

Women Exchange Get Together 2017



Women Own the Change

This year **85 women** from communities across Thailand came together to explore the theme *Women Own the Change*, a strategic celebration of ways in which women adapt to change in a developing world.

The 16th Annual Women Exchange Get Together (WE Get Together) was hosted by Migrant Assistance Program (MAP) Foundation with support and collaboration from Foundation for a Just Society (FJS), Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD), and Asian-Pacific Resource and Research for Women (ARROW).

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Origins of WE Get Together

WOMEN EXCHANGE

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 **12 locations**.

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 Women Exchange organizes a committee to run itself, MAP provides financial assistance and resources to facilitate the discussions (i.e. fact sheets and guest speakers). In addition, MAP runs workshops and trainings with the Women Exchange on topics such as sexual and reproductive health rights, living wage, women economic rights, and leadership development, out of which the WE Get Together was born.



WE GET TOGETHER

The WE Get Together is an annual MAP Foundation highlight. These gatherings offer a space for empowerment and capacity building amongst representative leaders from each Women Exchange group as they share and learn with one another. This year, women also shared with Thai women and People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) groups. The **5-day event** is unique in that it brings together 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.



The 16th Annual WE Get Together

BASIC STRUCTURE

At the 16th Annual WE Get Together, morning sessions were run formally as a plenary with guest speakers to provide women the opportunity to experience a formal meeting. These plenaries included a sharing component, where each group presented the migrant situation in their community. The meeting then broke into small groups for skill building sessions run by local, national, and regional organizations that each woman had the opportunity to attend over the course of five days.

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

PLENARIES

- Introduction and Welcome
- Women Re-discovering their Country
- Developmental Justice
- Networks of Support

SKILL BUILDING SESSIONS

- How to Access Social Services and Benefits in Thailand
- Reproductive Health and Public Health Services
- Living Wage
- Women’s Economic Rights
- Counseling Skills
- Changing Room
- Social Media Awareness and Best Uses
- Mekong Sisters

REJUVENATION WORKSHOPS

- Singing
- Self-defense
- Dance
- Macramé handicrafts

ACTIVITIES ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

- International Women’s Day
- Culture Party

Plenaries

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

This year the introduction and welcome emphasized the importance of connecting with fellow women at home facing the Myanmar military's violence: Rohingya, Shan and Kachin women. We chose to group the 3 ethnic groups together because "Rohingya" is such a controversial word in the community. But this year, with rising brutality against Rohingya women, we did not want to stay silent any longer. We felt that Women Exchange spaces in Thailand could embrace this issue with tolerance and begin by writing letters of solidarity, which were passed around during the WE Get Together. By proposing the conversation with women at WE Get Together, we tested the waters to see how women felt, and see if women in the network were ready to speak out against systematic Myanmar military abuses.

WOMEN RE-DISCOVERING THEIR COUNTRY

Migrant women are mobile, and many either return to their home countries after working or studying in Thailand for a time, or have plans to return eventually. In this session, migrant women shared the cultural re-adjustments and safety concerns they experienced upon returning to Myanmar; in particular, forms of harassment and discrimination in their home communities. In this plenary, the importance of addressing women's justice—not just in Thailand, but also in Myanmar, was at its forefront.

DEVELOPMENTAL JUSTICE

Development initiatives rarely address the implications for migrant communities and migrant women. This plenary proposed measuring a country's development using the following indicators: redistributive justice, economic justice, social justice, environmental justice, and accountability to its people.

NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

Three organizations, HIV/AIDS Network from Myanmar, 88 Generation from Myanmar, and EMPOWER from Thailand discussed their work supporting migrants and/or women. The organizations discussed resources available to HIV/AIDS affected people in Myanmar, migration and labor policies in Myanmar, and the importance of destigmatizing the work of sex workers in Thailand, with the hopes of raising awareness amongst WE Get Together participants and expanding their resource network.



Skill Building Sessions



HOW TO ACCESS SOCIAL SERVICES AND BENEFITS IN THAILAND

Migration policies in Thailand are constantly changing and inconsistent, leaving migrant women responsible for navigating its complexities in order to protect their legal statuses. In this session, women learned what government and support bodies to report to should they lose their documents, have their wages stolen by an employer, or need to adjust their legal status in Thailand.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

In this session, women received information from a nurse at the Maternity Hospital (Maer la Dek Hospital) on how to spread awareness about reproductive health and contraceptive methods.

LIVING WAGE

In Thailand, migrant women are often paid less than minimum wage, with salaries lower than their male counterparts. In this session, women learned about the concept of living wage—a wage high enough to sustain a decent standard of life for oneself and family—and how to negotiate for one with their employers.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Migrant women are never the writers or implementers of the economic policies that impact their lives. This session informed women of broader economic policies that perpetuate migration in the region, migrant labor policies that fail to protect women against discrimination and violence in the work place, and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.



Skill Building Sessions

COUNSELING SKILLS

Migrant women face many external pressures as they work to support themselves and their families in Thailand, away from their native languages and usual networks of support. The purpose of this session was to create a safe space where participants could discuss their mental health openly and identify signs of experiencing a mental health issue, in the hopes of calling attention to the importance of self-care and legitimizing stigmas around mental health.

CHANGING ROOM

Migrant women are subject to gender norms that more often than not favor men, both in their home countries and cultures, and while abroad in Thailand. The changing room session led women through exercises that helped them name what these gender norms are in the various communities they interact with, and what power dynamics they facilitate in society.

SOCIAL MEDIA AWARENESS AND BEST USES

Social media plays a huge role in the lives of migrant women, who use it to connect with their home communities and to stay informed on news pertaining to the migrant community. This session covered internet and social media security settings, and basic video documentation skills that women can use to inform and protect themselves and one another.

MEKONG SISTERS

This session was dedicated to drawing parallels between issues women face as migrants in Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, as well as with women around the world. The session was important for connecting migrant women at the WE Get Together with regional and international movements for women's justice.



Rejuvenation Workshops

SELF-DEFENSE

A local Aikido master walked women through the basics of self-defense with a team of Aikido volunteers.

SINGING

Women gathered to learn and sing women's empowerment themed songs with a voice teacher.

DANCE

Women practiced choreography for the One Billion Rising Dance, a song and dance called Break the Chain that is performed annually around the world, in preparation for the Chiang Mai International Women's Day event.

MACRAMÉ HANDICRAFTS

A professor from Chiang Mai University's Fine Arts Faculty led women through a basket-weaving activity using basic principles of macramé design.



Activities Engaging the Community



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

On International Women's Day, WE Get Together women marched through the streets of Chiang Mai as part of an annual, public march. The women shouted the 2017 WE Get Together slogan, "Who Owns the Change? Girls, girls!" in Thai, Burmese and English. The march ended at a local park, where a public event was held with a stage, performance art, singing, and dancing—including the One Billion Rising Dance. Women tore open a life-sized piggy bank with brooms, in an act that symbolized the reclaiming of their stolen wages. The public event connected women with the larger, International Women's Movement. Below is an excerpt from the public statement read on behalf of a network of local organizations supporting women, including the MAP Foundation.

"We are women—we are mothers, poor women, disabled women, sex workers, migrant workers, women fighting for our land, informal workers, women of diverse sexuality including lesbians, bi and trans women, refugees, indigenous women, women of all ages, all religions, all countries and cultures of the Mekong ... On International Women's Day we are expressing our concern for our situation as women in Thailand."



CULTURE PARTY

Women Exchange groups at the WE Get Together had pre-prepared songs and dances to perform for one another at a banquet style dinner party. Ten organizations from the local community working on women's justice were also invited to join the festivities

and network with the women in attendance. The culture party is one of the most looked forward to events at the WE Get Together, as it is held in the spirit of unity, and in celebration of womanhood as it manifests in women of diverse backgrounds.

Women of Courage



WAR WAR KYU'S STORY

War War is a Women Exchange 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 Women Exchange 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 Women Exchange 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 Women Exchange meeting, she was living in an abusive relationship and had experienced all forms of domestic violence. With the support of women in the Women Exchange 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 Women Exchange trainings.



REFLECTION FROM A 2017 WE GET TOGETHER PARTICIPANT

"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 Women Exchange meetings and WE Get Together, where we increased our capacity, met one another, and acquired knowledge. We got to increase our network of migrant women, make plans for the future, and participate in International Women's Day."

Onward WE Rises

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP, SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Around **50 women leaders** have been developed through the Women Exchange program, which reached over **1,000 women** in 2016 alone. These women leaders are active in protecting and engaging other women at work and in their communities. The Women Exchange 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. The WE Get Together is more than just a project, it is community empowerment in and of itself.

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Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD)

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research for Women (ARROW)

Foundation for a Just Society (FJS)

