What would we come back to?

Decision-making about return and repatriation by Burmese migrants and refugees in Northern Thailand

Student: Eva-Maria Munck
em.munck@gmail.com
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements**  4  
**Abbreviations**  4  

1. Abstract  4  
2. Background  5  
   2.1 Background and motivation of the researcher  5  
   2.1.1 Where is the place to call home?  6  
   2.2 Purpose of thesis and research question  7  
   2.3 Terminology  9  
   2.4 General facts about Burma  10  
   2.5 Human development in Burma and Thailand  11  
      2.5.1 Women's development and gender equality in Burma  12  
      2.5.2 Corruption Index Burma and Thailand  12  
   2.6 Ethnicity and religion in Burma  13  
      2.6.1 Freedom of religion and rise of Buddhist nationalism  14  
3. Methodology  14  
   3.1 Key informant interviews  15  
   3.2 Observations  16  
   3.3 Focus group interviews  17  
      3.3.1 Focus group interview with Burmese migrants with Muslim confession  18  
      3.3.2 Focus group interview with Burmese migrants with Buddhist confession  19  
      3.3.3 Focus group interview with Burmese migrants with Christian confession  21  
   3.4 Research and power  21  
      3.4.1 Research ethical considerations  22  
4. A landscape and ethnography in constant transition  24  
   4.1 State of conflict and Peace Process of Burma  24  
   4.2 Mixed migration in Thailand  25  
      4.2.1 Refugee influx and camps along the Thai-Burma border  27  
      4.2.2 Ethnicity and religion in the refugee camps and among migrants  28  
      4.2.3 Freedom of belief in Burma versus Thailand  29  
      4.2.4 Repatriation and return of refugees  30  
      4.2.5 Challenges of returnees  33  
      4.2.6 Land issues in repatriation  34  
      4.2.7 Prepared efforts for return in South-Eastern Burma  34  
      4.2.8 Challenges for refugee youth  36  
   4.4 Life and conditions for migrant workers in Mae Sot  37  
      4.4.1 Labour day 2018 Mae Sot  37  
      4.4.2 Statistics on Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot  39  
      4.4.3 Obtaining legal documents for migrant workers  39  
      4.4.4 Minimum wages Burma and Thailand  40  
5. Life, hopes and dreams of migrants and refugees along the border  42  
   5.1 Livelihood  43  
      5.1.2 Value for money  47  
   5.2 Access to and cost of quality education  47  
      5.2.1 Kyaw Hla's story  47  
      5.2.2 Parents value and decisions on education  49  

---

2
Acknowledgements

Many beautiful people have contributed to this research with their knowledge, experiences and connections. Without the kind help and assistance of family and relatives, friends, acquaintances and colleagues, this research would not have been possible. Deep thanks for taking your time to talk to me, sharing your stories, parts of your life and for explaining situations and conditions for migrants and refugees. I am truly grateful to you all for receiving such amazing help.

Abbreviations

Cl: Certificate of Identity, document issued by the Myanmar government for citizens working abroad
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization
MLC: Migrant Learning Centre
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. Abstract

This research focuses on the special considerations and reasons for Burmese migrants and refugees from Burma living in Mae Sot, Tak province, Northern Thailand to stay in Thailand or return to Burma¹. The researcher has more than three-years of experience of living and working in Northern Thailand. During the thesis process, the researcher lived and worked in Mae Sot. A multi-method approach was applied to compile the experiences, knowledge, opinions and feelings of migrants and refugees from Burma.

The research presented in this thesis shows that, even though the push factors from leading a life in Thailand are increasing in terms of obtaining legal documents, the pull factors towards return or repatriation to Burma remain few for refugees and migrants. In terms of the labour situation, migrants can earn more money and get more value for

¹ This paper uses the name, Burma, to denote the country. The choice is further motivated in the section 2.4 General facts about Burma.
their money in Thailand. In addition, access to affordable education and health care is much greater in Thailand than in Burma, mostly due to initiatives by international non-governmental actors. In Burma, poverty continues to be an endemic challenge: there are difficulties for families to sustain their livelihoods and obtain access to quality healthcare and education.

The findings from the research explain that migrants from Burma, many of which represent a marginalized minority in terms of ethnicity and religion, do not consider a future in Burma for themselves or their families if not forced to leave Thailand. In particular, the Myanmar Muslim subpopulation and those with lower education possess experiences or have perceived discrimination of a potential future in Burma, largely related to issues with identification documents and registration. In addition, lack of land ownership remains a large obstacle for migrant workers and refugees in the consideration of where to live and work in the future.

2. Background

2.1 Background and motivation of the researcher

After having lived and worked in Mae Sot, a town in Thailand bordering Burma, for nearly two years, whereof one year the researcher was directly engaged in education support for Burmese migrants, the choice of thesis topic was not a difficult one. What I experienced has become a developed interest, growing concern and accumulated humble understanding in the constant learning process of living and working on a different continent with a myriad of cultures.

In 2005-2006, I volunteered as a young, idealistic and active 19-year old in a dormitory for Pwo-Karen children and youth. These children consisted of marginalized Thai citizens from mountain villages in Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son province. When I returned to Sweden in 2006 I became involved with the resettled community from Burma. There I met a passionate student of political science who had resettled two years previously and who later became my husband.
My first master's thesis in 2012 was in Music Education, with a minor field study supported by Swedish State Development Agency (SIDA) promoting Karen choir singing. The research involved visits to Mae La refugee camp as well as communities in Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son and Tak. In Tak I met with a Karen population, some of whom were in a situation of mixed migration\(^2\). Prior to establishing myself in Mae Sot in 2016 together with my partner, I spent three months in Yangon, Burma teaching Burmese young people from different ethnic groups which also gave important insights about the diversity and complexity of Burma as the country began to develop towards strengthened peace, democracy and reconciliation.

Since May 2017 I have worked to support migrant education with a local Non-Government Organization (NGO) based in Mae Sot. This work involves daily meetings with migrant stakeholders such as students, teacher and parents. Prior to this I worked as a consultant contributing to a review on refugee education for an International Non-Government Organization (INGO) which involved joining focus group interviews in Mae La refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border. Needless to say, these previous work experiences have contributed in many ways to this thesis. The ethical considerations I have made as a researcher are expressed in chapter 3.4.1.

Since it might surprise some readers, I would like to explain that I, advised by my supervisor, chose to maintain the personal perspectives I as a researcher acquired in the thesis process.

2.1.1 Where is the place to call home?

*For many years,*

*I've been trying to find the right words*

*For many years,*

*I've been crying and hoping*

*and praying and lying:*

---

\(^2\) The concept, mixed migration, is further explained in 2.3 Terminology.
When can we go back?
What will we come back to?
Where is the place to call home?

When can we go back?
What will we go back to?
Is this the place we can call home?

The poem above are the lyrics for a short song which I composed after a visit to Mae La refugee camp 2017. After having heard many parents share their stories involving struggles for their children’s future, I once again reflected on my own privileged situation. I thought the least I can do is write a song honouring the families I had just met. I have had access to higher education through Uppsala University at no costs at all. I have freedom of mobility which gives me the opportunity to travel and live across the world. I don’t have to worry about food for me or my family. I sat down in front of my digital piano and allowed the melody and the words to evolve in symbiosis.

2.2 Purpose of thesis and research question

The focus in this Master's thesis on mixed migration, return and repatriation for migrants as well as refugees from Burma/Myanmar, living in Mae Sot area, Northern Thailand. Mae Sot is an area with a large migrant population from Burma. While there are no complete statistics, the general estimation accounts for as much as 50% of the population are Burmese. Although many do not possess identity documents, resulting in them having no other identity than “stateless”. In addition, there are nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Together they hold more than one hundred thousand refugees.

This thesis explores the key factors and driving forces for Burmese people of mixed migration background in their considerations to stay in Thailand or return or repatriate to Burma/Myanmar. The thesis hypothesis is: Economic reasons are not exclusive factors in the decision for repatriating or returning to Burma for people of mixed migration background living in Thailand.

This research also strives to seek answers to the following questions:
• What factors contribute the most for people of mixed migration background in their choice of whether to stay on in Thailand or to return to Burma? (i.e. what are the push and pull factors?)
• Have the recent transitions towards democracy in Burma contributed to distinguishable changes in their considerations of return and/or repatriation?
• Are there differences in the considerations of returning or repatriating people depending on their religion?

Describing the human development and current state of the peace process in Burma is far from easy. Years ago, it was possible to give a rather black-and-white description of the country who once upon a time was called “the rice bowl of Asia”. 60 years of military dictatorship led the country to an unquestionable decay in terms of human development. Burma is a country with seven regions and seven ethnic states “blessed with a wealth of natural resources and biodiversity” but with a curse of unsustainable extraction and sale.³

On the one hand, the steps towards democracy are remarkable. During the 2015 election Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory. Meanwhile ethnic cleansing of Muslim Rohingyas and internal armed conflicts in Kachin, Shan and Karen state are ongoing. At the same time as these crises were taking place, there have also been many improvements in terms of basic social services for many Burmese people. Access to health care and education is in a situation of improvement. However, the government is still putting very little of its budget towards basic social services.

In this complicated and ever-changing environment, how are people in mixed migration situations living in Thailand considering return and repatriation? Which narrative is perceived dominant by Burmese society? Are migrants and refugees considering a future in their mother country at all? Or, is their previous experiences of conflict and hardship as well as the ongoing violence overshadowing recent minor improvements. What do people in mixed migration situations in Thailand think about their future within the next ten years? Are they interested and prepared to be back in a changed

³ Resource federalism, p. 2
Burma? Or, have they established themselves as Burmese migrants in Thailand with few reasons for them to consider return?

2.3 Terminology

According to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR), refugees are all persons outside their country of origin because of reasons due to fear of “persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and who, as a result, require international protection.” UNHCR defines Returnees as people who were formerly refugees and have returned to the country they originated from, “spontaneously or in an organized fashion but are yet to be fully integrated, including those returning as part of the operationalisation of the cessation clauses in the 1951 Convention and regional equivalents.”

Migrant is a wide-ranging term which is in the words of UNHCR covers “people who move to a foreign country for a certain length of time – not to be confused with short-term visitors such as tourists and traders. /--/ Migrants are fundamentally different from refugees and, thus, are treated very differently under international law. Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve their lives.” Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom.

As the large difference between the terms refugee and migrants are those who out of their own choice choose to move to another country to improve the future for themselves and their families, whereas a refugee is someone who was forced to flee their country out of fear of their own survival. The most appropriate terminology to describe most of the Burmese migrant population of Mae Sot would be mixed migration.

Although far from a recent phenomenon, mixed migration is a wide ranging and relatively new term which incorporates complex population movements such as those of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants. The main characteristics of mixed migration include “the irregular nature of and the multiplicity of factors driving such movements, and the differentiated needs and profiles of the persons

---

4 UNHCR (2013), p. 3
5 UNHCR (2018), Mixed migration
involved. /---/ Unaccompanied minors, environmental migrants, smuggled persons, victims of trafficking and stranded migrants, among others, may also form part of a mixed flow.”

2.4 General facts about Burma

Burma or Myanmar, as a collective country or a union, did not exist before the third Anglo-Burma war in 1885, when the country became a British colony under the name ‘Burma’. Up until 1989 the official name of the country was ‘Union of Burma’ when it was changed to ‘The republic of the Union Myanmar’. ‘Burma’ as well as ‘Myanmar’ derive from the word ‘Bamar’ which is the majority ethnic group in the country. Several other countries as well as ethnic minorities inside Burma believe ‘Myanmar’ refers to the Bamar majority rather than to the country as a whole and are therefore unwilling to recognize the name change from Burma to Myanmar. Myanmar is nevertheless still used by the United Nations. In this thesis, I will use Burma except for in proper nouns.

The British gave Burma independence in 1948. Since Burma became independent from British rule, the country has been in one of the world’s longest running civil wars. The fifty-five years of civil war are the main reason why Burma is considered one of the least developed countries in the world. The capital of Burma was in 2005 officially changed from Yangon to Naypyidaw, requiring all officials to move 320 kilometres from the former capital and Burma’s largest city, Yangon. Colonial buildings in Yangon which were a base for many of the British people living in Burma, are still today a distinguished part of the city’s scenery, even though they have not been kept in repair.

Estimations of Burma’s population range from 47-60 million people. According to the internationally-criticized census, the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Migration and Urbanization which was the first census since 1983, 30% of the population resides in urban areas and 70% lives in rural areas. According to the census report from 2017, an estimated 4.25 million of the people born in Burma now live abroad. The majority originates from border areas such as Mawlamyine (Mon State)

______________________________

6 Ibid.
7 Myanmar Government, Foreword III
and Hpa-An (Karen State) and most live in Thailand or Malaysia. It goes without saying that the report was compiled before the crises in Rakhine state, when 700,000 Muslim Rohingya were forcibly displaced to Bangladesh.

2.5 Human development in Burma and Thailand

Human Development Reports (HDR) focuses on how human development can be ensured for everyone—now and in future. It starts with an account of the hopes and challenges of today’s world, envisioning where humanity wants to go. The UN vision draws from and builds on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which was endorsed by the 193 member states of the United Nations in 2015 alongside the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) UN member countries have committed to achieving.

In worldwide research from 2016 by United Nations Development Programme, Myanmar is ranked number 145 out of 188 countries and territories, and appears as number 39 out of the 41 countries in the Middle Human Development group. The Human Development Index (HDI) measures “three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living”. Burma/Myanmar, among 29 countries in the East Asia and the Pacific group, was valued with the Human Development Index (HDI) 0.556, which is below the average of 0.631 for countries in the medium human development group. In 2016 Burma/Myanmar was defined as a country of medium human development. In 2012 Burma was defined as low human development group. With this said, it is misleading to compare these values and rankings to those in previous reports, as there are updates in underlying data as well as adjustments to the methodology. Thailand is placed in the high human development category with an HDI value of 0.740 (2015). The country positioning it at 87 out of 188 countries and territories which is a rank shared with Peru.

---

8 UNFPA
9 UNDP (2017). p. 200-201
10 UNDP, Human development report, country notes Myanmar, p. 2
11 UNDP, Human development report, country notes Thailand, p. 2
2.5.1 Women's development and gender equality in Burma

Women's development and gender equality are fundamental dimensions of human development\textsuperscript{12} and should not be described as "add-on issues in development", rather than a mainstream dimension in the human development discourse; locally, nationally and globally\textsuperscript{13}. United Nations Human Development Index in Gender Inequality Index value of 0.375, ranking Burma/Myanmar 80 out of 156 countries in the 2016 index.\textsuperscript{13} Per cent of parliamentary seats in the Myanmar parliament are held by women. The percentage of adult women who have reached a secondary or higher level of education is 27.1 per cent, compared to 20 per cent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 178 women die from pregnancy related causes; and the adolescent fertility rate is 16.5 births per 1000 live births. Female participation in the labour market is 75.1 per cent compared to 81.1 for men.\textsuperscript{14} Due to lack of relevant data, neither Inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI), Gender Development Index (GDI) nor Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was calculated for Burma/Myanmar.\textsuperscript{15}

2.5.2 Corruption Index Burma and Thailand

Transparency International, the global organization fighting corruption worldwide, ranks level of corruption in 180 countries and territories and measures their perceived levels of public sector corruption. A scale of 0 to 100 is used, where 0 represents extreme corruption and 100 has no trace of corruption. Transparency International gives Myanmar/Burma a score of 30 out of 100 resulting in 130th place in the 2017 Corruption Perception Index. These rankings show that the best performing region is Western Europe with an average score of 66. The worst performing regions on the other hand are Sub-Saharan Africa (average score 32) and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (average score 34).\textsuperscript{16} In 2010, Burma was in the very bottom of the ranking alongside with Afghanistan and Somalia. In the same ranking, Thailand is given a score of 37 out of 100, ending up in place 96 out of 180 countries. In 2016 Thailand had a score of 35 and in 2015 and 2014 the country had a score of 38.

\textsuperscript{12} UNDP (2017), p. 19
\textsuperscript{13} UNDP (2017), p. 41
\textsuperscript{14} UNDP, Human development report, country notes Myanmar, p. 5
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 4-5
\textsuperscript{16} Transparency International
2.6 Ethnicity and religion in Burma

The sociological and anthropological context of Burma is multidimensional and diverse with 135 officially registered ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{17} Burma is a religiously diverse country with Buddhism as the largest religion. The overwhelming majority (88\%) of the population are followers of Theravada Buddhism. Around 6\% of the population are Christians (Baptist, Roman-Catholicism and Anglicans being the largest denominations) and 4\% are Muslim, most which are Sunni Muslims. Moreover, there are small communities of traditional Chinese religions as well as indigenous religions.\textsuperscript{18}

The government officially declares 135 ethnic minorities under 8 major national ethnic races in Burma. The government’s approach has been criticized for being based on numerology, creating division and labelling people within the ethnic minority community.\textsuperscript{19} The Burmese government has received harsh criticism by the international community for not acknowledging the Muslim Ethnic minority Rohingya as one of the official ethnic minorities. The rich ethnography and continued conflict have shaped the educational systems of Burma where multiple ethnic providers of basic education services play a key role in sustaining the right to basic human rights, such as education.\textsuperscript{20}

The author and researcher Ibrahim Azeem considers Burma to be in a situation where religion is confused with ethnicity, similar to that of Thailand and Sri Lanka. On this basis, he deems religion “can be used as an excuse for extremist groups to justify violence against those of different faiths and ethnic groups”.\textsuperscript{21} Marriage continue to be denied between people of different religious and ethnic groups. In 2015, a controversial Interfaith law was approved, restricting inter-religious marriages. The proponents of the

\textsuperscript{17} United States, Burma 2016 International Religious Freedom report, p. 1
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Lintner
\textsuperscript{20} World Education, p. 26
\textsuperscript{21} Azeem, p. 69
law say that it was created as a protection for Buddhist women who marry outside of their faith, and additionally critics argue that the law discriminates against many ethnic minority people. In the current Burmese culture and praxis, if a woman marries someone from another religion than herself, she is in most cases expected to convert to the religion of her husband.

2.6.1 Freedom of religion and rise of Buddhist nationalism

According to the constitution, Burma guarantees its citizens “the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution.” There have been two different Buddhist monk movements with a nationalistic agenda, namely 969 movement and the Ma Ba Tha. These movements focus on promoting and protecting Buddhism from what they see as treats. There is an obvious anti-Islamic message in their rhetoric which not all adherents agree with.

Since 2011, the rise of Buddhist nationalistic and anti-Muslim rhetoric and activity has yielded both domestic and international concern. According to International Crisis group, the rise of religious-motivated nationalism is a global phenomenon and not unique for the Burma context. The relationship between the Buddhist monkhood and monastic movement, in Pali language called “Sangha” and the state, is by many in the Buddhist majority viewed as symbiotic. In the argumentation of Matthew Walton, “Buddhism and nationalism has become almost inseparably intertwined in Theravada Buddhist majority countries like Myanmar.”

3. Methodology

In the choice of methods for an anthropological study such as this one, I found it appropriate to use a mixed-methods approach: primarily interviews, key informant interviews and group interviews, alongside a comprehensive literature review and

---

22 Radio Free Asia
23 United States, Burma 2016 International Religious Freedom report, p. 1
24 Azeem, p. 68
25 International Crisis group, p. 3
26 Ibid.
27 Walton
reflection on observations while living on the border. Eleven key informants were interviewed (formally and informally): all anchored in different ways, by work or own experience, to the situation for Burmese migrants and refugees. Three focus groups were formally conducted during the beginning of May with migrants of mixed genders, ages and different religious identities.

3.1 Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives possessing different experiences and responsibilities from the mixed migration community. The basis of this research were key informant interviews conducted in Mae Sot between January and May 2018. Nine people from various contexts and background were formally interviewed. These local partners were selected based on experience, involvement and work among migrants and refugees in Mae Sot. Moreover, the information from an informal conversation with two people were included in the fact basis of the thesis. Several of the people I interviewed are also themselves migrants from Burma, some with a personal refugee experience, all with a large network of other migrants, refugees as well as family and friends in Burma.

In the choice of participants for the key informant interviews, it was vital to consider different dimensions as well as fractions of civil society and views on return and repatriation. A representation of civil society actors with long experiences in local, community-based organisations as well as International Non-Governmental Organisations were chosen. To secure a suitable mixture of interviewees, the people selected as key informants did not work for the same NGO. People with the following experiences and commitments (current or previous) were interviewed:

- A female officer at UNHCR in Mae Sot with foreign country citizenship
- A female senior manager in an INGO focusing on child rights with foreign country citizenship
- Two males from Burma working in two different NGOs in the Education sector in Mae Sot with mixed migration backgrounds of their own and foreign country citizenship
- A Thai female social worker working with marginalised communities
• A Thai male interpreter in Thai and Burmese belonging to a Muslim community
• A Thai female child rights worker in an INGO belonging to a Muslim community
• An experienced male NGO worker, previously working in an INGO focusing on Education and other rights for Burmese migrants and refugees, with foreign country citizenship
• An experienced female NGO worker, previously working in an INGO focusing on Education and other rights for Burmese migrants and refugees, with personal refugee and mixed migration background and foreign country citizenship

Before meeting with the informants, the researcher always asked them where they would be comfortable to meet. All interviews were made in coffee shops with three exceptions: one interview was made with two people at the same time in the office of one of them. One interview was made in the home of the person being interviewed upon request. Interviews were recorded through taking notes in a Microsoft Word document while listening to the informants. Upon receiving informed consent from the informant, most interviews were also recorded using the voice recording function on a mobile phone with necessary security measures. Interviews intentionally took place in calm, peaceful environments. The questions asked in the interviews can be found in Annex 1.

3.2 Observations
Naturally, having lived in Mae Sot for nearly two years, whereof one year in the field of migrant education, the researcher has made uncountable observations shaping the paradigm used in synthesizing this thesis. It is not an overstatement to say that each day of the thesis writing process could be regarded as having experiences of unstructured observations, planned and unplanned, which all contribute to the mosaic which is the basis of the findings in this thesis. My own obliged visits to the Thai immigration office in Mae Sot could for instance be made as an opportunity to see the procedure for the Burmese migrants lined up in their process of obtaining work permits. Inspired by reading Kirin Narayan’s “Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov”, I nourished the ambition to put large efforts into observations and how to narrate these in a creative way.
The circumstances during the last years have changed much in terms of accessibility to the refugee camps along the border. It has become much more difficult to request permission to enter. Also, being a spectator in a refugee camp rhymes poorly with empathy. My decision to not enter the camp was also based on that I have had five pervious experiences of visiting Mae La Refugee camp starting from 2006. I have one time been inside the camps for private reasons, visiting my husband’s relatives. One visit was in 2011 when I wrote my thesis on Choir singing among Karen people and interviewed choir leaders in Thailand, Burma and the camp. Two visits have been related to personal involvement in Swedish Christian NGOs who have partnered with the Bible school inside the camp.

My most recent visit was in March 2017, when I worked as a consultant for a report on refugee education carried out by an INGO. During this visit, I participated in two focus group interviews with refugee parents on their thoughts and hopes on their children’s education. One of the interviews was made with a Myanmar Muslim focus group.

3.3 Focus group interviews

Three focus group interviews were made early in May 2018. I made the deliberate choice to break up the interview groups by religious identification to ensure to the largest possible extent that the participants would be able to speak their mind openly. Two acquaintances acted as local facilitators in the process to set up the interview sessions for the three groups. As recommended by one local facilitator who volunteered to assist me, the participants in the group interview were given a small gift after the interview consisting of oil, dishwashing fluid and hygiene articles after the group interview. To reduce any risk of bias, the participants were not informed about the gift prior to the interview.

An interpreter was used in all three interviews. For group interviews with the Muslim and the Buddhist migrants, the interpreter was the same person: a 26-year-old man from Burma with an ethnic minority identity and local community involvement. For the group interview with Christian focus group he was unavailable, so a 36-year-old man working in an NGO with long experience from translating and interpreting acted as an interpreter. This kind man has an ethnic minority identity as well. Before both
interviews, the researcher met with the interpreter to go through the research questions and the contexts.

The same interview questions were more or less used in all three interviews. These can be found in Annex 2. In all interviews, I discovered that I needed to be careful in phrasing questions so that the individuals would answer considering their entire community and not only consider their own situation or the situation for their family. In the beginning, the question “What would be the reasons for migrants living in Thailand to return to Burma?” would only generate an answer with a reflection on the participants’ own family.

3.3.1 Focus group interview with Burmese migrants with Muslim confession
In the early afternoon of Saturday May 5, community members living in one of the Muslim communities in Mae Sot, participated in a focus group interview. The group interview took place on location in a community house located in the middle of the community and next door to the local Mosque. Nine people, five women and four men, participated in the interview, which was facilitated by an INGO worker with local knowledge and possessing Muslim identity as well as an interpreter originating from Burma working at a CBO in the area. One of the participants in the group interview functions as an Imam, a Muslim religious leader, in the community.

On arrival to the community meeting hall with the facilitator and the interpreter, it was clear that there had been a misunderstanding about the interview. I did not fully understand the components in the problem, but it seemed to be that some of the community members thought that a permission was needed from a community leader to conduct the interview. The facilitator acted calm and explained the situation. Initially, she had planned and set up for two interview sessions, one with only women and one with only men. This recommendation was made to ensure that the women would feel free to speak their mind. However, after the misunderstanding and the discussion with male community members, we decided to conduct one joint interview involving both women and men.
At first, I was worried that this would lead to less expression of the female voices. However, since the local facilitator decided to stay in the interview together with the interpreter, she could encourage the female participants to freely speak their mind. There was a dominating male participant who often took the liberty to be the first to answer every question. This made me worried that other men and women did not get the chance to share their opinions and experiences. In the middle of the interview, I could, through the sensitive translation by the interpreter and the actions from facilitator, direct the discussion so that all participants could answer the questions. The participants in the focus group had similar views on the reasons and key factors for migrants to stay in Thailand. However, the individuals in the focus groups who did not belong to the majority religion articulated and reasoned more about the aspect of freedom of belief.

I was surprised to understand that this was the first academic interview for the majority of participants in the groups. I imagine that the number of students doing masters-level research about the conflict in Burma or situation of Burmese migrants and refugees in Thailand has decreased over the recent years. Before the transition towards peace and democracy started in Burma around 2010, Mae Sot was the temporary home to many students and researches who wanted to study the conflict in Burma and the situation for refugees along the Thai-Burma border. Now, after many positive changes and what can be considered as the most democratic election Burma has had in modern days, other conflicts and situations are perhaps considered to be more urgent and interesting? Even though more than 100 000 people are still in limbo in the nine refugee camps along the border, naturally and justifiably so, the displacement and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people demands the primary attention of the international community. I imagine that Sittwe in Rakhine State might right now have the same influx of students and research as Mae Sot had ten years ago.

3.3.2 Focus group interview with Burmese migrants with Buddhist confession

The interview took place in the early afternoon of Friday May 11. It was made possible by a female Christian community volunteer from a foreign country who together with her husband have created a community house and a social enterprise for and near to a migrant community. They had also just completed a summer learning camp for the
children in the community with focus on school subjects. Moreover, they run a breakfast club for malnourished children. The facilitator chose not to participate in the interview since she wanted to be sensitive and careful; she thought her presence might influence the discussion of the group given that the community members know that she is non-Buddhist herself.

The community house was full of people when we arrived due to a concurrent meeting on health insurance for migrant families. The three invited community workers gave information to primarily female migrants in Burmese language. Around 20 metres from the community house lies the migrant community from which they are from. The houses, more like shacks, have temporary building structures and tin roofs. Children of different ages were playing outside the community. Occasionally, a child would knock on the door to seek their mother.

When I initially asked about the participants to introduce themselves, they also gave me the background of their community. It turned out that the community they were currently living had only existed since 2015. Before that, all participants in the interview used to live in another community which has since been demolished. The inhabitants in this community received a formal warning: unclear if it was from the landowner, sub-district and/or the police. They needed to move, otherwise their houses would be “taken down with tractors”. I would imagine that it was painful to share this story, however, the participants did not show either nostalgia nor trauma, on the other hand, they tried to recall the series of events in chronological order. My interpretation of the unemotional way they shared the story is that they considered the situation to be a normality in the lives of undocumented migrants living in Thailand. At the same time, they are perhaps more content in the community where they are residing now.

There were 5 women and 1 man participating in the focus group interview. Some of the women in the interview group are engaged in a social enterprise in Mae Sot. Due to the choice of time for interview, in the middle of a Friday, few men could participate in the interview due to work, I was told.
3.3.3 Focus group interview with Burmese migrants with Christian confession

The focus group interview took place on Saturday May 12. I met a group of 6 people in a local Burmese speaking church. 5 female and 1 man joined the interview. Prior to the interview, most of the participants had joined a singing practice in preparation for a Sunday morning service the following day. Two young girls who participated in the interview were initially very shy. At first, I almost got the impression that they did not want to join. However, it turned out that the reason they were reserved was because they were uncomfortable speaking Burmese. Luckily, the local interpreter who kindly enabled the interview to take place had the same mother tongue as the two girls. Thankfully, he could therefore communicate with them in Sqaw Karen, an ethnic minority language, mixed with some words in Burmese which enabled them to express more of their experiences and stories.

One woman in the focus group had a much longer experience of living in Mae Sot: 30 years. She and the young Sqaw Karen man who joined the interview work for the same organisation, a Christian development and relief NGO which supports development work in several states and divisions inside Burma as well as relief work to the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh were 700 000 Rohingyas are sheltered. These two participants expressed a view of the situation for migrants and refugees where they immediately reflected broadly, not only considering the lives of migrants in the same situation as themselves. It was evident that the participants in this interview were very familiar to each other’s life stories and situation. On specific questions, when some considered there to be an important story to be told by one of the others, they encouraged the other person to speak out and share his or her story.

3.4 Research and power

When conducting research with marginalized populations in development contexts there exists a power dynamic which needs to be carefully and intentionally managed. Entering into a new environment as a researcher and bringing your own expectations and agenda creates an inevitable change of contextual dynamics. Doing research is also forming an intervention, especially apparent in research conducted in socioeconomically challenged environments where research participants have low access to education. Questions that are asked and observations that are made can be considered as an
intervention in the context as they give participants an opportunity to reflect on the challenges they have faced. The awareness of what risks there are of harming an environment with its community is crucial in performing considerate and responsible research.

It is vital for me as a researcher from Sweden, without any personal experience of poverty or war, to be sensitive and careful in asking questions of return and/or repatriation to people from the migrant and refugee community.

Moreover, it has been important for me as a researcher to adapt to the situation and current life schedule of my informants. Because of this reason, many of interviews were delayed due to the end of term for students, religious activities and high workload for some due to application of Certificate of Identity and work permit. Considerations were also made in relation to the large Buddhist new year’s festival, referred by many as “Water Festival”, which in Thai is called Songkran and in Burmese, Thingyan. This is the longest holiday during the year where people will make large efforts to go back to their places of origin to visit family and friends. Thingyan in Thailand and Burma is a four-to-five-day festival in mid-April. Even though only a few days are public holidays, the “holiday feeling” starts some days before and ends some days after the actual calendar holidays. In a Western context, it is perhaps much comparable to the break from work during Christmas and New Year’s. During this time, it was not advisable to schedule or carry out any interviews.

3.4.1 Research ethical considerations

As a researcher in this context it is very important to take a position in line with the principle of “Do No Harm” and consider interventions to mitigate potential psychological or experienced-induced harm. Even though there might be no problem in terms of security for me as a researcher, I might risk putting the people I interview and the organisations I approach in a difficult and even dangerous situation. Moreover, the question on return and repatriation is a highly sensitive one, which needs to be asked in the most sensitive way possible. It was therefore important that the interview part of this study was conducted fully considering the situation of the local people. I find
applying the principles of Collaborative for Development Action crucial in the ambition to do least possible harm.

Being based in Mae Sot and working daily with Burmese migrants, I decided for research ethnical reasons, as well as in the light of the principle of do no harm, it would be unethical to conduct focus group interviews with beneficiaries of the organisation where I work. Not taking this regard would perhaps have been easier to arrange interviews with teachers or parents of students that are beneficiaries of the Thai foundation which I work for. It would have led to misunderstandings about my role as a researcher. It could have created bias for me and potentially caused the people I interviewed to, aware of it or not, apply a filter when sharing their life conditions, hopes and dreams for the future. I saw two major risks when interviewing people supported by the organisation where I work: Either, the informants would have exaggerated their life situation in order to promote continued or increased support, or, they could have decided to be modest in the description of their life situation out of courtesy or consideration to the support they are given by the organisation. Moreover, even if they perhaps did not want to participate, they might have felt obligated to participate in the research in fear of endangering access to future support.

With this reflection and careful consideration, I instead trusted three locally-grounded people to help set up focus group interviews. A female Thai Muslim citizen working at a NGO with focus on development and relief for children arranged for me to meet with the Muslim focus group. The interview took place in a community where she has worked that she was very familiar with. However, she explained to community members in the interview that this interview was unrelated to her work. A female community worker from a foreign country with long experience in Mae Sot arranged the interview with the Buddhist focus group. The community members joining this interview all live in the community where she is working on the community development project. Prior to the interview, she made it clear to the participants that the interview was unrelated to the relief and development work in that community. The community worker introduced me to a third person, a male NGO worker from Burma active in the same church as herself. This person arranged and participated himself in the interview with the Christian focus group.
4. A landscape and ethnography in constant transition

4.1 State of conflict and Peace Process of Burma

After more than sixty years of ethnic conflict, Burma is now in major and unpredictable transition towards peace and authentic democracy. The next Union Peace Conference is scheduled to take place in May, however, doubts remain due to lack of recent achievements in the peace process. A stable and sustainable development requires considerable reforms to provide access to health, quality education, security, livelihoods and freedom from fear and discrimination for the population of Burma: a country which as a matter of fact did not exist prior to becoming a British colony.

Burma is divided into fourteen areas; seven states, each named after the seven largest ethnic groups; and seven divisions with a Bamar majority population.

In January 2018, ten of the eighteen Ethnic Armed Groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement: a fundamental component of the peace process. The Karen National Union (KNU) is the largest of these groups. Due to security reasons, many of their departmental headquarters, such as Health, Economics, Education, Land and Forest, are based in Mae Sot.

There are ongoing internal violent conflicts in many parts of the Union of Myanmar, specifically in Kachin State, Shan State, Rakhine State and since the beginning of March also Karen (Kayin) State after years of ceasefire. In Rakhine State the Rohingya Muslim minority ethnic group are suffering from institutional discrimination and violence based on their ethnicity and religion. More than 700 000 Rohingya people have been forcefully displaced after the military crackdown during August 2017. In the large refugee camps

---

28 EBO, p. 1
29 Ibid, p. 9
30 Reuters
in Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh there are around 800,000 people currently residing. 200,000 out of these are from a previous displacement. The situation for Muslim Rohygingas is by United Nations Human rights experts defined as ethnic cleansing.\(^{31}\) The recommendations from the seven Human rights experts who joined together in a call to stop all violence against Rohygingas stated, “Myanmar should provide uninterrupted humanitarian access to international organizations to assist tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of internally displaced people in Rakhine State. It should further ensure full and unfettered access of human rights monitors including the Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission for an independent and impartial assessment of the situation on the ground.”\(^{32}\)

### 4.2 Mixed migration in Thailand

During the past four decades, Thailand has hosted more than 3 million refugees.\(^{33}\) The first influx of refugees from Burma/Myanmar to Thailand came in 1984 and since then, there have been temporary shelters along the Thai-Myanmar border. There are nine refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border hosting over 100,000 people. The largest camp, Mae La refugee camp, has a current population of around 37,000 people and 6,700 households according to Burma Border Consortium which is an umbrella organisation caring for all services in the refugee camp.\(^{34}\)

In 2017 Thailand was expected to host 1.9 to 3 million Burmese people, a large proportion of whom were unregistered migrant workers. The two largest areas containing a migrant population from Burma are Bangkok city and Tak province. The 2015 supplementary report from IOM on the migration patterns of people from Burma/Myanmar stated that out of 3.5 million migrants, 3 million are expected to be in the labour market. The largest migrant community in Thailand is by far the population originating from Burma with an estimated 2.3 million people.\(^{35}\)

---

31 UNHCR (2017, September)
32 Ibid.
33 UNHCR (2006)
34 The Border Consortium (2018)
35 IOM (2015), p. 5
Mae Sot, a small town in Tak province which is the context of this thesis, has an estimated 200 000 inhabitants of which there is an estimated 100 000 Burmese migrants. Through observations, the society in Mae Sot can be described as a diverse combination of Thai and Burmese cultures. An example of the mutual trade relationship is that all announcements in the large and well-known mall *Robinsons* are made in both Thai language and Burmese languages.

There are also populations of ethnic groups from Burma in Mae Sot, the most distinctive are Karen and Myanmar Muslims, however, there are also people of Mon, Kachin, Kayah and Shan ethnicity. Moreover, given the many years of international aid due to the proximity to the refugee camps and the border, the number of INGOs, NGOs and Faith-based mission organisations with a background in Europe, USA and Canada are probably larger in Mae Sot than any other place in Thailand which has much influenced the town in terms of restaurants, coffee shops, stores, community activities and general knowledge of English.

Mae La refugee camp, the largest among the nine camps along the Thai-Burma border lies a 40-minute drive from the city centre, on the Mae Ra Mat road. There is traffic to and from the camps each day. Almost one time per hour, the popular local transportation vehicle with two sitting benches opposite each other in the back of a truck, in Thai referred to as a *song teow*, fills up from the bus station in Mae Sot city to
depart for Mae La refugee camp. From the camp, it is possible to obtain a day pass to travel outside of the camp. A person living in the refugee camp can apply for permission to, for example, go to Mae Sot for a hospital visit. There are, however, certain ambiguities in the issues of permissions.

4.2.1 Refugee influx and camps along the Thai-Burma border
The local organization Burma Link describes the background for many refugees: “The majority of refugees residing in refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border were forced to abandon their homes and villages in Burma due to direct or indirect consequences of armed conflict in ethnic areas. Some fled in fear after family members were killed, served as porters, tortured, and/or raped during conflict and many relocated because of the Burma Army decimating their homes and villages. Some have had to face repeated displacement prior to reaching refugee camps.”

As Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, displaced Myanmar migrants in Thailand are not entitled to Refugee status. This is the reason why the "refugee camps" along the border are referred to by the Royal Thai Government as "temporary shelters." There are nine refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border, situated in four provinces; Mae Hong Son (four camps), Tak (three camps), Kanchanaburi (one camp) and Ratchaburi (one camp). The refugee camps vary in size. The largest camp is Mae La Refugee Camp in Tak province where 36,703 people currently live. The refugee camps with the smallest population are Ban Mae Surin with 2,277 people and Ban Don Yangon with 2,746 people.

An organisation called The Border Consortium (TBC) provides food, shelter and other kinds of support to the more than 100,000 people living in refugee camps in Western Thailand. Besides the refugees, TBC also provides support to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) affected by the conflict in Burma.

---

36 Burma Link and Burma Partnership, p. 7
37 IOM (2015), p. 5
38 TBC (2018), Mae La refugee camp
39 TBC (2018), About us
TBC has its head-office in Bangkok. The organisation has changed and evolved over the years. As of April 2018, TBC’s nine member organisations included: Christian Aid (UK and Ireland), Church World Service (USA), DanChurchAid (Denmark), Diakonia (Sweden), Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (The Netherlands), Inter Pares (Canada), International Rescue Committee (USA) and Norwegian Church Aid (Norway).

A key actor in the coordination of services for people in the temporary shelters is the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT). CCSDPT is a coordination committee comprised of the UNHCR and eighteen INGOs and NGOs committed to humanitarian service and protection activities. CCSDPT was founded in 1975 and has its headquarters in Bangkok.\(^\text{40}\) As of February 2017, there were 102,412 refugees living in the nine camps according to the statistics from TBC. One year later, in February 2018, the number decreased to 100,015 people verified by the United National High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR) and the Thailand Ministry of Interior (MOI).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refugees by Ethnicity</th>
<th>Refuges by Age Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>New Born &lt; 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.80%</td>
<td>1.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karenni</td>
<td>6 months &lt; 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.20%</td>
<td>11.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burman</td>
<td>5 years &lt; 18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.20%</td>
<td>33.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>&gt;= 18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.70%</td>
<td>54.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: The Border Consortium (2018)*

4.2.2 Ethnicity and religion in the refugee camps and among migrants

The ethnography of the refugees in the nine camps along the Thai-Burma border is quite different from the ethnic diversity in Burma as a whole. Within the nine camps the UNHCR estimates that approximately 83% are of Karen ethnicity, 10% are Karenni, 4% are Burmese/Burman and 1% are Mon and 2% are other ethnicities.\(^\text{41}\) In terms of religion, 50% are self-identified as Christians, 36% Buddhists, 8% Islam/Muslims and 1% Other.\(^\text{42}\)

\(^{40}\) CCSDPT, Website

\(^{41}\) UNHCR (2018, March)

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
There are temples, churches and mosques in the camps and many organized religious activities for the camp population. Religious organizations also run religious learning activities or institutions, such as Bible and Islamic schools. From my own observations and from speaking to people with experiences working or living in the camps, I have understood that the refugee camps have clear divisions between religions.

There are no statistics available on the religion and ethnicity of Burmese migrants living in Mae Sot. Based on the focus groups interviews and observation, my own appreciation says that the majority are Buddhists and Bamar with groups of Christian and Muslim migrants. Just like in Burma, the clear majority of people identifying themselves as Christian and Muslim also belong to an ethnic minority group. A Thai informant working in a Thai foundation providing social services for Burmese migrants was asked to describe the differences between Thai government schools and the migrant learning centres. They cited religion as one of the main differences. In general, the leadership and teacher collegium in migrant schools has more diversity in terms of religious identity than the Thai government schools.

Even though many migrant communities are separated by religious affiliation, there are also exceptions where people of different religions live in the same community. One example was given by an NGO worker working on enrolment in Thai government schools for out of school children. He described one of the communities where he helps children in their enrolment processes. Burmese migrants of Muslims and Buddhist identity live together in the same community. The Muslim migrants live in one part of the village and Buddhist migrants live in another.

4.2.3 Freedom of belief in Burma versus Thailand

Muslim as well as Christian migrants in the focus groups perceived that there is a greater degree of religious freedom in Thailand compared to Burma. Notwithstanding that the Buddhist majority is larger in Thailand than in Burma and that the government of Thailand is highly affiliated with the Buddhist religion, there is an experience among migrants of Muslim and Buddhist identity that there is greater freedom in terms of worship and expressions in Thailand.
Two informants referred to a speech and an approach that the late King of Thailand, King Bhumibol Rama IX had held towards believers from religions other than Theravada Buddhism. He had said that people of all religions in Thailand should be respected. King Rama IX had also told Muslim religious leaders when he met them that they could do “what they needed to do” in an encounter with His Majesty. This was interpreted to refer to the permission of Muslims to not need to bow down for the King, as they would only do for God. The informant, a Thai Muslim citizen, quickly found a photo using Google that was taken from the encounter between King Rama IX and the Islamic leaders. Notwithstanding that Thai society is a majority Buddhist society, this is clear in all government schools where all students are expected to recite a Buddhist creed during the morning assembly. The communication on freedom of belief from the previous King of Thailand has played a major role in the way Thai society values religious diversity. King Rama IX and the Queen also played an important role in the translation of the Quran into Thai language.

4.2.4 Repatriation and return of refugees

Most the refugees that could register between 2004 and 2005 have already left the refugee camps. Since 2008, resettlement from the camps to third countries started to decrease. In 2015, 6400 people were resettled. In 2016, five thousand registered refugees were resettled.

The obvious question of concern for people in the camps or with relationship ties is when the camps will close. Prior to 2018 there were rumours in the refugee and migrant communities that the camps would close in 2018. The contributing background of this elaborate rumour was the cuts in rations by The Border Consortium and pull out by international donors.

However, the true answer is that the camps face an uncertain future. The camps are under the overall management of the Royal Thai Government which has not given a clear timeline regarding camp closure. UNHCR accounts for three different modes of return: Spontaneous, Facilitated and Promoted. UNHCR support the right to return regardless of whether the return is spontaneous, facilitated or promoted. According to

---

43 The Nation
44 Burma Link, website
the UNHCR, facilitated return offers the most protection since it follows a legal, transparent process in alignment with international principles as well as some modest assistance. The return guidelines from the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), the largest ethnic organisation operating in the refugee camps along the border state that voluntary repatriation is the only acceptable form of repatriation and that forced repatriation will not be tolerated. The approach of UNHCR is the same in Thailand as in other places with a refugee population. UNHCR will only facilitate voluntarily return and is committed to not forcing return on any refugee. The guiding principles of voluntary return is Voluntariness, Safety and Dignity. When refugees are in the process of facilitated voluntarily return they are granted an assistance package.

So far there has been two voluntary repatriation processes from refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. The first one was carried out in October 2016 and involved 71 refugees. The second return took place in May 2018 when 161 refugees were scheduled to repatriate from five refugee camps to different places in Burma. On May 7, more than 90 refugees returned to Burma. The 28 families from 5 different refugee camps repatriated to Karen and Kayah states, and Yangon, Bago and Sagaing regions. Their repatriation from Thailand was also assisted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

4.2.4.1 Case Study - Organized refugee return October 2016

In October 2016, the first facilitated/organized voluntarily return to Burma was organized for in total of 71 individuals during October 2016. The transition was made for people from different refugee camps, with the largest group coming from NuPo. Most refugees went to Karen State. The total number of locations for repatriation was seven states, nine townships and eighteen different villages. Ten families went to Kayin State, nine to Kyainseikgyi Township, one to Myawaddy township, four families went to Yangon Region including Yangon City, and two families moved to Mawlamyine in Mon State. Moreover, out of the twenty families that repatriated in October 2016, one family went to Taninthayi region, one to Rakhine state and one to Kachin state. The return

45 Karen Refugee Committee
46 Democratic Voice of Burma
47 World Education, p. 32
48 UNHCR and The Border Consortium
was preceded a delegation by the Myanmar government to NuPo and Tham Hin to meet with the refugees to verify their nationality. At that time, there were 96 people who met with the delegation. This number was later changed to 71.

Before their departures, the refugees returning to Burma were also provided with UNHCR protection counselling to confirm their voluntariness as well as sessions on mine-risk awareness at the Voluntary Repatriations Centers by Humanity and Inclusion International. The guiding principles for protection and assistance from the UNHCR in the voluntary return are voluntariness, safety and dignity. In order to ensure return by choice, the UNHCR was required to confirm that the refugees wanted to return. This was assured by each household signing a voluntary repatriation form. In Burma, the UNHCR assisted the returning refugees together with other actors utilizing a community-based approach. Specific areas of consideration are non-discriminatory access safety, civil documentation, housing, land and property, public services and livelihoods. In the approach of UNHCR, as told by the repatriation officer in Mae Sot, the refugee returnees would not necessarily be singled out or privileged in treatment compared with nationals.

In the Voluntary Repatriation Operation which was operated by the UNHCR and supported by the Royal Thai Government and the Government of Myanmar, the families were transported from the camp to the border through IOM Thailand, given cash assistance on the day of departure consisting of a transport cash grant of THB 1800 per person, a reintegration cash grant of THB 1800 per person and a household support of THB 3600 per adult and THB 1800 per child. Moreover, on the day of departure, the returnees were given a cash assistance from World Food Programme, through IOM, of THB 1100 per person during the first three months. Refugees were also provided with one mosquito net per two persons along with one sanitary kit per woman. Five students from the returnee batch went back and finished their studies in the camps on request by their parents and with the permission of the Camp

---

49 UNHCR (2018), Thailand-Myanmar Assistance Package for Facilitated Voluntary Repatriation
50 Humanity and Inclusion was previously called Handicap International
51 UNHCR, Assistance to verified refugees returning to Myanmar through Facilitated Voluntary Repatriation
52 UNHCR (2018), Thailand-Myanmar Assistance Package for Facilitated Voluntary Repatriation
Commander. This decision supports a continuous mindfulness towards flexibility in the education transition for the students.

4.2.5 Challenges of returnees

Notwithstanding the recent positive nationwide political changes in Burma including the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and the Peace Process, many obstacles remain for potential returnees from the camps to locations in Burma.

UNHCR has held a series of more than 22 consultations and workshops to provide the opportunity of discussing return and reintegration of displaced people in Kayah, Kayin, and Mon state as well as Thanintharyi region in South-Eastern Burma among authorities, non-state actors (NSAs), community-based organisations (CBOs)/civil society organisations (CSOs) and UN/NGOs as well as some refugee representatives.\(^53\)

Held between May and September 2016, the sessions included a total of nearly 500 people. Hosted by state/regional authorities and the UNHCR, participations came from more 150 governmental departments. The sessions resulted in mapping out five different areas of concern for return. A reintegration support matrix was developed in the workshops which contains:

- Physical safety and security including landmine contamination, Political stability and potential for armed clashes, Community tension and discrimination, Protection of individual rights/violations of human rights, Access to justice and rule of law, Exploitation and trafficking and Sexual violence and abuse.

- Access to Civil Documentation including Recognition of citizenship (CSCs/ID cards), Birth registration and obtaining birth certificates, obtaining household lists and Ensuring freedom of movement.

- Secure Land Tenure including Secure use of residential and agricultural land, Access to land for landless returnees, Complicated or disputed land ownership, Protecting the environment and ensuring sustainable livelihoods and Quality and availability of housing (spacing, house size, sanitation).

\(^53\) UNHCR (2017)
• Equal Access to Basic Services including Basic Health Issues, Education Access, Transportation and access to and from remote areas, Access to utilities, including electricity and water (portable water and sanitation needs), Communication issues and Protective Social Services.

• Livelihoods including Opportunities for jobs and livelihoods, Knowledge of agriculture and livestock practices, Access to markets and commercial opportunities and Recognition of training and certificates issued in Thailand.

4.2.6 Land issues in repatriation

A huge obstacle for repatriation is land rights issues. Even though it might be considered possible and safe for return to occur, many refugees have no land to return to. Many have been forced to flee from their land as it was taken by the military junta. Also, landmines remain a large concern for many.

The land policy of the Karen National Union (KNU) aims to promote, system-wide, progressive realization of human rights, environmental protection, sustainable livelihoods, and a just and peaceful future for all members of human society in Kawthoolei.\(^54\)

Revised in May 2016, it recognizes that displaced people have right to land restitution. It also describes that alternative plots of land should be arranged for those who cannot return to their previous areas. The KNU Authorities will set aside land in townships to use for providing alternative land plots for those that are not able to return to their original land plot, for whatever reason.

4.2.7 Prepared efforts for return in South-Eastern Burma

Despite the Nationwide ceasefire and the recent political changes in Burma, many obstacles remain for refugees in considering return. In addition to landmine contamination, additional obstacles include a lack of security, access to land rights, livelihood opportunities, social services, education, health in areas of potential return.

\(^{54}\) Kawthoolei is the Sqaw-Karen name for the Karen country. It roughly approximates to present-day Karen State.
The UNHCR has assessed that more people in the refugee camps will now choose voluntary repatriation than before. A key assumption in UNHCRs *Strategic Roadmap for Voluntary Repatriation* is that people who choose to go back to Burma would like to go back to their townships of origin but not necessarily to the exact place of origin.

There have been several “Go and See” visits organised for investigating the feasibility of return to Burma. Education is a major challenge for sustainable return. In most cases, new schools need to be built to meet the basic needs of education. In few of the villages there was full access to basic health and education services. Moreover, land mines remain a great risk and land ownership according to Go and See reports by the Karen Refugee Committee.

Indeed, many considerations need to be made in cases of voluntary returning to Burma. After the facilitated voluntary return of 71 people in October 2016, the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) highlighted that it is important for the Burmese authorities to take responsibility in providing accommodation after return, as some refugees in the returning batch had places to return to and some did not.

In a UNHCR-workshop on return for refugees in the refugee camps in Thailand in August 2016, three main challenges for transition in education were highlighted: recognition of documents on previous studies, language of instruction, and curriculum. Returning children face difficulties in enrolling in government schools due to a lack of recognition of camp education certificates. Moreover, low access to vocational training is listed as a challenge for returnees’ livelihoods.

In addition to the already mentioned challenges, an initial obstacle for returning refugee children was accessing the education placement tests, which are based on a different curriculum and conducted in another language of instruction than their schooling has been. The three subjects included in the placement test are Math, English and Myanmar language. Moreover, the placement tests presuppose a large load of memorized facts instead of focusing on the competence and applied skills of the students, which is

---

55 World Education, p. 50
56 CCSDPT, meeting notes
another important aspect to take into consideration. With this said, there has, according to the UNHCR, been recent signs of flexibility shown towards to application of the placement test for returnee children by government schools.

4.2.8 Challenges for refugee youth

Refugees have skills, ideas, hopes and dreams... They are also tough, resilient and creative, with the energy and drive to shape their own destinies, given the chance.57

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi

The currently 65 million forcibly displaced people due to conflict and disaster. This is the highest number since the Second World War and more than the current population of the country of France.58 This figure contains refugees, asylum seekers and forcibly displaced people. The major victims of forcible displacement are children. Worldwide around 50 million individuals are forcibly displaced or migrants.59 Young people are often the majority in countries affected by conflict. Overall more than half of those displaced are children, and six million are of primary and secondary school-going age. Every day 24 people are displaced from their home and around 244 million people live outside their home country according to United Nations Development Programme.60

Concerning challenges for refugee youth, the UNHCR lists the following ten difficulties:

• Difficulties with legal recognition and obtaining personal documents.

• Difficulty in accessing quality learning, education, and skills-building opportunities.

• Discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and “culture clash”.

• Few youth employment and livelihood opportunities.

• Gender inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and violence, including for LGBTI youth.

---

57 UNHCR, Missing Out, p. 3
58 UNDP (2017), p. 35
59 UNDP (2017), p. 36
60 UNDP (2017), p. 5
• Poor access to youth-sensitive health care, including psychosocial support.

• Lack of safety, security, and freedom of movement.

• Challenges for unaccompanied youth.

• Lack of opportunities to participate, be engaged, or access decision makers.

• Lack of information about asylum, refugee rights, and available services.\textsuperscript{61}

In the Camp Closure Guidelines from Camp Coordination and Camp management, the following in terms of education should be taken into consideration while planning for camp closure: Certification for students, Certification and employment records for teachers and school calendar.

Education is also a factor in terms of protection and reintegration. Education must be taken into consideration when planning for camp closure to ensure a smooth transition and continuity, as education provides a degree of protection and accelerates reintegration into communities. This involves consultations during the planning stage with the displaced and host community at different levels, including school management committees.

4.4 Life and conditions for migrant workers in Mae Sot
4.4.1 Labour day 2018 Mae Sot

It is Tuesday May 1\textsuperscript{st}. This is a day when I am used to seeing the red colour in my home country, Sweden, and hearing marching bands. Ever since childhood, we would take the commuter train from our suburb to Stockholm city to see the celebration and listen to the speeches from prominent politicians alongside classic worker’s movement brass music. Me and my family’s participation was perhaps more spectating rather than participating.

Instead of solely red, many colours represent the workers’ movement in Mae Sot. Dark blue T-shirts with the message “May Day 2018” in capital letters are handed out by a local NGO working on the rights for Burmese migrants. Youth from Karen and Rakhine

\textsuperscript{61} UNHCR, Global Refugee Youth Consultations, p.6
ethnic minority groups share the cultural manifestations. Dressed in their national costumes they contribute with song and dance from their traditions as well as pantomime drama. Their performances are met with great appreciation from the somewhat three hundred people that came and went during the three-hour event. The event took place in the old Mae Tao Clinic. The celebration is made reality by several local organizations who are all working for Burmese migrant workers’ rights. The head of the migrant workers’ union holds the initial speech in Burmese. A friend and old student from Burma happens to be visiting and offers to translate. The key speaker is wearing the same bright green T-shirts starts with sharing the history of May Day, starting off with the strike for eight hours working in Chicago 1886.

My translating friend, a polite and calm man 25-year-old man, tells me that he did not know the meaning of May Day before coming to this event. May Day is a public holiday in Burma, but a day of which few know the background, he said. I got the impression that attending this event contributed to somewhat opening knowledge of the world to him. I was not surprised to hear that few people in Burma knew the background of May Day. The powerful solidarity message supporting equal rights and pay is nothing the military government would have been eager to promote. Honestly, I am a little bit surprised that May Day has been a public holiday in Burma for so long already.

The main messages from the key speaker was that fair pay should be given to all workers, no matter where they are from. For the same job, a Burmese migrant worker should earn the same amount of money as a Thai worker. The issue of child labour was also raised. He stated that children should be in school and not work, especially those under 15 years old. Two government officials from Thai immigration also participated wearing their official costumes. As one of them gave a speech in Thai, we could understand that he is informing at the same time as giving encouragement to the workers.

All throughout the event, local organizations organized information booths about their services to Burmese migrants. One organisation, M-fund, supports health care plans for migrant families and was recruiting members. Another one, MAP Foundation, had various media channels with information in Burmese concerning rights for migrants. A third one, Suwannimit Foundation, focused on inequality and violence against women
and what to do if you witness a violent situation. Close to the registration, there was a place for children of all ages to draw and write their May Day messages.

4.4.2 Statistics on Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot

It is impossible to give an accurate number of how many migrants and migrant workers there are in Mae Sot. However, estimations state there are approximately 100,000 people, which makes up around half the population of Mae Sot. The most common work for Burmese migrants in Thailand is work with agriculture and in factories. Common crops that migrants work with are corn, rice and beans. Flowers are also a common agriculture product. Outside of Bangkok, the majority of migrants work in the fishing industry.

Child labour is common according to informants, especially on the countryside outside of Mae Sot, Phop Phra and Mae Ramat areas. Many children who are out of school in Tak province are involved in child labour according to informants in migrant education.

A headmaster at a migrant learning centre in Phop Phra says that during the intensive harvest period, many parents take their children out of school for a couple of weeks to work alongside them in the fields. Many parents consider the double or triple income that the family can earn for three or four weeks necessary for the family’s survival and prioritize this over their children’s education. A headmaster in another migrant learning centre described the same situation but was glad to share that many parents had changed prioritizes after the local Thai foundation that oversees the school had conducted a large community event focusing on awareness raising on the importance on children’s education and parent’s involvement. After the community event in November, many parents were reluctant to take their children out of school, even for a short period of time, since they had understood that it would risk the quality of their children’s education.

4.4.3 Obtaining legal documents for migrant workers

One of the main obstacles, in addition to safety and security, for Burmese migrant workers is obtaining legal documents for their work and stay in Thailand. Key informants working with migrant education in Tak province shared that this issue is the most discussed during parent meetings. The daily queues outside of the immigration
office in Mae Sot are striking. Hundreds of Burmese migrant workers dressed in their company’s colourful and branded t-shirts wait for their turn to go through the process of obtaining a work permit and be legally granted stay in the country.

In January 2017, the Myanmar government announced the Certificate of Identity (CI) procedure to keep track of the migrant workers in Thailand. Many people were living and working without documents in this area before the Thai immigration law was implemented on June 23rd, 2017 by the Royal Thai Government through a Royal Decree on Managing the Work of Aliens. Due to the forceful implementation of this law there has been a rapid change for people in their need and willingness to secure identity documents and work permits. In January 2018, there was a significant increase in the expenses related to CI and work permit procedures with a deadline to complete the process before March 31, 2018.

Informants have shared that Muslim migrants are suffering from structural discriminations in their challenge obtaining a CI due to a widespread lack of national identity cards. To make a national identity card is more difficult for Muslims as they need to show a household registration from their birthplace which is often not available or otherwise very difficult or expensive to obtain in Burma for Muslims. Also, informants have shared that some government officials have been reluctant to process the national identity card for Muslims, despite obtaining all required documents. From key informants and the focus group interview with Myanmar Muslims, 30 000 Thai Baht ($940) was said to be the estimate of total costs to obtaining legal documents. The easily-accessible Thailand-Burma Friendship Bridge separates Mae Sot in Thailand from Myawaddy in Karen State, Burma. Nowadays, people from both sides can get their border pass for less than 100 Thai baht ($3) which gives them 7 days stay in Thailand or Burma.

4.4.4 Minimum wages Burma and Thailand
As determined by each country’s government and according to their national law, the minimum wage is, the lowest salary which a worker should be receiving. Moreover, it is a floor below which the workers should not sell their labour. Before the beginning of 2018, the minimum wages of both Thailand and Burma were changed.
The new minimum wages of Thailand came into effect April 1, 2018. Thailand has chosen the recommendable model where different provinces have different minimum wages to attract investment. In Tak province where Mae Sot is situated, the minimum wage was raised 5 THB, from 305 ($9.70) to 310 THB ($9.85). The minimum wage was introduced in Burma in September 2016. In March 2018, it was raised by one-third (33%) to 4,800 kyat ($3.63) per day. The change of minimum wage will likely effect the two country's labour-intensive exporting industries like garment manufacturing and food processing.

4.4.5 Education for migrants
For a migrant family living in Tak province where Mae Sot is situated, there are several obstacles, options as well as opportunities in terms of education. The numbers of out-of-school children (OOSC) are high, especially in the rural areas, such as Phop Phra, where it is common for families working in agriculture to bring their children along with them to the fields during the peak weeks of harvest season. Thailand adopted an Education for All (EFA) policy in 1999. Together with a decision from the cabinet in 2005, the children of migrant workers have the right to free education for fifteen years. Therefore, enrollment into Thai government schools should not be problematic for migrant children. However, some school’s administration request unnecessary documents for the students, adding additional obstacles school enrollment.

Most migrant parents choose to enroll their children into Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs). The MLCs centres cannot officially be called schools, since they do not teach the Royal Thai Government curriculum. Instead, the Myanmar government curriculum is used with Myanmar language (Burmese) as language of instruction. When students return to Burma, they can use a transfer certificate issued by Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC) enroll into Myanmar government schools in Karen State using this local agreement. Although at a basic level, most MLCs in Thailand also teach Thai language.

---

62 English news
63 Asian review
64 Save the Children (2016)
According to the migrant education para-government body in Tak province, the Migrant Education Coordinating Committee (MECC), there are 70 MLCs in Tak province. These learning centres are supported by local NGOs, CBOs, charities or faith-based organisations. The teachers in MLCs are almost exclusively Burmese citizens, most having only a basic level teacher training and intention to stay and teach in the area for a couple of years. Needless to say, the principals and teachers who stay in service for a longer period of time is integral to secure a stable situation for the school and keep close relationships with the students, parents and teachers.

5. Life, hopes and dreams of migrants and refugees along the border

An important aspect in understanding mixed migration situations for migrants and refugees in Mae Sot was the student revolution that occurred in 1988. These events, involving many injured and killed students demonstrating for democracy and freedom of speech, caused politically active young Burmese people to flee from persecution in Burma due to their political perspectives and affiliations. There was a large influx of migrants who later settled down at that time and many are still living in the area. As a
matter of fact, the Mae Tao Clinic was established by a group of young doctors to serve this displaced population.

Within the current migrant population of Mae Sot there are migrant workers and families who have a background which involves political activity. As described by a participant in one of the group interviews, for most migrant workers, the possibility to make a livelihood for themselves and their families is more appealing than political activity and the risks that political involvement might entail. According to the INGO Right to Play, which works towards stronger rights for migrant children, migrant children in Mae Sot are extremely vulnerable and face many burdens that children should not have to face in their childhood. Many children must work from young age to contribute to the family income or stay at home to take care of younger siblings thus missing out on vital education. Extreme poverty leads some parents to selling their children to make money with young children being lured into child labour or trafficking rings in the area, describes Right to Play. Human trafficking in Thailand is widespread among the fish industry, such as shrimp factories. Also in these cases, one female Thai social worker explained, the reason behind is the need for financial support to the family.

A push factor that can force refugees take a leap to the migrant community is the reduction in donor support to the camps, especially food rations, which can lead refugees to seek additional income to provide adequate food for their families. In addition to this there has been speculation in the Thai media about the imminent closure of the camps which heightens anxiety and uncertainty of the refugees in the camps. There are almost three generations of refugees within the camps with many of them never having travelled to Burma and only knowing life in the camp. This sense of fractured identity and not knowing where one belongs adds to tension in the camps.

5.1 Livelihood
There are large obstacles and push factors from Burma for people in mixed migration situations in terms of sustainable livelihoods for migrants as well as refugees. For refugees who fled from their place of origin many years ago and have lived in one of the
nine refugee camps along the border, their access to land for the purpose of agriculture is highly uncertain. Many migrants left Burma because they had no land for agriculture purposes and hence possessed few options to earn a livelihood.

Most migrants in the Mae Sot area suffer from a lack of adequate housing and shelter, high rates of malnutrition and disease with little or no access to mainstream healthcare. They often must accept employment on any terms, which means that many employers give limited recognition to the protections supposedly afforded by Thai law (such as minimum wage, safe working conditions, maximum hours etc.) Theft, physical or sexual abuse, harassment, and extortion all occur without recourse, explains Right to Play. With this said, as the Thai female social worker pointed out, “good employers” also exist: people who follow the law and treat their employees fairly.

As part of the discussion on the future for refugees in the nine camps along the border, a transition towards becoming documented migrants living and working in Thailand has been proposed as one of the possible durable solutions.

I am reluctant to quote; however, I have heard many Thai citizens articulate their opinion on why Thailand is depending on Burmese migrant workers in formulations like: “Thai people are lazy. They prefer not to do heavy jobs”. The same assumption, however expressed in an academic language, is used when a woman from a European country working with Child protection in an INGO with long experience in Mae Sot explains: “There is also a need of work in Thailand. The migrant workers do the jobs that are commonly referred to as 3D’s meaning: Dirty, degrading and dangerous”. It is not misleading to use the three D’s in explaining the most common jobs among the migrant population in Thailand.

**Dirty:** housekeeping, washing dishes in restaurants, refuse collection  
**Degrading:** prostitution and sex trade  
**Dangerous:** construction work with few safety standards

Besides the 3D’s, many migrant workers are hired labour in factories as well as in plantations. If the conditions are poor, these occupations can also be considered
dangerous as well. Unlike refugees, migrants do not qualify for official protection from international agencies. As a result, many migrants live in constant jeopardy of exploitation, abuse, arrest, child labour, imprisonment and deportation.

Mae Sot being a designated export processing zone has created opportunities for migrant workers from many states and divisions of Burma to easily found a labor-based occupation in Tak province. In the early morning in Mae Sot it is common to witness migrant workers unsafely transported from their accommodation to their work place. Workers return in the late afternoon or evening commonly squeezed together on top of a van. The visible migrant worker population engaged in construction or service-related work in the city appear to be quite young: with many not over 15 years of age. In comparison to Burma, were child labour is visible for example among the staff in many tea shops, child labour in Thailand seems to be more hidden and less common. Judging from what is visible in restaurants in cities such as Bangkok and Yangon, the government of Thailand seems to have a more implemented policy on under-aged labour than the Myanmar government.

5.1.1 Ma Ei’s story

A hard-working migrant in a rural area of Mae Sot, widow with three children

Ma Ei\(^{65}\) receives us in a simple but tidy bamboo hut in a small community in rural Phop Phra close to the trafficked main road where agriculture products for the fields in the area travel back and forth daily. Her house does not stand out much among other houses in the area. Two of her three children are playing in the dusty yard. As we enter, we also encounter her mother sitting on the floor and notice that she has a distinctive problem with her eyes.

Ma Ei has been living in this community in Phop Phra, located in the countryside outside of Mae Sot, for 6 years. She originates from Bago Division in Burma and has not been back since moving to Thailand. She originally came to Thailand to work together with her husband who passed away 5 years ago. She has three children; her oldest is a girl in Grade 4, the middle one is a boy in Grade 1 and the youngest boy is in Kindergarten.

\(^{65}\) Mae Ei is a fictitious name used to protect the anonymity of the participant.
For her work in the field, she earns on an average 150 THB per day (8 USD) and the price of food is getting higher. Mae Ei is 33 years old and only finished Grade 2 in Burma before she started to work. She can only write her name and read easy sentences. However, she says she does not remember the letters much anymore. Her situation and background are not out of the ordinary for Burmese migrant women in this area.

We talk for almost one hour and she explains her situation. Since her husband died, she is the sole breadwinner of the family. She also needs to take care of her mother who is suffering from an eye condition making it hard for her to see. Ma Ei has not yet been able to take her mother to the hospital.

Ma Ei would like to go back to Burma, “because the country is developing”. During the six years she has spent in Thailand she has not been able to go back even to visit. On the question of whether she and her family will be able to go back for Burmese New Year, Thingyan, she gives a slight laugh. Without a doubt she wants to, but there is no money or possibility for her or her family to take any holiday. Hearing her explain the situation I felt a bit ashamed for asking her.

At the beginning of next school year, she will be faced with a difficult choice, whether to let her daughter continue to Grade 4 or ask her work in the same corn field as herself. Her dilemma for her daughter’s future is complex. If both she and her daughter would work, if the family would have two bread winners, the income for the family would be twice as high. Will education actually lead to increase future opportunities for her daughter to earn more money and break out of the cycle of poverty?

At the end of the interview she turns to the teacher and the headmaster who followed along and urges them to expand to grade 5 at the school next year for her daughter. Despite the poor conditions and the state of their situation, I leave Ma Ei’s hut with a feeling of hope for her and her family. It is clear that she wants the best for her children.
5.1.2 Value for money

Even though many migrants earn a small wage, the value they get for their money is higher in Thailand compared to in Burma. Key informants mentioned this as a reason for staying and working in Thailand rather than returning to Burma. A migrant can earn 300 THB per day in Thailand and while it is a low amount, it affords a meagre livelihood. That same amount in Burma, around 12 000 MMK, is not an amount which can be considered enough to survive, especially not in a city like Yangon where many of the migrants that I met originate from.

5.2 Access to and cost of quality education

Education, especially higher education, is a strong pull factor for young migrants from Burma to migrate to Mae Sot. The cost and quality of higher education in Burma remains low and unattractive for many young adult students. Informants who have completed higher education have opportunities for higher academic and vocational studies in Thailand at little cost, provided through international education providers such as education foundations and NGOs. A diligent student can, through hard work in his or her studies, find ways to get a diverse education in Mae Sot. Several of the Burmese people I’ve talked to who are now migrant workers in Thailand have had many years in non-formal, formal and vocational education initiatives such as Wide Horizons, Brighter Futures, Youth Connect and Australian Catholic University.

The difference compared to Burma is large. As one key informant who has spent ten years in Mae Sot shared, he educated himself and now works in an NGO, “I did not even know that there were scholarships for students when I was in Myanmar”. Moreover, the quality of education was mentioned as a pull factor for students in higher education to cross the border and stay in Thailand. While the focus in Burma is on memorization, the education programmes provided in Mae Sot through international NGOs and through scholarships is more based on critical and analytical thinking.

5.2.1 Kyaw Hla’s story

*An ambitious NGO worker educated in Mae Sot with his family in refugee camp*

Kyaw Hla is a fictitious name used to protect the anonymity of the participant. Kyaw Hla is a 22-year old man who belongs to one of Burma’s major ethnic groups. He

---

66 Kyaw Hla is a fictitious name used to protect the anonymity of the participant.
was born in Northern Shan State and has been living in Mae Sot for nearly 4 years. He rents a house together with two friends who are also working in local NGOs. His mother and sister live as unregistered refugees in Mae La refugee camp, a forty-minute drive from Mae Sot. Kyaw Hla used to live in the same refugee camp for almost 6 years prior to moving to Mae Sot. When I ask him about his father, he answers that it is “difficult to express”. The reason why his family moved to the refugee camp was that they were hoping to be eligible for resettlement. However, as repatriation is a much more feasible solution than resettlement now, Kyaw Hla is trying to convince his mother and sister to return to Burma.

Needless to say, there are many differences between life in the camps, in Burma and in Mae Sot. For Kyaw Hla, the main difference between life in camp and in Mae Sot is the resources available. In the camp schools, chalk and black boards are still used as the main education materials. Internet access is much better in Mae Sot than in Burma which is very important to Kyaw Hla since he uses internet a lot, both for studying and learning as well as for enjoyment.

At this stage of the refugee situation, the camp population mostly consists of children and older people, he says. Residing in the camp is still more peaceful than life in Burma, however, the youth do not want to stay in the camps any longer as the access to education and job opportunities are too limited. Kyaw Hla seems to be a clear example of the decision to seek employment outside the camp.

Kyaw Hla has no interest in returning to Burma in the near future. In five years, he sees himself still living in Mae Sot and working in the education sector for one of the many NGOs. However, within in five years, he reckons that he will have advanced to be in a management position instead of assisting. There are many advantages for Kyaw Hla to live in Mae Sot rather than somewhere in Burma. He experiences a much greater freedom in Mae Sot, he says, and can get more value from the money he earns in Thailand compared to Burma. However, one of the primary reasons for him to stay on in Mae Sot is the possibility to study and learn. Like many of his close friends and acquaintances, he is a motivated learner who has completed an 18-month academic education initiative free of charge through Australian Catholic University.
5.2.2 Parents value and decisions on education

According to surveys from the INGO Right to Play, migrant and refugee parents value education for their children. A recent study illustrated that parents in migrant communities as well as in refugee camps reported to have a high value for their children’s education. Among migrant parents, the interest towards secondary education was slightly decreased. During all focus group interviews, it was clear that the parents interviewed had strong ambition to send their children to school. The alternative to send their children to Thai government school seemed to be more prevalent among migrants with a Muslim or Christian confession. With that being said, I would be careful to assume that the decision is linked to religion. Rather, it is an indicator that the migrant sees the long-term future for her or himself in Thailand and not in Burma.

According to Thai law, a child with a non-Thai citizenship in Grade 6 is eligible to “a ten-year card” which grants the individual ten years of certain stay in Thailand. This, together with the quality of education and the possibility to peruse further education in Thailand is an incentive for many migrant parents to enrol their children into Thai government schools. Local NGOs and foundations such as MAP Foundation and Help Without Frontiers Thailand Foundation assist migrant families in the enrolment process into Thai government school. These organisations have multilingual staff who make the enrolment procedures possible. Moreover, they pay transportation costs and any existing school fees, stationary, one set of student uniforms as well as provide awareness raising on the importance of education to the parents and community members.

5.3 Access to affordable and quality health care

The access and quality of health is increasing in Burma as the country is developing, however, it remains expensive and inaccessible for a large majority. One example is the consistent flow of patients to the well-known clinic, the Mae Tao Clinic. The clinic, located in Mae Sot, runs only by support from NGOs and INGOs and serves Burmese migrant and refugee populations. As a matter of fact, migrants from almost all parts of Burma travel to the clinic to have their right to health care met. The clinic provided 103,872 consultations in 2017. 9,898 of them were admitted for the further diagnoses

67 Right to Play (undated)
and treatment. Among the total patients, 65% were women and 20% were children under 5 years old.\textsuperscript{68} In one of the focus groups, the clinic was mentioned as one of the reasons why life as a migrant in Mae Sot is better than living in Burma.

5.4 Ethnicity and Religion and freedom from discrimination

A finding from the interviews and literature study is that ethnicity and religion are both a push and pull factors. Rather than being a factor of its own, religion and ethnicity are part of a larger package where ethnicity, socio-economic situation, language and trade are situated. The research does not find enough proof that religion is the main factor for Burmese migrants and refugees in their decision to stay in Thailand or return to Burma.

According to key informants, discrimination based on ethnicity and religion occur more frequently in Burma than in Thailand. One key informant said, “For an ethnic person who does not speak perfect Burmese, you will always be discriminated against in Myanmar!”\textsuperscript{68}. In high positions in the military and the leadership of governmental organisations or bodies, a person who is not a Buddhist and a Bamar is an unlikely candidate. Key informants have stated that discrimination is common towards Muslims as well as Christians and other minority religions such as Hindus and Sikhs. Discrimination also applies for students in their search for scholarships. As one informant stated, “If we try hard here in Thailand, we can get a chance. In Myanmar, the scholarship opportunities mostly go to the military leaders.”

5.5 Specific concerns for Muslims

Concluding from the interviews conducted by the researcher in this study, is fair to say that for Muslims living in Mae Sot, ethnicity and religion play a larger part in the decision to stay in Thailand. However, Muslims in Mae Sot are not necessarily affected by the crises in Rakhine and the ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in their decision to stay or return. Rather, it depends largely on the origin of the individual or family. If Muslim migrants have left a community or town in Burma where people, regardless of religion, have lived side by side they are likely to not consider their Muslim identity as a primary reason for not returning. However, if they come from a place with large challenges in societal cohesion, especially where Muslims have been targeted and declared

\textsuperscript{68} Mae Tao Clinic (2018), website
unwelcomed, it can obviously be expected that they have a dysfunctional community in mind when considering the possibility for people of different ethnicities and religions to coexist peacefully.

A freelance interpreter between Thai and Burmese, often contracted for short trainings, shared about large community signs he had seen and heard about in several places in Burma with the message “In this village, no Kalaw are welcome”, using the considerably derogatory word Kalaw which translates to “dark-skinned Muslim”. In the Buddhist focus group, stories involving discrimination and violence were told by the participants. A young woman who originates as a Muslim and converted to Buddhism through marriage described how her younger brother as having been a victim of human trafficking. When I ask if anyone had experiences or stories on discrimination, she was encouraged by her friend sitting next to her to share her story. Telling about what happened recently to her brother, she is touched. The young boy, around nine years old, had been beaten by the person who “bought him”, making his face swollen, and deprived of the little pocket money he had got from work for a foreigner. He had finally got help from an organization and has reconnected to his aunt. He is now doing better. His sister said he has been comforted and upset at the same time.

A young man from Mon state working as a welder in Mae Sot participated in the focus group interview together with his wife and their baby. The parents take turns to hold their adorable child during the group interview. He described when he and several others were on a boat on the way to Karen state to work on a construction site. They had been stopped and warned before arriving by a Karen military group (unclear which one) that only Bamar and Karen could enter to work. “If you are Muslim, we will kill you”, he was told by the soldiers.

One woman in the Christian focus group, who had a former Muslim identity, shared that she had all the papers to apply for Certificate of Identity when she went together with a group where she and a man with Chinese appearance were the only people who “looked different”. The officer told the group that “Chinese and Kalaw do not get a national identity card”. When she tried to apply, giving forward all her prepared documents, such as household registration, birth certificate and such, to the officer, she was still asked for
another document namely a certificate saying that her parents had passed away. This was a document neither she nor most the migrant population has ever heard about was needed to apply for a certificate of Myanmar citizenship. Before, one participant said, they did not restrict much in Myawaddy (in Karen state across the Thai-Myanmar Friendship bridge). Nowadays, she said, Muslims cannot own land there.

5.6 Naam’s story

An established Thai citizen whose parents fled Burma before she was born

Naam is a 30+ year old women working in an organisation in Mae Sot. She is from an ethnic group and her parents fled from Burma before she was born. Naam grew up in Thailand. Her first years in Thailand were spent in the refugee camp. She later went to a Thai government school. She is fluent in Thai, spoken Burmese and spoken Karen.

She has three brothers and sisters. Two of her sisters resettled to USA a couple of years ago through UNHCR. She keeps contact with them through Skype. Naam is married to a Thai man from another province and they have two children. Before her daughter turned 1 year old she needed to register her in the refugee camp for the child to also have UNHCR refugee status.

Even though she is much established in Thailand, she says she wants to keep the opportunity of resettlement to a third country open. She jokes and says that she sometimes threatens her husband that if he is not nice to her, she will take their two children and resettle to a third country. She says, she knows that her situation is not unique along the border. She knows of many who have Thai citizenship and are at the same time registered with the UNHCR. However, she is for obvious reasons reluctant to talk about it openly since she knows that the Thai authorities are not happy with the situation.

---

69 Naam is a fictitious name used to protect the anonymity of the participant
6. Conclusions

For migrants living in Mae Sot, the pull factors towards return to Burma are not as large as the pull factors for staying and working in Thailand.

The main pull factors to Thailand are basic social services such as education, sustainable livelihoods, access to affordable health care. Moreover, freedom from discrimination is a strong reason as well, especially for people confessing to a minority religion such as Islam. Mobility and access to quality internet were mentioned as factors especially by people below the age of 30. The push factors from Burma are larger for people belonging to a minority, either in terms of ethnicity, religion or both. For a person with Myanmar Muslim or Kachin Christian confession and identification, there is an understandable feeling and experience that the majority culture, ethnicity and religion of Myanmar, Bamar and Buddhist, do not include them in their perceived national identity.

The primary difficulty for migrants no matter their confession, is to obtain legal documents for staying and working in Thailand. However, this obstacle exists because of clear structured discrimination and is larger for Myanmar Muslim or people who have appearances which could lead biased officials to consider them to be Muslim.

Despite the recent crack downs on migrant workers in Mae Sot, I get the impression from speaking to migrants who have not been able to obtain these documents, that they would choose living in an uncertain reality: in a constant fear of being displaced for a short period of time and put in custody, rather than going back to Burma.

Participants in all focus groups shared that they would not want to return to Burma if they did not absolutely have to. “If there was no choice for us, because of change of policy from the Thai government, of course we would have to return, but before that they, there is no reason for us to go back” was the gist of what Burmese migrants with Muslim, Christian and Buddhist confession told me in the focus group interviews.
There is a strong connection between levels of education in relation to anticipation for the future. The Burmese migrants I interviewed who expressed a consideration or will of future return to Burma had all obtained a higher level of education. Moreover, they were well settled in Thailand with a permanent job providing them with a fair CBO/NGO salary. It is assumable that it is easier for them to imagine a future in Burma since they have an established life in terms of life quality and work security. In addition, the Thai language of some of them was advanced which makes them more attractive in the job market.

After several years in Mae Sot, many migrants who have educated themselves and are now working in qualified jobs. The experiences of returning to their place of origin and visiting their family even for a short while, can be both joyful and frustrating. When asked how it was for him to go back and visit family and relatives in Burma after more than ten years in Thailand, the young, educated Burmese man with ethnic identity living and working in an NGO in Mae Sot expressed his feelings with an understandable smile: “Sometimes, I feel like I am an alien in my own house. Every time we talk about something in the family, we disagree”. Is a future in Burma even a consideration for migrants after a long time in a totally different situation with so many new experiences?

For migrant workers, the obstacle for Myanmar Muslims to obtain the National identity card from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, despite their Burmese citizenship, also creates problems in obtaining a Certificate of Identity (CI) which is a pre-requisite for applying for work permit from the Thai immigration and thus have legal stay in Thailand. This is the primary obstacle in their life and the first issue mentioned by all focus groups as a reason for return. For refugees in the refugee camps, the push factors from the camps in terms of cuts of rations are higher than the pull factors towards a life in Burma. Due to the long history of the refugee camps along the Thai Burma border, it could even be argued that there are pull factors towards a life in the camps, in terms of to education at no cost deemed to be better than in Burma as well as access to healthcare.

In the writing process, it has been clear to me that the migrant communities, in Mae Sot area are much segregated. I assume that this reflects society overall in Burma. People seem to not know very much about the situation of others. However, it is my assumption
that the places for worship, the mosque, the temple and the church, as well as the special religious events, such as Ramadan in Islam, Thingyan/Songkran in Buddhism and Christmas in Christianity, bring people together from different origins, sometimes from different languages and socio-economic situations and sometimes even from different religions. There is something hopeful for humanity in that religious worship and activities can unite people, rather than split them apart. In the Mae Sot, there are religious places were people with different mother tongue languages meet for worship.

Many migrant parents want their children to learn Burmese which will increase their opportunities for the future, hence the need for support from the Royal Thai Government to the Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) which teaches the Myanmar government curriculum and uses Burmese as the language of instruction. Carrying out the research work to compile this thesis has for me been an eye-opening experience on the complexity of migration. After reading about, observing and speaking to migrants and people closely connected to the migrant community, I feel well informed about the situation for migrants and refugees in Mae Sot and I have cultivated a large respect on the multi-dimensional nature of migration.

At the same time as listening to the metal sound of construction work by Burmese migrant workers on our landlord’s house next door, I have followed the political discussions on the radio for the upcoming elections in September in my home country Sweden. Through listening to Swedish radio and reading articles online, it is more than obvious that migration is dominating the political climate in Sweden. Suddenly, the Burmese songs that I hear some of the workers are singing while working became a more than a suitable soundtrack as I write these lines.

With these multiple narratives playing in my head during the time I have written this thesis, I am convinced that it is about time to consider migration not as a temporary element or phenomenon in the history of humanity but an all too common reality. It is also time to understand that migration is never black and white. One could perhaps be called naïve to put it as simple as saying that there are positive and negatives with migration for everyone involved, as there are pros and cons of many transitions in life.
As one of the two young educated men with two different ethnical identities said in the end of the interview: “Conflict is about rejection. When you do not feel like you fit into the community, you are discriminated, and maybe start to rebel against them. If we can give equality to them, people might change their attitude. We need to support each other, living in harmony. It would reduce the conflict.”

7. Bibliography

7.1.1 Articles


English news (2018, January 18), *Minimum wage to rise 5 to 22 baht, effective April 1*, retrieved May 1, 2018, from: http://englishnews.thaipbs.or.th/minimum-wage-rise-5-22-baht-effective-april-1/


Walton, Matthew J. (2013, May 20), Myanmar needs a new nationalism, Asia times, retrieved May 1, 2018, from: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-02-200513.html

7.1.2 Material published on websites


The Border Consortium (2018, February)
- About us.
  Retrieved June 1, 2018, from: http://www.theborderconsortium.org/about-us/
- Where we work / Camps in Thailand.
  Retrieved June 1, 2018, from: http://www.theborderconsortium.org/where-we-work/camps-in-thailand/
- Where we work / Camps in Thailand / Mae La refugee camp.
- Where we work / Camps in Thailand / Refugee camps population.
7.1.3 Reports, guidelines, notes, press releases and papers

Burma environmental working group (2017), Resource federalism, A roadmap for decentralised governance of Burma’s natural heritage

CCSDPT (2016, November 25), Minutes Bi-annual meeting, Bangkok, retrieved from CCSDPT

Euro-Burma Office (2018), Background paper, No.1, retrieved May 1, 2018, from Euro-Burma Office

Karen Refugee Committee (2015, October 15), Refugee return guidelines, retrieved from Karen Refugee Committee in Mae Sot


Right to Play (undated), research in Migrant Communities and Refugee Camps in Thailand, retrieved from Right to Play, Mae Sot


Transparency International (2018), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2017*, retrieved May 1, 2018, from:  

http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/MMR.pdf

http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/es/THA.pdf

UN Development Programme (2017, March 21), *Human development report 2016*, retrieved May 1, 2018, from:  

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2006, November), *Analysis of Gaps in Refugee Protection Capacity*, retrieved May 1, 2018, from:  

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2013, October). *Note on the Mandate of the High Commissioner for Refugees and his Office*, retrieved May 1, 2018, at:  
http://www.refworld.org/docid/5268c9474.html

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2016, September), Missing Out - Refugee Situation in Crises, retrieved May 1, 2018, from: www.unhcr.org/57beb5144

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2016, September), *We believe in Youth - Global refugee youth consultation final report*, retrieved May 1, 2018, from:  
http://www.unhcr.org/protection/globalconsult/57e1126e7/final-report.html
UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2017), *Report on the return and reintegration workshops in South-Eastern Myanmar*, available from UNHCR Mae Sot

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2018), Mixed migration, retrieved May 1, 2018, from: [http://www.unhcr.org/mixed-migration.html](http://www.unhcr.org/mixed-migration.html)

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2018), *Thailand-Myanmar Assistance Package for Facilitated Voluntary Repatriation*, available from UNHCR Mae Sot

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2018, March 31), RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population, Source; UNHCR progress database, available from UNHCR Mae Sot

UNHCR and The Border Consortium (2016, October 31), First organized volrep, available from UNHCR Mae Sot


World Education (2017, December), Refugee Integration and Education review, retrieved May 1, 2018, from: [https://www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/inc/common/_download_pub.cfm?id=19335&lid=3](https://www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/inc/common/_download_pub.cfm?id=19335&lid=3)

### 7.1.4 Books

Burma Link and Burma Partnership⁷⁰ (2015), *Voices of Refugees Situation of Burma’s Refugees Along the Thailand Burma Border*


Johnson, Andrew P. (2012), *A short guide to action research*, Minnesota State University, Pearson Education


### 7.1.5 Maps


---

⁷⁰ Burma Partnership is called Progressive Voice since October 2016
Pages 25, 43: The Border Consortium (2018, April), Map: Refugee camp populations, retrieved June 20, 2018, from:

Page 26: Google maps Burma (2018, June 1), Map: Burma, retrieved June 20, 2018, from:
https://www.google.se/maps/@14.0018399,102.4105774,6z
Annexes

Annex 1: Questions for Key informants

Before the interview begin:
Introduction of researcher, the facilitator and/or the interpreter
Present the thesis topic
Ask permission to use the interview material in the thesis (after removal of names)

Describe your organization’s current and previous work with migrants and refugees.

In your opinion and experiences:
- What are the largest reasons for migrants to stay in Thailand?
- What would be the largest reasons why migrants would return to Myanmar?
Could religion be a contributing factor in the decision why migrants or refugees (mixed migration) would decide to stay in Thailand or return to Myanmar?

What discrimination of migrants have you seen or heard about?

Prompt if needed:
Have you seen or heard of any discrimination particularly towards migrants with a Muslim identity?

Prompt if needed:
Are the crises in Rakhine state effecting the way Muslim migrants and refugees reason about return or repatriation?

Annex 2: Questions for Focus groups

Before the group interview begin:
Introduction of researcher, the facilitator and/or the interpreter
Present the thesis topic
Ask permission to use the interview material in the thesis (after removal of names)
Ask all participants in the group interview to describe their situation
   - Family
   - Livelihood
   - How long time in Thailand
   - Living condition
   - Documentation

In your opinion and experiences:
What are the largest reasons for migrants to stay in Thailand?

What would be the largest reasons why migrants would return to Myanmar?

*Prompt if needed:*
Could religion be a contributing factor in the decision why migrants or refugees (mixed migration) would decide to stay in Thailand or return to Myanmar?

What discrimination of migrants have you experienced, seen or heard about?

Where do you see yourself and your family in ten years’ time?

*Prompt if needed:*
Have you experienced, seen or heard of any discrimination towards migrants with a Muslim identity?

*Prompt if needed:*
How is the process to obtain documentation?
Is it different for Myanmar Muslims?

*Prompt if needed:*
Do you think the crises in Rakhine state effect the way Muslim migrants and refugees reason in terms of return or repatriation?