inside. In my journal on September 20, 2011 I wrote,

[The camp] is like a little village with people coming and going up the hill and down the hill. Going, going but where? The hills are very slippery from all the rain and to walk along means dodging puddles and trying not to slip. Every third house appears to be a shop, which was completely unexpected to me, selling

anything from clothes, to veggies, to pop and beer. There is even a motorcycle mechanic shop. It is like a rural little town – that people cannot leave! Cannot leave! It is so difficult to wrap my mind around that.

During my three months in Ban Mai Nai Soi I was working in one of the very few post-study opportunities offered within the camp. The majority of the students in the program have completed high school, or grade 10, but there are varying levels of education. Some students had come to the camp as small children and some had horrific stories of hiding in caves and jungle camps until it was safer to attempt a border crossing into Thailand. Alternatively some of the students in the program had just arrived from “inside.” This means they had entered the camp for the semester from Burma for the sole purpose of further education, as the small villages and IDP camps in which their families were living offered few educational opportunities. These students either live with extended family members already residing in the camp or stay in boarding programs provided by NGOs for unaccompanied students. Some of these individuals will choose to remain, unregistered, in the camp and some will return to Burma, when their studies are completed.

As the property of the school was much larger than the average space allotted to each family, the students were able to grow a garden and raise a pig for income generation. Unfortunately, although some residents were growing small plants in recycled cans, the majority of people did not have the space to, nor was the land adequate for, growing their own vegetables, fruits or chilies. Although, I did listen to a speech on refugee rights conducted in English by Thai authorities, in which the students were told that if the refugees from Burma weren't so lazy, they could grow their own chilies and stop relying on rations provided by NGOs.



Above: houses in Ban Mai Nai Soi. Below: an elementary school & a house sitting precariously on the river's edge.

I took these following photos in Ban Mai Nai Soi on October 26, 2011.



The second camp I had the opportunity to visit was Umpiem Mai. After leaving the Thai city of Mae Sot, I was driven on a winding mountain road for a couple of hours. Eventually we pulled into a rest stop to use the washroom and buy some fruit. And, because of the stop, I had expected that the trip would continue for a while more; however I was informed by the staff I was working with, that we were close enough that I could see the camp from where I was standing. I looked a bit down the highway and could faintly see a settlement of houses up on the hills in the direction they had pointed. My co-workers asked me to take a picture of them with the camp in the background and asked if I would also like a photo of me taken. I declined.

Two smaller camps were combined in 1999 to form what is now known as Umpiem Mai. The population sits at 11,000 residents with the majority identifying as Karen. Umpiem Mai is placed high up on a windy hill just off the highway near a Thai-Hmong village and on the way to local tourist destinations. Despite tree planting initiatives by the UNHCR and NGOs, Umpiem Mai feels rugged and cold compared to the enclosing comfort of Ban Mai Nai Soi's jungle location. I heard people call Umpiem Mai the USA of Thailand, because of the cold windy weather felt there.

In addition to geographical differences, I was also surprised at what appeared to be the relaxed practices for managing the coming and goings of Umpiem Mai. In complete contrast to what I had become used to over the previous months, officials responsible for the entrance to the camp didn't even look up from their TV when we simply signed in and out of the registry at the same time. After entering, we parked our truck up on a hill and walked down a small path to some community buildings where I would be conducting my interviews. Because of the openness of the location it was

possible to look out over most of the camp quite easily and I found it interesting to see the landscape dotted with not only homes, but crosses on church steeples and gold stupas on temples.

My experience in Umpiem Mai highlighted for me that although similar situations do exist within the Thai camps, there are also many differences in residents' lives based on many factors. On November 21, 2011 I wrote,

The camp is basically perched on treeless hills over a valley. You could see the whole camp because of the lack of trees. The infrastructure, houses, and schools seemed, in general, a lot more run down and in poorer condition. Again, like I felt in Ban Mai Nai Soi the first time, how can you put any thoughts, feelings and observations into words when your mind and body are in complete sensory overload? You have all the same scenes of dirty bumpy roads, dogs and chickens running around and children playing. But, the geographical location and the mix of people gave it a very different feel.



I took this photo of Umpiem Mai refugee camp and the following two photos on November 21, 2011



In my journal I wrote, "I loved seeing the kids playing soccer and just running around playing."



One of the many churches within the camp.

My final visit was to Mae La camp. Much has been written about Mae La camp as it is the largest of the nine camps on Thailand's western border with a population of approximately 28,000 people. Mae La was established in 1984 with a population of 1,000 people but due to increased military offensive in Burma and an amalgamation of many smaller camps, it has grown to its current size. Ninety-seven percent of the population identifies as Karen but there is a substantial Muslim population as well.

My first impressions of Mae La were awe at the picturesque mountain scene surrounding the camp location and shock at the sheer size of the settlement. The backdrop of Mae La camp is stunning rugged mountains covered in lush jungle. Mae La is long and thin and driving past the camp in a car takes about 5 minutes to reach the other end. The camp sits in a tight spot squeezed between the highway and a large cliff extending over the camp. I was surprised that homes backed right on to the highway, with only a wire fence for separation. Houses and buildings were rambling structures built very close together and my assessment of Mae La after my brief visit, was it simply felt packed. After my visit to Mae La on November 23, 2011 I wrote in my journal,

Mae La is huge. You drive a long side of it on the highway for a few kilometers for sure. It is also set in a very picturesque location. The back drop is rugged jungle covered mountains. There is a beautiful high spot of the camp that has houses set on a hill with a large rockface behind. Unfortunately this beautiful spot overlooks a crowded, dirty, dusty, run down camp that sits right on the highway.



A local business in Mae La camp.
I took these photos of Mae La during my visit on November 23, 2011



It happened to be “traditional clothes” day while I was in the camp. On this day students are required to wear their traditional clothes to school. I was told that on regular school days, students tend to wear more “western” clothes.

In conducting research for this project, three of the women I interviewed were from Umpiem Mai camp, two from Mae La camp and in Regina four women had lived in Mae Ra Moe camp and one woman was from Mae La Oo camp. I did not interview anyone from Ban Mai Nai Soi for two reasons. The initial reason was related to recruitment and my access to weavers living in Mae La and Umpiem Mai but not in Ban Mai Nai Soi. The second reason was related to the population of Ban Mai Nai Soi, which consists almost entirely of a population falling under the political and cultural spectrum of Karenni people. My experience in Ban Mai Nai Soi has led to me understand more fully the very unique differences in cultural clothing and traditional practices, including weaving, between Karen and Karenni people. As a result, I decided to focus my research solely with Karen women weavers in Thailand as I would also only be interviewing Karen women in Canada. To accurately capture a cultural portrayal comparing weaving in displacement and resettlement, I could not interview both Karen and Karenni women and due to my access to Karen women weavers in Canada, decided to conduct my research interviews with Karen women alone.

As a contextual setting, Ban Mai Nai Soi offered important insight into the daily activity and protracted situation for refugees from Burma on the Thai Burma border. Although I found that experiences within camps could be considered similar in many regards, what I have come to learn is each camp is unique to its location, people, governance and infrastructure. Although the women I interviewed expressed similar experiences of what it meant to be a Karen woman weaver living as a refugee in a camp on the Thai-Burma border, it must be acknowledged that there are many different experiences among the refugees from Burma. Despite the fact that the majority of

weavers are from small villages situated remotely in the mountains of Burma, the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border are also home to many urban refugees including persecuted students, professionals and former political prisoners. The camps are also used by ethnic army soldiers retiring from duty and school children crossing the border in search of educational opportunities. The mix of ethnic people, from both urban and rural areas with varying levels of formal education contributes to the unique context of each Thai refugee camp.

PART 3. THE KAREN PEOPLE: CANADA

Since the first UNHCR registration was approved by Thai authorities in 2004/2005, almost 70,000 persons from Burma have chosen to relocate to a third country (James, 2011; TBBC, 2011). This overwhelming decision to resettle is a result of frustration with the lack of opportunities, freedom and future within the confines of the camp and no foreseeable return to Burma (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). The United States alone has accepted 53,200 refugees from Burma and other significant resettlements have occurred in Australia (7,350); Norway (1,141) and Finland (1,292) (TBBC, 2011).

Canada has also played a significant role in the resettlement of refugees from Burma. After the initial resettlement of 756 refugees from Thai camps in 2006, Canada has gone on to resettle a total of 4,167 individuals or approximately 7% of the resettled refugee population (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010; TBBC, 2011). The majority of these individuals have been resettled under the Government Assisted Refugee Program and qualify for one year of basic financial and settlement support from the Canadian government (CIC, 2011a; Connelly, 2011). According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, services provided to those resettling under this program include the provision of

accommodation, clothing, food, help in finding employment or becoming self-sufficient, and other resettlement services (2011). The “other” assistance often includes English language programming, counseling services, community education and family host programs. In addition a small minority of families have been resettled under private sponsorship which often occurs through churches and community groups which in turn become responsible for the family’s financial and settlement needs for one year (Connelly, 2010). The 4,167 Karen refugees selected for resettlement in Canada have been dispersed throughout the country in the following cities: Charlottetown, St. John’s, Moncton, Hamilton, Ottawa, London, Toronto, Kitchener, Windsor, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Medicine Hat, Red Deer and Lethbridge (CIC, 2008).

Saskatchewan has also accepted a significant number of Karen refugees with settlements in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert and Moose Jaw. The resettlement of Karen people to Regina began in 2006 when 133 individuals arrived (Dietrich, 2009). Since then the number has grown to over 550 people (author interview, 2012). Upon announcing the resettlement of Karen refugees in Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada suggested that it wouldn’t be easy for the newcomers to adjust to life in Canada after so many years spent in remote jungle refugee camps (CIC, 2007a). Language barriers and the lack of affordable housing in communities close together were highlighted as challenges affecting adjustment (CIC, 2007a). Canada, and specifically the wide open prairies, is a very different context for the Karen people restarting their lives. Resettlement on the prairies means that not only are people experiencing political freedom for the first time, but also the foreignness of snow and winters of -30 Celsius (Connelly, 2010). The weather continues to be a topic of conversation and a difficult

adjustment for many refugees in Regina (author interviews). Additional information regarding the resettlement of Burmese refugees in the prairies is minimal. Although there is little data emerging from Saskatchewan with regard to the success of Karen resettlement, initial data is emerging in other areas of Canada as well as in the United States. The information suggests that although the lives of individuals are improving as many now are able to fulfill their material needs, have leisure time and are settling into the routines of North American life, many difficulties and concerns exist (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010).

One very recent study from Toronto highlighted the difficulty for Karen youth to focus on their aspirations for higher education due to responsibilities within their families that caused additional work and stress within their lives, as well as other barriers such as poor guidance in the educational system; linguistic difficulties; financial burdens and discrimination (Shakya, Guruye, Hyrie, Akbari, Malik, Htoo, Khogali, Mona, Murtaza, Alley, 2012). Additionally, a study was conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area, a location where 500 refugees from Burma have been resettled since 2007 (Jeung, Jeung, Le, Yoo, Lam, Loveman, Maung, 2011). The authors of the study found that 63% of the refugees were unemployed, seven out of ten reported having stress-related symptoms that affected their ability to work or care for their families and nearly 60% lived under the federal threshold for extreme poverty (Jeung et al., 2011). Another study conducted in north eastern United States with approximately 70 Karen refugees found the newcomers were given very little time to recover from the adjustment before being forced into employment which tended to be in low wage service sector or manufacturing jobs (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). In addition, a significant portion of individuals were

living in the most dangerous neighbourhoods known for gang, drug and prostitution activities (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010).

Although assumptions are made that the resettlement of Karen refugees to Regina has been successful (Dietrich, 2009), very little information actually exists. To obtain population data, I was required to consult a member of the Karen community. She counted every individual Karen person in Regina and arrived at the number of 552 people, highlighting 7 deaths and 8 pending births (author interviews). Although much information exists within the Karen community regarding the changes in population and the individual resettlement experiences, there is little data constructed in the broader community. Similar social situations found in the studies from outside of Saskatchewan highlight many experiences that do also exist within the local Karen population including the responsibilities placed on youth to support their families; high rates of unemployment; employment in low paying service jobs; and housing in marginalized neighbourhoods due to extremely inflated rental costs (author interviews). In addition one must consider the weather and the affect it can and does have on the local resettlement context. Further research would help to better understand the resettlement experience of the Karen population in Saskatchewan.

ETHNOGRAPHY

In early March I received a call from my Karen friend, and in very broken English she asked me to come visit her. I was initially worried that something was wrong and that she needed help, but when I received another call from her niece I learned that I was invited to share their Sunday meal with them. As I always welcome the opportunity for homemade food and visits with friends, I made my way over to their small bungalow on a busy but pretty tree-lined street in Regina, Saskatchewan.

I come from a big family and grew up living with my grandma, so I find comfort in the busyness of my Karen friends' homes, and this particular friend's house is no exception. As I sat in the living room, glancing at the movie "The Beach" playing on the TV, I enjoyed watching the comings and goings of the multiple adults and teenagers living in this modest house, not to mention the additional children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, neighbours and friends who seemed to be moving in and out through a revolving door.

The first dish shared with me was Lahpet thoke, Burmese green tea salad, which I believe was made from the packages I brought home from Thailand and that I had shared with them the previous week. I am not sure anyone else really enjoyed the dish, since I seemed to be the only one eating it. It was, as done in Burma, served with tea. Soon after this treat, we were invited to sit down at the table to eat the wonderfully prepared meal. As I sat down to my bowl of rice, I was taken back to many meals shared with my Karen friends in Thailand. I began to taste the communally shared dishes, each at a time and only a small spoonful at once, as is commonly done. My friends had prepared no less than five deliciously flavored Karen dishes. I was asked if I would like a beer, and I gladly accept the Molson Canadian handed to me. My friend's husband, through

translation, told me that he would cook a Karen style bbq for my husband and me in the city park this summer. I made a joke saying that he can do the cooking and we'll bring the beer. Everyone laughed. After we, the initial eaters, finished, the next round of visitors sat down with their bowls of rice, refilled the communal dishes, and began to eat.

My friend came to Canada in 2006 and was one of the first families to be resettled in Regina. When she first arrived she could not speak any English and found the adjustment to her new life very difficult. I know she really struggled with the decision they had made to resettle but insisted it was a better life for her children. I left Regina in 2009 and wasn't able to have much contact with her over the following two years. When I returned to Regina this year, I was surprised how much her English had improved and she seemed happy that we were now able to have a basic conversation without the need for an interpreter. I was also pleased to see that many more people had resettled in Regina and that she now had numerous extended family members living either with or near her in the city.

I think her family is doing quite well, although maybe things have not been exactly as they had envisioned for their life in Canada while living in the camp. First and foremost rent is expensive in Canada, especially in Regina with rental costs that have skyrocketed over the last five years. It has become extremely difficult to find safe rental housing in many places in Saskatchewan. To help with the cost, my friends' children not only go to high school during the week but also work six days a week at a local carwash. From what I understand, this is not uncommon among the Karen children living in Canada. As well, my friend and her extended family members have decided to live together to help save money, allowing them to pay their travel loans, and have a more

comfortable life than paying rent individually would allow. Sharing a home means that at times there are up to 10 people living in the one small house. With health concerns and little education, my friend has told me there is not much she can do. She finds it difficult staying home during the day and would like other opportunities but she isn't sure what is available to her or how she could manage to do it. Despite these difficulties, she recently told me that although things are still hard for her, she is happy to be in Canada and is excited about the prospect of becoming a Canadian citizen, hoping her English is good enough to take the exam next year.



A picture of downtown Regina taken on March 2, 2012. For many of the Karen refugees in Regina, this is the first time they have ever lived in an urban setting.

The following two photos were taken in Regina neighbourhoods with a high concentration of newcomers. They depict the typical style of homes for many Karen refugees in Regina. Both photos were taken on March 2, 2012.



CHAPTER 3

“SOMETHING BETWEEN THEM”

PART 1: HISTORY OF WEAVING AMONG THE KAREN PEOPLE

The skillful act of textile making can be traced back to ancient times, as a means of meeting the human needs of protection, clothing and decoration (Riley. 2008; Sentance & Sentance, 2009). The ethnic people of South-East Asia, including the Karen, have produced various forms of both useful and ceremonial textiles for centuries (Fraser-Lu, 1988). At one time, all Karen groups throughout Burma and Thailand were active weavers producing clothes, blankets and bags from home-grown cotton on hand-made back-strap looms (Fraser-Lu, 1988). Despite changes to the process, textile making remains an important practice for many Karen women in Burma, Thailand and, by means of resettlement, throughout the world (Fraser-Lu, 1988; Beltran-Figueroa & Rey Ty, 2011).

The process of producing textiles, from the initial step of growing cotton to the final stages of weaving, has almost entirely been the work of Karen women (Marshall, 1922). Traditionally, prior to relocation, persecution and modernization, Karen women engaged in the agricultural practice of growing cotton, including tending the plants, picking the bolls and carrying them home to be processed (Marshall, 1922). At home, the women engaged in no fewer than five steps with the cotton to eventually create a garment, blanket or bag for themselves and their families (Marshall, 1922). Traditional clothing items created from the cotton include the *hse* or a loose fitting shirt worn in various forms by men, women and children; the *ni* or women’s sarong; the *hko peu ki* or head-cloth worn by women; the *teh ku* or men’s sarong; and the *hteu* or shoulder bag (Marshall, 1922; Fraser-Lu, 1988). Although the practice of making hand-made cotton

thread has significantly decreased, for those engaged in this work, the process remains the same as was done for centuries (Fraser-Lu, 1988).

To begin the process of making yarn, the cotton must initially be whipped into cotton batting type fibers, which will be then rolled into narrow strips and eventually spun into thread on a spinning-wheel (Marshall, 1922; Fraser-Lu, 1988). The next stage is the creation of colour by dyeing the newly spun yarn (Marshall, 1922, Fraser-Lu, 1988; Sentane & Sentance, 2009). Tree bark and leaves, steeped in hot water are used to create the solid colours traditionally used by the Karen people including blue, black, red and brown (Marshall, 1922; author interviews). These colours will be used to create solid pieces of fabric for shirts, sarongs, bags and blankets, as well as for adding elaborate flower patterns to women's shirts.

Additionally some Karen women are able to make the "python pattern" or *ni mae* used on women's sarongs through a process known as *ikat* dyeing (Fraser-Lu, 1988; Sentance & Sentance, 2009, author interviews). The process of *ikat* is much like tie-dye in that threads are tightly woven around bunches of yarn at certain points (Sentance & Sentance, 2009). When the yarn is submerged in the dye, the thread resists the colour and when untied reveal undyed spaces on the yarn (Sentance & Sentane, 2009). For the Karen, this process is used in making the women's *ni* or sarong (Fraser-Lu, 1988). This practice of resist dyeing found in South-East Asia, is thought to be as old as weaving itself (Fraser-Lu, 1988). The creation of thread, the dyeing of cotton and the weaving of patterns is social and cultural knowledge passed on to young girls by their mother and other elder women in their communities and is an important part of the education involved in becoming adult women (Fraser-Lu, 1988).

Burma's policies of self-sufficiency and closure to foreign contracts, combined with the practice of wearing traditional dress have sustained the demand for hand-woven textiles internally, despite an increasingly modernized world outside the country's borders (Fraser-Lu, 1988). Although some Karen women in remote villages in Burma and in the bordering hills of Thailand, continue the traditional practices of thread making, the forced relocation of many villagers and the increased access to imported thread, have resulted in a declined usage of hand-made cotton and an increase in the use of synthetically dyed and machine made threads (Fraser-Lu, 1988).

Despite the use of new synthetic cottons, the back-strap or body-tension loom remains the instrument of choice for the Karen women in their practice of weaving. The back-strap loom has been used throughout the world for thousands of centuries and can be found in numerous geographical locations outside of South-East Asia including South and Central America and Scandinavia (Taber & Anderson, 1975). The back-strap loom relies on the tension of the body to keep the warp threads tight by using a brace that is first secured around the weavers back and onto the breast plate that sits on her lap (Fraser-Lu, 1988). The other end is attached to a stable object, such as a tree or house post (Sentance & Sentance, 2009). With her body, the weaver is able to control the tension of the weave, by moving forward and backward as required (Fraser-Lu, 1988). For the Karen, the back-strap loom is constructed of poles made from bamboo or other local woods, and as such can be easily made or remade with products found in the jungle and forests around their homes (Marshall, 1922).

Through the growing of cotton and making of clothes, the role of weaving in the life of a Karen woman has traditionally been a means of contributing to the social,

cultural and economic self-sufficiency of her community (Fraser-Lu, 1988). In addition, the creation of woven products has also acted as a form of cultural identification for the Karen people (Marshall, 1922; Fraser-Lu, 1988). The use of symbols and colour has served as a way for the Karen to distinguish themselves from other cultural groups as well as from one Karen community to another (Fraser-Lu, 1988). The traditional clothing woven and worn, not only distinguishes, for example, Pwo Karen and S'gaw Karen people from one another, but can even be a means of differentiating one village from the next (Marshall, 1922; Fraser-Lu, 1988). The Karen people have not traditionally decorated their homes, tools or other implements, leaving the expression of Karen culture through colour and design almost exclusively in the creative cotton weaving of women (Marshall, 1922). As a result of expressing cultural identity through weaving, the creation of textiles is deeply interwoven into the history of Karen women and an examination of colour, style and pattern choices can offer a means of understanding the social and cultural changes that have occurred for the Karen people.

PART 2. WEAVING AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TEXT

Fraser-Lu states that, “a study of textiles serves as a useful lens through which to view a number of important social and cultural developments in South-East Asia” (1988, p. 16). Riley also writes that the feelings evoked from textiles can be linked contextually to the historic and meaningful events that shape a person's life (2008). McCall, in her study of Hmong textile art, supports this statement when she concludes that textile can be used to understand and learn about the changes of life for the Hmong people from their traditional life in Laos, to being a refugee in Thailand and eventual resettlement in the United States (1999).

Similarly to the Karen, the Hmong of Laos villages traditionally reserved their cultural decorations to clothing created by women with designs representing cultural beliefs, important symbols, depictions of the environment and geometric patterns (McCall, 1999). As they were forced to flee their homes and settle into Thai refugee camps, the textile art of Hmong women offered a means to generate income for their families and was adapted to suit the styles and tastes of Western buyers (McCall, 1999). As the economic status of textile work increased, so did the interests of men to participate in the art form (McCall, 1999). While in the camp, both men and women participated in the making of Hmong textiles for sale outside of the camp (McCall, 1999). Resettlement to the United States has seen yet another change to the textile art of the Hmong people. With little time for textile work due to added pressure on women to meet their families essential needs of housing, food and clothing, and with little demand for hand-made textiles, the making of traditional textile art by Hmong women has been limited to the sewing of children's outfits for special New Year's celebrations (McCall, 1999). Even many of these specially created outfits will not be worn by the children who ultimately are uninterested in their Hmong traditional clothing, instead preferring to wear modern, urban and western styles (McCall, 1999). A study of Hmong textile art reveals the social and cultural changes of the people as they have transitioned through displacement, refugeeism and resettlement. Like the Hmong people in McCall's research, the textile art of Karen women is a means of understanding the social and cultural changes that have occurred in their lives beginning in their villages in Burma, to refugee camps in Thailand and eventually into cities in "safe" third countries.

The creation of stories through fabric art representing persecution, torture as well as resistance by women living in conflict zones, remains an invaluable contribution to the historical recording and the formation of memories that recall the injustices experienced throughout time and place. Women in many cultural settings and contexts have traditionally used fibers, thread and fabric as a way of expressing the social and political realities shaping their lives (Pershing, 1996). During World War I, tanks and Communist images appeared on the batik created by the Javanese (Fraser-Lu, 1988). The Montagnard people of Vietnam, whom were relocated often during the Vietnam War, would set up their back-strap looms hours after fleeing persecution and immediately begin weaving (Taber & Anderson, 1975). Among the traditional designs of flowers and animals, blankets and skirts woven by the Montagnard during the war contained designs of helicopters, soldiers, airplanes and bombs (Taber & Anderson, 1975). Similarly, during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, the traditional motifs of tribes people on hand woven rugs were replaced by Soviet vehicles and weaponry (Ware, 1990). For Chilean women living under the oppressive Pinochet regime, the creation of *arpilleras* allowed their stitched stories of persecution to reach the outside world (Agosin, 2008). The construction of these images into traditional fabric items provided the men and women living in conflict zones a means to record for future generations the war stories of their time as well as inform a wider audience of the current political and social situation they were facing. Although the creation of politicized images of war and persecution have not been recorded in Karen weaving, images such as Karen state flags – forbidden by the Burmese government within Burma – are, in the camps, now woven into traditional clothing, such as bags and head-cloths.

Despite some direct use of symbols, much of the storytelling in Karen textiles is not directly observable through imagery, as is done in other cultures who have used fabric art to express their own experiences of war and displacement. The changes to Karen weaving are more often left in the representational expressions and modifications to colour, motifs and styles used on traditional clothing as well as in new products. These changes are observable in the use of synthetic threads instead of home spun and naturally dyed cotton to make modernized clothing such as vests and short skirts as well as western products including computer bags and change purses. These reforms tell the symbolic stories of social and cultural changes of Karen weaving; some by choice, in response to access to new opportunities for creative expression; and some forced upon the Karen women, their way of life and their weaving as a result of persecution and extreme human rights abuses at the hands of the Burmese military junta.

PART 3. WEAVING AND WOMEN'S STORYTELLING

Reinharz states the three goals of feminist ethnography as: “(1) to document the lives and activities of women, (2) to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, (3) to conceptualize women's behaviour as an expression of social context” (1992, p.51). These goals highlight the participation of women in their social, economic and political worlds, value female activities that are often trivialized by men, and emphasises the importance of context in which the activities are taking place (Reinharz, 1992). By engaging in ethnographic qualitative research that examines the practice of weaving in the lives of Karen women in three stages; Burma, Thailand and Canada, I am documenting the role of weaving in the social, economic and political lives and activities of Karen women, I am exploring the meaning of weaving from their own

perspectives and I am connecting their weaving to the social contexts in which it is taking place.

Weaving has been an integral part of “women’s work” in Karen culture for centuries (Marshall, 1922; Barron, 2007). Women have traditionally used weaving to help care for the needs of themselves and their family, tell cultural stories, such as the Naw Mu Eh and the python, and as a means of creative expression (Marshall, 1922). For many Karen women, formal education has not been an option while living in Burmese villages; and instead women receive informal education on the skills of life, including weaving, from their mothers. Weaving is shared knowledge between Karen women that is passed from woman to woman; it is tradition, storytelling and education shared only by women (Fraser-Lu, 1988). As my interpreter in Umpiem Mai refugee camp expressed, “[weaving] seem like something that they can just read, some education, something between them...” (author interviews).

Outside of a few studies conducted by female researchers, the meaning of weaving for refugee women from Burma has been virtually unexplored in discourse concerned with the sixty year old civil war and the protracted refugee situation in Thailand. In approaching research within a feminist framework, it can be argued that an exploration of weaving both values women’s experience in research and examines stories which may have traditionally been ignored and suppressed (DeVault, 1997 as cited in Ball, 1999). In choosing to research Karen weaving, I chose to hear gendered stories of activities, experiences and meaning that could not have been told by men. Without a commitment to feminist research, that seeks to listen to the voices of women and document women’s lives, these stories may likely remain untold (Baker, 1998). In

conducting the research, the women I spoke to were able to discuss their social, political and economic experiences in three different contexts through a description of their weaving practices. In contextually analyzing weaving, much is revealed regarding the social and cultural transitions of the Karen women. The interest of women to discuss their weaving or “women’s work,” highlighted their interest in answering the question of “what are they for themselves” outside of their relationship to men; a point of view that is often ignored in social science research (Simmel, 1911 cited in Reinharz, 1992) In documenting the experiences of weaving for Karen women it has been my intent to attempt to make their work, and in a greater sense, their lives visible in the social contexts of Burma, Thailand and Canada.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

PART 1. MY PATH TO THIS RESEARCH

Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, ethnographic research and photography, this study explores the meaning and interpretation of weaving by Karen refugee women from Burma in the contextual frameworks of resettlement in both Thai refugee camps and Regina, Saskatchewan Canada.

My personal interest in the weaving of Karen women stems from my own social work experiences with Karen women weavers resettled in Canada and my work with Karen and Karenni refugee women in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp situated on the Thai-Burma border. My interest in weaving derived from a desire to understand the phenomena of traditional weaving by Karen women as they transitioned from life in Burma to Thai refugee camps to resettlement in third countries such as Canada, as well as my commitment to feminist and critical research pursuing human rights and social justice in the field of social work.

Working as a settlement social worker in Regina, I became exposed to both the lived experiences of newcomers as they settled in Canada, and also to the socio-political framework in which the terms of “immigrant”, “refugee” and “migrant” are framed. I often heard language commonly used to categorize new residents as “skilled vs. unskilled” and “educated vs. uneducated,” and found it one dimensional, virtually non-descript and extremely demeaning. Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s 2007 *Annual report to parliament on immigration* states, “the number of displaced people – most of them unskilled – is predicted to grow substantially as the world population increases by 2 billion people by the year 2050” (2007b, p.6). The 2010 report *The current state of*

multiculturalism in Canada and research themes in multiculturalism 2008-2010, discusses the idea of “super-diversity” dichotomizing temporary residents as either, “highly mobile globe-trotting professionals to unskilled migrant workers on repeat temporary work permits.” (CIC, 2010, p. 29-30). This view of “unskilled” migrant also positions the wives and children accompanying skilled workers to Canada, as “tag alongs” with little economic value, and subsequently with no value at all,

... that 60% figure for economic-class immigrants is very misleading. It also includes the dependents the primary immigrant brings with him—and usually it is a “him”... And a great number of the female spouses from quite a few of our source countries were pretty unlikely to work (Collins, 2010).

As I worked in the area of resettlement, I began to struggle with these social constructions around “skilled” and “unskilled” labour and the value attached to the label. When I visited the homes of Karen people, I witnessed how many skills exist among the people, including weaving, basket making, and an incredible knowledge and understanding of nature. And yet, these pieces of knowledge, become trivial in resettlement and the holders of this knowledge and skill, are classified as “unskilled displaced persons.” The skills and knowledge so many individuals bring when they come to Canada, are never explored in settlement work nor by the greater “host” community because it lacks what is considered “economic value.” In response to this dichotomy, I decided that I wanted to expose knowledge that has been ignored in resettlement. I wanted to hear the voices of women weavers and understand what this skill has meant for them and hear about the transitions their weaving has taken. I also wanted to hear their

thoughts about the future, what they want to see happen with their knowledge and skill, both as refugees and as newcomers to Canada.

For multiple reasons, including the trivializing of women's work and the extreme oppression of ethnic minorities in Burma, I could find very little discourse concerning traditional weaving practices of Karen women, much less information that considers their own perspectives. As Burma has remained closed to almost all journalism and academic research over the last sixty years of military rule, information regarding weaving comes from either early 20th century non-feminist anthropological reports on the Karen people (Marshall, 1922); literature on weaving, most of which was collected prior to the democracy crackdowns in 1988 (Fraser-Lu, 1988); or brief descriptions in pre-resettlement material designed to inform settlement agencies on Karen culture (Barron, 2007).

Minimal literature exists with regard to the benefit of weaving for income generation for Karen women living in Thai refugee camps. These reports are mostly compiled by or in participation with NGOs working with women to generate income on their weaving and the discussion is almost entirely concentrated on the occupational and economic empowerment aspects of weaving and does not consider the complex personal meanings, behaviours and interpretations of weaving in a contextual framework of culture, identity and displacement (WEAVE, 2009; KWO, 2010b).

The most detailed study I could locate specifically speaking to the weaving of refugee women from Burma, was Dudley's work on the identity of Karenni refugee women as expressed through their "traditional" clothes. In this work, Dudley provides valuable insight into the transition of what is considered "traditional" to that which is

considered “modern” as Karenni people settle into Thai refugee camps (2007). She highlights the importance of cultural dress, and subsequently traditional weaving, in the changing cultural and political identities of Karenni women (Dudley, 2007). She attributes the changes to cultural dress of Karenni women within the camps to their access to education, Christianity and modernity and how this engagement devalues traditional female clothing (Dudley, 2007). Unfortunately Dudley’s work does not extend to include resettlement and what might be considered a second wave of modernity that impacts and changes social and cultural identity for ethnic refugee women from Burma.

In addition to Dudley’s research with Karenni women, both Snyder and Humphreys discuss the participation of migrant women in craft based income generation programs in Thailand. The two authors provide dichotomous positions regarding the status of women participating in weaving programs dependent on the marketability of their products. In her exploration of empowerment, Snyder concluded that the participation of refugee women on the Thai-Burma border in NGO training programs, including vocational education in knitting, sewing and haircutting, increased the pride and self-confidence of the participants as well as challenged traditional patriarchal gendered divisions of labour (2011). In her research, she further resolved that formal education in combination with training improved the lives of some young women and provided them with opportunities other than subsistence farming as their former lives in Burma would have allowed (2011).

Alternatively, Humphreys research highlights the shortcomings of income generation programs that seek to support ethnic and migrant women in Thailand (1999). Humphreys raises concern that the craft industry, almost exclusively built on the

traditional work of women, is unsustainable due to its dependence on a volatile tourist and foreign market (1999). Further, she explores the perception of women's traditional work as "home based" and "natural" which allows for the classification of women's work as unskilled labour and results in women being paid low wages for their work (1999). She concludes that the mathematical, technical and scientific skills required to weave are not natural but both taught and learned and deserve greater attention, shifting the perception of women's work from unskilled to skilled labour (1999).

As third country resettlement for the Karen people only began in 2006, the topic is still quite new and as such, very little discourse exists. I could not find any published research regarding Karen weaving in resettlement, however I did find one unpublished student paper from the University of Utah, discussing an occupational restoration program developed through the Occupational Therapy department. The program has been designed to provide space and purpose for Karen women to continue weaving in resettlement (Stephenson, Gibson & Watson). The findings from this study indicate that although the context has changed for Karen women, from Thai refugee camps to American cities, the meaning of weaving has remained consistent through the transition (Stephenson et al.) The researchers concluded that the Karen women involved in the restoration of weaving in resettlement found participating in the program a valuable way to show and preserve their culture as well as gain a sense of empowerment through the social networks created in a communal location designed for weaving (Stephenson et al.) Despite efforts of restoration, the financial pressure of life in the United States and the lack of entrepreneurial opportunities offered through weaving was a consistent theme

offered by the participants and resulted in a dismissal of weaving by many Karen women choosing instead to engage in paid employment (Stephenson et al.).

Although I found this initial study informative with regard to the importance of weaving in the lives of Karen women, I was interested in further exploring nuances in contextual meaning that may have been missing from this research. Additionally, I wanted to conduct research in Saskatchewan, where restoration programs for weaving have not been developed, to understand whether women were interested in participating in the restoration of weaving in Canada and whether their perspectives on weaving differed from those expressed in the study from Utah.

I approached the refugee serving organization, Women's Advancement for Education for Employment (WEAVE) located on the Thai-Burma border about the possibility of completing both my graduate field placement with their organization as well as conducting thesis research with their support. WEAVE is an organization with projects that "attempt to address some of the problems faced by marginalized ethnic women and their children from Burma in the key areas of education, health, economic empowerment and self-reliance" (WEAVE, 2012). Through their projects WEAVE offers educational and economic generation programs for refugee women in camps on the Thai-Burma border. With regard to the support for research, I specifically was interested in WEAVE's help in obtaining access from Thai authorities to enter refugee camps for the purpose of collecting ethnographic data and conducting semi-structured interviews. I was also interested in the support of WEAVE to recruit participants and interpreters for the study. WEAVE accepted my proposals and I completed my field placement through the months of September 2011 to November 2011, with data collection for this study taking

place in November 2011. My field placement work took place in WEAVE's women's study program in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp, with Karen and Karenni women. I conducted five semi-structured interviews with Karen women in Umpiem Mai refugee camp and Mae La refugee camp. I visited Umpiem Mai and Mae La camp for one day each. I worked in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp, on average, three days a week for nine weeks.

As I was interested in exploring the value placed on weaving, the desire to weave among the women and the purpose for weaving in each location, the general questions that informed this research were: How and why do women weave? What aspects of weaving are important to Karen women? How does forced displacement and resettlement impact the act of weaving for Karen women?

PART 2. THE METHODS

Although I was not initially committed to completing this study within the perspective of feminist research, I eventually found comfort in the use of feminist methodologies for multiple reasons. First, feminist research is concerned with the lives of women and the telling of stories by women for women (Reinharz, 1992; Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). As I started to conduct my research, I began to understand the importance of gender in the stories that were being interpreted by the women participants, the female interpreters and me, the female researcher. Weaving is gendered, the stories that emerge from weaving are stories constructed by women, from the perspectives of women and are ultimately contextually interpreted by women. As a result, it can be proposed that the stories are also "for" women, both in the individual and in the collective.

In jointly creating the stories that emerge from this research, feminist methodologies encouraged me to further deconstruct the multiple dimensions of gender in the co-construction of story-telling (Mehrota, 2010). The interpretations of the weaving stories presented in this research are a combined result of the gendered experiences of the participants, as Burmese Karen refugee women weavers from Thai refugee camps resettling or anticipating resettlement in third countries, as a white Canadian female student visiting Thai refugee camps to collect research and as educated English speaking female Karen interpreters. To understand the multiplicity of women's lives it is important to consider the tenets of age, race, class, citizenship, education level, occupation, nationality and independence in intersection with gender (Mehrota, 2010). These intersections together support the construction of this collective narrative of weaving which concerns the lives of women and seeks to tell stories by women for women.

Secondly my choice to settle in feminist research grew out of knowing I wanted to use multiple methods, but was unsure how to "string" them together. It was important for me to conduct semi-structured interviews to hear the stories of the women weavers. I also wanted to collect contextual data through participant observation as well as take photographs to display the fabric art created by the women to both disseminate at least partial research data to the women participants who are unable to read and write and create pictures which highlight the contextual changes that the women have experienced. I found the ability to link these components together through the use of feminist methodologies. Feminist research acknowledges that multiple methods may be used and combined in a way that allows for the collection of the broadest of perspectives (Hesse-

Biber & Leckenby, 2004; Mehrota, 2010). “Feminist researchers may use multiple tools to gain access and understanding into the world around them and may in fact use multiple methods within the same study” (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999 cited in Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 209). In this way, feminist research allows for the theoretical frameworks, methodologies and methods to develop throughout the research and does not restrict the process to the early stages of the design (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004).

Finally, I am attracted to the commitment of feminist research in the struggle to improve the lives of women. “Feminism throughout history ... has always been concerned with action and social change”(Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 221). Through a commitment to social action and change, feminist research draws attention to the linkage between power and knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). This speaks to my own concern in the socially constructed view of refugee and immigrant women as “unskilled” and “uneducated.” Those women pushed to the very margins of society have very little opportunity to express their knowledge in their own way or exercise the power situated in this knowledge. I am concerned with and committed to structural change and social justice that seeks to value women’s knowledge and identifying power situated within “knowing,” and also recognizes the oppressive ignorance of dismissing women’s knowledge.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

For this study I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Karen women weavers in two contextual locations; refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border and in Regina, Saskatchewan Canada. Five women were interviewed in Thailand and 5 women in Regina. The criteria to take part in the study required the participants to be: (i) a Karen

woman (ii) currently living in or have previously lived in a refugee camp in Thailand (iii) currently practicing or previously practiced traditional back-strap loom weaving (iv) over the age of 18. As a component of the semi-structured interviews, women were asked to bring articles that they had woven to both discuss during the interview as well as for me to photograph following the interview. All of the women interviewed identified as Karen women weavers in or having previously lived in Thai refugee camps, and although many did not know their exact age, their ages ranged between approximately 30 to 60 years old.

Before beginning each interview I verbally outlined and explained the purpose for the research and the process of the interviews. This included my position on anonymity and confidentiality, which allowed the women to choose whether to use a pseudonyms or their real name in the study. This was important to me as I wanted the women to have the choice of having their name associated with the weaving art that would be displayed in photographs throughout my document. In discussing her use of pseudonyms in feminist ethnographic research with young women Skegg writes, “They were especially upset by pseudonyms, wanting to see their names with their comments in print” (1994). I wanted to leave the choice of pseudonyms up to the women I was interviewing, especially as I consider them to be fabric artists and wanted them to have their work recognized if they chose. All the women I interviewed chose to use their real names in the study.

In addition, all of the women signed consent to have their weaving photographed, their interviews audio recorded and direct quotations to be used. As well, the women agreed for me to collect ethnographic research, where applicable and the women in Thailand agreed to allow me to transport their data to Canada. Finally all of the women requested a copy of the final report. The document will be delivered to the women in

Thailand via WEAVE and hand delivered or mailed to those individuals living in Regina. The audio recordings and consent forms were for my use only and were not shared with WEAVE or any other individuals.

Thailand

The interviews in Thailand were conducted in two locations on the Thai-Burma border. Three women were interviewed in Umpiem Mai refugee camp, located 87 km south of the Thai city of Mae Sot. Two women were interviewed in Mae La refugee camp, located 57 km north of Mae Sot. All participants in both locations were recruited through WEAVE prior to the day of the interviews. The women recruited to participate in the research were all involved in WEAVE's income generation program. Female interpreters were used in both locations and also recruited through WEAVE prior to the day of the scheduled interviews. Interpreters were compensated for their work at a rate established by WEAVE.

The Umpiem Mai interviews were conducted on November 21, 2011. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length including time spent taking photographs of the women's weaving. All interviews were conducted sitting on the floor in a community building located next to the WEAVE's camp office. The location was chosen by WEAVE staff and participants were asked to attend the WEAVE office in the morning to share lunch followed by participating in interviews with myself. As part of the agreement with WEAVE, I provided funding for lunch which was prepared in the WEAVE office by staff and shared by staff, participants and myself. Due to time restrictions allocated to visitation within the camp, the three interviews were conducted consecutively over a three hour period.

The interviews in Mae La were conducted on November 23, 2011. Again the interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length including time spent taking photographs of the women's weaving. The interviews were conducted in the upstairs section of a personal home next to the WEAVE office located in the camp. All interviews were conducted at a low table sitting on the floor of the house. The location was chosen by WEAVE staff after I requested a quieter location than was initially offered located in the WEAVE office. Again, lunch was provided by me for staff and participants and served in the WEAVE office. One interview was conducted before lunch and one after, leaving time for participant observation and interaction with other women fabric artists making products in the WEAVE office.

I used an interview guide for all of the interviews but as my interviews were semi-structured, I allowed for the participants to take the interview in the directions they were interested. I used the guide during lulls in the conversation or to help direct the interview. After the initial three interviews in Umpiem Mai, I adjusted the interview guide slightly to help trigger questions that I was concerned had been missed in the initial interviews.

Canada

The interviews in Canada were conducted with 5 women in Regina, Saskatchewan between the dates of February 3 to 16, 2012. I hired a local Karen woman as an interpreter to assist with the recruitment of participants as well as conduct the interviews. The interpreter was financially compensated for her work at a rate suggested by the local settlement organization in Regina.

The participants in Regina were recruited through snowball sampling. I initially spoke to one Karen women weaver I had known from my previous work with weavers in

Regina. The woman agreed to participate in the study herself, as well as contact friends of hers that were weavers whom she thought might be interested. As interpretation was required to speak with the women, I was provided with the names of the individuals expressing initial interest and had the interpreter call them to explain the study and confirm their interest. The interpreter then set up interview dates and times with each individual participant.

In Regina, I followed the same interview guide as in Thailand for the initial set of questions with an additional section of questions regarding resettlement in Canada. Because of the additional questioning, the interviews in Regina lasted between 90 and 120 minutes which included time for taking photographs of the weaving. All the women interviewed lived in Regina and I suggested the women choose a place for the interview to take place that was most comfortable and convenient for them. All but one woman chose her own home for the interview with the remaining individual choosing the home of her friend. All the interviews were conducted on the floor of the women's homes with, in all but one interview, many people coming and going throughout the interview process.

ETHNOGRAPHY

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, I also participated in two forms of ethnographic research. I was engaged in participant observation with women while conducting interviews and it consisted of observing the "contextual setting" of the women's lives and where the activity of weaving may be or not be taking place. I received consent from the women involved in the research, to observe, particularly in Canada, where in their homes they may be weaving and how weaving fits into their

current life. The second form of participant observation was conducted without obtaining consent and was a more indirect data gathering of context with regard to life in Karen villages on the Thai-Burma border and within the refugee camps. I draw from my own experiences in Thai-Karen villages on the border, my work with Karen and Karenni women in Thai refugee camps and my experience working and visiting Karen women in Regina.

In both forms of ethnographic data collection, I used reflexive journaling as a way to record my own experiences, thoughts, interpretations and observations. After every visit to the camp, I would spend at least a half an hour making notes about the day. In addition, I also took photos to compliment my journal writings. With regard to ethnography as part of the research interviews, I took time to take notes and make recordings when I returned to my home following the interview(s). In the more indirect contextual journaling, I have drawn from the overall three month period I was working with WEAVE and living in Thailand. Parts of the indirect participant observation was collected through an active participant role, including working in WEAVE's women's study program; participating in presentations and talks in the camp; visiting camp agencies in accompaniment with co-workers and residents of the camps; and visiting Thai-Karen villages. As well, additional information was gathered as a participant observer noting the day to day life within the camps, the interactions between camp residents and Thai-authorities and the physical environment of the camps.

The ethnographic observations provided additional insight into the political, social, economic and cultural contexts which shaped my analysis of weaving. It provided me with a greater understanding of the phenomena of weaving for women in Burma,

Thailand and Canada. My ethnographical observations and descriptions are based on my own interpretations of what I saw, what I did, who I interacted with and the biased lens in which I view the world. As Van Maanen states,

...the language and models that ethnographers have available to them – the conceptual tools that precede the doing of ethnography – shape what will be seen in the field, written in the report, and read by those who purchase their texts (2004, p. 435).

My lens is informed by my work as a settlement social worker and as a social work graduate student working with refugee women from a human rights and social justice perspective. I have attempted to place my ethnographic research in the genre of feminist critical ethnography. I am situated in feminist ethnography by focusing on the lived experiences of women by looking at what may, in non-feminist literature, be considered trivial and mundane - weaving (Reinharz, 1992). In exploring the symbolic meanings of weaving in the contexts of displacement, relocation and resettlement, I am also positioned in what Van Maanen calls critical ethnography (2004).

Critical ethnographies provide another genre wherein the represented culture is located within a larger historical, political, economic, social, and symbolic context than is said to be recognized by cultural members. This pushes the writer to move beyond traditional ethnographic interests and frameworks when constructing the text (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 433).

Finally, language and the barriers of language are important factors warranting consideration in both my methods of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Although I had access to interpreters during my interviews and to a large

extent while I worked and visited the camps, I am aware that my own inability to speak Karen is a limitation to my ethnographic inquiry. As such, the participant observation data collected and presented in this research does not include a language analysis. Further, the quotations used from the semi-structured interviews have derived directly from the transcriptions and although I have bridged some disconnections in quotations with words seemingly missed to help communicate the main idea, I have chosen to make only minor alterations to the language used. Although I acknowledge that this means in many cases there are grammatical errors in the quotations, I did not want to edit what was being relayed by the interpreters into a grammatically correct version of their dialogue, as I believe this could result in quotations virtually unrecognizable from their transcribed form. In addition, although the quotations are direct responses from the participants, the interpreters dictated the responses in the third person narrative. I chose to use the quotations directly from the transcription as was stated by the interpreters and not alter the pronouns to first person view, as I wanted to edit as little as possible of what was directly transcribed from the audio recordings.

PHOTOGRAPHY

I chose to include photos in this study to allow space for the visual recording of each woman's weaving art and the unique processes, motivations and expressions which inform her work. According to Prosser & Schwartz, the use of photographic visual records can "...systematically record visual detail with emphasis on reproducing objects, events, places, signs and symbols, or behavioural interactions" (2004, p. 343). The use of photography in this document is intended to both record visually the contextual contrasts and similarities of space and time for the Karen women as they weave in one location to

another and offer the reader a richer medium to experience the art of weaving than written description alone can provide. In describing the capturing of context in ethnographic research, Crang & Cook state, “More often, perhaps, pictures are used to show some object or place that would be hard to describe vividly or concisely in words alone” (2007, p. 121). The taking of photographs allowed me, as an ethnographic researcher, an additional tool to collect rich, detailed and contextualized data for later reflection and analysis (Ball & Gilligan, 2010).

The process of taking photos of the weaving art created by the women provided me the opportunity to consider the idea of a reciprocal relationship formed between myself and the weavers linked through the production and viewing of the visual mediums of weaving and photography. Visual communication is the transmission of a message by a producer to an audience through a visual medium, ranging from the creation of fabric and clothing to film making and photography (Ball & Gilligan, 2010). The transmission of a message from one person to another creates a relationship between the producer and the audience which is mediated through the visual product (Ball & Gilligan, 2010). In this relationship, the producer creates the visual medium and the audience views the product while constructing cultural and social meaning about the medium (Ball & Gilligan, 2010).

In my research with the weavers, a reciprocal relationship of visual communication was created in that both the weavers and I assumed the roles of producer and audience at different points within the research process. When considering weaving as a communication tool, the women weavers were the producers and I the audience viewing their product to understand meaning. Alternatively when I was taking photos of

the weaving, I became the producer and the women became the initial audience, viewing the weaving on the screen of my digital camera, as well as eventually included in a broader audience, viewing the medium on paper in the dissemination of the research. Additionally, during one interview in Mae La camp the weaver and the interpreter became co-producers of the photographs and I the audience, as it was decided I should model the weaving while they took photographs. The participant suggested ways in which to place her woven scarf on me, while the interpreter operated the camera. This role reversal in producer and consumer of the photography not only opened additional opportunities for communication, it also provided a reciprocal relationship in terms of participant and researcher, as I, sitting on the opposite side of the camera, became more aware of what it felt like to be a participant in this research study.



A photo of me in Mae Law camp wearing a scarf woven by Naw Pay The photo was taken by the interpreter with the assistance of Naw Pay.

PART 3. CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS

Upon my return to Canada I transcribed the audio recordings of all the interviews conducted in Thailand. In Regina, I transcribed each interview within two days of conducting it. In listening to the audio recordings for transcription, there were times that I felt like an “outsider” in the interview process. Especially in Thailand, there were long conversations in Karen between the participant and the interpreter, which the interpreter then relayed to me as, “I can’t explain.” These moments arose when we were talking specifically about the weaving techniques for making certain patterns or the discussion of how particular designs were made. I believe the interpreters often found it difficult to explain the difficult technical aspects of weaving that used words they were unfamiliar with such as warp and weft to describe the process. I struggled with how to transcribe these moments. In the end I decided to continue the conversation simply as was relayed in English. I also considered hiring another interpreter in Canada to listen to the transcriptions and reinterpret them for me, but as I could not contact the women in the refugee camps to receive their approval of this, I decided against it.

The audio recordings also provided excellent contextual detail for me of the women’s lives that I had missed, or forgotten during the interview process. While listening to the first interviews from Thailand, I was surprised to hear the sounds of the camp picked up on the audio recordings. In Umpiem Mai it was the soft clucking of chickens walking around the interview room, with the occasional dog barking. In Mae La, the sounds were so loud that at times I had a hard time listening to the interview. I am not sure how I had missed the sounds of blaring music, of women laughing while they sewed in the WEAVE office and of helicopters flying overhead. In Canada, the sounds of

the women's house ranged from silence in the one home where we were the only three people present, to loud busy homes full of family and friends, with phones ringing and TVs playing. When listening to the audio recordings, the "busyness" of the women's lives was revealed, as the recordings exposed that the interviews were conducted amongst children running and jumping around, visitors coming and going and side conversations happening in and around the discussions we were having about weaving.

In addition, I noticed in the audio recordings, that the interviews, especially those from Regina, contained a lot of the laughter, both by the participants and by me. I felt compelled to include [laughter] in my transcription of the interviews. I have always found humour and laughter to be a way of connecting in my social work practice, and I was interested to learn much laughter could be found throughout my research processes as well. My interpretation of the laughter in the interviews is settled in the merging feelings of nervousness, excitement, and warm connection between women. In feminist methodologies the inclusion of feelings during the interview process is known as "flow" (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004),

The instances of potent and powerful connection between interviewer and respondent are in part consequences of careful listening and an openness to *feel* during the interview. Here we see the feminist researcher *present* in the oral history process, allowing herself the ability to listen to the flow of her emotions and the bonds created within the interview process (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 217).

I transcribed all the interviews from Thailand in January 2012 and began coding after I had finished transcription. I transcribed and coded each interview in Regina within two days of completing the interview and usually before the next interview took place. I reviewed each transcript and did an initial line by line coding recording of reoccurring

themes. I then reviewed the transcriptions a second time coding each interview chronologically: in Burma; in Thai refugee camps; in Canada. After forming chronological categories, I organized data into specific themes under each context. These specific themes formed the subcategories found in Chapter 6. Findings from my ethnographic data collection supplemented these findings, as did the photographs I took. The chapters providing contextual background for the lives of Karen women and subsequently their weaving are also informed by my ethnographical observations.

Interpreting the women's stories through line by line coding left me to recognize that I was actually providing a third interpretation of what weaving means for Karen women. The first chosen story was told by the participant to the interpreter, who then expressed her version of the story seen through her lens to me, with a final interpretation of the data conducted by me. When reviewing the interviews there were many unanswered questions, especially in the interviews in Thailand that I wished I could have understood better. I found that in some instances the women hinted at ideas, for example, concerns with income generation projects, but because I cannot clarify with certainty, in the end I am left interpreting what it is I think they were saying. Although I have the normal reservations regarding consistency of data that come with conducting qualitative research, I am confident that I have co-authored stories that are representative of what the women have told me and through the use of participant observation and photography have triangulated the data for reliability. Additionally, I believe my own work with the Karen people and the relationships I have formed and maintained continue to validate the credibility of the stories I have interpreted from the weavers.

In “writing up” the ethnography, I included a summary of each women’s story in Chapter 5 The Women and Their Weaving to, at the same time as highlight the uniqueness of each woman story, also form a collection of stories expressed by Karen women weavers. Ethnography, especially that positioned in a critical and feminist stance, has moved from “unreflective, closed and general” (Van Maanen, 2004, p. 430) descriptions of “cultural” sayings and doings, to a more cautious, open and complex interpretation of member sayings and doings (Geertz, 1973 as cited in Van Maanen, 2004). Although many women reported similar experiences, I chose to repeat as little as possible in the personal stories of the women and highlight the individuality of each woman’s experience. Yet at the same time as opening up individual interpretations through personal stories, I wanted to also create a contextual storyline for the Karen women weavers in how weaving symbolically represents the social and cultural contexts of village life in Burma, being a refugee in Thai refugee camps and resettlement in Canadian cities. “Feminist research walks a fine line between balancing the efforts to seek knowledge that is capable of making generalizations about women as a group and the recognition that all knowledge is socially situated” (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 214).

In the analysis of the photos taken for this project I considered the factors of content, composition and production as tools to choose the photos to include in the final document (Crang & Cook, 2007). The contextual photos of space were chosen to expose the geographical and development settings of each location with consideration to not uncover the location of homes or community spaces of the women. In selecting photographs of the weaving and weaving materials to include, I attempted to choose

photos that complemented the stories chosen to be discussed by each individual woman. The images available to be captured were based on the choice of weaving articles and items brought by the women to the interview however the composition and editing of the photos was left to my interpretation. Crang & Cook write, “Some scenes will be chosen in preference to others, the researcher’s presence is likely to contribute to what is there to ‘record’ and so on” (2007, p. 106). I too am aware that my interpretation of the data through selection and editing is inextricably present in the photographs displayed in this document.

CHAPTER 5

THE WOMEN AND THEIR WEAVING

Bway Bway was born in a village surrounded by mountains and far away from cities in Karen State. When she was fifteen years old her mother began to teach her about the work that was required of Karen women including working on the farm, growing cotton, dying thread and learning how to weave. Bway Bway was happy to begin her education as she was eager to learn everything the people of her community knew and feel a sense of belonging with the women in her village. Although her weaving education began with her mother, many other women, including friends, aunts and relatives, happily shared their knowledge with Bway Bway. With her weaving skills, Bway Bway was not only able to help her mother but eventually make clothes and other belongings for her husband and children.

Bway Bway's life was devastated in 1999 when the State Restoration Law and Order Council (SLORC) came to her village. The SLORC arrested her with her small daughter, and murdered her husband. After being released, Bway Bway fled to Mae Ra Moe refugee camp in Thailand where she lived for 10 years. When she arrived in the camp, she didn't have any of her weaving materials, but after just a few weeks, she had remade what she needed from the trees around her and was weaving once again. By weaving she could earn a little money to pay her children's school fees and buy food as well as pass idle time that presented few other opportunities.

In 2009 Bway Bway was resettled in Regina, Canada. Although she brought some items with her, Bway Bway fashioned a new loom out of a broken bed frame and other spare wood she could find using a knife her father had made in Burma. Today Bway Bway continues to weave but she is no longer making clothing for her family or items to sell, now she weaves for herself.



Two pieces of Bway Bway's loom and the knife she used to make them. The loom piece on the left was made in Thailand from the Betel Nut tree and the piece on the right was made from scrap wood in Canada. Bway Bway's father made the knife in Burma and she brought it to Canada as a memory.



The pattern from a traditional married woman's shirt. Bway Bway made this in Thailand for herself.

For generations the elders in December Paw's village had passed on their knowledge of farming, weaving and self-sufficiency to the next generation, continuing their culture and traditional ways of life. Like those before her, December Paw learned how to weave as an adolescent girl in preparation for her work as a community member, a wife and a mother. Although December Paw was able to learn the basics of cotton making, thread dying and weaving in Burma, the persecution of her people, the destruction of their livelihood and their forced displacement forever shattered her life as she knew it.

“the enemy movement a lot in the village, if they attack the village they destroy all things and burn the house and she didn't have anything for food or clothes at that time, a lot of villagers were killed by the Burmese army and also her father too ... she have to run all the time ... and she have to stay in the forest and never stay in the village ...”

December Paw fled to Thailand in 1995 at the age of twenty with her husband and two children. During her eleven years in Thailand, December Paw was moved to three different refugee camps with a final settlement in Mae La Oo camp. With her knowledge of the forest, December Paw was able to make new materials for weaving out of bamboo and earn some money by selling her weaving to friends. She also learned a lot of new modern patterns and designs in the camp as many people brought ideas back from their visits to Thai and Burmese cities.

In 2006 December Paw and her family resettled in Regina. As she was one of the first families to come to Canada for resettlement, she had very little information about what she was allowed to bring with her, and as a result, left all of her weaving materials behind. She has since remade a loom but as she is extremely busy with work and school, she no longer has very much time to weave. December Paw is very concerned that the next generation of Karen children living in Canada will not know how to weave or be able to identify with their culture by wearing traditional clothes.



December Paw made this shirt special for her move to Canada. It took her four days to weave the black base and one month to do the colourful embroidery. December Paw explained that in her village the patterns on married women's shirts were embroidered, such as this, rather than woven, as in other Karen villages.



These are women's sleeves that are traditionally worn in the winter time for warmth. December Paw explained that women's sleeves can be many colours but men's sleeves are typically made using either black or red thread.

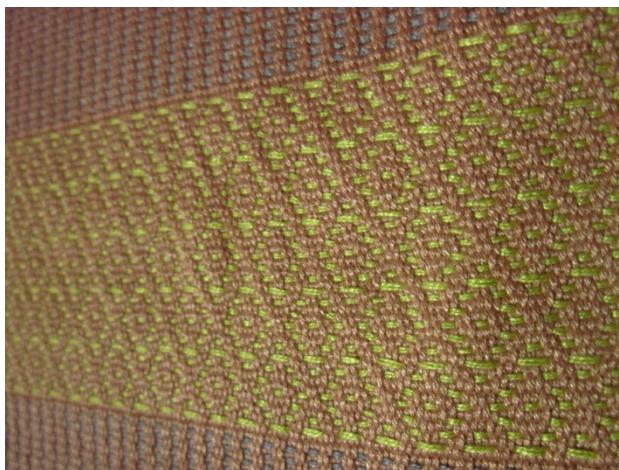
Ma Bo was born in a village near the city of Pa'an in Karen state. As her village was close to the city, Ma Bo did not have the need or the opportunity to learn to weave as a young woman. Instead of making her clothing, as the other women from more remote villages did, she simply purchased Burmese clothing in the city market. Ma Bo advised that as a child she was always interested in weaving but wasn't presented with the occasion to learn. Although some of the older women in her village knew how to weave, Ma Bo indicated that they were not interested in passing on the knowledge to the younger generation. While living in Burma Ma Bo's days were spent mostly working in the field.

In 2000 Ma Bo was forced to leave Burma and seek refuge in Thailand. She has lived in Ma La refugee camp since that time. When Ma Bo arrived in the refugee camp she decided that she wanted to learn to weave and asked her mother in law to teach her. Her mother in law happily agreed to do so and Ma Bo has now been weaving for the last 11 years. Ma Bo advised that she was motivated to learn to weave by the prospect of making money for her family and obtaining the knowledge to create something beautiful. She also expressed a deep belief that weaving is an important part of Karen culture and that the knowledge should be passed on to the next generation. Ma Bo indicated that she will teach her daughter to weave when she is old enough to learn and she also enjoys the social aspect of helping her neighbors and friends with their own weaving.

Ma Bo is involved in the weaving income generation program offered in Ma La camp. Although she is happy to make a profit from weaving, Ma Bo advised that she will continue to weave even if there is no longer a market. She explained that she will weave for the next generation and for Karen culture.



Ma Bo holding the shawl she has made for the income generation group. It took her about 3 days of “relaxed” weaving complete. She will earn 150 Baht (\$5.00 Canadian) for this.



Taken from Ma Bo’s shawl, the photo depicts the triangle pattern identified by all of the women I asked as *me kglee* (it was translated to me as: eye; owl eye; owl face). It is a very common pattern used in most Karen weaving.

Naw Day started to learn to weave in her village located in the mountains of Papun district in Karen state when she was about thirteen or fourteen years old. During that time, children in her village did not have the opportunity to go to school but Naw Day had a deep desire to learn and be educated. Because of this drive to learn, she asked her mother to teach her to weave. As Naw Day's village was very far from the city where thread could be purchased, her mother did not want to waste her precious thread on childhood mistakes. Instead, her mother taught Naw Day to weave using the bark of the boh wah boh tree. The peeled bark is string like and can be used to teach the techniques of weaving. Once Naw Day had mastered weaving with the bark, her mother allowed her the opportunity to begin weaving with thread. Over the years Naw Day continued to weave and learned many traditional patterns from her mother as well as her mother's friends.

In 1999 Naw Day was forced to leave her village in Burma and flee to Thailand. She was initially resettled in an undisclosed Thai refugee camp before moving to Umpiem Mai refugee camp in 2000 where she has lived ever since. Now that Naw Day lives in a refugee camp, she uses the patterns taught to her by her mother to make money for her family through income generation initiatives in the camp. Naw Day indicated that the traditional Karen designs she learned in Burma are now being woven to create new products such as blouses, pillows and shawls for sale outside the camp.

Naw Day believes that weaving is one part of Karen education that must be passed on. Although she has sons, who will not learn to weave, she does teach and help many of her friends and their daughters to learn. Naw Day advised that culture is very important to her and she would continue to weave even if no one wanted to buy her products as she will keep the traditions she learned from her mother and pass what she has made on to her sons and the next generation.



This piece of fabric woven by Naw Day will be cut into 4 pieces and sewn into pillowcases. It took her 7 days of fulltime work to weave and was ordered by the income generation project.



A scarf woven by Naw Day

Naw Htoo Kay grew up in the small village of Htee Moo Kee in northern Karen state. She advised her village is in the border area with Thailand. In 2008 Naw Htoo Kay's village was one of seven villages forced to relocate due to increased military control by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (Karen Human Rights Group, 2008). Naw Htoo Kay's family made the decision to seek safety in Thailand and arrived in Umpiem Mai refugee camp in 2008.

At the age of fifteen or sixteen, Naw Htoo Kay was taught to weave by two of her cousins. In her village, all women were weavers and it was important for her to learn to weave so she could make the cultural dress worn by the people of her community. She described weaving as a cultural tradition and suggested that if a person wants to be able to wear traditional clothes, they need to learn how to make it for themselves. She also highlighted that a woman's ability to weave allows her to create new styles and make whatever she wants to wear.

Although Naw Htoo Kay weaves things she likes to wear, now that she lives in Umpiem Mai refugee camp, she not only weaves for her family but for profit as well. She advised that it has become very important to her to earn money from her weaving. She described feeling good when she weaves something nice that she can sell but also having the same feeling when she weaves something for her children. She indicated that the difference between weaving for family versus weaving for profit is the creative personal choices she is able to make. When she weaves for the income generation group Naw Htoo Kay is usually filling an order and so she weaves what is already designed and has been ordered. Conversely when she is able to weave for herself and her family she can make whatever she wants and however she wants to do it.



Hsay Mo Htoo - a traditional white dress worn by unmarried Karen girls. Naw Htoo Kay made this dress to sell. She created the pattern based on her colour and design preferences.



Naw Htoo Kay made this wall hanging to fill an order from the income generation group. The pattern was made as directed but she chose the colours herself. She indicated that she wasn't very happy with the result.

Naw Pay was born in a border village near the Wa Ka River in Burma. She is not sure when she was born or how old she is but knows that she left Burma as an adult in 1984. She and her family have been living in Thailand for the last twenty-seven years. Between 1984 and 1996 Naw Pay and her family were forced to relocate many times within Thailand. Finally in 1996 they were moved to Mae La refugee camp where they continue to live today. Upon relocating to Mae La, Naw Pay decided to resume weaving seriously as she finally had stability and was living in a “*real place*.” The sense of permanence left her with a strong feeling that weaving was an important thing to do for her culture.

Although weaving is typically passed from a mother to her daughter, Naw Pay was determined to learn to weave despite the fact that her mother had left her family when she was a child. While living in her village in Burma, Naw Pay decided she was going to teach herself how to weave. With the resolve to learn, Naw Pay would go around the village to look at the other women’s weaving and then go home and copy what she saw. She explained that she didn’t have a teacher but learned how to weave by simply studying the patterns she saw. She was motivated to learn to weave by the prospect of making something beautiful that people would admire and would as a result, make her feel good.

The ability to learn and teach herself has turned Naw Pay into a very skilled weaver. As part of an income generation program in Mae La refugee camp, Naw Paw regularly creates new designs as well as updates traditional designs for new products. She also helps other women weavers in the camp and was very happy with the opportunity to teach her daughter in law how to weave. Naw Pay believes strongly in the importance of weaving in Karen culture and believes that this knowledge must be passed on to the next generation so they will know about their culture and know how to create their traditional clothes.



Naw Pay demonstrating how to weave a scarf



Naw Pay advised that it was her idea to update the traditional zigzag pattern to improve the design for new products, such as this scarf. Traditionally the pattern is only “beautiful” on one side but now she weaves both sides to be equally beautiful and functional. She explained that she likes to make modern designs that others are interested in.

Naw Poe Pee was born in Burma about 60 years ago in a village near the Thai-Burma border. She left Burma 10 years ago and has been moved around to different camps until being relocated to her current home in Umpiem Mai refugee camp.

At the ages of fifteen or sixteen, Naw Poe Pee learned to weave from her mother as part of her work within the family. She indicated that at the time it was very common for young girls to learn to weave because the people in her village made everything they needed themselves. Naw Poe Pee advised that when she was young in Burma, the ability to weave many blankets was a way in which young girls were able to show-off. Although she was never interested in creating new designs, Naw Poe Pee did learn traditional patterns and designs passed to her from her mother.

These days, while living in the refugee camp, Naw Poe Pee weaves to earn money. She explained that she could make more money doing farm work in Thai villages, but as she is becoming older, weaving is easier work physically and keeps her out of the sun. Naw Poe Pee no longer weaves intricate designs as she makes a lot of mistakes and forgets all the patterns. Instead, she now weaves solid pieces fabric that the income generation group will use to sew into other products. When Naw Poe Pee fills an order, she receives cotton which she then spins into thread, arranges on the loom and finally weaves.

Although she has taught her daughters how to weave, they find it difficult and have told her they are not interested in continuing the tradition. Naw Poe Pee also indicated that she is not concerned about the future of weaving in the next generation. However for her, weaving is what she knows and she will continue to work for herself until she is no longer able to do so.



Naw Poe Pee wove this 10 foot piece of solid fabric to fill an order from the income generation program. A weaving this size takes Naw Poe Pee 4 days to complete and she will receive 110 Thai Baht (\$3.62 Canadian) as payment.

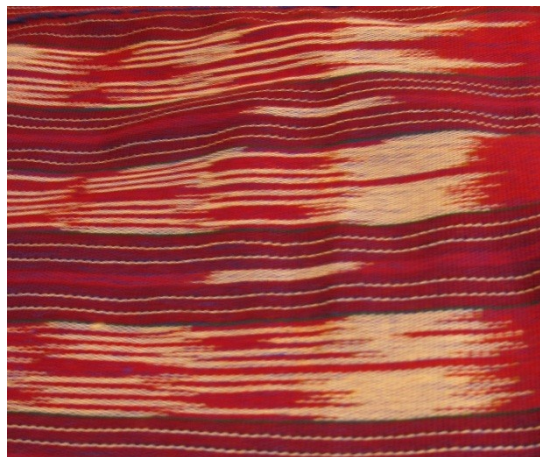
Nyo was born in a village set deep in the jungle in the mountains of Burma. Her older sister taught her how to weave when she was fifteen years old. As she did not have the opportunity to attend school, Nyo was determined to learn everything about weaving. She became an excellent weaver, learned how to grow cotton and make thread and also became skilled at a specialized thread dying process known as *ikat*. Nyo also sometimes made the four day journey to the city to buy materials that allowed her to modernize her traditional designs with bright synthetically dyed thread. When she was twenty-five, Nyo left her village in the mountains to support the Karen resistance on the Thai-Burma border. Here she learned how to sew and put her fabric skills to use by making uniforms for the Karen National Union (KNU).

In 1995, Nyo fled to the relative safety of Mae Ra Moe refugee camp in Thailand. After one month, Nyo resumed weaving after being chosen to be part of an income generation program offered by a women's organization operating in the camp. Nyo enjoyed the opportunity to weave in the camp because she was happy to be making a little bit of money for herself and her family. She was kept very busy weaving for the women's organization and had, when she left the camp, been working on an order for three hundred scarves.

When she left Thailand in 2006 for third country resettlement, Nyo had hoped that she would be able to access different employment opportunities in her new home in Canada.

Unfortunately due to health concerns and language barriers, Nyo does not feel she has many employment options in Canada. Although there is little market for weaving now, she continues to weave to have gifts for her teachers and to make scarves to donate to local charities.

"... if she can do anything else she is going to do some other thing [that] is not weaving but she can't do anything else, so she have to weave again."



Traditional *ni' mae* or ikat dye pattern. To make the ikat pattern Nyo first created the design by tying select threads with tight bindings in a way that resists the dye that it is submerged in. Once she dyed the thread and let it dry, Nyo removed the bindings and wove the thread into a sarong for herself.



A traditional woman's shirt (left) and man's shirt (right) made in bright modern colours made by Nyo in Thailand.



Nyo weaving in her home in Canada. The wool she is using was found by her friend at her job as a sorter for a local recycling company. Nyo plans to donate this scarf to a local charity thrift store.

Paw Paw learned to weave when she was thirteen years old in her mountain village in Burma. As it was an important part of belonging and being accepted by the people of her community, Paw Paw was happy to start weaving. Her mother taught her the patterns and designs that were indefinably from her village, which were different from those around.

In 2000 Paw Paw fled her mountain village for Thailand. After a difficult journey by boat and on foot, she arrived in Mae Ra Moe refugee camp. When she arrived in the camp, Paw Paw did not have anything to weave with and so instead, out of need to support her family, began making crafts out of bamboo to sell. Unfortunately, Paw Paw could not find buyers for her bamboo crafts and as such, began weaving with borrowed materials from friends in the camp after about two years.

Paw Paw came to Canada in 2008 after living in Mae Ra Moe refugee camp for eight years. When she first arrived, Paw Paw was asked to do some weaving for another Karen woman. At the time, there was a small thrust to sell Karen products at craft sales in Regina and Paw Paw made a few items for the other woman to sell. In the last four years since her resettlement in Canada, the craft sale project has stopped and Paw Paw has moved to a new house that doesn't have a place to properly secure her loom.

These days Paw Paw is no longer weaving but she expressed that she is happy with the opportunity to do other work than weaving. She advised that working outside the home, at a local carwash, gives her a sense of freedom she never felt in the camp,

“it is more free for her, when you live in the camp you cannot go out of the camp for long, you can go out only for a week or two weeks, you have to come back, it is usually for men, it isn't for women.”



This is a traditional married woman's shirt that Paw Paw made as a single woman, in preparation of getting married. She wove this shirt in her village and it has travelled with her from Burma to Thailand to Canada.



Paw Paw described the pattern as "stars"

Tho Mu left her village in Karen state Burma in 1986 to seek refuge in Thailand .While in Mae Ra Moe camp Tho Mu was a very active weaver and spent time weaving for a women's organization as well as for her friends. The majority of Tho Mu's weaving in the camp was to make a little money for her family. Although she found the strictness of weaving for the women's organization to be frustrating and difficult, Tho Mu did not have any other employment options and needed to weave in order to support her eight children.

The women's organization in Mae Ra Moe camp recruited Tho Mu to weave with them in 1999 because they were aware that she had become a skilled weaver in Burma. Tho Mu was taught the basics of weaving at the age of fourteen years old by her mother and her cousin while living in her village. Tho Mu's village was in the mountains and far from any cities, requiring the people of her community to be completely self-sufficient. From the teachings passed on to her, Tho Mu learned how to make traditional Karen bags, shirts and sarongs. In the camp, Tho Mu also made many blankets and scarves to fill orders from the women's organization.

In 2009 Tho Mu and her family resettled in Regina. Prior to her move, Tho Mu spoke on the telephone to a friend of hers already resettled in Canada. Her friend advised her not to bring any weaving materials with her as there was no adequate space to do any weaving in their new homes. As a result, Tho Mu did not bring her loom or weaving materials and to date has not decided to remake them. Tho Mu sometimes thinks weaving would be a nice way to make a living in Canada as she wouldn't have to leave the house and go out onto the cold icy streets, but she knows that she likely will not be able to sell her products. For now, Tho Mu thinks about asking her friends where she can buy the wood she needs to make a new loom, but she hasn't decided what she will do.



Tho Mu made this shirt for herself while living in Mae Ra Moe refugee camp in Thailand. She indicated that traditionally she would have used seeds from a plant found in Burma instead of the white stitches she used here. She made the change because in the camp she was not allowed to grow the plant and in the local market the seeds were sold to refugees at highly inflated prices.



This is a modern styled outfit that Tho Mu made for her daughter while living in the refugee camp. Tho Mu advised her daughter does not like it and doesn't want to wear it.

CHAPTER 6

THE FINDINGS

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Karen women weavers. All of the women had been born in Kawthoolei, or Karen state in Burma. Six women were born in remote mountain villages, 3 were born in the Thai-Burma border region and 1 woman described being born in a village situated close to the city of Pa'an. All of the women had lived in at least one refugee camp in Thailand. The average amount of time the women spent living in displaced situations within Thailand, including designated refugee camps is 13 years, with the longest stay reported at 27 years and the shortest being 3 years. The five women in Canada had all resettled within the last 6 years. One woman was among the first wave of Karen people to resettle in 2006, two women arrived in 2008 and the remaining two arrived in 2009.

During recruiting of participants I had asked that each woman participating in the research bring a couple of items they had woven to talk about and have photographed during the interview. There was a clear distinction between the woven items the women chose to discuss in Thailand versus those in Canada. All the women in Thailand brought weaving that they had made as ordered by the income generation program they worked for which consisted of non-traditional products including wall hangings, pillow cases, modern scarves and long strips of fabric made to be cut and sewn into other products. The one exception was Naw Htoo Kay who in addition to a wall hanging chose to discuss a modernized version of a traditional girl's dress that she made. Although the majority of the products chosen were designed and ordered for an outside market, many of the women in the camp were wearing some pieces of traditional clothing, such as shirts, sarongs or bags during the interview and began to incorporate a discussion of these items

when explaining handmade versus machine made products, patterns, designs and traditional clothing.

Alternatively, in Canada all of the women chose to discuss traditional clothing items that they had made for themselves and their families while living in either Burma or Thailand. These included men and women shirts and sarongs, children's clothing, winter sleeves, bags and head scarves. Many of the designs, especially those made in the camp, were considered "modern" based on the bright colours and "new" patterns and styles. All but one of the women, who wore a modernized machine made vest made in a Karen patterned weave, wore western clothes during the interview.

Because I did not clarify with the women in the interviews why they chose the specific items that they did, I can only speculate that the women in Thailand chose new products because it was the most recent work of theirs, and that I would be interested in the work they were making for income generation rather than things they had previously made for themselves and their family. I cannot be certain that the women were not encouraged by the recruiting organization to bring items to the interview that they had made for sale rather than those they had made for personal use in Burma or in the camp. One woman did express her concern that she wished she would have known I was interested in traditional weaving because she would have chosen to wear her formal traditional clothing instead of an old "plain" shirt her mother had made in Burma and a machine woven sarong.

Nine out of the 10 women I interviewed told very similar stories about learning to weave in Burma, stories of tradition, belonging and cultural identification; gendered work and self-sufficiency; and the acquisition of education and knowledge. These women all

identified as being from remote mountain villages or concealed jungle locations on the border regions between Thailand and Burma. The lone woman who did not learn to weave in Burma, grew up in a village close to an urban centre and thus had access to inexpensive Burmese clothing and worked as a paid farm labourer with little need or time to weave.

PART 1. TIDY PATTERNS: WEAVING IN BURMA

It is traditional, if you are Karen you have to know how to weave, if you don't know how to weave, it will be difficult because you wear, at that time most people they wear, most Karen people they wear traditional clothes so everyone have to know how to weave (December Paw)

FROM WOMAN TO WOMAN

In their villages in Burma, the Karen women I interviewed described learning to weave around the ages of 13 to 15 years old. All of the women had been taught through direct instruction by the women in their family and community, or by observing and studying the practice of weaving by older women. Female weaving teachers identified by the participants ranged from mothers and sisters, to aunts, cousins, neighbours and friends. Although weaving was consistently described as a solo activity that takes place alone in one's home, it was also identified as being a social activity in which knowledge was shared.

Yeah, like, they ask for her friend or aunty or relatives too, but she don't need to pay anything ... yeah, sharing, volunteering (Bway Bway)

She go and looking around [at] other weaving and she come back and weave (Naw Pay)

The women spoke of four main motivations to learn to weave and to continue weaving in their villages. The first motivating factor being that their mother's asked them to help make clothes and blankets for their families, the second as a means of following

traditional practices, expressing identity and for cultural belonging, third being the motivation to create something beautiful and the final being a desire to obtain education and to learn.

WORK & SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The nature of living in remote villages, days away from the nearest market town, requires strong agricultural and domestic self-sufficiency. The self-sufficiency demonstrated by Karen people living in Burmese villages, is a direct result of the Karen women's knowledge of agriculture, nature and textile making. Many of the women described their ability to grow cotton and to use natural resources in making fabric dyes. This knowledge was used for the purpose of weaving and textile making. The women described weaving clothes as important work for women to provide for themselves and to help their mothers weave for their family members. Some women described being asked to learn to weave by their mothers while others expressed a desire to learn to help their mothers with their domestic work.

...the parent, the mother asked her to learn it (Naw Poe Pee)

Nobody force her to weave, but she just want to learn weaving by herself because she is the older person in her family, she have to weave for her brother and sister and her mom taught her first (Tho Mu)

The women described knowing how to weave as essential knowledge in order to have one's need for clothing met. This need was a result of not having ready access to premade clothing for purchase because they lived far from urban centres and they did not have money to purchase clothing if they did visit a city on rare occasions. For the majority of families living in villages far from urban centres, every piece of clothing, as well as all items made from fabric that were used by the Karen people in their villages were woven by women.

In Burma they don't have any, they don't have a lot of western clothes. Everything they have to make themselves. They also make a long sleeve for men and women too, the blanket, the scarf, the bag, everything ... they like don't have money to buy thread ... they usually use cotton ... they make it themselves (Bway Bway)

She didn't have any western clothes, so at that time she had to weave them herself, if she didn't weave nobody weave for her (Nyo)

Based on their ability and the inaccessibility of outside material, the women all spoke of wearing only traditional clothes while they lived in their villages. They described "traditional" as a simple white dress for unmarried women, a black shirt and sarong featuring the python or "ni mae" pattern for married women and a simpler style shirt, usually red, and sarong for men.

...everyone is weaving [at] the time, they only wear like this, longyi, the traditional, yeah the traditional dress (Naw Poe Pee)

Although not all the women interviewed knew how to process cotton, as their grandmothers had likely known, many of the women had worked to grow cotton plants, processed the cotton into thread, collected natural items such as tree bark to dye the thread and eventually woven the traditional clothes of the Karen people including shirts, sarongs and bags.

Like you know, you know in Karen state, in the mountains, Karen people usually they don't have enough clothes and enough thread and they just plant cotton tree and then they just make it by themselves (Bway Bway)

She have to use the tree root, the betel nut skin and the other one is a kind of leaf, like to tie to make the colour come out (December Paw)

Learning to weave as an adolescent girl and continuing to weave as a wife and mother was a part of the daily work completed by the women I interviewed. Weaving was an activity that was tied to the home and was often done in the evening after all the

other work was finished and the rest of the family had gone to sleep. Although all the women identified weaving as solitary and personal work, the next section describes that the sharing of weaving knowledge and the act of weaving also contributed to the women's acceptance in their community as well as their recreation of Karen culture and the practice of Karen traditions.

IDENTITY, TRADITION & BELONGING

Through their interviews the women discussed ideas of work and self-sufficiency that were also closely tied to the ideas of identity, traditional practice and belonging within their villages. Many women expressed a desire to learn to weave resulted from community pressure to “pull their weight.” They expressed that knowing how to weave helped them to fit in and have people in their community look favourably upon them. Their ability to work, including weave, was an important factor in community acceptance.

When she live in her village if you don't know how to weave it the shirt, the longyi, the bag and the scarf and everything some other people will look down on you, oh this lady don't know how to do anything ... it is part of culture (Paw Paw)

Like if everyone can do it, if you can't, you do not feel good ... if your friend do it, if you can't do, people will look down on you (Bway Bway)

In her village, if you don't know how to weave, if young Karen people don't know how to weave, people will look down her, they are lazy ... they didn't do a good job (December Paw)

Despite pressure to learn to weave from their mothers and other community members, the women also voiced their desire to learn the traditional gendered work was based on wanting to continue cultural practices and wearing their traditional clothes. The women discussed themes of identity as expressed through their weaving. The ideas of both cultural identity and personal identity were discussed simultaneously when speaking

about the patterns, colours and designs they chose for their traditional garments. The patterns on the clothing they learned from their mothers and other elders, were identified as “traditionally” Karen and the signifiers of Karen cultural identification.

It’s like – something like, the parent, this is our culture, so if you want to wear this, we can just do it by ourselves, so she just learned it (Naw Htoo Kay)

[she] saw that from her parent and then she just copy her parent (Bway Bway)

The weavers expressed that the women’s elaborately woven shirts both identified and distinguished the Karen people from other ethnic groups as well as secured a unique identity for individual villages of Karen people. The women discussed that by wearing traditional Karen clothes, “outsiders” would be able to identify them as Karen people as they subsequently displayed their cultural and personal identities.

Her cousin teach her that the shirt and the scarf and the blanket and the sarong, you have to weave it because it is Karen tradition, you have to wear and if you didn’t wear and if you didn’t weave nobody would know that you are Karen and then maybe one day if you lost your culture, maybe you will lost your personal, your national too (Tho Mu)

Because of this, the weaving, other people also know that we are Karen (Ma Bo)

I think that because I am Karen, I have to wear Karen (Naw Htoo Kay)

The idea of Karen identity became nuanced in the women’s discussion of the patterns and designs known and used to each individual woman. Although each woman expressed that because she knew how to weave, she could copy any design she saw in others weavings, the women did identify designs that were specific to their regions as well as to their villages. Many women indicated that the village locale of Karen people was expressed in the patterns woven on their shirts. For example, many women highlighted the difference in Thai Karen and Burmese Karen patterns displayed on women’s shirts with the Thai style having two bands of patterns in between bands of

solid colour alternating in the middle, and the Burmese style having solid patterns through the mid-section. Some women also expressed that each village had unique patterns for the women's clothing which distinguished them from other Karen villages.

[pointing at pattern on shirt] This is for the Karen people from Thailand ... In Burma, some of the villages, they used to put more red in this part and this part too ... but in our village we use the black, more black (Nyo)

Some villages they make it very different, it is not the same, different village and different designs, the shirt is different for different villages and even the sarongs too, their own designs (Paw Paw)

It is a little bit different, it is the same clothes, it is the same, but the designs are a little bit different ... in her village she doesn't have that kind of design [woven] ... she just have this design [embroidery] (December Paw)

In further deconstructing cultural identity, the presence of individual identity and creative choice was very strongly expressed. Although women did recreate the patterns and designs taught to them by the elders in their communities all of the women interviewed confirmed that weaving was their own personal creation and they could make what they chose. For older women, who had little access to synthetic threads or modern designs, they continued to use traditional patterns passed to them from their mothers. However, the women expressed that should they have access to new brightly coloured synthetic threads and exposure to new patterns during their periodic visits to market towns, they were free to use these additions in creating Karen clothing that was personal, modernized and creatively expressive.

If she see the pattern, she just see and learn it, whatever she like, she can do it (Naw Htoo Kay)

Some people like ... people don't like the same thing, they like different things so they do whatever they want ... if you make the same colour it is not good, she just choose the colour that she like (Paw Paw)

CREATING BEAUTY

In the discussion of personal choice and identity as expressed in their clothing, many of the women articulated one of their reasons for learning to weave was a direct result of wanting to create beauty.

[She] want to do it, because she look at it [as] very beautiful, so she make it (Naw Pay)

The ideas of beauty and creation were further highlighted in the women's discussion of their pattern, design and colour choices. Many women expressed that their decisions around the patterns and colour combinations they chose to use were driven by the desire to create what they considered to be beautiful and appealing to the eye. What is considered beautiful by the weavers is ultimately tied to traditional patterns, such as the placement of specific designs in precise locations on an article of clothing. For example, it is customary of the majority of women interviewed to have a band of pillars and triangles or pagoda-type structures as the top pattern exhibited on their shirts. It was relayed that this traditional pattern was for the sake of beauty and simply looked the best in this location.

Despite their tie to traditional patterns, the women also expressed their choice to use particular colours or designs, within the formal pattern structure of their traditional clothes, was based on their own creative desire to make something beautiful. When asked how they chose specific colours or patterns on their shirts or sarongs, the women most often talked about creating what looked good to them based on what they personally liked.

She just choose, like this pattern go with this pattern, like she just choose. She like it but others might not like it, but she don't know but she like it (Naw Htoo Kay)

She weave [mostly] black, because black go with red also, black go with white or black go with anything, so for her, mostly she likes black (Naw Day)

Sometimes she just create a new design for herself too ... sometimes she just create herself, when she was weaving she try like which design is good, which one is good, then if she see the best one, she just choose to do that (Bway Bway)

The process of making something beautiful through pattern and colour choices provided the women with a space for creative self-expression. Women combined traditional patterns with new ideas that they created and used home-grown cotton with new synthetic threads to make individualized designs for their clothing. This act of weaving not only fulfilled the women's needs of self-sufficiency, identification and creative expression, it was strongly expressed that the weaving process also satisfied a desire in the women for learning and education.

A DRIVE TO LEARN

Many of the women discussed the desire to learn to weave was a direct result of wanting education. As formal schooling was either unavailable in their communities or too expensive to attend, weaving was used in fulfilling a drive to learn. Some of the women expressed that they wanted to learn anything and everything available to them, which at the time was domestic work including weaving.

Because they don't have to go to school and they have nothing, they don't learn anything so this is the only thing that they learn (Naw Day)

She just want to learn by herself because she don't go to school, so she just want to learn to weave everything (Nyo)

Some women talked about weaving as a necessary self-driven cultural education process which was tied to the importance of self-sufficiency and community belonging. Their discussion on cultural education highlighted both the excitement and motivation to learn for the sake of learning and to fit in to their community.

Nobody ask her to learn, she just want to learn by herself because everyone know how to weave and to work, so if everyone grow up they would like to learn everything (Bway Bway)

She is happy, was very enthusiastic to learn her culture because Karen people wear traditional clothes, so she like to learn about that (Paw Paw)

One participant made a strong connection between weaving and literacy. She explained that knowing each weave was like knowing a letter from the alphabet. If a person knows the individual letters of an alphabet, she could write words. The same is for weaving, if a woman knows each individual weave, she can create a pattern.

Something like this, they have the name right, ok, the name is up and three down and up, that is the name. They have their own name and another has its own name. This one they call this name or A, so A is this style, ok, so this is B, B goes with this style ... they have their own name, so they [make] the pattern, you want to make the pattern so [you make] ABC, or sometimes you make BAC, you can do it yourself ... like something they can just read ... something they know how to do but they don't know how to read (Naw Day)

For centuries, learning about weaving was part of the educational process for young Karen women living in Burma. To weave required knowledge of nature in order to collect the proper items for making a loom, growing cotton and creating dyes for colouring. It also involved learning the complicated process of weaving from setting the loom, to making basic functional fabric, to eventually creating intricate patterns. This gendered education was passed from woman to woman for the practical purpose of clothing their families as well as for community belonging and for cultural identification. It also subsequently provided women with a means for creating their own expressions of beauty and allowing for the manifestation of personal identity.

THE PRACTICE FRAYS

The practice of weaving has significantly changed as the Karen women from Burma were forced to flee their villages and seek refuge in Thailand. Many women expressed concern that a break in the passing on of knowledge, and subsequently the self-sufficiency of Karen villagers is a direct result of the human rights abuses inflicted on the Karen people by Burma's military regime.

Most of the older people, they used to plant the cotton to make the thread, because they don't usually [go] to the city to buy the thread, they also don't have money too ... she don't know how to make for herself but she has seen [from] her grandparent ... at that time the enemy were movement a lot in her village, ... whenever the enemy, the Burmese army attack the village, most of the time they burn the house and destroy things and kill people ... she have to run, she try to escape (December Paw)

Yeah, like because over there you always have to run, you don't have peace, if there is peace we can do it ourselves and then we will wear it (Naw Htoo Kay)

Destruction and relocation have severed ties to the agricultural, domestic and community work previously practiced by the Karen villagers. Forced displacement and persecution have irreversibly disrupted the traditional practices, cultural identity and belonging that have held together Karen communities for centuries. As oppression to livelihood, cultural identity and freedom has eternally altered the story of the Karen people of Burma, so too has the weaving of the Karen women been forever changed. The story of the weaving by Karen women offers a symbolic representation of the experiences of Karen people as they attempt to transition and rebuild their lives from Burma to Thailand to Canada.

PART 2. FRAYING ENDS: WEAVING IN THAILAND

The weaving for Burma and refugee camp is very different, because in Burma she usually weave for her family and she don't weave to sell that and in the camp she usually weave to sell that, make some money for her family (Tho Mu)

REMAKING

All the women I interviewed had, at one point over the last 27 years, fled to Thailand from their villages in Burma to seek safety from persecution, torture and death. The oppression of Karen people forced families to run and hide in the jungle, leaving behind everything but what could be carried for their immediate survival. Despite the loss of the majority of their possessions, including their weaving materials, all of the women interviewed began to weave again as they settled and rebuilt their lives in Thailand. The women's knowledge of nature and their ability to construct by hand what they needed, including shelters, cooking utensils and looms, out of bamboo and other resources found in the jungle, provided them with the tools to survive in displacement.

She didn't bring anything with her when she came in the refugee camp because she have a tree, bamboo, she can make everything there (Bway Bway)

She cannot take anything with her but wherever she live or stay ... she can, if she have tree or bamboo, she can do what she want ... because you have to do that because you have to weave your clothes (December Paw)

For some women, weaving was necessary for survival and was taken up within weeks of settling in camps. These women expressed the immediate need to weave was both for the purposes of clothing their families as well as earning income to meet the additional needs of their children. For other women, a return to weaving came after a sense of permanency was felt, sometimes many years after fleeing Burma. Many women described their ability to begin weaving again was tied to their connection to other Karen women. This reliance was directly related to access to materials, as to begin weaving

meant the need to borrow thread from others. Some women found this support in friendships formed in their new communities while others received help from women's organizations and income generation programs operating within the camps.

She didn't take anything with her, she just make in the refugee camp ... probably the same month when she arrive in the camp, the women's organization also choose a woman who, choose the people who know how to weave ... so she also start to weave at that time with Karen organization (Nyo)

When she arrived in the camp, she didn't know anyone weaving, she didn't have any friend, so if you didn't have any material you couldn't do anything, after two year she knew some friends in the camp so she just got some material from her friend and then start to weave (Paw Paw)

Despite access to thread sourced from outside the camp, some women described a lack of resources to continue making traditional products the way they once would have made them in their villages. Much of the diminishing of resources for weaving was directly related to the restriction by Thai authorities on the agricultural practices of refugees. The inability to grow cotton and process their own thread which resulted in a reliance on synthetically dyed fibres, and a lack of "Buh" seeds to decorate women's shirts, were all directly related to limitations placed on their livelihood in the camps.

If you live in Karen state in Burma we can plant the seed, we have lots of seeds, but when we came to Thailand, to refugee camps, we cannot plant the seed (Tho Mu)

The complete disruption of life and forced changes to livelihood experienced by the Karen people have had significant effect on the lives of Karen women and subsequently their practice of weaving. Due to connection to a market economy, a need for survival and through exposure to urbanization, the purposes and meaning for weaving has drastically changed over the 30 year period of displacement for the Karen women.

CHANGE TO PURPOSE AND MEANING

Market & Income Generation

Although all the women interviewed eventually returned to weaving, the complete severance from livelihood and community life as experienced in Burma due to forced displacement and administrative restrictions within the Thai camps resulted in changes to the women's motivation to and purposes for weaving. The elements of self-sufficiency afforded to Karen women through weaving as experienced in Burma, began to evolve into a means of survival dependent on marketability and profit, rather than a means of providing clothing for their families.

She is weaving because she [can] earn a living from weaving, so she is weaving (Naw Poe Pee)

For many women weaving became a means to make a small amount of money to care for their family. Although basic rations are provided by the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) in Thai refugee camps, any supplementary items such as vegetables, meat, clothing and school supplies are luxuries left to individuals to obtain themselves if possible. The sale of their weaving allowed women flexibility to provide these additional amenities for themselves and their families.

When she arrived in the refugee camp, [after] about 2-3 weeks she start to weave again ... when she live in refugee camp she have nothing to do, she is not educated people, she just only know how to weave, and so she just, so if some people ask her to weave something for them she just do it, if she get a little bit of money she just pay for her children's school and her food and everything (Bway Bway)

Although some of the women earned an income by weaving on their own for friends and neighbours, many women participated in income generation programs offered through Karen organizations and other NGOs operating both inside and outside of the

camps. Weavers are often recruited by the NGOs, through networks of women in the community, if they are known for their weaving skills. Additionally, other women weavers approach organizations to receive training and employment opportunities. The organizations have access to an external market outside of the camps, and as such much of the woven work from the income generation programs is destined for sale in Thai towns. As a considerable amount of the weaving made in the camp is sold in tourist markets and the majority of those purchasing the products in Thailand were not Karen people, a market for non-traditional products emerged. Many women turned the use of their traditional skills and knowledge of pattern design to making westernized products such as pillow cases and table cloths. Much of the redirection in product development was directed by the organizations leading the income generation programs and women received training on how to use their traditional designs to make new items.

She make different kind of thing in [the camp], because she said it is not for her family, so she just make cartoon clothes ... for cartoon, and the table cloth and the scarf, new scarf, new design, like the cloth, like the flags (Tho Mu)

Long time we have it, this pattern, and then now days [we] go back and do this, and then when people coming and see, ok I like this pattern, they order it to have it on anything like ... a blouse or pillow or shawl and then they use (Naw Day)

The access to profit through income generation in the refugee camp provided one participant with the opportunity to learn to weave. She explained that although she was interested in weaving, she did not have an opportunity to learn in Burma. While in the camp she had both time and resources and decided to learn to weave as a means of receiving traditional Karen education and to earn money to care for her family.

She want to learn because she interested and because she want to get this education from her mother in law ... when she weave it, she sell and get money and feed her family also (Ma Bo)

Although all the women interviewed expressed happiness at being able to sell their products for income to help support their families, there were concerns raised and discussion regarding the strictness of working for income generation through an organization. Women talked about working fulltime and long hours to complete orders for the organizations they worked for. Some women discussed the physical difficulty of sitting for so long, but found it easier than doing illegal field work on Thai farms.

One woman raised concern about the difficulty of making large items, such as blankets. She advised that the organization she worked for was very strict about size and she found it physically difficult to make the exact size they wanted every time, even though she tried her best. She indicated that if she was off by 1 cm, they would pay her less money. Other women advised that if their products did not meet the standards set by the organizations they worked for, they made less money, had to redo the order or simply not be able to receive payment for it. Some women also discussed that filling orders for the women's organizations contributed to stress and worry for them regarding the cleanliness and neatness required for the sale of their products.

She have to do it very neat, and very nice and very clean, if she didn't do that very clean, the women's organization won't buy that ... the women's organization told her that she cannot eat when she was weaving or she could not drink, she cannot do, she cannot touch anything when she was weaving ... if something not nice, they won't buy that (Tho Mu)

If for yourself you can do anyhow, this one she worry oh if not pretty she may not sell it also she worry about it ... because if you weave it, [it] also have to be nice, have to look clean, only then people will look [at] it and like it, you have to sell it (Naw Day)

In discussing personal creativity while weaving for the income generation programs one woman expressed an ability to create new designs and use these in the products she created. Many more women expressed little freedom in the pattern or

product design available to them, with personal choice delegated to colour preferences. However, these choices were also based on what thread colours were provided to the women by the group. Most women discussed weaving to simply “fill orders” and wove what was ordered by the group for sale outside of the camp. Patterns were designed by the organization or trainers within the organization, taught to the weavers and subsequently replicated by the weavers on the products ordered.

If the trainer, if the group will ask [her to] do this, do this, she will do it, if this is the order, she just do it, but the colour, she just decides herself (Naw Htoo Kay)

Some women discussed their unhappiness with the work offered by the organizations they worked for. Despite their unhappiness, the women discussed that their lack of formal education, and their inability to leave the camp for outside work, left them with few options. If the women wanted to earn some income for their families, they often had to swallow their concerns and fill orders as they received them.

She was not happy to do that sometimes but she have no choice [because] she have no way to do nothing [else]. If she weave for them, she will get a little money but if she didn't do anything she won't get any money, so she have to do that ... she was not happy [but] she have to keep it in her heart (Tho Mu)

Furthermore, a focus on weaving for profit provided less time for the women to weave clothing for their families. Stepping into the market economy transformed weaving from part-time work that women fit in at the end of their work day, to a fulltime activity that sought to meet market demands. Women discussed a direct correlation to participating in paid labour and a change in the clothing that their families wore. As the women began to weave non-traditional products for sale outside of the camp, their families progressively wore less traditional clothing. The traditional clothing of the Karen people begin to be replaced, initially by the young and eventually by the older

individuals, with modern takes on Karen clothing and western styled items including T-shirts and sweaters. Although a transition in clothing from traditional to modern is not unique to the Karen people, forced displacement, resulting in exposure and reliance on the market economy and urbanization, expedited the course of this transition for many of the Karen refugees in the largely westernized country of Thailand.

Going Modern

All of the women highlighted the idea of modernity in their interviews. This idea was most often expressed by discussing that the transformation in the purpose for weaving from personal in Burma to economic in Thailand, coupled with exposure to the modernity of Burmese and Thai urban culture, resulted in a dismissal of Karen traditional clothing by many Karen people. The desire of their children to own clothing that they considered modern often left the women seeking to earn money to purchase T-shirts and westernized clothing, rather than making traditional outfits.

Like before people they have never seen the western clothes so they usually wear Karen traditional clothes, they just make it themselves and wear it, but now you know, most young people, they have seen a lot of things, so they just want the modern (Tho Mu)

You know, at that time, most of the people used to wear Karen traditional clothes, but some of them because they have been to the city and they seen a lot of thing different, they used to buy western clothes (December Paw)

Last time they wear [traditional clothing] but now here they [are] sneaking and wear others too (Naw Day)

Some women discussed that the transformation in clothing choice was not only related to exposure to the urban settings and ideas of modernity but was also based on what was considered easiest. For women who had been tasked with the time consuming

work of making clothing for their entire families in Burma, purchasing cheap western clothing in the camp was seen as favorable to having to weave the items themselves.

Now days we wear the easier, we wear this you see [T-shirt], more than we wear Karen clothes or Karen shirt because it is easier, we just buy it and we just wear it (Naw Htoo Kay)

For some people [it is] easier for them to wear western clothes (Nyo)

Most of the young people now they like to wear western clothes, [it is] easier for them (Bway Bway)

The women in Thailand discussed that although their children desired to wear western clothes, traditional clothes were still worn in combination with the new items. Should their children wear traditional Karen clothing in the camp, they preferred for it to be in styles featuring modern designs and new colours.

Most young people like new designs, if you make old designs as before, they won't wear it (December Paw)

As the majority of weaving in the camp is done with purchased synthetically dyed thread, the women's access to many new colours in large quantities increased substantially from when they lived in their remote villages in Burma. This access to brightly coloured thread allowed the women to create traditional clothing in what was considered modern colours and designs. The women indicated that many of these designs came from the urban centres and people in the camp were able to copy the new patterns they saw.

Many designs she have learned [from] those who live in the city, [they] just create a lot of thing ... they just made it by machine, but it is still Karen clothes and shirt, they just make different kind of thing, like if you are educated people you have to wear the shirt or suit or something like that, but many many different kind of thing, you know in the camp, people in the camp, if they seen that, they will copy for that (December Paw)

The women also discussed that in addition to the modernizing of youth clothing; strict traditional clothing practices for men and women were also being altered by ideas of modernity within the camp. Changes to traditional clothing directly affected previously strict practices of social organization constructed through the type of clothing worn by particular members of Karen society. The changes to women's clothing were expressed as the most notable change to traditional clothing and have left the marital status of women subjective.

Traditional colour is black ... when you are already married you wear black ... but now day people use [any] design or any colour ... they don't see young or old, married or single, now day young people also want to wear black, they just wear it (Naw Day)

Like an old parent, the old parent, the grandparent, they usually use the clothes, it is not the same as this generation, the old people they never wear like this, like if you are married, you have to wear the shirt like this, and people will know you are married, and if you are single different, but now they usually wear very similar so people don't know if they are married or if they are single ... (December Paw)

The modernization of Karen clothing was attributed to both exposures to urban culture and a desire to make new and modern designs. Although women found it easier to buy western clothing for their children then engage in the time consuming practice of making the clothing needed, women did continue to make items for themselves and their families to wear. For the women participating in income generation programs, personal weaving was done in between filling orders for the groups. These women discussed that at times, the requirements of the organization resulted in feelings of stress and worry due to the strictness in quality and quantity demanded. Despite their concerns, these women also discussed feelings of fulfillment and happiness at the sale of their weaving and the time filling nature of the work. The women not involved in formal income generation

projects, were also able to make some money weaving items for friends and family and found weaving to be a natural way pass time as they waited inside the confines of the refugee camp for change in Burma or resettlement to a third country.

Filling time

Because we have nothing to do, we weave (Naw Poe Pee)

Waiting is inarguably the greatest passer of time in the Thai refugee camps. With few employment opportunities and almost no agricultural work, there is often very little for people to do. The provision of rations coupled with the restrictions by Thai authorities on the raising of animals, growing of rice and plants and foraging in the jungle, left the women accustomed to agricultural work with much idle time. All the women interviewed indicated that they had not had formal education and thus had few opportunities for work inside the camp setting. For many of the women interviewed, weaving in the camp became a significant way to keep one's self busy while creating something beautiful for a small profit. As the importance of weaving was recognized in the income generation programs and in each individual woman's life, weaving shifted from the additional part-time work they attempted to fit into their lives while in Burma to significant time filling work in Thailand. For many women the time that had previously been spent in agricultural work was turned into time spent on weaving. Without weaving, women's options for work outside of her family's demands were minimal. In this way, weaving also provided space for the women to have personal time and do something for herself away from the work of caring for her family.

If you compare Burma and the refugee camp it is different, in Burma she have to work in the field the whole day, 7 days a week, and they didn't have much time there, they just do when they have time, like after work, but when they came to the camp they don't have to do anything, like some people if they know how to

weave they can weave but some people if they don't know how to weave they just stay at home and look after their children (Nyo)

When she live in the refugee camp in Thailand, she have more time because she receive yellow bean, fish paste and the chili and the rice from TBBC and she just have to [get] some extra thing, like meat or something, and so she have more time for weaving (December Paw)

Because [she] live in the camp, [she] cannot go out, go outside, they stay in the house, if they visit house by house, it waste time, so [she] stay in the house and make it, weaving, it is beneficial for her (Ma Bo)

With the skill of weaving, women had the opportunity to spend their time in a creative way that was felt to be productive, useful and fulfilling. Through weaving, the women interviewed found a way to pass time with purpose and enjoyment in the waiting game of life inside a refugee camp. Despite the fact that weaving was identified as important in the lives of the women interviewed, not all women felt that weaving should be passed on or continued in the lives of the next generation of Karen women.

THE FUTURE OF WEAVING?

Although some women strongly believed that weaving needs to be continued into the next generation for cultural identification and knowledge, a severance in the “passing on” of this traditional practice was discussed by many of the women. The subject of passing on the knowledge of weaving garnered a wide spectrum of perspectives, with some women feeling very strongly that weaving must be continued for cultural preservation and self-sufficiency, while others did not see any real benefit in continuing the practice. This idea becomes further nuanced as women resettled in Canada and will be discussed in the next section.

With regard to the discussion from the context of the life in the refugee camp, some women discussed that the traditional knowledge of weaving as well as an

understanding of Karen cultural practices were essential elements in the education of Karen youth. In the camps many were interested in continuing to pass on this knowledge to the next generation of children and to newly arrived women to the Thai camps. It was discussed that weaving was not only a tool for cultural preservation but also a means of survival and self-sufficiency.

It is important to keep our culture, that is one thing and the second thing is if no one comes to sell clothes, we can make it ourselves and wear it ... keeping our culture and weaving is important because if our generation cannot weave it, our culture may be lost, a part of our culture will be lost ... better thing is teaching our children and our generation to know about our culture, to know about clothes, longyi and bag (Naw Pay)

She want to teach her daughter and her neighbour to get it, and so to be generational, passed by a generation so that weaving is not lost ... it is important to weave, [they] can make a cloth and longyi and sometimes [if] they don't have money they [can] weave by themselves, to make a beautiful dress, yes, it is like that (Ma Bo)

Alternatively some women, although they did express minor concern that the traditional practice may be lost, indicated that weaving could only be passed on if someone was interested in learning and could not be forced upon the next generation. Further, some women indicated they were not interested in fulfilling the task of passing on the traditional knowledge of weaving and felt they were already tired of the work.

If they want, up to them, if they want, we can teach them, if they don't want, she cannot do anything ... she don't worry, not worried ... if we have clothes that is ok (Naw Htoo Kay)

It is up to the person, if they want to learn, then they can learn, if they don't want to learn, you cannot force ... she don't worry, for her it is ok already, for her enough (Naw Poe Pee)

For other women, the act of weaving was not tiring in the least and instead they felt an internal drive to weave. These women discussed their love for weaving and the

value of weaving for Karen people based on their ability to generate income, keep their culture and provide for their basic need of clothing should they require to do so in the future. For these individuals, weaving was an extremely important part of their cultural and personal identity, of which they hoped to pass on to the next generation.

She didn't want to stop it, because it feeling something like, want to weave, want to weave, want to weave ... [If] no one buys [it] she wants to continue weaving ... she want to keep it if somebody doesn't like it, [because] some may like [it] later on and they will come buy it and also if they don't buy, she will keep it for the generation (Ma Bo)

She love weaving and is interested in it and want her generation to also be like her (Naw Pay)

Although these women express a strong commitment to weaving for the next generation, as the women living in the camps began to consider the possibility of resettlement and as other women resettled in Canada, the perspectives regarding the purpose, meaning and ability to weave became less and less cohesive. In discussion of weaving in Burma, women consistently agreed upon the practice of weaving as a traditional practice for cultural and personal identification and in fulfillment for the need of clothing. As women moved into refugee camps and rebuilt their lives in areas with modern and urban influences, the unified purpose for weaving, evolved into a means of generating income for themselves and their families. While in the camps the women highlighted that the need to wear traditional clothing became less important to Karen people and the value of weaving began to diminish for some women. The story of weaving for Karen women becomes further unravelled and less interconnected as women discuss the role of weaving in their new lives in Canada.

PART 3. UNRAVELLED: WEAVING IN CANADA

In Burma is better than here, you know, even if you, when she live in Burma, she don't do anything for any other people, she just do her work, so if she have time she make it for one hour or two hour, she can make it, if she want to relax, she can relax, but here she have no time, she have to go to work and be on time, like you know, just in her work, for 8 hours, she just have break for lunch is for 30 minutes ... so it was difficult for her, if she have time she just weave, it is different ...
(December Paw)

ANTICIPATING RESETTLEMENT

It has been six years since the first wave of Karen refugees were resettled in Canada. The experience for the initial group of individuals to arrive would have been a daunting journey into the complete unknown requiring extreme courage. The choice by each subsequent individual to resettle themselves and their families, although afforded with new information from friends and family already relocated, endures elements of the “unknown” and requires great strength, trust and perseverance. The anticipation of being accepted in their new home country, by their new government and their new community, must cause enormous stress and worry over all matters that need to be considered, including the basic decisions of what to bring to Canada and what should be left behind. Although all those accepted for resettlement are given basic “training” on what to expect in their new lives, the practicalities of their current life, such as the practice of weaving, are not considered nor discussed during the information sessions. To fill in this gap, people ask their friends and neighbours for information, and knowledge, based on experience or best guesses, is created and passed on. The lack of official information on what can be brought out of the camp into Thailand and on to Canada results in a feeling of “knowing nothing” and in the choice by some Karen women to leave behind their weaving materials.

She is the first group to come to Canada, they don't know anything, some people scare her like you cannot bring the wool or anything special like that (December Paw)

She know nothing ...she want to take with her but [only] if the government allow it (Ma Bo)

For other women, despite receiving similar types of information, the choice of what to bring to the third country conclusively includes their weaving. This feeling was expressed by both women who had resettled in more recent years and women waiting for resettlement living in the refugee camps. The choice of whether or not to bring the materials for weaving was based on what the women had learned from friends and family already resettled in third countries. Women living in the camps were aware that the purpose for weaving in the new countries was likely very different than what they were accustomed to in the camps. They had received information regarding the lack of physical space for weaving and the inability to generate sustainable income from the sale of their products. The choice to bring weaving materials was then based on whether the woman valued the ability to weave for herself or whether she did not feel it valuable without the ability to make profit.

Her plan is that she can weave in the third country. She will weave for her family but to sell, it is difficult for her in the third country ... she want to want to take her material things so when she go, she live in third country, if she have time she will weave and at Christmas time or New Years, she will give it to her teacher or neighbour (Naw Pay)

Nobody tell her to bring the material, she just like did it by herself, because she wanted, she think if she arrive here, she might get an opportunity to do something for herself if she like (Bway Bway)

She think about weaving, but before she came here she call, she make a phone call to her friend here and she ask, is anybody weaving there? Nobody weaving here because they don't have the wall to [secure the loom] ...her friend told her

that she didn't weave anymore, so she didn't bring anything with her so she can't do anything (Tho Mu)

Alternatively, a conscious choice not to bring weaving material was also discussed, as some women had anticipated and even hoped for different employment opportunities in their new country. Women discussed their excitement prior to resettlement at the possibilities of working in occupations of their choosing. In Thailand weaving was the only choice available to many women seeking to generate income for their families and the anticipation for other alternatives was great for many of the women interviewed. One participant discussed her choice not to bring her weaving to Canada as she hoped to do anything else possible. She further expressed her sadness at having to return to weaving to pass time, after realizing she was not physically able to participate in the paid workforce.

If she can do anything else she is going to do some other thing, not weaving, but she can't do anything so she have to weave again because her health is not good. She would like to work in cleaning, because she is not educated people, she would like to work at cleaning or car wash or something like that (Nyo)

As the importance of weaving for Karen women weavers begins to splinter into individual perspectives in the anticipation of resettlement, the act of weaving in resettlement becomes further individualized as the essence of Karen is dissolved in the greater Canadian experience involving outside paid employment, adaptation to climate and generational splits in cultural identification. Contextually, resettlement to third countries continues to evolve the entwining of meaning and purpose in the story of Karen weaving.

THE STORIES COME UNDONE

Remaking Weaving in Canada

Three out of the five women resettled in Canada, did not bring any of the materials required for weaving with them. Alternatively, two women indicated that they brought some items with them with one woman explaining that she chose to bring the most important pieces of her loom with her as she anticipated being able to remake the remaining pieces in Canada. Out of the five women, four have completely remade their looms and have done some weaving in Canada. One woman has not remade any materials and has not been weaving since she resettled.

She brought some material when she arrived here, she made some here too (Paw Paw)

For the women remaking their looms, much resourcefulness and many techniques were used to acquire the items they needed. Some women purchased wood from the store and either constructed the material themselves or received help from Canadian friends. Other women created resources out of material found and repurposed. One participant created all the pieces she needed from reclaimed wood through the reshaping of the pieces by hand with a knife she brought from Burma. Although the knowledge of nature necessary in remaking the products needed for weaving is not comparable to the experience of the women while in Burma and Thailand, the wisdom required to reconstruct their traditional items in Canada speaks to the resourcefulness and creativity of the Karen weavers.

She just brought some material from Thailand ... and then some of the other material she just make it here ...she saw the wood ... like if she see something, you know like the bed [frame] ... yeah the bed frame is broken, so she just used it (Bway Bway)

She just went to the wood shop and she just buy it and make it, and for the whole, you know the one that is very long, to set up, she asked one of the Canadian ladies ... to make the hole for her (December Paw)

Although the majority of participants did not arrive in Canada with their weaving materials, some of the women indicated that they were motivated to remake their looms and begin weaving again because a small market emerged in Regina. This market was started with the support of Canadian volunteers and interested Karen women and involved selling traditional products at local craft fairs. For some, they were encouraged by a friend to make some articles for sale in this outside market. These women advised that this market is now very minimal, as they no longer attend craft fairs to sell their products and the remaining market is almost entirely based on orders within the Karen community for traditional items created for special occasions or for gifts.

When she has been in Canada for almost a year she start to weave again because some friend asked her to weave for her, for them (Nyo)

As the initial participation in the craft market for the sale of their products diminished, the practice of weaving has also seized for some participants. For those women no longer actively weaving, they attributed the lack of time due to participation in paid employment as a contributing factor in ending their practice of weaving. For some of the other women who, due to health concerns and other contributing factors, do not work outside their homes, weaving continues to act as an unpaid activity to help pass time.

Work: Where Does Weaving Fit?

There are three areas of employment that the majority of the Karen people resettling in Regina work in. These sectors include the cleaning of office buildings, the

washing of cars and the sorting of recycling. Work in all three of these positions was among the experiences of the five women interviewed in Canada. In Thailand, all the women interviewed generated income through the sale of their weaving. In Canada, there is little to no income to be made from weaving. For some of the women interviewed, the ability to work outside the home, with choices other than weaving was expressed as very positive. Some of the women indicated that given the choice to weave for money or work for someone else, they would choose to give up weaving.

Now she is working so she doesn't have much time to weave ... it is very important for her when she live in the camp, but here she have a job so it is ok ... she would choose to work (Paw Paw)

Other women expressed the inability to choose weaving as an option to generate income made life more difficult for them than they had anticipated prior to resettlement. For some women, the ability to weave was seen as a desirable option to working in a situation outside of their home. All the women interviewed had children and were often balancing home life, with work and English classes. These demands coupled with the difficulty of navigating the winter months, left women exhausted from work and expressing the desire to weave as they had done in the past.

She think, thought [about] working, to do cleaning is better than weaving, or is weaving better than cleaning ... if she have an opportunity to weave here that would be great because she can weave at home, inside her house, but like if you do cleaning job you have to go somewhere and you have to walk outside (Tho Mu)

She don't usually have time because she start work at 1:00 in the morning and she have to work until 9:00 and she have to go to school at 9:30, she just finish her school at 11:00 and she came home, and when she came home she have to cook the meal for her children, and if she have time, she used to do that sometime, even [if] she doesn't have time, she still have the weaving in her house (December Paw)

For other women unable to participate in outside employment, weaving remained an activity to do occasionally at home to pass the time. One woman expressed her enjoyment in doing the familiar activity for herself. She recognized that she would like not be able to sell much of what she made but still continued to weave for her own pleasure.

This is only for herself, nobody need the clothes and she also cannot sell that, only for herself, if she need, weaving for herself ... like if she doesn't have anything to do she just want to weave for enjoy[ment] (Bway Bway)

For another participant, the inability to make money from weaving changed the feelings for her, yet with few other options, she continued to weave. She indicated that even though she did not enjoy it, she was still weaving. She continued to weave in creative ways that allowed her to make gifts for people in her life as well as give back to her community. She advised that she was using new material, such as wool given to her by a friend, to create scarves to donate to thrift stores for those in need.

She was very happy in the camp because she got some money for her family but when she came here she feel a little bit different, she don't like to weave but she still weaving ... she don't have nothing to do after school, so if she have time she just want to weave and give it to volunteer ... to give for donation (Nyo)

As the women transitioned into life in Canada, weaving moved from the primary source of income for themselves and their families in the camp, to an activity that was fit into a busy life, with little opportunity for profit. Although weaving was considered extra work while the women lived in Burma, weaving had the direct purpose of clothing one's family, and differed greatly from the experiences of weaving in resettlement. In Canada, the purpose of weaving consisted neither of making essential clothing as in their villages nor of earning income as it had in the refugee camps. Although weaving remained an

activity for some women to make gifts and items for others, it was not necessarily viewed as a preferred activity but simply doing what one knows how to do to fill time. As weaving moved into a marginal role in the lives of the Karen women, the devaluing of weaving and the decline of cultural teachings suggests an uncertain future for the art.

To Teach or Not To Teach?

Life in Canada has become very busy for many Karen people. For many women, the days in their new country are filled with caring for their families while attending a mix of English classes and working in both part time and full time jobs. Many Karen youth, whose families depend on the additional income they are able to earn, are also balancing the demands of education, work and family. This balancing act between parents and youth leaves little time for cultural practices such as weaving. As learning to weave is squeezed into extra time, such as summer holidays, some youth resist learning and reject their mother's teachings.

She don't have time with work and at home, her older daughter is only 14 and in the summer time sometime she used to teach her to weave but she don't really like it ... sometime she just ignore her and she say I don't really like your job (December Paw)

Although some youth dislike learning the weaving work of their mothers, it was discussed that other youth wish to learn to weave, but the physical barriers within Canadian homes hinders their ability to practice and learn. For some women, the lack of adequate wall space on which to anchor their looms has both prohibited them from weaving, as well as affected their ability to pass on the knowledge to their children.

Her daughter ask her to teach her but she doesn't have a place, the space, so she didn't do that for her ... in Burma she have more material, probably more space for weaving, so it is good for her, but here it is not so good (Paw Paw)

For What Purpose?

The value of weaving and subsequently learning to weave was also explored in the interviews. As some women discussed the inability to teach their children to weave was due to physical space barriers and time constraints, other women signified that the lack of purpose for weaving in Canada was reason enough not to pass on the tradition to their children. For one participant, weaving was seen in direct opposition to education. Possibly drawing from her experiences in Burma, having only had access to traditional educations such as weaving, and in Thailand, having only weaving as an employment option, she explained that formal schooling trumped cultural knowledge, as only education could improve one's life.

If you know how to weave only this one, it does not improve your life ... only if you weaving if you cannot do any other job, only if you stay home and weave ... education is very important for her children, weaving is less (Nyo)

Alternatively, some participants discussed their own personal attachment to and value of weaving, as well as their wish for the youth to know how to make the traditional Karen items. However, the participants were also keenly aware of the devalued status of weaving among Karen youth. As weaving is no longer imperative for survival, parents felt they had little capacity to encourage and require their children to learn. Nor, as expressed by the women, did many youth see the value in learning.

Most young people now, they don't like to weave, they just want to buy and you know if they know how to make that, [it] would be great but they usually don't like to weave ... like when people came here, arrived here, it is not important for them because we have a lot of clothes here so they don't want to care about their traditional clothes, for them it is easier for them when they come here, easier for young people ... because they don't have to make their own clothes and nobody can force them (Bway Bway)

As children refuse to learn and the practice of weaving is devalued to a cultural exercise from the past, so too is the act of wearing traditional clothes been diminished. The transition from traditional Karen clothing to western clothes began for many Karen people in Thailand and has subsequently left the wearing of traditional clothes in Canada allocated to special occasions such as attending church, Martyrs Day and Karen New Year's celebrations.

Most of the kids they want ... modern but in a special occasion like to go to church or a special occasion something like that [they] usually wear traditional clothes still (Tho Mu)

Some women expressed their concern that even special occasions do not warrant an interest in their children to wear traditional clothing. One woman explained that her child was worried that by wearing traditional clothing people would know that she was Karen. For her, identifying as Karen and wearing cultural clothing made her feel shy and embarrassed.

She asked her children to wear the traditional clothes but her children told her that she worry if she wear Karen shirt, somebody will see that she is Karen, that they are Karen, so they are very shy to wear their traditional clothes (December Paw)

This particular mother expressed great concern for the fact that her child was uncomfortable with being identified as Karen. Many women discussed that losing the tradition of wearing Karen clothes and the practice of weaving would affect the maintenance and expression of Karen culture. Some women voiced their concern at this loss and continued to support the idea expressing of cultural identity through the wearing of Karen clothes.

If you don't wear traditional clothes, nobody will know you are Karen ... if you wear your traditional clothes people will know you are Karen (December Paw)

It was further expressed that the continuation of weaving and the use of traditional clothes could make other Canadians, outside of the Karen community, aware of Karen culture.

Weaving and the traditional clothes is very important and it is part of Karen traditional. If nobody know how to do that, maybe for the future, the Karen people will lose their culture and if she have a chance to weave here that would be best. If she have the organization to support her or some other friend that would be best and then like people will know more about Karen culture and tradition (Tho Mu)

Although all the women recognized that, should it not be passed onto the next generation of Karen youth, the traditional practice of weaving would be lost in the future, not all women expressed an interest nor the power to alter the erosion of this tradition. One participant indicated that she was aware of the transitions taking place to Karen culture, expressing that the culture could be “lost” in Canada, however did not believe she had the ability to change this outcome.

If every woman stop weaving, their culture will be lost but she cannot do anything for that (Paw Paw)

Another participant, when discussing the devaluing of weaving in her new country highlighted the dichotomy between her Karen and Canadian identities and expressed her wish to no longer be Karen. She further explained the contradiction between the identities as describing that as a Karen person she has not experienced freedom and is happy to be Canadian instead. When questioned as to whether she could identify as both Karen and Canadian at the same time, she responded that maybe it would be possible in another life but not in this one.

No, she don't miss it, she is okay, she love to be Canadian ... she have been Karen for a very long time, but she didn't have independence ... so she don't like to be Karen now (Nyo)

Despite the voiced concern by many participants over their children's reluctance to wear traditional clothing, and subsequently the loss of Karen cultural practices, the women themselves discussed their own divergence from clothes they made themselves to western clothing. Although the women discussed the comfort of wearing Karen clothes, they all highlighted the impracticalities of such clothing in Canada.

It's Too Cold!

As all of the women in Canada were wearing western clothing during their interviews, their own decisions to wear traditional versus not traditional clothing was also discussed. Many of the women indicated that although they at times wear traditional clothing around the house, the wearing of traditional clothing outside the home was not practical. This decision was based on the fact that the Saskatchewan climate is just too cold to wear items designed for the tropics of Burma and Thailand. Many women explained that they don't mind the transition to western clothing, including pants rather than sarongs, and enjoy wearing both types of clothing inside their homes but not outside in the wind and cold. For many women, the adaptation to the winter weather warrants the layering of clothing and as such traditional clothing is seen as impractical.

She like to wear in the camp, but not here because it is very cold, so she would like to wear western pants, it is easier for her (Nyo)

Especially when she go outside she don't like to wear Karen traditional clothes because if the wind blows ... when she go to school she usually wear two, three shirt and pants too (Tho Mu)

She like that one and she like this one, she love both, but the other one you know here in the winter time, she couldn't, it get very cold so it is easy for her (Bway Bway)

TOO SOON TO TELL

The demands of life in Canada are at times a direct obstacle in the way of keeping cultural traditions. As many significant changes have occurred in the lives of the women resettled in a country characterized by individualism and independence, the purpose of weaving for Karen women is anything but cohesive. The experience of each weaver is unique to their own situation as they begin to adapt and settle into Canada. For some women weaving remains an extremely important personal and cultural element in their lives that they both practice in their homes and hold with high value. For other women, weaving is no longer significant to their life as they balance work, school and family. Many of the previous practical purposes for weaving in Burma and Thailand are no longer relevant or attainable in Canada, as the traditional clothing of the Karen people is seen as impractical for the climate and largely rejected by the next generation of youth and as weaving is no longer a means of viable income for women. Although it does not appear that a relational purpose for weaving has yet been established among the Karen weavers in Regina, it is likely too soon to predict the future of Karen weaving in resettlement. As more individuals resettle over time and as Karen families settle into their new lives, the purpose for and the value of weaving may be established and reinvented. Some women suggest that the future for weaving is the responsibility of elders within the Karen community to encourage the next generation to value and continue the cultural traditions.

The older people, those who know how to weave or the older people who are a little bit more educated, if they teach the children, to encourage them to weave, to make the community, make a small community, maybe for the young people, like some people are interested to learn that but maybe if they don't [teach], the young people will not know how to do the weaving anymore (December Paw)

PART 4: PRETTY AS A PICTURE: THE PHOTOS

I have included in the research, as a data source, the photos I took during my participant observation research and during the semi-structured interviews I conducted in both Thailand and Canada. The photo images I collected are a source of data that provides additional information regarding the Karen women weavers, their weaving and the contexts in which they weave. The photos include perspective on three levels in the discussion of weaving. Some of the photos are taken from within a micro focus, directed entirely on the weaving and weaving materials, others display a broader perspective of the act of weaving by the women participants and the remaining images capture a larger view of context and location in which the women reside. The three levels of images are not separate from one another but build on each other to provide deeper and more detailed information about the weaving of Karen women in Burma, Thailand and Canada. The photos describe a tri-level model for weaving, with one set of photographs building on the next to provide richness in context and description. The images providing the largest view of context, representing the space where Karen weaving takes place, creates the first level of analysis. Building on this level, is the portrayal of women weaving in the particular context in which they live and the final level, built up from the other two are the intimate photos of the weaving.

THE PLACE

For the purpose of setting context, I have included images of a Christian Karen village on the Thai-Burma border, various images from Ban Mai Nai Soi, Umpiem Mai and Mae La refugee camps in Thailand and photos from within Regina Saskatchewan Canada. The photos are constructed with consideration of my experience in the context as they are representative of the images I chose to capture. They are meant to provide a

visual of context, highlighting the transitions experienced by Karen women and the way in which these ultimately affect their weaving.

The photographs of the Karen village on the Thai-Burma border show a small community made up of traditional style Karen housing with a minor paved road running through the middle. The general scene suggests an overall feeling of calmness and peace. The green vegetation suggests warmth but the air also shows misty mountain coolness. The image of the family home displays the use of bamboo and leaves to construct a family house surrounded by space to raise animals and grow a garden. Under the house some of the family's ducks rest in the shade. Plastic jugs sit on the front porch and hand woven baskets hang from the structure of the house. The scene suggests a traditional way of life with some modern influence and infrastructure.

The images from the camp, alternatively, show extremely crowded conditions with houses built very close together with no space for the raising of animals or gardening. The photos highlight the various geographical locations of the camps and the varying levels of vegetation present with each location. The images of Ban Mai Nai Soi and Mae La suggest that overcrowding has diminished the natural resources of the jungle and as such the camps are hot, dusty places. Umpiem Mai suggests a mountain location void of trees and natural protection in the windy spot. In Ban Mai Nai Soi, the large bamboo school suggests the need for the building to accommodate many children as a result of the overcrowding in the camps. The pictures of Umpiem Mai show the merging of life for villagers with different beliefs as both Buddhist stupas and Christian churches can be seen within the same camp. In Mae La, formalized businesses exist in the semi-permanent infrastructure of bamboo homes. The photos from the camp suggest changes

to the scale of community, increases in services, decrease in access to nature and an overall escalation of activity.

In complete contrast, the images from Regina suggest highly developed infrastructure set in a scene of snow and below zero winter temperatures. A winter cold that keeps people inside their homes in houses with closed doors, yards and fences that advocate the separation of neighbours from one another. Instead of images of people walking, the paved roads are lined with cars. The scenes are almost void of vegetation, excluding a few planted trees that line the street in a neat orderly fashion. The images from Regina suggest changes to weather, economic development, infrastructure and a general sense of order. They also suggest increased isolation.

THE MAKING

I have included three images demonstrating weaving on a back-strap loom. One image is from Mae La refugee camp in Thailand and two images are from Regina. In both images the process for weaving is the same. The women are weaving as the Karen women have done for centuries. Despite this, there are many differences in the images that provide context. In Thailand, the image shows Naw Pay sitting on the floor of a bamboo structure wearing a sarong. The warp beam of her loom is attached to the bamboo rod on the wall and all the pieces of her loom are made from bamboo and other wood. She is using the synthetic cotton available in the camp, to make a scarf for the income generation program. In Canada, Nyo weaves on the carpeted floor in the basement of her house. She wears pants and a T-shirt. Her loom is attached to a metal chair with a bag of rice securing it in place and made from purchased wood and plastic pipes. She weaves using thick yarn to make a scarf for donation. The images highlight

both the similarities of Karen weaving in each context and the differences created by and subjective to context.

THE WEAVING

Without the inclusion of photos of weaving, it is difficult to provide a rich description of the art allowing the reader to fully appreciate the work of the Karen weavers. The use of photos provides a space to exhibit the creativity of each weaver. It allows the reader to consider and appreciate the meaning behind the colour, pattern, design and item chosen to both be created and exhibited by each individual woman. The photos display the personal identities of each woman, their favorite colours or pattern choices, as well as for some of the women, the identities formed from being members of particular villages. Some of the images also explore the meaning of weaving in identity formation in Canada. The photo from Bway Bway's story, shows a piece of loom from the betel nut tree, made in Thailand sitting next to the recycled wood piece from Canada, made using the knife her father had made in Burma. It is a beautiful photo that combines elements reminisce of the past and those suggesting the possibilities that exist in the present.

The photos also show the transitioning of weaving from the traditional garments of Burma, to the modernization of Karen clothing, to the making of non-traditional items for sale. They display traditional clothing showing Karen identity and patterns that hold significance in Karen culture both with stories, such as python pattern and without, such as *me klgee* or the eye. The images alternatively show the bright colours used to weave clothing in the camps. It also shows the changes to weaving based on restrictions in the camps, such as traditional shirts missing the use of seeds for decoration. Also, the images allow for an exploration into the weaving of non-traditional items for market in Thailand.

The photographs display the changes to weaving, from shirts and sarongs to wall hangings and pillow cases. As well, they provide an understanding of the high quality of products created by the Karen women and the unjust earnings of the weavers for their work.

The images of the weaving allow for the reader to appreciate the work of the weavers. They also capture the expression of creativity exhibited by each woman in her choice of colour, pattern, design and item. The images of the weaving tell many stories about the women and the remoulding of weaving, but do not provide significant contextual detail. The images of the making, showing women and their looms, offer greater contextual detail and further highlight the changes to weaving within the context of the location of the weaver. Finally, the images in the place, portraying a general sense of context, inform the reader of the overall changes to the context for Karen women weavers. These images also create the scene for understanding where the woman weaves and support a theory of interdependency between the weaving, weaver and context.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

The primary explorative question that informed this research was: What is the meaning and interpretation of weaving for Karen refugee women weavers during settlement in Thai refugee camps and resettlement in Canada? Secondary questions allowing for deeper investigation into the role of context in meaning and interpretation included: To what degree does the meaning and interpretation of weaving change for Karen women during the process of settlement in Thai refugee camps to resettlement in Canada? What role does weaving have in the settlement process in Thai refugee camps and in the resettlement process in Canada? What factors impact the meaning and interpretation of weaving for Karen women in refugee camps and in Canada?

Through critical feminist ethnographic research including semi-structured interviews, participant observation and photography, I have gained insight into the meaning of weaving for Karen women in the contextual settings of refugee camps in Thailand and resettlement in Canada, as well as in Karen villages in Burma. I have ultimately learned that the meaning and purpose of weaving for Karen women has transformed with each change of context. The weaving, the weavers and the context are fundamentally interdependent of one another. As the political, social and economic context alters, the experiences of Karen women weavers change, which subsequently leads to transformations in the meaning of their weaving. Each interconnected element, the weaving, the weaver and the context, is a representation of the other component and as such the weaving offers a reflection into the experience of Karen women as they transition from Burma, to Thailand to Canada.

The findings of Stephenson et al., in their study with Karen women weavers in Utah, concluded, “although the context wherein the weaving takes place has changed, the essential meaning of the Karen weaving has remained the same” (2011, p. 19). They further discuss that contextual changes from Burma to Thailand to North America impact weaving in terms of time spent weaving and the design of the products, however they find that these changes do not ultimately transform the meaning of the weaving for Karen women (Stephenson et al., 2011). In contrast my research with Karen women in Thailand and in Canada, suggests the meaning of weaving for Karen women is changed with the shift in context. At each stage of displacement and migration, the weavers experience a transitioning purpose for weaving which subsequently alters, adapts and evolves their meanings and interpretations of the activity. In her research with Karenni refugee women in Thailand, Dudley states that the hand woven clothing worn by women “... plays an important role in the ongoing forging and changing of Karenni cultural and political identities” (2007, p. 335). Similarly, I too argue that the changes to context for Karen refugees both influences change in the meaning of their weaving, subsequently altering the traditional dress of the Karen people, and ultimately impacting the social and cultural, as well as individual identities of Karen women.

Based on my observations and analysis in Thailand and Canada, with a commitment to the representation of the women’s lives, I find it imperative that social workers and community developers supporting refugees strive for a commitment to social and development programming that recognizes the importance of traditional activities, such as weaving, in the lives of many refugee women and the significance of creating textiles in the formation of identity. It is necessary that practitioners understand the

impact of persecution and displacement on the traditional livelihoods of ethnic villagers and the subsequent impact of this disruption on future economic opportunities.

Additionally, social workers must analyze the notion of power and the nuanced position of income generation programs operating in protracted refugee situations where few economic and educational opportunities for women exist. A commitment to understanding, recognizing and valuing the skills and education of refugee women in resettlement can influence both practice and policy seeking to create programs that are needs based, responsive and socially just. In addition, social work education must further consider the importance of art making, including textile creation, in understanding and valuing women's storytelling, identity formation, community building and resiliency.

THE CHANGES TO MEANING IN CONTEXT

IN PEACE

In speaking of their weaving in the context of their villages in Burma, the participants in the study describe the meanings of weaving through their discussion on community belonging, cultural identity, the passing on of tradition and the means of self-sufficiency. For centuries, Karen women in Burma have practiced the art of weaving to clothe themselves and their families. Their creation of woven items has fulfilled the essential needs of their families for clothing, blankets and other items of function required in their practice of agriculture and hunting. The skill of weaving is taught and passed on to adolescent women by their mothers and other female members of their family and their community. Entering the circle of female weavers fosters both acceptance and approval by community members.

To belong to a community dependent on the acquisition of traditional skills by the next generation for continued self-sufficiency, requires young women to gain additional knowledge about nature and agriculture. These further skills provide Karen women with the education necessary to grow cotton and collect the natural materials needed to build a loom, and process, spin and dye thread. From community members, Karen women learn how to use leaves and bark to create ancient *ikat* dye patterns and weave these intricate designs into functional articles. The acquisition of such gendered skills satiates, for many women, a desire to learn and obtain knowledge in settings where formal education is not accessible or available.

In addition to acquiring knowledge to care for the needs of themselves and their families, weaving in Burma has also provided a forum for Karen women to explore, create and display both their personal and cultural identities. The use of traditional patterns, designs and colours on clothing has traditionally created symbolic unification of Karen identity distinct from that of other ethnic groups. The use of specific patterns, such as the python design found on women's sarongs, have been a means of passing on Karen stories from generation to generation. The unification of community is also displayed in the designs and techniques used to create patterns specific to individual villages. And yet, in the unification of Karen symbolic patterns, unique identities emerge through creative expression. As women both learn and create new designs, they are incorporated into her weaving to create what she personally likes and sees as beautiful.

For generations, the practice of weaving was repeated by Karen women in Burma built on the foundations of self-sufficiency and cultural identity, with the importance of passing on of traditional knowledge and community belonging instrumental in

construction of meaning in the act of weaving. Many of the participants describe that the continuation of this practice significantly changed with their migration to Thailand. Some of the women explicitly described that the beginnings of change to the capacity and purpose for weaving was a direct result of the ethnic persecution they encountered by the Burmese junta through human rights violations and forced displacement.

In my conversations with the women weavers and through participant observation in Thai refugee camps, I have found that an exploration into the changing meanings for weaving for Karen women offers exposure to the persecution of ethnic villagers in Burma by the military junta. For the last sixty years, Burma has been almost entirely closed to the outside world, with stories of extreme human rights violations leaking out by revolutionaries, journalists, political activists and courageous citizens. Despite these disclosures, much of the persecution of ethnic minority groups in remote regions has gone undocumented. Social advocates, working in the pursuit of social justice in Burma, can learn much about the oppression of ethnic people through an examination of the changes to meaning and purpose for weaving by Karen women, as the weaving reveals the destruction of traditional livelihood and forced disruption to the cultural traditions of Burma's ethnic people. These revelations can support ongoing efforts by international organizations concerned with the continued human rights violations conducted in ethnic regions by the Burmese military seeking to destroy villages and displace people for access to natural resources. For social advocates concerned with the situation in Burma, significant apprehension remains that Burma's ethnic people will continue to be persecuted for access to natural resources, as is the current offence against the Kachin people, especially as the world begins to lift trade sanctions on the military regime. The

continued persecution of villagers results in an ongoing flow of displaced persons into bordering countries including Thailand and China. Considering the meaning of traditional gendered activities, such as weaving, exposes much about the change in the community and self-sufficiency of the ethnic people in Burma, including the Karen, and the connection to a commercial market for the weavers as they transition into Thai refugee camps.

IN DISPLACEMENT

Migration into Thailand for the Karen people is not a journey of simply “stepping” over the border. Almost of all the women interviewed lived in remote locations either deep in the jungle or in the mountains of Burma. The passage to Thailand was a result of many days of walking through thick jungle and over mountain terrain carrying only what each person could on their bodies. Due to the distance covered and the sheer number of people fleeing, precious few items could be carried and for some people from villages recently destroyed by the SPDC, few items remained to be taken. For many women, this included much of the weaving they had made for themselves and their families as well as the materials required for weaving. For some of the women interviewed, they were able to save a few articles that they kept as a memory, a shirt they had woven in anticipation of marriage or one that had been woven by their mother and passed on to them. But for many refugees, what they owned was simply what they were wearing.

As displacement carried on, and without access to thread, the use of donated clothes, T-shirt and machine made cotton sarongs, became a necessity for the Karen women and their families (Connelly, 2009). This need for donated clothes became the

first switch from Karen traditional clothing to westernized and modern clothing for the majority of the participants. Although all of the women interviewed had, at one point during their displacement in Thailand, made looms and the other materials they required to weave, as the women settled into encampments in Thailand, with support from NGOs, the use of donated clothing also allowed the women to focus on weaving for profit rather than to clothe their families.

Involvement in income generation provided the biggest shift in the meaning of weaving in the lives of Karen refugee women in Thailand. All the women interviewed discussed the importance of selling their weaving as a means of earning income while they lived as displaced persons in Thai refugee camps. For some women, they were able to weave items on their own and make money by selling these to friends, family and neighbours. For other women, income generation was a result of their work with women's organizations who offered training and support to weave items for an outside, mostly tourist, market. Working with women's organizations, and weaving for an outside market, meant women often had little choice on what or how they wove and only created what was ordered or directed. Women working for income generation programs were given thread, mostly synthetic but in some cases naturally dyed in the camp and were paid to fill orders as they came from the organizations. Some participants discussed their enjoyment in learning and creating new ways to use their weaving, such as for pillow cases and wall hangings. Other women suggested they just made what they were told to make and that weaving for profit within income generation programs was not enjoyable but they had little choice for other options.

Displaced persons living in Thailand, a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, face many restrictions on their daily life and livelihood. Many of the women discussed that other than illegal farm work, which could have them arrested and deported; weaving provided them the only means of income generation. Despite their ability to weave, further restrictions within the camp resulted in changes to the ways in which Karen women had woven traditional articles in Burma. The inability to practice agriculture, including the growing of cotton, by displaced persons in Thailand and limitations on foraging for natural products in the jungle, resulted in their weaving being almost entirely dependent on the use of synthetic and machine made threads. Additionally, restrictions on horticulture prevented Karen women from planting trees to produce the seeds traditionally used to decorate their shirts. Although some items, such as the seeds, could be purchased in the camps, one woman complained about the inflated price charged to refugees for these items. The restrictions in Thai camps played an important role in the subsequent changes to the look of Karen traditional weaving, both for the Karen people and for items sold in an outside market.

As the Karen women used their weaving to enter an outside market economy and adapt traditional skills to make new products for tourists and for modernized clothing in the camp, the purpose of weaving shifted significantly from the foundations in Burma of community and belonging, cultural identity and the passing on of tradition. Although women continued to use weaving as a means of survival and self-sufficiency, the purpose, and subsequently the meaning, was significantly altered. In Thailand, the purpose for weaving is far less concerned with clothing one's family out of necessity but of earning income to purchase modern clothing and supplement the basic rations and

services provided within the camp. As weaving is no longer considered necessary for survival and as younger women have access to additional educational opportunities, the traditions of passing on weaving to the next generation has significantly declined. In addition, as the majority of youth, due to exposure to Thai and Burmese urban culture, favor the use of modern clothing over traditional Karen items, the practice of expressing Karen identity through traditional clothing becomes less important and valued as refugees negotiate survival in Thailand.

As persons with no status living in displacement and with few options to provide for one's family, refugee women weavers often offer cheap labour to fill tourist markets with handmade underpriced products (Humphreys, 1999). Despite the multiple days of weaving required to make many of the products ordered by income generation groups, women are often provided with extremely meager earnings for their work. Although participation in income generation programs can provide refugee women with an important means of supporting their families financially, social and development work committed to women's rights must consider the power structures that can exist within organizations offering income programming for refugee women and the nuances of participating in such programs. The hierarchical structures of programs, with foreign or non-refugee staff often operating as directors, managers, quality control officers, trainers and pattern designers, can leave the women weavers with few opportunities to exhibit their own power and voice within the organizations. In my own observations in Thailand, I often questioned the conflicting stated purpose of women's organizations versus the actual day to day practices of program delivery. I remain concerned that income generation programs can become less focused on maintaining the traditional work of

Karen weavers, to foster the retention of culture, community building and identity formation and become overly concerned with the running of successful handicraft businesses. Although the income earned by the weavers is vital in supplementing their families' incomes, it remains grossly meager. Social work practitioners committed to international practice must continue to evaluate the benefit of income generation programs for women with attention to and reflection on the concepts of power, integrity and exploitation. Despite significant concerns regarding the operation of some income generation programs, for many women the participation in programs to earn money for their families is necessary as for those living in protracted refugee situations, few other employment opportunities exist.

Based on discussions with the weavers, and through my observations working in the refugee camps in Thailand, I find it essential that refugee advocates continue to lobby for the ability of displaced persons in Thailand to participate in livelihood activities and opportunities. As the organization responsible for the delivery of food rations in Thai refugee camps, The Thai Burma Consortium (TBBC) advised in their 2011 program report that due to funding cuts, food provisions provided to refugees in Thailand have been reduced and in some cases eliminated entirely. And yet, despite this reduction to the food provided, Thailand continues to impose restrictions on agriculture and income generation in the refugee camps. These restrictions force those living within the camps to participate in illegal farm work, which can result in arrest and deportation to Burma, or to participate in the few tolerated, paid positions and income generation programs available. The participation in illegal migrant work and in some income generation programs, as previously discussed, can be exploitative in nature and need to be of concern for both the

international community and local social and development advocates committed to the pursuit of social justice and human rights. The dependency on outside sustenance and economic programming, due to restrictions on livelihood, directly affects the traditional practices and cultural identity of the individuals living within the confines of Thai refugee camps.

It is important to consider that displacement and resettlement are not the only processes that impact the traditional practices and cultural identities of people. Should the recent changes to Burma result in the opening up of the country to increased tourism and foreign investment, very similar changes in the expression of identity through clothing, from traditional to modern, may occur for the Karen people who continue to live in rural Burma. Despite recognition of the possibility of impending change, the involuntary termination of livelihood and cultural practices for Karen people due to persecution and forced displacement are not insignificant in the swiftness of transitions that have occurred in Thailand and continue into resettlement.

IN RESETTLEMENT

Since 2006, Canada has become home to 4000 resettled Karen refugees from the Thai-Burma border (CIC, 2011b). Due to the persistent conflict in Burma and the protracted refugee situation in Thailand, for many individuals, third country resettlement offers the only durable solution for freedom, peace and opportunity. The confirmation of acceptance for third country resettlement often comes very suddenly for UNHCR registered individuals in Thailand. Refugees, who frequently wait years for resettlement, are often given little more than a few weeks' notice that they will be moving to a foreign city in a new country. As such, preparations to leave can be rushed affairs, as people

make decisions on what to take and what to leave behind, say farewells to friends and loved ones and attend mandatory training sessions from their new government. The decisions of what to take in anticipation of a new life, in a new country very different from their own, with minimal factual information, can be extremely daunting. For the first Karen refugees arriving in Canada, with little information on what they were allowed to bring, misinformation resulted in women leaving behind items such as their weaving materials. As more people resettle, and word spreads that people no longer weave in resettlement, some new arrivals choose to leave behind the weaving that had offered a means of survival and self-sufficiency in their previous lives.

In Thailand, weaving became an important way for women weavers to earn income to support themselves and their families. Weaving also helped women pass time as they were confined to the boundaries of the refugee camps. In Burma, weaving, practiced for centuries by Karen women, was purposeful for clothing one's family, while passing cultural identity and traditional stories from one generation to the next. To weave was to be accepted by one's community and belong among a culture of Karen weavers. The meaning and purpose for weaving in Canada has become a combination of some of these elements for some women during some moments. As experiences become more and more individualized in the freedom of Canada, the stories of weaving become less and less cohesive for Karen women. Further rejection by the next generation, outside paid employment, physical barriers and evolving identity suggests a questionable future for weaving in resettlement.

As some women began to enter and have exposure to employment opportunities outside of their home, they expressed happiness to have options available to them other

than weaving. Alternatively, some women found that the demands of caring for their families while attending English classes and fulltime employment outside of their home, took away from the opportunity to keep their cultural tradition of weaving. One woman suggested a longing for weaving in Burma, where she was able to work for herself, when and how she chose. The demands and opportunities in Canada have a significant impact on the traditions of Karen women weavers and their desire and ability to weave. For some women who wish to work, but with few opportunities, weaving is sometimes seen as an undesirable activity from the past but the only thing available to them. For women who are working but wish to continue weaving, there is little time in their new busy lives to weave even if they would like to.

As the generation of income is no longer considered a purposeful reason to continue weaving, questions regarding former meanings of weaving including self-sufficiency, community belonging, the passing on of traditional knowledge, cultural identification and the filling of time need to be considered. In Burma, weaving fulfilled the practical purpose of providing necessary clothing and supplies for one's family. As traditional clothing is progressively seen as impractical for the weather conditions of Canada, and as youth reject the wearing of Karen clothing, the need for women to create clothing for themselves and their families is increasingly diminished. Although Karen clothing is still worn for special occasions, the quantity of clothing needed does not warrant a significant continuation of weaving. Further, although encouraged to wear Karen clothing for special occasions, the women spoke of the Karen youth's distaste for wearing and dislike of the traditional woven clothes. One woman expressed a deep concern that her child's embarrassment was not limited to the wearing of clothing but of

being Karen, stating that she was shy to wear Karen clothing for fear that she would be recognized as being a Karen person.

It is not the children alone who show signs of disengagement with a cohesive cultural identity. Although some women stress the importance of keeping cultural traditions through identity defining cultural clothing, others do not. For those concerned with the importance of keeping cultural traditions, the need to be identified through the wearing of Karen clothing was an essential factor in keeping Karen culture in resettlement. However, none of the women interviewed wore traditional Karen clothing on a daily basis. Other women suggested that clothing, and subsequently the loss of weaving, was not overly important in keeping culture as it was simply just clothes. The multifaceted sentiments of identity expressed through weaving and traditional clothing suggests shifts in meaning regarding community belonging and the expression of Karen cultural identities through weaving.

The loss of income generation through weaving, the decline in need for Karen clothing, the disengagement with cultural identification and belonging and the breaking in traditional education suggest that the meanings of weaving for Karen women have significantly changed within the context of resettlement to Canada. The questions that remain in this new context consider what new meanings may exist and where they might be found. It may be that weaving continues to act as a time filling activity for those women not connected to the employment sector; however this warrants further consideration as women are no longer confined to refugee camps and have access to new opportunities. And yet, despite freedom to engage in other endeavours for themselves, some women continue to pass time at home through weaving. The women who weave

suggest that weaving provides them with something they can do for themselves, an ability to make gifts for friends, teachers and charity. Does this suggest that in weaving in Canada there remains elements of significant meaning and purpose, warranting a concerted effort as was done in Utah, to restore this gendered occupation? Does it also suggest that weaving continues to present an important part of Karen identity that requires support and encouragement to flourish in a new setting? Or does it highlight a shifting of identity, both representative of the past and foreshadowing the future, somewhere in transition?

WEAVING, MEANING & IDENTITY IN RESETTLEMENT



To begin the discussion on the future of weaving for Karen women resettled in Canada, I wanted to draw from a photo I took at Nyo's house of her loom. Although Nyo

adamantly states she does not want to weave anymore nor does she want to focus energy on being Karen, Nyo is one of the few women still actively weaving in Regina. This photo provides a lot of detail about the context of weaving in Canada, as well as insight into the interpretations of weaving for Karen women. The photo shows Nyo's traditional back-strap loom, remade in Canada using a strip of rice bag for the back-strap, pieces of purchased wood for the beams and a plastic tube for the shed stick. The warp beam, traditionally attached to a wall or bamboo pole, has been connected to a metal chair and secured by placing a heavy bag of rice on top. Nyo is weaving using yarn, found and recycled into use.

This photo is interesting in that it explores the question of why a woman expressing her disinterest in weaving continues to weave. It also considers the discussion presented by other women, including some of those highlighting the importance of keeping Karen culture and tradition, that weaving is impossible in Canada because of physical barriers, including inadequate space. Nyo does not have the proper wall space in her house to set up her loom as she would have done in both Burma and Thailand, but has adapted her work to fit into her new space in Canada. On her loom is a pink and white scarf made of non-traditional type thread that she is working on to donate to charity. The nuances between what the weavers indicated in the interviews and what is expressed in the photos suggest an exploration of weaving in resettlement that must consider the purpose to continue the practice and the evolution of cultural and personal identity.

CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

For the majority of refugees choosing resettlement after decades of persecution and displacement, migration to Canada presents as a chance for a new start with the potential for educational and employment opportunities for themselves and their families.

Women in particular may be presented with their first opening to experience paid employment, outside of their home. For many women, this comes as an exciting opportunity to both do something for themselves away from the demands of the home and to contribute to the financial security of their families. Unfortunately the experience in resettlement does not always present in reality the opportunities envisioned. In a society stressing the tenets of capitalism and individualism, many women find themselves juggling the demands of work, school and family to subsist in their new country. While, simultaneously, other women are unable to find or secure employment as a result of serious health conditions derived from years in the jungle with inadequate health care and the dismissal of their skills in a system that has them allocated to the classification of “unskilled” government assisted refugees.

For those women unable to work, weaving may offer purposeful activity and create a sense of doing something meaningful for themselves. As few new opportunities present themselves, the weavers may cling to what they know how to do from the past. For the women working, and balancing the demands of life in Canada, weaving possibly offers little purpose or meaning in an already busy life occupied by new experiences. Although some women discuss the barriers that prevent them from weaving, in looking at the photo of Nyo’s loom, it may be suggested that the choice not to weave, is due in larger part to the lack of purpose for weaving than the actual inability to weave. In choosing to weave for oneself, for adding purpose and meaning to one’s time in Canada, or to choose not to weave, requires an exploration into the construction of personal and cultural identity. As resettlement is still very recent for many Karen people, the

formation of meaning for weaving may still be emerging and as such it might simply be too soon to understand the defined purposes for weaving in resettlement.

CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

In her research with Karenni refugees, Dudley writes, “In a process by which Karenni identity is self-consciously, and reasonably successfully, strengthening and remoulding itself, elements of ‘tradition’ are selectively appropriated, transformed or rejected” (2007, p. 344). As Karen refugees resettle in Canada, the practice of tradition is similarly used, altered or dismissed in the formation of identity. Weaving is a connection to the past, to what has been left behind, in both Burma and in Thailand. In this way, weaving may be rejected in resettlement as it binds the hopefulness of the future to the painful memories of the past, or alternatively be gripped to, as a connection of what was. The continuation of weaving may also be a combination of both of these elements, a push and pull of memory and forgetting. “Weaving is simultaneously connected to what has been left behind and the painful nature of the leaving-behind process itself ... it is one of the things refugees prioritise in their desire to make their current situation more familiar. It is both a symbol of the past and an important factor in trying to make the present more bearable and familiar”(Dudley, 2007, p. 338).

The formation of identity in resettlement is made up of many parts, some drawn from the past, some unchangeable and some new in the present; Karen, woman, refugee, weaver, mother, Canadian, student, employee, wife, permanent resident; all elements that may be included or dismissed as identity is remolded in resettlement. The construction of identity requires evolution, transition and a blending of what is purposeful and meaningful to each woman based on time, space, experience and opportunity. For women

connecting to new opportunities, beginning to transform their identity as residents in Canada, weaving may no longer hold the significance it once did in shaping personal and cultural identity. Alternatively, for other women, weaving may offer a sense of comforting purpose and familiar identity, making the transitions in resettlement slightly more tolerable. In a new culture, where the skills a woman from the Thai-Burma border possess are not necessarily valued, the comfort of weaving in one's home may allow women to retain a sense of their personal and cultural identities as they settle in Canada. In a market economy that suggests to some refugee women that they are unskilled and unemployable, weaving may provide space for women to define themselves and their skill, 'I am weaver, this is my skill, this is what I know how to do.'

In their study concerning the sewing of immigrant women in Australia, Boerema, Russell and Aguilar found that the significance of sewing in resettlement was multi-dimensional for each individual and linked to the formation of identity (2010). Their study further suggested that having control over one's occupation, is an important factor in recognizing its valuable properties on personal and social identity (Laliberte-Rudman, 2002 cited in Boerema et al., 2010), and that "occupations engaged in overtime contribute to identity formation" (Boerema et al., 2010, p. 83). This research suggests that a shift from weaving to alternative occupations of one's choice, with choice being defined as those options available to "unskilled" individuals, contributes to a shift in identity. Subsequently, the continuation of weaving to compensate where other employment opportunities do not exist, suggests identity formation as a motivating factor in the purpose for and meaning of weaving. Occupations, "are opportunities to express the self, to create an identity" (Christiansen, 1999 p. 552)

THE ROLE OF RESTORATION

Should a large scale shift in the cultural acceptance and value of Karen weaving occur in Canada, where weaving could be considered a viable occupation and restored, what impact on the identity of Karen women would be experienced? Is it possible for the construction of a cohesive purpose and meaning of weaving for Karen women weavers in resettlement? In their research with Karen women weavers participating in an intentional weaving restoration program in Utah, Stephenson et al., found “participants identities have been influenced by their new surrounding culture, yet weaving has remained a stable aspect of their identities” (2011, p. 16). This nurturing of Karen identity, through the support and encouragement of cultural activities and occupations, suggests a transformation of identity in the new context which includes identification with being Karen and being a weaver. The research in Utah further suggests that although the restoration of weaving does not provide adequate and sustainable long term income, it has provided Karen women with the ability to supplement their families’ incomes and bring attention to Karen weaving to those outside of the Karen community (Stephenson et al., 2011). As well, the program has created a space that allows for Karen women to pass on their tradition of weaving to the next generation, and create social networks to encourage weaving (Stephenson et al., 2011). The networking experienced as a result of communal weaving has also provided a place for Karen women to reminisce about the past together and support one another in the transitions and struggles of resettlement (Stephenson et al., 2011). In Utah, as Karen women weavers come together each week, it is suggested that new meanings in weaving are constructed and new purposes for weaving are created. This construction of purpose and meaning is drawn from the past and blended into the present context of resettlement. The continued participation of

weaving and the meanings constructed in this activity may also extend to and be a reflection of the personal and cultural identities of the Karen weavers in resettlement.

In Saskatchewan the restoration of weaving has yet to be formally considered. In discussion on the creation of a restoration program in Regina, the women interviewed in this study echoed the findings expressed by the women weavers in Utah. The majority of women indicated that having more opportunities to weave simply for social interaction and 'fun' would be beneficial but not to be traded for their participation in paid employment. Some women suggested that earning an income from weaving would encourage them to weave more but other women suggested that the expectation of income generation through weaving in Canada is unrealistic. For many women, the creation of a small community group where older weavers could teach young women the traditional skill was considered beneficial to retaining connection to and acceptance of Karen culture. It was further suggested, that the formation of a group to support weaving could also encourage the retention of other elements of Karen culture including language.

With regard to the implications for practice and policy, social work practitioners, especially those involved in settlement services, need to be mindful and supportive of the role of art and craft traditions in the lives of refugee women. As the skills and education of many immigrant and refugee women are often greatly dismissed and marginalized in their new countries, social workers must be committed to advocacy for immigration services that are considerate of the cultural, traditional and economic customs of refugees; and that encourage the recognition and restoration of skills and knowledge in resettlement. Fostering and encouraging the creation of art traditions in refugee communities not only provides a valuable means of artistic expression for the artist but

may also generate networks for community building, economic development, integration and identity formation. Host countries, such as Canada, need to shift practice and policy from the use of terms such “skilled” vs. “unskilled” and “educated” vs. “uneducated” when welcoming newcomers, to an inclusive stance that acknowledges and values the skills and education each individual possess and how these attributes benefit both the integration of each individual and contribute to the overall fabric of each community.

Considering the initial research questions seeking to explore the meaning, interpretation and role of weaving through displacement, settlement and resettlement and the factors that influence change, I have found that context has had substantial impact on Karen weaving. The role of weaving has been described as significantly different in Burma, Thailand and Canada. The influence of context has also significantly impacted the meaning and purpose for weaving and subsequently the weaver herself. The research has found that the weaving, the identity of the weaver and the context for weaving are interdependent of one another and as one element is altered, so too are the others impacted. Although the stories of weaving by Karen women weavers from remote villages in Burma and in Thai refugee camps are fluid, findings reveal much consistency with one another. Alternatively, the full impact of resettlement on the meaning and purpose for weaving offers much less clarity, as this most recent transition is still in the early stages. Despite my expectation to find unequivocal expression of interest and support to continue weaving in Canada, the findings reveal a much less cohesive and evolving purpose for weaving and subsequently identities of Karen women weavers in resettlement. Further research is warranted in exploring the impact and influence of the encouragement and support for cultural activities in resettlement, such as the restoration

of weaving with Karen women, on identity and meaning construction. As well additional research may consider and compare the experiences of resettling refugee women in the practice of traditional occupations with the participation in outside paid employment and the influence on these engagements in the construction of personal and cultural identity.

An important element in conducting critical feminist research is a consideration to the way in which power differentials play a role in the lives of women and as such, future research with Karen weavers should consider the notion of power in the lives of the women as they negotiate resettlement. Although my own research focus was not a direct analysis of power in the lives of Karen weavers, I have attempted to locate their experience, and thus expose power variances, in the larger historical, political, economic, social and symbolic contexts of being a Karen woman in Burma, Thai refugee camps and a newcomer to Canada. Through critical feminist ethnography I have attempted to consider notions of power by choosing to explore the lives and gendered activities of women, by understanding the experiences of women from their own points of view and by conceptualizing women's behaviour as an expression of social context (Reinharz, 1992). Further, as my inquiry has been concerned with improving the lives of women, I have attempted to consider power in discussing the various social and economic positions in which weavers are located as they move through each context (Hesse-Biber-Leckenby, 2004). Despite my initial consideration, there remains a potential line of exploration delineating power differentials in the lives of Karen weavers in relation to the transitions they have made from Burma to Thailand to Canada.

CONCLUSION

In 2006 when I first learned about the Karen refugees on the Thai-Burma border and became interested in further understanding their experiences, I was unsure where the journey of learning would take me. In the time since then, I have grown from the person initially learning about the political, social and cultural context of Burma to becoming a Canadian female researcher, using mixed qualitative research methods in foreign terrain attempting to capture stories and understand meaning created by Karen women. Through semi-structured interviews, photography and participant observation I have attempted to portray the perspective and the stories of refugee Karen women weavers, as they have presented them to me. I have struggled at times, questioning how I, as an outsider can truly represent the feelings and experiences relayed to me through the use of written word and the presentation of images alone, in contexts unfamiliar to me, intertwined with the use of multiple languages. I take solace and comfort knowing I have been as honest to the stories and the experiences of the participants as I can be, recognizing that the narratives have been co-constructed by the participants, the female interpreters and myself. I am aware that I cannot present an entirely impartial study, as my presence exists in this work. I am positioned in a framework of social justice that is constructed from my own experiences as a social worker in Canada and as a student researcher in Thailand.

From my work as a resettlement social worker in Canada, I remain concerned about the social construction of “refugee” in our society and the way in which words such as ‘unskilled’ and ‘uneducated’ discredit and devalue skills and knowledge obtained, respected and cherished prior to resettlement. This distress has fueled my desire to learn about the weaving of Karen women from their perspective, through their narratives and in the contexts in which these stories are formed. For this purpose, I traveled to Thailand to

work on the Thai-Burma border. As I completed my student field placement work in a Thai refugee camp, I became more aware, and disturbed with the ongoing persecution of villagers in Burma and the continued suppression of livelihood and freedom of displaced persons in Thailand. Because of this exposure and my desire to represent these experiences, I decided to approach the research using a critical feminist ethnographic lens. This lens has allowed me to both capture the lived experiences of women from their perspective and locate these stories in a larger historical, political, economic and social context with a commitment to social justice (Reinharz, 1992; Van Maanen, 2004).

Localizing the lived experiences of Karen women weavers in a larger context has exposed social justice concerns, relative to the context, in all three geographical locations this study considers. In Burma I have attempted to bring awareness to the extreme human rights violations that continue to violate, displace and take the lives of the ethnic minority people. The persecution of Karen villagers has destroyed the livelihood, peace and cultural traditions of the Karen people. The extreme oppression of Karen people and their culture has resulted in indirect disruption to the cultural tradition of weaving by Karen women.

Exposure to the inhumane actions of the military junta towards its own people cannot be timelier than in this moment, as the sixty years of oppressive rule by the military regime is beginning to fracture. In response, countries previously opposing the regime, including Canada, have suspended formerly imposed sanctions. In only a few months since I began writing this study, the regime has released thousands of political prisoners from prison, including democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. They have further conducted democratic elections, electing 43 members of the National

League for Democracy, including Suu Kyi, to office and signed a historic ceasefire agreement with the Karen National Union. And yet, it is too soon to claim a victory for justice in Burma. As the junta makes progress on one front, the ceasefire agreement with another ethnic army, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), has broken down on the northern border with China. In the last year, the KIA has clashed with the regime over economic exploitation and in resistance to abuses committed against the Kachin people living on the resource rich land in Kachin territory. As a result of the conflict, 75,000 Kachin villagers are living internally displaced in need of food, medicine and shelter (HRW, 2012). As countries lift sanctions on Burma due an exhibition of democratic progress and subsequently opening the economy for trade and development, the rights to livelihood, ownership of resources and general freedom remain precarious for Burma's ethnic people.

In exploring weaving within the larger context of Thai refugee camps, I have attempted to expose the restrictive location of persons with no status, in a country not bound to the official policies and practices of the UNHCR. For displaced persons from Burma living in Thailand, the tenets of freedom, choice and opportunity do not exist. Refugees in Thailand are restricted from practicing the livelihoods they have left behind including agriculture, foraging, horticulture and hunting. As few employment and education prospects are provided, many Karen women have little option to support their families other than through the sale of their weaving. Although the opportunity to weave and sell their products to supplement the needs of their families can be satisfying and empowering for many women, the dependency on income generation programs can also be exploitive of the weavers. For some women, the restrictiveness on quality, quantity

and creativity expected by some income generation programs, can create feelings of discontent, stress and worry. Additionally, the meagre earnings received by the weavers for the hours of work they contribute, raises questions of exploitation and economic viability. Although current restrictions on registration suggest an uncertain future for the thousands of Burmese refugees unregistered in Thai camps, the protracted situation of displacement, void of freedom and opportunity has resulted in 70,000 individuals choosing to resettle to a third country.

In contextually exploring the experience of Karen weavers in resettlement, I have considered the nature of the resettlement processes in Canada, which focus on the integration of newcomers into an existing society, with little consideration for the full depth of individual skills and how they inform identity formation. As Karen weavers construct identity in Canada, the defining characteristic of weaver is both embraced as a valuable and personal activity, reminiscent of what has been left behind and rejected as an attachment to the anguish of the past. As some women struggle to balance work, school and family as demanded in their new country, weaving is provided little space and is of minimal value. For other women not engaged in paid employment, weaving provides opportunity to participate in a meaningful activity displaying their skills. The restoration of weaving in third countries may offer refugee women the opportunity to support one another as they settle in their new country, assist in the construction of identity in resettlement that embraces cultural knowledge and encourage the passing on of traditional skills to the next generation. Settlement in Canada must move beyond the lone goal of integration and explore what has warranted meaning for individuals in their

past contexts and consider whether these items hold significant value in the formation of identity in the context of resettlement.

Though qualitative research I have considered Fraser-Lu's statement, "... a study of textiles serves as a useful lens through which to view a number of important social and cultural developments in South-East Asia" (1988, p. 16). I have found through my research, an interdependent connection between weaving, weaver and context. The interdependency of these elements results in a remoulding of meaning for weaving at each stage of migration. In Burma, weaving tells stories of community acceptance and belonging. Of cultural identification expressed through personal creation, self-sufficient gendered work and the passing on of tradition. Refugeeism in Thailand shapes weaving into a means of income generation to supplement the needs of one's family and to pass time in the waiting period of displacement.

In third country resettlement, it may be too soon to fully understand the meaning and interpretation of weaving for Karen women, nevertheless unless embraced and encouraged, the weaving of Karen women is almost certain to undergo a complete unravelling. Consequently it is important to consider the notion of enculturation in the discussion of Karen weaving in resettlement. Despite much consideration by the participants regarding the importance of maintaining Karen culture and Karen identity, as the weavers and their families forge a new path for themselves in their new country, the ability to hold traditions and practices from the past may prove to be extremely difficult. To belong in the dominant culture, one that does not currently value the traditional skills of the weavers, many women will be required to move away from their former cultural traditions in order to engage in what is accepted and demanded in their new home. Many

of the participants described weaving to already be in an evolutionary position as it is rejected by many due to the demands of school and work and continued by others despite the desire to do something different. Despite this, some women do continue to engage in the practice of weaving to do something they enjoy for themselves, continuing the tradition, with the hopes of passing it on. And yet, the enculturation of the next generation away from traditional education already signals a questionable future for the practice, but to what extent the cultural weaving of the Karen women is abandoned as they and their families transition into the dominant culture of their new home remains to be revealed.

As the strength of Karen weaving is of an indestructible quality, so too is the spirit of the Karen refugee women weavers I interviewed. In my time spent with the women for this research, I have been witness to the capacities of courage, strength and resiliency in the need to remake, restart and survive. I have also been so fortunate to experience the tenets of enduring generosity, kindness and humour in the face of extreme adversity. An exploration of weaving has offered me the opportunity to hear, observe and present the stories of Karen women from their perspectives. Although my own ethnographic journey into the world of Karen weaving, explored in this study, has in this sense come to end, I believe my process to learn, understand and act, committed to the pursuit of social justice, is only just beginning.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In Thailand, additional research would be beneficial to consider the role of income generation programs (IGPs) in the lives of refugee women. The findings from this study suggest that feelings of mistreatment in some income generation programs are

present amongst the women weavers. Although the economic benefit of such programming has been investigated to some extent, less information exists regarding the actual lived experience of the weavers participating in the programs. Research concerned with IGPs may further consider the association of exploitation and the craft industry in Thailand which is sustained in large part by ethnic minority and refugee women.

In North America, further exploration of intentional weaving restoration may provide additional information regarding the importance and meaning of weaving for Karen women in resettlement. Support for such programs could warrant the intentional restoration of traditional weaving in Canada. The development of weaving preservation programs would allow for further research that considers the role of weaving in the creation of identity in resettlement and could result in a comparative study with similar programs in the United States. Research on the restoration of traditional skills may also consider the impact on purpose for and meaning of weaving for Karen women, if actively supported, encouraged and valued by their new community.

Also, further research considering the resettlement processes of the Karen population in Canada would provide important data to better understand the actual lived experiences of Karen people resettling. Initial studies with refugees from Burma in the United States and Toronto suggest significant barriers in employment, housing, language, education and mental health (Jeung et al., 2011; Shakya et al., 2012). As well, Citizenship and Immigration Canada initially suggested that the resettlement of refugees from Burma would be a difficult transition due to their protracted situation in extreme isolation (2007a); however little data has been produced by CIC tracking the success of this

process. Additional research should examine the processes of resettlement for Karen refugees within the context of Canada.

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APPENDIX A

NAW MU EH & THE PYTHON

There are many different versions of the Karen story about Naw Mu Eh as the originator of the traditional snake (python) pattern (Marshall, 1922). This is the story of Naw Mu Eh and the snake pattern as told to me on February 16, 2012 by December Paw in Regina, Saskatchewan Canada.

You know, there was a lady named Naw Mu Eh, and in her village she is the most beautiful and very intelligent. She had a boyfriend in the village named Saw Boh Law and her boyfriend loved her very much and her boyfriend didn't let her do anything. Whenever he went to the field or farm, she just stayed in the village and she just waited for her boyfriend. She didn't have to do anything. She just stayed in the tent, in a small tent and her boyfriend just do all the things for her.

In another city, there was a hunter. He came to Naw Mu Eh's village and saw her. When he went back to his city and he let the king of his city know that he saw Naw Mu Eh and she is a worthy wife for him. His king gave him the permission to get the lady. The hunter had to create a wood image that looked like the lady. The statue looked like the lady and he put it in the tent and then just took the lady. He thought, if her boyfriend comes back, he will think my girlfriend is in the tent. But when her boyfriend came back, the statue looked like his girlfriend, but he saw that it is not his girlfriend.

At that time, the lady was taken to the city and was already with the king. The hunter just brought her to the king at that time. At that time, her boyfriend was very sad and he had to go to a fortune teller. He went to the fortune teller, to get an idea of how to get back his girlfriend. The fortune teller told him, you can get back your girlfriend but when you go on the way, there will be many temptations but you have to control yourself. Whatever the fortune teller told him, he must do it and follow it. The fortune teller told him that if you see the squirrel, don't kill and eat it. But if you eat the squirrel, don't eat with the vegetable and if you cut the meat, don't cut on the tree root.

When the boyfriend, Saw Boh Lay, went on the way, he remembered everything his fortune teller told him. The path was beautiful with the river and the trees but he would like to eat something. He was hungry but he didn't have anything to eat at that time. He killed the squirrel to cook but he didn't have anything to cut the meat. But he saw the root so he thought it would be good to cut the meat on the root. When he cut the meat on the root he saw one vegetable. He didn't have any vegetables but he just saw that one vegetable. It is kind of a special vegetable that he couldn't eat, but he had nothing else. He didn't have any other and he just had that one. He just picked it and cooked it. His

fortune teller told him, if you eat this meat with the vegetable, after you eat it, don't take a shower or bath. After he ate the squirrel with the vegetable, he became itchy. And he couldn't stand it. Then he saw the water, the pond, it is very pure and nice and he thought if he have shower he will be better. So he had a shower. When he came out, when he finished the shower and he came out he saw on his body that he had become a snake. When he remembered his fortune teller's words he couldn't do anything because it was too late for him but he continued going.

At that time he already became a snake but he still continued going to see his girlfriend. When he arrived in the city, he just stayed in a big box.

The King's name is Koon Nah Lay. This new boyfriend loved Naw Mu Eh very much too and the new boyfriend kept her at home all the time and he didn't let her do anything, just stay home. You know, one day when Naw Mu Eh stayed home, she heard some song from her pig Her pig made noise. And when she heard the song, she couldn't control herself to go and see her pig. At that time she was just spinning thread and when she went to see her pig, she saw a snake squeeze the pig. During that time she was screaming and she just beat the snake with her spinning stick. When she tried to hit the snake first time, the snake got a little bit bigger and the second time a little bit bigger and the third time bigger and bigger until the snake squeezed her. The snake took her to a hole in the mountain. And the king's servants went to tell him.

At that time her new boyfriend had gone to make the ring for her. When the king is going on the way [*on the path the king is travelling*], people cannot travel. So they asked one of the animals to go and tell the king. The animal cannot go and then they ask one of the birds. They just asked him, one of the birds to go and tell the king. Maybe the bird was screaming, the bird called, "king come hurry and come quickly because the snake took your girlfriend." At that time her new boyfriend came home and he didn't see the girlfriend.

Naw Mu Eh's new boyfriend loved her very much and also tried to get her back too. Everything he had he gave it to her. He tried many ways, he tried for many ways and he could see his girlfriend [*in the hole*] but the snake held her. After many ways of trying he couldn't get her back. He saw Naw Mu Eh. The snake was coiled, and she just stay in the middle, and Naw Mu Eh stay in the middle and she was weaving. Other people saw her too. She was just weaving and make [*the design of*] her old boyfriend, her boyfriend who is now a snake, the skin like this, her boyfriend's skin. They still have that place now, the hole is still there in Burma.

The king tried many ways but he couldn't get that, he didn't know how far from him Naw Mu Eh was. To know how far, he just got the river, but the river does not reach the place that Naw Mu Eh lived. Finally Saw Boh Law saw that the king really like her and he try

many ways for her, so he told Naw Mu Eh, her old boyfriend the snake told her that if the king really likes you, ask him to give his blood to me. The king asked for the dog blood, and the animal blood but you know the old boyfriend know it is not his real blood. He know everything is not the real blood. It is the enemy blood. Finally because he really liked the lady the king just gave his blood. He just cut his finger to give it to the snake. At that time the snake took the blood and then he let the lady go. When the snake took the blood, the king died.

When Naw Mu Eh came out of the hole, she didn't see her new boyfriend, but she just saw that her boyfriend was already dead. At that time she could not do anything. She was very upset and she thought she didn't have anyone to love because her old boyfriend had already become a snake and she couldn't do anything. And her new boyfriend was already dead, and she had nothing to do now. So, she just went to the fire and died with her new boyfriend together.

Naw Mu Eh is the first one who started weaving the snake pattern.



December Paw provided this example of the “snake” pattern that she wove on an unmarried woman’s traditional head dress or “hko peu”

APPENDIX B

THE ORIGINS OF KAREN WEAVING

This story was told to me on October 22, 2011 by a Thai-Karen woman living in the Karen village of Ban Hua Hee near the Thai-Burma in Thailand. She explained that the designs on women's shirts do not hold specific meaning but that this is the oral story she knows as to why Karen women weave colourful patterns on their solid coloured shirts.

A long time ago, there was a man and a woman who got married. At that time the women's clothing was pure black. After three days of being married, the husband left his wife. The woman was very sad so she went to get a tarot card reading. From the reading, she was told that her husband left her because her clothes were black. In order to have her husband stay, she needed to make her clothes colourful and sew flower patterns on to them. If she did this her husband would return and stay. That is why Karen women have bright colours and designs on their shirts, in the belief that it will keep their husbands from leaving them.



Karen women's shirts drying on a clothes line in Ban Hua Hee Karen village in Thailand.

APPENDIX C

REMEMBERING UMPIEM MAI

On February 24, 2012 I sat down to write the stories of three women living in Umpiem Mai refugee camp. I wrote the stories of Naw Htoo Kay, Naw Poe Pee and Naw Day. I wrote about their life in Burma and how they were forced to seek safety in Thailand after persecution and displacement in their villages. They told me about the years since leaving Burma and how they have been rebuilding their lives in Umpiem Mai. Remaking, creating, designing, working and doing ... the words they used to talk about how they are constructing their life in the camp. They told me about weaving and how they have weaving to help support their families, maintain their culture and fill their hands with purposeful work while they wait for peace in Burma. Their stories are ones of strength, courage and resiliency.

On February 24, 2012, as I wrote about these women sitting in my own home in Canada, a fire ripped through Umpiem Mai refugee camp. Within minutes, hundreds of homes, nursery schools, churches and mosques, all made of bamboo and leaves, were reduced to ashes. At least one-third of the camp was destroyed by the fire and over 4000 people affected (Mae Tao Clinic, 2012). I have no way of knowing how the lives of the women I interviewed have been affected by the fire. Maybe their houses have been destroyed, or their children's schools are gone, or their churches now piles of ash. I can only assume the worst and hope for the best.

Today I documented a snapshot of life for three women in Umpiem Mai refugee camp as it was three months ago. As I write, their lives have most likely changed again. The future is uncertain. My heart goes out to Naw Htoo Kay, Naw Poe Pee, Naw Day and all the men, women and children, forced into displacement and waiting for peace in Burma. (*February 24, 2011*)



I took this photo of Umpiem Mai refugee camp during my visit there on November 21, 2011



This is a photo of Umpiem Mai refugee camp after the fire on February 24, 2012 (photo courtesy of UmpiemFireRelief)