

Women Exchange



Women Exchange

The Women Exchange (WE) is a MAP Foundation project based out of Chiang Mai, Thailand, with programming that supports migrant and refugee women throughout the country. The WE project is supported by Foundation for a Just Society (FJS), Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD), and Asian-Pacific Resource and Research for Women (ARROW).

Table of Contents

ABOUT WE	3
WE PROJECT ACTIVITIES.....	4-10
Case Management	5
Meeting Facilitation	6
Leadership Training	7
Annual WE Get Together.....	8
Networking in Action	9-12
Mentorship	13
WOMEN OF COURAGE	14
FURTHER RESOURCES.....	15



ABOUT WE

ORIGINS TO NOW

Since 1999, MAP Foundation has supported migrant and refugee women in coming together once a month to challenge the isolation imposed upon them as “aliens” in a foreign country, in addition to social norms that consider women second to men with limited rights. Begun in Chiang Mai, these women-only spaces became very popular and were replicated along the Thai-Myanmar border. Today, migrant and refugee women from Myanmar of different ethnicities, ages, and occupations meet monthly in the following **18 areas**:

➤ *Northern Thailand*

- Chiang Mai city
- Chiang Mai suburbs
- Mae Sai
- Mae Hong Son
- Mae Sot city
- Mae Sot suburbs
- Mae Sairiang

➤ *Central Thailand*

- Bangkok
- Mahachai

➤ *Western Thailand*

- Sangklaburi

➤ *South of Thailand*

- Ranong
- Phang Nga
- Ko Kaloi
- Phuket
- Hat Yai
- Kuraburi
- Surat Thani
- Songkla

Called “Women Exchange,” these forums have become a network of information that can be spread throughout the migrant community and inform donors, researchers, and policy makers of the situation on the ground. While each WE organizes a committee to run itself, MAP provides financial assistance, trainings, and resources to facilitate capacity building on a range of topics, including sexual and reproductive health rights, living wage, women economic rights, and leadership development. The WE program reached over **1,000 women** in 2016 alone. Since the program's inception, it has held **10 leadership trainings** to support the growth of its **50 women leaders**, mentored **6 young women** from the migrant community, hosted **16 regional gatherings** for migrant and refugee women, facilitated **2 cross-border networking trips**, and supported hundreds of monthly WE gatherings and individuals across Thailand and beyond.



WE PROJECT ACTIVITIES

CASE MANAGEMENT

WE provides direct support to migrant women who experience domestic and/or sexual violence in the Chiang Mai area.

MEETING FACILITATION

The project supports WE groups as they organize monthly WEs on topics that range from domestic violence, living wage, sexual and reproductive health, among other topics.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Leadership skills trainings are held by the WE project twice a year to foster leadership skills in women participating in their local WE groups.

ANNUAL WE GET TOGETHER

The WE Get Together is an annual, 5-day gathering that offers a space for empowerment and capacity building amongst representative leaders from each Women Exchange group.

NETWORKING IN ACTION

Recognizing that its work is strengthened by connecting with other communities involved in supporting migrant women and women in general, the project participates in outside initiatives and events related to its work.

MENTORSHIP

MAP invites young women in the community to apply for MAP WE internships. Interns are involved in the facilitation of project activities, exposed to the work of network organizations, and receive one-on-on mentorship from the WE coordinator.



Case Management

HOW IT WORKS

An important element of the WE project is providing support to migrant women who experience domestic and/or sexual violence in the Chiang Mai area. The WE project offers migrant women who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence translation and accompaniment at hospitals and police stations, transportation to and from hospitals and police stations, counseling services, as well as information on community resources and women's rights.

Although undocumented migrants can file domestic and/or sexual abuse cases with Thai police, without documents, they run the risk of being deported once their case is closed. Even with documents, many women who do report to the police are discriminated against for being women, migrants and/or member of an ethnic group, and are not provided with translators to properly detail their cases. Thai government hospitals likewise do not provide translators for non-Thai speakers, and are not an affordable option for migrants, who do not receive adequate access to health care. Another accessibility issue is the location of hospitals and police stations, which are often situated far away from areas outside the city where many migrants live. Besides these tangible constraints, there is the equally important reality that no woman should have to navigate these complex systems alone, especially when they carry emotional, physical and/or psychological trauma—hence the importance of the WE project's case management work.

WE CASE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

In a **6-month period**, the program's sole case worker provided direct assistance in **5 domestic violence** cases and **1 rape case**. Of the women involved in those 6 cases, one was undocumented and four were documented.

In one case, the WE project coordinator supported Ma Sabai*, a young migrant woman in Chiang Mai. Ma Sabai does not have documents and has survived reoccurring physical and psychological abuse by her partner, a documented migrant, with whom she lives. Ma Sabai's perpetrator has isolated Ma Sabai from friends and family, threatening to further physically abuse her should she reach out to loved ones for support. The WE project coordinator was able to support Ma Sabai after a concerned friend contacted MAP on her behalf, asking for counseling support and guidance on how to navigate Ma Sabai's living situation. WE was quick to provide Ma Sabai with emotional support and coping strategies in her language (Burmese), as well as accurate information on how Thai police and hospitals deal with undocumented women's domestic violence cases. Every woman who experiences domestic and/or sexual violence has their own story, but Ma Sabai's experience speaks to many of the issues survivors of violence face as migrant women in Thailand.

*Ma Sabai is a fabricated name to protect the actual individual's anonymity.

Meeting Facilitation

HOW IT WORKS

MAP provides financial assistance and resources such as fact sheets, guest speakers, and information to ensure monthly meetings are informed, engaging, and useful. In addition, MAP runs workshops and trainings with WE groups on topics such as sexual and reproductive health rights, living wage, women economic rights, and leadership development—as requested by each WE group.

WE MEETING FACILITATION IN ACTION

In January 2017, the WE group in Bangkok held a meeting titled “How to Build a Healthy Life.” The meeting focused on addressing mental health challenges felt by migrant women. **14 migrant women** participated in the meeting, including the group’s local WE leader. Most of these women work in seafood and slipper factories in the Bangkok area, where they work roughly 10 hour days, 6 days a week. The WE project coordinator facilitated dialogue around stress and stress management, including how to cope with it internally and how to support others struggling with its harmful effects. The purpose of the meeting was to create a safe space where participants could discuss their mental health openly, in the hopes of calling attention to the importance of self-care and legitimizing the stigmas around mental health.

Women identified shopping and over- or under-eating as unfulfilling responses to stress in their everyday lives. One woman described the experience of spending too much of her salary on unnecessary items in response to feeling overwhelmed, which in turn contributed to her stress because she had insufficient funds to cover her living costs. As potential alternatives to these behaviors, through a guided activity women drafted step-by-step strategies for managing stress in more positive ways, such as exercising, meditating, gardening, as well as talking with friends and family members. It is significant that the women came up with these strategies themselves, facilitated by their female migrant leaders, because it fosters trust amongst participants and ensures that the strategies are relevant to their lived realities. Women came out of the meeting eager to apply their learning, with support from, and faith in, one another.



Leadership Training

HOW IT WORKS

The WE project holds leadership skills trainings in Thailand twice a year, once in the north and once in the south, for women participating in their local WE groups.

The basic leadership trainings cover the following topics: the origins of power in society, personal development, leadership skills, labor rights and strategy planning for the WE program. The WE project coordinator facilitates discussions around building self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-esteem, in addition to engaging women in activities aimed at identifying their personal management styles and leadership qualities. In an effort to improve upon the WE program, women are led through a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of their communities' WE meetings over the past year. Women come together at the end of the training to identify areas for growth, and how best to approach these areas moving forward.

These trainings provide WE women with personal and professional development, and create a space for them to network regionally. The WE project's hope is that the leadership trainings will provide WE participants with the skills they need to self-sufficiently mobilize, organize and support migrant women in their communities.



WE LEADERSHIP TRAINING IN ACTION

Out of a leadership training held in October 2017, **2 WE groups**—the Ranong and Phang Nga WE groups—determined they had each developed the facilitation skills and capacity necessary to lead their community WE meetings autonomously in 2017. The WE project has continued to provide the budget and other logistical support to the Ranong and Phang Nga WE meetings, but has stepped away from organizing and facilitating these communities' WE meetings. This major change to the WE program is a testament to these women's leadership in action, and also to the great success of the WE project's leadership trainings.

Annual WE Get Together

HOW IT WORKS

The WE Get Together is an annual MAP Foundation highlight. The **5-day** event is unique in that it brings together between **85-100 women** who would not have the opportunity to network otherwise—women laborers in southern Thailand's canning factories with women working as seasonal laborers in northern Thailand.

At the event, morning sessions are run formally as a plenary with guest speakers to provide women the opportunity to experience a formal meeting. These plenaries include a sharing component, where each group presented the migrant situation in their community. The meeting then breaks into small groups for skill building sessions run by local, national, and regional organizations.

Activities in the afternoon are dedicated to “rejuvenation,” and women attended fun, extracurricular workshops. These are choices that migrant and refugee women rarely have. During the 5 days, women also joined in activities that engaged the community. One is a public march and event to celebrate International Women's Day, and the other is a Culture Party where local organizations are invited to attend a celebration of traditional cultural songs and dances prepared by WE Get Together women.

ANNUAL WE GET TOGETHER IN ACTION

In March 2017, the WE project held the **16th** Annual WE Get Together attended by **85 women**. The theme was *Women Own the Change*, a strategic celebration of ways in which women adapt to change in a developing world. Some of the topics covered at the 2017 WE Get Together included developmental justice, how to access social services and benefits in Thailand, and social media awareness and best uses.

Below is a reflection from a woman who participated at the 2017 WE Get Together:

"I was very proud of being a participant at the WE Get Together. I never expected to participate in an event like this one. No one cares about us because we are female migrant workers that came to work in another country. Therefore, on behalf of female migrant workers in Thailand, I'd like to thank donors and the MAP Foundation who organized the WE meetings and WE Get Together, where we increased our capacity, met one another, and acquired knowledge."



Networking in Action

HOW IT WORKS

The WE project recognizes that its work is strengthened and informed when it connects with other individuals and organizations working to improve the situation for women and migrant women in the region and around the world. To stay connected, the WE coordinator attends relevant conferences and holds meetings with stakeholders in the region.

LOCAL DIMENSION



MAP's WE program coordinator received an emergency phone call upon return to Chiang Mai after a **2-day** Basic Leadership training in Ranong. The call was from Ma Twe*, a WE participant, describing how she had been physically abused by her husband when she came home from the training. Ma Twe's husband beat her in front of her children, left her face bruised & battered, and kept repeating that she had gone to a hotel over the weekend to cheat on him with another man. Her husband had heard this rumor from other community members, who thought it was strange for a Burmese woman to travel to a Thai beach "alone" for a weekend.

As a migrant with no documents, Ma Twe theoretically has the right to report the situation to the Thai police, however, once the case is closed she runs the risk of being deported back to Myanmar. MAP's program coordinator counseled her to a safe location, and advised her on her rights and options, in addition to recommending that she get in touch with her local WE leader. Ma Twe called her WE leader, who called another WE woman, who called another. The next day, several women from the training bused to Ma Twe's home to speak with her husband. They discussed the activities and purpose of the WE, why he had believed

the rumors and responded in the way he had, and warned him that the network would be watching should he be violent towards Ma Twe again. The women then collectively created an alert system for the future should another event like that one occur, and decided they would all take shifts to check-in with Ma Twe.

The way in which the WE women navigated this tragic situation speaks to the network's ability to respond effectively to issues in the migrant community. Ideally, Ma Twe would have been able to report to Thai police and seek medical care in a Thai hospital, however, due to her lack of legal status, limited Thai-language speaking abilities, and financial constraints, these options were not available to her. In response to these gaps in protections, WE women created their own accountability and safety mechanisms that were tailored to Ma Twe's lived reality—making its impact effective. The WE functions as a sustainable model for addressing the failure of migration policies to protect migrant women because it is community empowerment in and of itself.

*Ma Twe is a fabricated name to protect the actual individual's anonymity.



CROSS BORDER DIMENSION

In May 2017, the WE program facilitated its second, 9-day exchange trip between two WE leaders living in Thailand and women leaders in Myanmar. These WE Plus exchange visits seek to expand upon the connections made at annual WE Get Together events. WE traveled to Yangon, Naypyidaw, and Taunggyi to participate in and facilitate a WE Plus WE meeting and paid visits to several organizations and women community leaders in these areas. The purpose of WE Plus exchange trips are to build stronger networks between women from Myanmar living in their home country and those living abroad in Thailand to best support women migrating within the region.

On the 2017 WE Plus trip, the two WE leaders living in Thailand, Ma Twe and Ma Lwin*, were able to learn about the work of the following Myanmar organizations: Myanmar Positive Women Network, THELO Women Crisis Support Center, Kanbawza Wellness Center, and Southern Shan State Women Network. The Myanmar Positive Women Network representative has previously joined the annual WE Get Together, and was able to give Ma Twe and Ma Lwin information about where migrant women with HIV/AIDS returning to Myanmar can go to access the health support they need. In Yangon, connections were made with the THELO Women Crisis Support

Center and the Kanbawza Wellness Center. Ma Twe and Ma Lwin met and learned sewing skills from women living at the THELO center, many internal migrants who have previously experienced some form of abuse at home or in their places of work. At the Kanbawza Wellness Center—a Karen, community-led center that provides vocational training to young Karen women—WE leaders were able to learn about how the center was started and how it's grown from the founder herself. These visits exposed Ma Twe and Ma Lwin to different organization models and expanded their networks, which ultimately informs the WE groups in Thailand.



After visiting Yangon and Naypyidaw, WE staff, Ma Twe and Ma Lwin traveled to Shan State to meet with representatives of the Southern Shan State Women Network and returned WE leaders now living in the Taunggyi area. One returned leader was one of the first WE participants from the program's first cohort begun in 1999. She was a WE leader in Bangkok for over a decade, and has since moved back to her home town in Myanmar where she continues to work on migrant issues as a volunteer with the International Organization on Migration (IOM) and as a WE leader in her local community. Although Ma Twe and Ma Lwin had already met this leader at the annual WE Get Together, it was very special for them to discuss the challenges a returning migrant women faces in her community and in her trajectory as a woman, leader and former migrant.

The local WE leader collaborated with MAP staff and the Southern Shan State Women Network—a network of 12 community organizations working in the Taunggyi area—to put on a WE Plus WE meeting that Ma Twe and Ma Lwin were able to participate in. The meeting covered gender stereotypes and types of abuse against women, and the visiting leaders were able to share their own expertise in these areas and exchange ideas with local women. The meeting was instrumental in getting participants connected with resource persons in Thailand and Myanmar, and introducing a safe space where women could discuss largely stigmatized issues. MAP staff also highlighted migration issues—including reasons for migrating, migrant integration experiences, potential challenges migrants might encounter in Thailand and resources for migrants in the region. By creating a space where WE leaders living in Thailand and local women living in the Taunggyi area could exchange ideas, knowledge, and experiences, a web of support was created that will reach far beyond the meeting's participants.

The WE program focuses on creating a space for migrant women to come and share with one another, while organizing around issues that affect their lives. The WE program's core belief is that by working to raise

awareness and empower women, women are able to build up their capacity to articulate and advocate for their rights—on their own terms. Because migrant women are frequently moving around Thailand and Myanmar, WE works cooperatively with local groups on these WE Plus trips to strengthen the program's presence in the region and engage with existing resources in the interest of women. These trips also support the MAP Foundation's efforts to gather information on the opportunities and challenges returning migrant women encounter that in turn informs its programming within Thailand. As the MAP Foundation's WE program grows, so does the web of support for migrant women throughout Thailand and Myanmar.

*Ma Twe and Ma Lwin are fabricated names to protect the anonymity of WE leaders.



INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

WE staff attended the **2014 Asian and Pacific Conference on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing +20 Review conference** in Bangkok, Thailand. The review was hosted by ESCAP in cooperation with UN Women and focused on identifying remaining gaps for the successful implementation of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—a global framework for realizing gender equality. At this conference, MAP was able to network with the 52 UN member States and 188 civil society organizations in attendance, learning about the issues various stakeholders face when working towards gender equality and how they navigate those issues. In the immediate region, MAP stays in touch with organizations in Myanmar that support returned migrant women, as well as with returned WE leaders who wish to continue WE meetings in Myanmar.

Mentorship

HOW IT WORKS

The WE project strongly believes in cultivating future young women leaders in the community. The project offers opportunities for young women to apply to be an intern with the program for a minimum of 3 months. In these internships, young women are involved in coordinating WE activities, translating at meetings, carrying out trainings, conducting research projects on migrant women, and reporting on issues related to migrant women. The WE project has mentored **6 young women** from the community at its headquarters in Chiang Mai since 2009. Interns work closely with the WE coordinator, who provides interns with regular feedback and guidance as they develop themselves personally and professionally with MAP.

WE MENTORSHIP IN ACTION



"My name is Hay Mann Zaw and I graduated from Chiang Mai University with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science in 2015. MAP Foundation's Women Exchange project was a foundation for me to become a young feminist activist. I started working with MAP as an intern during my last two summer breaks at Chiang Mai University. By working with WE, I got a chance to learn about the reality which is the hardship of migrant women and migrants in general. Simultaneously, I learned so much from my supervisor, also a mentor, and all the other MAP staff on migrant issues they work to address. Later, I worked as a young feminist researcher for a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) project which involved the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) and MAP. The project focused on 'Living Wage for Migrant Women'. I have been given chances to engage with leading, like-minded women organizations such as the Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Nobel Women's Initiative, Women Deliver and APWLD."

WOMEN OF COURAGE

LEADERS

Around **50 women** leaders have grown through the WE program. These women leaders are active in protecting and engaging other women at work and in their communities. The WE model created by these women with the support of MAP Foundation has since been replicated by other organizations to reach other communities of women in Thailand. As Women Exchange leaders return and reintegrate into their Myanmar communities, their knowledge and skills continue to be shared and utilized amongst women in the region.

WAR WAR KYU'S STORY



War War is a WE leader who works in a seafood factory in Hat Yai, Thailand and has participated in annual WE Get Together events. War War arrived to WE Get Together by way of a corrupt broker who misinformed her that she would find a job at WE Get Together in 2013. MAP staff was able to reconnect her with her family, whom the broker had cut her off from, and guide her away from the exploitative broker. She is now a leader in her community and at the factory. She has gained experience and self-confidence through the WE meetings. When fellow migrant women face barriers or are exploited—such as needing to go to the hospital without being able to speak Thai or are not paid a full wage—she helps them translate or negotiate with their employers.

SU SU'S STORY



Su Su joined the WE program in 2016, and this year was her second time participating in the WE Get Together. She lives in Bangkok working as a tour guide, and volunteers at hospitals supporting Burmese-speaking patients. When Su Su came to her first WE meeting, she was living in an abusive relationship and had experienced all forms of domestic violence. With the support of women in the WE network, Su Su bravely left her partner and is now a single mother supporting her four children who are in Myanmar. She has become a leader in counseling other women in the network experiencing similar abuse, and has developed organizing and counseling skills at the WE Exchange Get Together and other WE trainings.

FURTHER RESOURCES

WE WOMEN INFORM

Since the project's inception, women participating in the WE project have been a source of information for donors, researchers, and policy makers seeking to inform themselves of the situation on the ground for migrants and migrant women in Thailand. Below are printed reports and articles, as well as documentaries that WE women have contributed to:

Print

- "International Women's March," Marie McCoy-Thompson, *Chiang Mai City Life*, March 2017
- "Thailand's overworked, underpaid women migrant workers number high—UN Report," *Asian Correspondent*, December 2016
- *High Rise, Low Pay: Experiences of Migrant Women in the Thai Construction Sector*, International Labour Organization, December 2016
- *Self-Care & Health Care: How Migrant Women in the Greater Mekong Subregion Take Care of their Health*, Mekong Migration Network, April 2015
- *Migrant Workers in Thailand's Garment Factories: Pay a Living Wage*, MAP Foundation, 2014
- *Country Profile On Universal Access to Sexual and Reproductive Rights: Thailand*, MAP Foundation, 2013
- *Exchange, Unite, Empower! The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Experiences of Burmese Migrant Women in Thailand*, MAP Foundation, November 2013
- *Automatic Response Mechanism (ARM): What to do in Cases of Sexual Violence for Migrant Women*, MAP Foundation, November 2003 and September 2010
- *Knowledge for Daily Living: Forced Migration & Forced Labour*, MAP Foundation, March 2006

Documentaries

- *Worker, helper, auntie, maid?* International Labour Organization
- *Women Exchange Spanish*, MAP Foundation
- *Migrant Women Workers in Southeast Asia: Best Practices*, MAP Foundation
- *Migrant Women Working in Thailand*, MAP Foundation