



# Where the Rivers Meet:

## Our Future Community Leaders

Weaving Bonds Across Borders  
2019

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# Weaving Bonds Introduction

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Weaving Bonds Across Borders (WBAB) is a global network that connects and empowers young leaders and communities working for peace and justice in marginalized communities.

Founded and led by women from Burma, Thailand, Colombia, and the U.S., we work with communities from the global South as well as marginalized groups in the global North.

Our work is holistic and brings together peacebuilding, mindfulness, community empowerment, gender equality, and environmental justice to build the leadership of marginalized communities. We do this through workshops, trainings and financial and technical support for community and youth-led actions.

We are proud to be a minority and women-led organization.



[www.weavingbonds.org](http://www.weavingbonds.org)

# Acknowledgement

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We want to thank everybody who was involved in this project, and we want to especially thank the Oxfam Inclusion Project for providing financial support to us from 2015 to 2019.



## WBAB Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not in any way represent the views of Weaving Bonds Across Borders.



## Oxfam Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam. This publication has been made possible in part by funding from the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.



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Women are leaders everywhere you look—from the CEO who runs a Fortune 500 company to the housewife who raises her children and heads her household. Our country was built by strong women, and we will continue to break down walls and defy stereotypes.

— *Nancy Pelosi*



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# Youth are our Future Leaders and the Engines of Change

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*Photo credit: Nang Shining*

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### Author background

Ms. Nang Shining is founder of the Mong Pan Youth Association and a Co-founder of Weaving Bonds Across Borders. She has a Master of Arts in International Development Studies from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, a second Master's degree in Sustainable Natural Resources Management from the University for Peace, Costa Rica, and a third Master's degree in Global Politics from Ateneo De Manila University, Philippines.

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I was born in Mong Pan, Southern Shan State, Myanmar. Mong Pan is a small town located near an international river known as the Salween. Mong Pan is where I spent my childhood, and my hometown is surrounded by a range of beautiful mountains. A tall and deep teak tree forest and the Nam Pan River flowing through the town's center add to the magnificent calm, beauty and economic value of Mong Pan and its surrounding areas. I feel very fortunate to belong to an incredible place, with natural beauty, fresh breezes, clear and clean streams and rivers, green paddy fields, fresh food and a friendly environment. All these resources provide a wide range of basic needs for my family and our community. Especially, our forests are an important resource that complement our livelihoods and help us to meet our basic needs.

I left my hometown when I was twenty-two years old and full of energy, curiosity, determination, and hope to explore new



Photo credit: Nang Shining

experiences in a new world. After ten years aboard studying and working, I decided to come back to my hometown to support our youth and community, because the whole community is suffering from logging activities. Logging has damaged our community's natural resources and the villagers' basic livelihoods. I returned to my hometown because of my grave concern for our environment and to empower the youth, build their capacity and raise awareness about ongoing social and political issues in Mong Pan. My hope is that they will be aware of their rights and take action to defend themselves and their natural resources. In February 2013, I established Mong Pan Youth Association to empower

Shan youth and their communities. In 2014, I worked with two friends from the US and Columbia to establish Weaving Bonds Across Borders to empower communities around the world impacted by conflict, violence, environmental disasters and climate change.

As a woman leader, it's not easy to start an organization in a male dominated society. I always face bitter experiences when moving forward step by step in my community. I always have to find a way to defend myself while maintaining a good relationship with male leaders. Yet I also have to empower women leaders and advocate for their rights. *I believe that change often starts with hope, by individuals and through small actions.* In the midst of risks and challenges, therefore, I devote myself to making positive changes for society and the environment within my means, and I vow to stand beside marginalized communities and vulnerable people. I



*Photo credit: Nang Shining*

especially support young women to take leadership roles in their communities by providing trainings and encouraging them to further their education to enhance their knowledge.

Now, Myanmar is in a democratic transition period and my great concern is that without a proper natural resource management plan, law enforcement, and collaboration among stakeholders, the result will be a complete imbalance between an “incredible miracle” and “extreme jeopardy.” I thus believe that “youth are our future leaders and the engines of change.” I myself continually invest my time in youth for lasting change in our society.



*Photo credit: Nang Shining*



To all the little girls who are watching, never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and achieve your own dreams.

***— Hillary Clinton in her 2016 concession speech***





# A Global Woman's Story of Healing and Empowerment

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*Photo credit: Hannah El-Silimy*

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### Author background

Ms. Hannah El-Silimy is a trainer and consultant for peace and social justice and one of the co-founders of Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Her family background is Japanese and Egyptian. She has a Master's degree in Global Politics from the London School of Economics and a Bachelor degree in Politics from Oberlin College in Ohio. She has coordinated training programs for EarthRights International, led peace-building, diversity and conflict transformation trainings for youth in public schools, workshops in mindfulness and wellness with resettled refugees and teenage youth, and worked with young activists in Southeast Asia to develop their strengths in peacebuilding, particularly in peace and social justice education and facilitation skills. She is currently in her first year of the PhD program in Political Science and Indigenous Politics at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

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My name is Hannah Osama El-Silimy. My mother is Yuki Yamashita of Kitakyushu, Japan, daughter of Chizuro Hijikata and Tetsuo Yamashita. My father is Osama El-Sayed El-Silimy of Port Said, Egypt, son of Bonna Nakaddy and El-Sayed El-Silimy. I was born in England, far away from either of my parents' home countries.



*My parents, Yuki El-Silimy (nee Yamashita) and Osama El-Silimy*

*Photo credit: Hannah El-Silimy*

My parents met and fell in love in 1977 while working at a hotel restaurant in Earl's Court, London; they raised my sister and I in a suburb of London called Belmont Circle. In that grey suburb where I almost never remember seeing the sun, my father grew a garden of fruit trees, tart apples and strawberries, and built a swing for us to play on.

As a family we spent our time like most other immigrant/diaspora families around the world. Our lives in our small semi-detached house centered around cooking, eating, making crackly and expensive long-distance phone calls to relatives, visiting our relatives, gossiping about our relatives, and always being told that our main job as kids was to study hard and do well in school.

Connected through our ties to loved ones in Asia, the Middle East and Europe, we were living embodiments of globalization a decade before it was a buzzword. Looking back, I can trace my interest in



*My mother and I in my childhood home in London, England*

*Photo credit: Hannah El-Silimy*

global politics, borders, and social justice to those childhood memories of my family home.

While globalization was ever-present in my childhood, colonialism existed in only the negative spaces and shadows of growing up in England, a country that had never addressed its racism and colonial past. I grew up with school assemblies where we learned the Bible, were taught to speak ‘proper’ English and memorized the Lord’s prayer. In this environment of subtle yet pervasive racism, I always rebelled in my heart from a young age.

At the age of 14, chasing the American Dream, my father moved to the East Coast of the United States with my mother and I. I continued to live a relatively apolitical, privileged life until the events of September 11th 2001 shook my family up. Within a few months, our lives went from normal to seeing family members and friends

in the Arab community investigated, harassed, attacked on the streets, and arrested for the crime of being Muslim. Since that day, many Arab/Muslim families in the U.S. continue to live in fear and under conditions of structural, invisible violence.

This event made me realize on a deeper level about injustice, and I committed myself to working to support communities who had experienced marginalization, racism and discrimination. Seeking to make meaning of my experience, I immersed myself in immigrants' rights work and worked with youth in New England to start the first immigrant youth group in the State of New Hampshire; called Young Organizers United, which still continues to this day.

Yet even within NGOs, I continued to experience the persistent stress of living and working within environments in the U.S. where I was almost always the minority. I looked for non-profit jobs overseas, and after doing a Master's degree in Global Politics back in London, applied for jobs in Asia, as I was keen to work with and learn from activists in the global South.

In the shadow of Doi Suthep mountain in Northern Thailand, working in Southeast Asia with regional Asian social movements, I found myself and a place where I felt at home. Away from the anti-Arab environment in the U.S., working with colleagues from across Asia, the U.S., and Europe, I felt seen and recognized as an equal to others in a way I had not felt in England or in the U.S. It was there that my personal experience and identity shifted from what had been a victimized stance to an empowered advocate.

Working with young people from across Asia who were fighting for their communities' rights, who had been fighting against dictatorship regimes for over 50 years, and who were passionately committed to improve their societies, [made me understand the context of my](#)

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*The view from the top of Doi Suthep mountain*

*Photo credit: Hannah El-Silimy*

own experiences of discrimination in a global context and want to use my experiences to ensure that they didn't happen to others. I met other people from around the world who had experienced marginalization because of their identity, and who were finding ways to keep their strength and belief in themselves alive even when being told the opposite by the mainstream societies they lived in.

In Chiang Mai, I learned how to make meaning from my experience and translate it into action. I built a community with other young women who had experienced marginalization, both within their societies and within civil society. Together, we formed our own





*Photo credit: WBAB*

transnational network, called Weaving Bonds Across Borders. We translated our experiences of disempowerment and marginalization into spaces for healing and empowerment for other marginalized women. In the past five years, we have worked with hundreds of women across Asia, as well as in the Americas to support young women's empowerment and leadership in their communities.

Now, studying for my PhD in Political Science and Indigenous Politics at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I consider myself a political activist first before I am a political scientist. The meaning of my research comes from working together with, rather than 'for'

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*Mekong river*

*Photo credit: Xuelian*

communities. My motivation in doing research is to better understand the systems, conditions, and ways out of oppression and violence for myself and the communities that I care about.

Both in my research here in Hawai'i, and my work with Weaving Bonds Across Borders, I continue to find great inspiration in the work that strong, empowered women are doing to fight for justice and healing for themselves and their communities. As someone who has had the great privilege to work with so many inspiring women in Asia and across the world, I am proud to be a part of the Weaving Bonds Across Borders family. My home is in my community of family and friends that transcends borders and links us in our hearts even when we are not in the same physical place. Together we build our own communities, liberate our minds and spirits, and build our own hope for the future.





I've come to believe that each of us has a personal calling that's as unique as a fingerprint — and that the best way to succeed is to discover what you love and then find a way to offer it to others in the form of service, working hard, and also allowing the energy of the universe to lead you.

— *Oprah Winfrey*



# Education as a Practice of Freedom

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*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*

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## Author Background

Ms. Ka Ji Jia (Kha Kyi Gyel) is from a Tibetan community in China. She has been the Regional Coordinator at Weaving Bonds Across Borders since 2015, and she is also doing her PhD degree in Gender Studies at Chiang Mai University in Thailand.

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I grew up in a Tibetan village where I spent my childhood with my grandparents. My childhood was one of the most important parts of my life, and it's given me unforgettable memories and happiness, as I had the chance to live and play in nature until I finished



*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*

primary school. Maybe because of these memories and life experiences in my village, I have a special feeling and strong connection with my village and I always feel I should do something for my villagers in the future. In my village, the villagers depend on two forms of livelihoods, which are animal husbandry and agriculture, so we identify ourselves as 'semi-herders.' In my village, life was very simple and peaceful, but gradually the villagers' livelihoods have changed.



*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*

When I was a child, some villagers preferred to go to outside of the village to find more income, but the women villagers were not encouraged to go outside of the village. I often heard people gossip about woman migrants, and people perceived that women who went outside of the village were not 'good.' Woman villagers also had less chance to receive an education at that time. I didn't know then that this was gender inequality and discrimination against women. When those women came back to the village again, they were willing to offer help and financial support for the village's public well-being activities. These women later started to run their own businesses, and their businesses were very

successful. After many years passed, no one said that woman migrants were 'bad' anymore, and both men and women villagers have to go outside of the village to find income in order to have a better and more modern life. In mentioning this social phenomenon from my childhood, I want to address the fact that gender is socially constructed; it is not a fixed idea as long as we open our minds enough to dismantle gender dualisms and reduce gender inequalities. After I finished my primary school and high school, I left my hometown to pursue my college education in Xining city, the capital city of Qinghai province. In college, it was my first time to learn the term 'gender,' and about critical development issues.

My program provided me much valuable knowledge and skills, and further helped me to think about who I am, what I want to be, and

what I can do for my community and society in the future. The new knowledge and skills I learned from this program prompted me to not only think about myself, but also to think about others. In this program, I learned about gender and the kind of development issues we are facing, and I found that I had a strong interest in gender issues, *because gender is linked to our rights, and if we know our rights, then we know our values and identity.*

After I finished my college education, I joined a women-led organization in my city, and I learned how to develop project proposals and reports. This non-profit organization provided various kinds of support for Tibetan women, and my first community project was funded under this organization when I was 22 years old. As a young woman, this seemed like a big project to me, as it amounted to 82,015 RMB (\$13,502). The local government also supported this project, and with the money I purchased a harvest machine for



*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*



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my village. I was not surprised to hear that the village leaders and my uncle did not believe in me. My uncle said, “no one has ever done such work for our village, and you are a girl. How can you do that?” But later he believed in me when he saw the harvest machine in front of the village meeting hall where many villagers were gathered to receive this project by presenting Tibetan kha tak to me (kha tak is a piece of silk used as a greeting and gift in Tibetan culture).

In 2011, I had the chance to attend a seven-month program on environment and development at an international organization in Thailand. In this program, I learned critical thinking skills and development issues in the Mekong region and I visited many communities affected by massive development projects in Thailand. The program broadened my knowledge and stabilized my goals. In the same year, I got a ‘Young Environmental Leader Fellowship’ award from the Netherlands and had the chance to publish my first



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

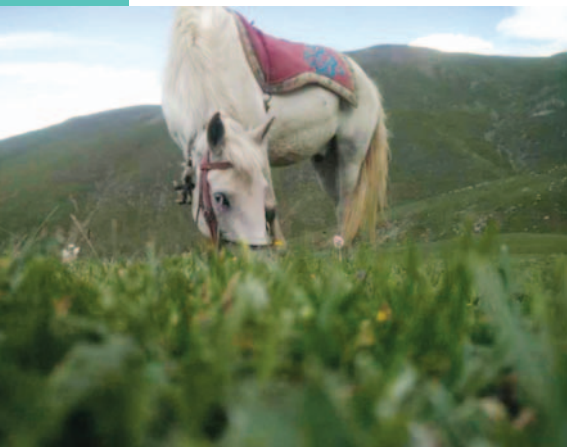
research paper in Thailand. Gradually, I realized that I have a strong interest in social science research, but to do this I needed an academic background to enhance my knowledge and research skills. I then decided to do my MA degree in Development Studies under the Social Sciences Department at Chiang Mai University. In this program I spent three years learning Social Science research skills and relevant theories, and then completed my thesis in 2015. On graduation day, her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn awarded an MA degree to me. It was the first time to see her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn in my life, and I never forgot her affable smile. It was the power of a smile for me.

After finishing my MA degree, I joined the Weaving Bonds Across Borders team as a part-time staff member in 2015, and I learned that many young women are facing serious gender issues in their communities and countries. Through



*Photo credit: WBAB*

Weaving Bonds Across Border's workshops, I learned that **the best way that we can support one other is to empower ourselves first and then empower other people through our work and life experiences; as the American scholar bell hooks put it, 'education as a practice of freedom.'** In my understanding, I perceive that education is a way to develop a good personality and education is a way to create more freedom and to protect our rights. That way, we are able to deal with any form of discrimination, social labels and stereotypes towards women, and we can be free from these socially constructed ideologies in our life. Furthermore, education is a way to promote gender equality and defend women's rights.



*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*

When woman have their own skills and abilities in their communities or work places, they can raise their voices and take leadership roles.

With this in mind, I decided to do my PhD degree in the field of Gender Studies under the Social Sciences Department at Chiang Mai University in 2016. My research focuses on gender

issues in relation to women's roles in natural resource management, women's property rights, educational rights, women's knowledge on environmental protection and development issues. In 2017, I got a "Salween Studies Fellowship" from Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, and with this fellowship I had the chance to work with an international academic team outside of my school and have gained many valuable experiences.

I believe that access to higher education is a way to practice freedom and to work on gender equality is a way to build better understanding to work together on social justice on different levels and scales. I have been fortunate to choose this path. Although this path poses a lot of challenges and difficulties, I want to challenge myself on this path. I am always empowered by positive people who offer their support and help to me. I believe that collective power can build the strong networks and solidarity necessary to make positive changes in our communities and society, and I will continue to carry on with my career and mission on this path with great hopes and dreams.





When there are no ceilings, the sky's the limit. So let's keep going — let's keep going until every one of the 161 million women and girls across America has the opportunity she deserves to have.

— *Hillary Clinton*



# "Our Values Are Reflected By What We Do Rather Than What We Say"

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*Photo credit: Zuo Tao*

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## Author Background

Ms. Zuo Tao is Weaving Bonds Across Borders' board member and she has worked for more than ten years in the non-profit development field. Zuo Tao demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility and leadership in engaging with different actors, from grassroots organizations to international institutions, both within China and across the Mekong Region. She obtained a Master's degree in Social Anthropology of Development from SOAS, University of London in 2013. After returning to China, she made an effort to accelerate non-profit innovation by promoting social enterprise development, and cofounded a crowdsourcing website for empowering the disabled. She has experience working with Save the Children as a National Lead on youth development, specializing in community development. Now she is working as founder of Global Youth Tie to foster Chinese youth to become global citizens through global development education.

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In contrast to the majority of my generation born in the 1980s, I went to work after graduating from a nursing program while my peers entered university. My parents thought that it was more important to secure a job after graduating from Nursing School than to receive higher education.



Photo credit: Zuo Tao

The day when I got an offer to attend a medical vocational junior college, I stood there and cried desperately for 2 hours. But that didn't change my parents' minds. I spent 17 hours seated on the floor of the train to the medical school. My uncle accompanied me, and said to my mum, 'This is the first time that Tao has left home to such a faraway place. I pity her!' 'Why pity me? I'm only 15 years old! I will lead myself to a brighter future!' I said to myself.

I was lucky! Although I was born and grew up in one of the 100 poorest counties of China, I had bigger dreams than being someone's wife and getting a stable job in a hospital. I believed I could do more! I struggled to continue studying while working, and finished my college degree through self-education. Finally, I went to university when I was 21.

After graduation, I worked in an aviation company and as a college teacher. I didn't find my ideal career until I received an offer from Save the Children, the biggest INGO working for children's rights in the world. I was based in Yunnan province where the "poverty cycle" or "development trap" is still prevalent, which requires intervention, especially for girls from poor families. In 6 years of working for children up to 18 years of age, my projects helped tens of thousands of children to receive education through setting up Early Childhood Development Centers from scratch, training parents and teachers, and empowering children by strengthening community education.



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

I'm passionate about making changes for people from marginalized communities, and that's how I found my value in life. I wanted to understand more about social development. Why in some areas, like my hometown, with abundant nature resources, this turned out to be a resources curse, with poor economic conditions and many people with poor health and even cancer. I went to many places in Thailand and learnt how local people struggled to live with dignity and happiness. This bettered my understanding of how different people see life and how various living styles influence development.

I thought with many years' working in the development field, I needed to integrate my practical experiences into the academic field, and make more contributions through advocacy and consulting. So, I applied and got support from the Chevening scholarship program from the UK government.

With the Chevening scholarship, I studied Social Anthropology of Development at SOAS in the UK. This provided me the opportunity to deepen my understanding of development issues and to explore ways to promote social justice and equality from a holistic perspective. While I studied in the UK, I learnt about social enterprises that helped to solve social and environmental problems through sustainable business models. This inspired me as another effective way to contribute to society.



*Photo credit: Zuo Tao*

After graduation, I helped lots of NGOs, non-profit organizations, and individuals to improve their service quality and effectiveness. In the meantime, I co-founded a social enterprise called Ermoo to promote disabled people's career opportunities through online crowd sourcing. This helped hundreds and thousands of physically disabled people to earn their living with dignity and respect.

I proved that both females and males could contribute to society equally. Thus, I was awarded several international awards and certificates, including an Environmental Leadership award from the Joke Waller-Hunter (JWH) Initiative, Netherlands in 2013, the International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP), and the Professional Fellows Program (PFP) in 2016 and 2017.

Promoting a better and more sustainable future for all living creatures is the goal for everyone, especially for children. I started to think about how could I fill in the gap in youth development education for youth from different backgrounds.

As a board member of Weaving Bonds Across Borders, a woman-led organization empowering young women and youth from Asia to work on gender equality and environmental justice issues, I decided to set up a social enterprise to help raise funds and to connect Chinese youth with world development issues. So, I co-founded Global Youth Tie, a social enterprise promoting participation

from the younger generation to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals, and to become responsible global citizens. In 2017, the Global Youth Tie program began with trainers worldwide to help Chinese youth engage with international development issues. Gender study became the most important part of the program. More than 80 youth visited and studied at the Women Studies Center at Chiang Mai University. They showed a strong interest in gender issues as they learned that many girls cannot access education in developing countries. They also learned gender issues on different levels such as gender roles in the family, in school and in society, gender identity, and LGBTQ rights. Most importantly, they learned how to respect and support each other through gender equality, inclusiveness, diversity in multiple cultural backgrounds regardless of race, ethnicity, and social status. Some program participants have become ambassadors for gender equality, advocating how to be gender sensitive and to contribute to an inclusive environment for girls in their schools and communities.

In addition, with funding from Global Youth Tie, Weaving Bonds alumni from China, Vietnam, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines have received small grants to promote their communities' awareness on gender equality,



*Photo credit: Global Youth Tie*



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*Photo credit: Global Youth Tie*

women's leadership skills and environmental protection through meetings, workshops, and community-based research.

I think that through my own example, my peers may be inspired and break through constraints and limitations from society and within themselves. I have shared my story and my beliefs with many people, through speeches at the British Council's Female Entrepreneur Forum, the Lean In Forum, the Chevening Alumni annual meeting, Rotary Boston, Sino-Japan Youth Forum, and through articles nationwide.

Our life values are reflected by what we do rather than what we say. My personal growth could shed light on more people, especially girls, so they can find their own value. **"Keep moving forward, and you will reach heights that you have never thought possible!"**





There's something so special about a woman who dominates in a man's world. It takes a certain grace, strength, intelligence, fearlessness, and the nerve to never take no for an answer.

***— Rihanna in the March 2017  
issue of Harper's BAZAAR***



# "Youth Power, Youth Solidarity: A Driver for Change"

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*Photo credit: Noudsavanh*

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### Author background

Ms. Noudsavanh is from Laos and she is Weaving Bonds Across Borders's consultant in the Mekong region. She graduated with a bachelor degree of Environmental Sciences from the Faculty of Environmental Sciences, National University of Laos. Noudsavanh is also a member of the Mekong Alumni Network. She has done much volunteer work in Laos and the Mekong region.

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I was born in a rural area of Xiengkhuang province, northern Laos. I am a daughter of a Tai Daeng indigenous family. My village is surround by hills, and I feel I have a connection with the atmosphere of the mountains and communities who always care for one another and share everything and live as families. When I was a child, I really enjoyed going around my village, which was surrounded by rice fields and a small stream where my friends and I always went to catch fish. That was the happiest time for me and my friends. Even though we did not have a big forest and big mountains around us, our land was very important for us to find food and do cultivation. So, that's why I always feel comfortable whenever I go somewhere with a similar atmosphere to my village.



Photo credit: Noudsavanh



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

I think because I love to be with nature, rivers and forests, I told myself before I came to university that I would like to study more about how to protect the environment and nature. Since then, especially starting from my high school life, I had a goal that I would go to study more about the environment and nature because I would like to protect them.

I chose to study Environment at the Faculty of Environmental Sciences, National University of Laos. During the time I studied there, I had a lot of questions regarding to lessons I learned. I felt I would like to explore and understand more about the relationship between humans and the environment, which I could not much learn from the university.

One day, one Lao alumni from the Mekong School introduced me to the Mekong School program. She explained that I would learn

more from this school and that would make me understand more about the environment and people. From the moment I met her, I thought to myself that she came at just the right time and I did not hesitate to apply to join this school.

During my time studying there, I learned so many things that I never learned from the classes in the university. At this school, I remembered well that in the beginning of the class we learnt about peace and to explore where we all came from and to respect one another. From learning and sharing I have learnt that we should all respect others regardless of ethnicity, sex, color, belief, origin, culture or religion. I think that was the first time for me to really learn about human rights. There, at the school, I also learnt from communities who are the real environmental guardians and who stand up to protect their natural resources and communities.



Photo credit: Mekong Alumni

I think that studying at the Mekong School was my turning point in many ways, especially to help me to be more critical to see or analyze things related to social issues. It also brought me to learn about the importance of social work and working with communities. The school was also a place where friendship was created. Especially, I had the chance to meet friends from different backgrounds who were like brothers and sisters as we share the same river called the “Mekong River.”



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

After that school where I gained a lot of knowledge and friendship, I came back to my hometown and started to work on environmental issues, putting what I learnt from school into practice. In this period, I had the chance to work more at the community level and that made me realize community members' important roles in protecting natural resources. But the

natural resources that they have tried to protect for many generations were being threatened. I wanted to understand why their natural resources were being threatened, so joined a program with one Lao Mekong School alumni to work with a local youth group and to stay with the community to learn from them what they thought about development and what changes they see as affecting their lives. From staying in the community, I saw that the role of women in protecting natural resources is very significant because their expression concerning their communities and children is very strong. I really appreciated their willingness to do things to try to protect and make their community safe even though it is very hard for them to do.





*Photo credit: Noudsavanh*

Since I had the chance to work with young people in the community for the first time, I realized that besides seeing the important role of women in protecting natural resources, I felt that youth are also a key group to continue to protect natural resources. I joined a youth group where I also have the chance to work together with young people from different backgrounds, cultures and countries to promote the role of young people and advocate for the importance of the voices of youth to make positive change for our environment and society, especially regarding environmental degradation.

In joining a youth group to advocate for public participation in decision-making, I think this work is very important. As I spent more and more time with the youth group, I learnt that for youth, it is very important to have a space to express their concerns and to come and do actions together. We are working together to promote and advocate for participation as youth from the Mekong region to have a healthy and safe environment for us and for our future generations.



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Through the Mekong youth group, I was introduced to the concept of Ecological Child Rights (ECR), which always reminds me to think about my childhood when I enjoyed a clean and healthy environment. Now, because of environmental and natural resource exploitation, it seems that ecological child rights are not being taken into consideration even though impacts on the environment and natural resources directly affect children's lives.

As part of a youth group, I will continue to work with youth from different communities to raise the issue of ECR and to advocate for the role of young people to take action to ensure that our voices are heard and taken into the consideration before decisions are made and our that environment is protected.

When I look back at myself as a young woman who would like to be part of process and making changes, it is very difficult to speak



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

publicly because I was born in a society where public space and the community is always dominated by men. It is somehow very challenging for me to be a leader and I need to work even harder to advocate for our issues and for my rights as a young woman to speak in public or in communities where men see themselves as the supreme leaders.

As a young person, I believe that we can make change, especially by having a dynamic group of young people including boys, girls and LGBT members who are concerned about the environment and want to be part of that change. It is important for us to come together, to empower one another, and to share power and support one other to raise awareness and take action so we have a healthy and clean environment for ourselves and for all of our children.

I will continue to be a part of actions and advocacy for youth and children's participation to have a better environment. As for myself, I will also encourage more young women or girls to be a part of these actions and to be leaders and work with another groups (men/boys and LGBT groups). *I believe that no matter how small or big a group of young people, when it is thoughtful and collective, it will be capable of very powerful action and everyone will be a part of the change.*



*Photo credit: Xuelian*



Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength.

— *G.D. Anderson*



# A Young Woman Leader for Women's Rights

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## Author Background

Ms. Pu Sor is from Thailand. She is a 2015 alumna of Weaving Bonds Across Borders, and first female university student in her community.



My name is Phattharin (Po Sor) and I come from a village called Baan Thiyaper, Sob Moei, Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. The village is located in the north of the country and is the southernmost district of Mae Hong Son. Travel in this region is still difficult due to poor road conditions. During the rainy season travel is especially difficult, and in the summer, dusty conditions make travel uncomfortable, so winter is the best time to visit. In the past, our village was a simple village. We relied on nature for life; we had no electricity and no means of communication. We could live without having to rely on these things, but development came to my community and provided access to communication with the outside world.

## Where the Rivers Meet: Our Future Community Leaders



*Baan Thiyafer, Pu Sor's community in Mae Hong Son, Thailand*

*Photo credit: Po Sor*

As a young woman, I was discouraged by many people around me, including my family. I wanted to get an education and a career, but this was very difficult for me because of gender and also because I am Karen and was discriminated against on ethnic grounds. The girls and women in my community have less opportunity to get educated and participate in decision-making processes.

When I was a child, always I heard people in the community such as our parents say that we as women are not leaders. Also, we have always emphasized that women should get married and have children and take care of their families. There is one thing that has not changed at all and that is the subject of sex and gender. Our religious faith and culture have handed down the concept that women are the weaker sex. Since I was a child I have heard people



*Photo credit: Mick*

in my community and also my parents say that women cannot be leaders; just being a woman is a sin in itself. It is always emphasized that a woman's role is in the family home – getting married and raising children.

The roles of men and women in my Karen community are clearly divided. Women should be the main parent, taking care of their family, making textiles, cleaning the house and cooking, while men work outside the home, for example farming and gardening. Even so, women often work outside the home too! Karen women are expected to be patient and gentle with their family members and to undertake all they can for their families and homes. In contrast, men are not pressured to marry, stay at home or take care of their parents. A woman who wants to leave home to go work in the city faces difficult questions from her family, and if she does leave she is expected to send all of her money to her family and to return as quickly as possible to marry.



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

Women are seen as the weaker sex and are often pressured into marriage and seen as the property of men. Social views about the role of women lead to women marrying at a young age (when they are seen as more desirable) and cases of domestic violence – often in connection with economic problems. Many women end up in situations where they live with a husband who does not love them without the option to divorce or leave their husband due to beliefs around sexuality, gender roles and family.

I am the only female university graduate from my community and I feel so sad for my sisters and other young women who cannot get an education. Luckily, I got support for my tuition fees since I was in high school up to university from Sangsan Anakod Yawachon, which is working in Mae Hong Son and Tak provinces. These are the reasons why I really want to do something for my community in terms of women's leadership. I wanted to change this situation, but I didn't know where to start or what kind of things I could do. This





*Photo credit: Xuelian*

question stayed in my mind until I met Weaving Bonds staff and participated in their workshop in 2015. In the workshop, I gained a lot of valuable knowledge from different teachers and local community leaders. The workshop encouraged and supported me to go further and make my dreams more possible.

After attending the Weaving Bonds workshop, I became confident enough to get involved in women's leadership issues in my community. As you can imagine, girls and women have less opportunities to get educated and participate in decision-making processes in my community. I also spent three months as an intern at Weaving Bonds Across Borders in Chiang Mai, where I built up my skills and knowledge and supported a research project on gender in Thailand and China. I received a small grant from Weaving Bonds to organize a project in my hometown in Mae Hong Son Province, along the Salween River on the Thai-Myanmar border. For my project, I worked with women and children from my

## Where the Rivers Meet: Our Future Community Leaders



*Photo credit: WBAB*

community to learn about our community history and produced a community map in order to build local women's confidence and understanding of their local history and wisdom in natural resources management.

Now, I am continuing to pursue my dream by leading a women's empowerment program for Karen women in Mae Hong Son, Thailand with the organization Development Center for Children and Community Network.



A woman is the full circle.  
Within her is the power to  
create, nurture and transform.

— *Diane Mariechild*



Where the Rivers Meet:  
Our Future Community Leaders

# Our Rivers, Our life

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*Salween River*

*Photo credit: Xuelian*

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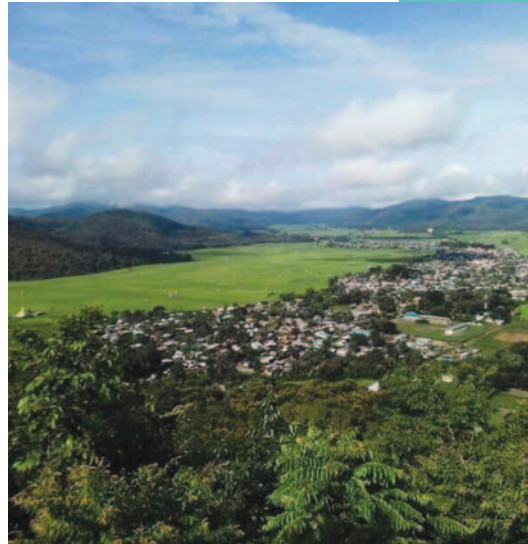
## Author Background

Ms. Hom Kham is from Shan state in Myanmar. She is an alumni and intern of Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Currently, she has joined an international organization and is working on environmental justice issues in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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My name is Hom Kham. I am a young woman from Mong Pan who was chosen by Weaving Bonds to take part in a training workshop in Chiang Mai. Mong Pan is a small, remote village in the Shan region of Myanmar. My village is small and beautiful, and relies heavily on the Salween River and its tributaries. My region is primarily agricultural, so we rely on the rivers for water, in addition to the cultural meaning that the Salween and its tributaries have for indigenous ethnic people in the area. I was born in this village and it is my ambition to spend the

rest of my life here – I want to make sure this is a possibility not only for me, but also for my community as a whole.



*The view of Mong Pan Township*

*Photo credit: Nang Hom Kham*



*Culling the small green-rice and planting to grow flowers again*

*Photo credit: Sai Da*

Mong Pan is surrounded by green mountains covered in dense forests – there are a lot of natural resources, including our river, which flows into the Salween River (one of the most important rivers for our community). This area is ‘out of bounds’ for tourists due to being a conflict area. We have no industry, so we rely completely on crops to earn money and develop our village. We grow mostly rice and garlic, both of which require enough water to succeed.

Aside from that, we collect firewood from the forest and grow green vegetables to eat; the forest and water are central to life for our community.

In our hometown, we have many different ethnic groups including Pa-o, Lisu, Shan and Karen, but the majority of the people are Shan. Mong Pan is rich in culture, literature and traditional festivals. There





*Photo credit: Hseng*

is an ancient lake and culturally significant pagodas and monasteries, including one particularly famous monastery where a respected monk is celebrated every year. Nearby is a beautiful waterfall, from which people have obtained electricity since 2008. The area is surrounded by green rice fields and teak forests. The people in the area are known for their kindness; everyone knows each other and welcomes new visitors to the area.

Last summer in Mong Pan was very hot, because we have one river with a small dam on it. The government built this dam on our 'mother river' at the top of the township, so it is now difficult to get enough water to the agricultural areas. Our community lives under a military government and military groups encircle the town; I believe their population is higher than the population of my town. Sometimes they block the water flow to the fields, so we can't catch fish or





*Photo credit: Xuelian*

make money. Finally, the crops can't produce at high levels and the end result is that we lose income, education and health.

It was for these reasons that I wanted to join the Weaving Bonds leadership workshop in Chiang Mai. Prior to this workshop, I had been interning in Mong Pan; it was my first job and a valuable work experience. During the Chiang Mai

workshop I learned about human rights, the environment, peace building and women's leadership. We were shown how different groups protect their local environments, for example the Karen ethnic group. I can apply what I learned in my own community, for example by organizing trainings and conducting research. I'm especially interested in organizing trainings, as I think people in my village do not have many opportunities to learn about these issues. Furthermore, the workshop also improved my English speaking skills a lot, so I am more able to communicate with people outside my region.

After the Weaving Bonds Across Borders workshop, I got an opportunity to do a further internship with Weaving Bonds based in their Chiang Mai office. I stayed there for three months, got more experience, learned more about environmental issues in the region, and met people from other countries working on the same issues. My dream is for all of the communities who live around the Salween River to work together in the future. I believe that if we try our best we can change our environment for the better and people will also recognize women's vital role in their communities.

In conclusion, my village is a quiet and peaceful community. We have our culture, traditions, literature and a strong desire to give a good future to the next generation. Our education level is lower than other towns, but we try our best – and I am so lucky and proud of myself to be one lady who has the chance to stay in my small town, with my happy family and lovely ethnic groups, and to help my community as much as I can.



Photo credit: WBAB



I love to see a young girl go out  
and grab the world by the  
lapels. Life's a bitch. You've got  
to go out and kick ass.

— *Maya Angelou*



# Everyone Has A Dream

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## Author Background

Ms. Achyit is from Kachin State in Myanmar. She completed a college degree in Social Science in Myitkina. She has been a Weaving Bonds Across Borders alumni since 2016, and she did a three-month internship at the Weaving Bonds Across Borders office in Chiang Mai, Thailand.



I am Achyit. I was born in a rural area called Bang Chyung. Bang Chyung is a very small village. At that time most villagers were animist, but they later become Christians because of missionaries. Even though they are now Christians, they are still sometimes confused about their religious identity. Sometimes, when they get problems or become ill, they sacrifice animals or give money to animist leaders. Even now, some people still practice animism. The animist leaders are very powerful and nobody denies their words or orders.



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

After 1995, most of the villagers moved to settle in other places. The main problem was that there was no school for their children, even no kindergarten. Now, it is said that there are only five or six households in that village. I haven't been back to the village where I was delivered into the world since I was 5 years old.

My mother is a widow who lost her husband at a young age. She and her husband were together only seven years after their marriage. My mother delivered three children, however one died before he grew up. My elder sister and I became humans because of our mother. This was a big responsibility for my mother, as is not easy to feed two children without a husband and any property from her parents. In my society, widows are not allowed to be involved in certain business. In addition, they never include the households of

widows in the village activities. But when they collect money or others things like rice for the village, widows have to pay the same as other houses.

I still remember when some men came to my house at midnight, because my family did not have any boys, only girls. Sometimes drunken men would come and we could not sleep the whole night, because my sister and I had to protect my mother. It was a very tough time for my mother. We didn't have rice to eat and my mother had to collect wild food from the forest. I cried when I saw there was no rice. If my father had left some property for his family, we would have lived comfortable lives. Thus, my mother needed to struggle every single movement to give us food and send us to school.

I organized my family, which is made up of my mother, my sister and me, to move to several different places such as China (Yunnan



Photo credit: Xuelian





*Photo credit: Xuelian*

Province), Manwin (Shan State, Myanmar), and Zi Hpak Gum (Kachin State, Myanmar). We are currently living in Bhamo at an orphanage center. We have faced not only economic difficulties, but social problems as well. At that time, I thought that if I could, I would rather be a boy. My mother and sister would not need to worry about their lives and I could protect them because of man's power. But one thing I realized is that my mother never gave up on our education, even though we could not have rice to eat regularly.

It is said that I am a very lucky person, because I very badly broke my head and my right leg. Because of my mother's difficulties, even though she had a baby, she could not stay at home with her baby. She left me at home with my sister even though my sister also not old enough to care for her baby sister. I still remember that I faced so many obstacles in learning to walk well again, the same as many disabled people. By the grace of God, later my body became well again. Till now, some old people who knew of my situation then are





*Photo credit: Hseng*

surprised when they see that my body is strong. They say that I have turned away from death. I was able to go to school, and finished primary school at the Zi Hpak Gum village. After that, I assumed that I wouldn't be able to continue my education, because in that village all of my friends had left school after primary school. Actually, some families could afford their children's education, but they didn't support them. So I thought that I also needed to stop and work for my family. Moreover, we were one of the poorest families in our village. I could say that the blessed rain came upon our family just in time. I got the chance to go to an orphanage. Even though I have a mother, the pastor had sympathy for us. I did not realize that was an extremely great chance for my future.

When I arrived at the orphanage, I was only nine years old and we still did not have enough food to eat. The other kids at the orphanage and I collected food from the village garbage can. My sister also stayed at the pastor's house. She was a cook, and got the chance

to go to school after she cooked for their family. I stayed there for 12 years, till my university. Later, I passed my matriculation exam, and my mother moved to Bhamo from the village. From that time, my mother became a cook at the orphanage.

My state school life was difficult. I never thought I would survive in the world, then I told God, "Dear father, please take my breath from me. I am too tired to stay in the life which you gave me." I did not know that this was crazy thinking. Mostly, hunger made me nearly die and searching for food in the rubbish became one of my habits. From that time, I really wanted to overcome my suffering and I decided that I must be a person who will give her life to others. Because I knew the taste of hunger, loneliness and pain, I could share the feelings of other people who lack confidence. Before, I had cursed my destiny and I felt that I suffered in every way. But



*Photo credit: WBAB*

later, I saw so many children who could not attend school and people who didn't have even a small place to sleep. Finally, I realized that I was a very lucky girl, and thus had a responsibility to help others. I have gotten the chance to attend so many schools compared to those who don't have the chance to attend a state school, a university and other short courses as well.

I completed a degree at the school of Arts and Social Science in Myitkina in 2015. One of my teachers encouraged me to apply for Weaving Bonds Across Borders's Regional Workshop and internship program in Chiang Mai. Luckily, I was selected by Weaving Bonds Across Borders

where I got a real place to learn much knowledge such as communication skills, peace building, and leadership skills. All of these knowledges were very new to me. In 2018, Weaving Bonds Across Borders nominated me to attend a workshop entitled "Regional Youth Exchange and Training on Storytelling" organized by Oxfam in Cambodia to develop my leadership skills, and in this workshop, I learned photography and story collection skills. In the future, I will continually improve my knowledge and skills and will apply this knowledge to help and support more people in Kachin state.



*Photo credit: WBAB*



Women belong in all places  
where decisions are being  
made... It shouldn't be that  
women are the exception.

— *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*



# A Young Woman Leader Gigi's Story from Cambodia

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## Author Background

Ms. Gigi is from Cambodia. She is a 2016 alumna of Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Currently, Gigi is a women coordinator with Mother Nature in Koh Kong Province, Cambodia. Her work focuses on women's empowerment, education, awareness and reduction of gender bias in communities around Cambodia. She provides trainings to raise awareness among women in Cambodia about women rights, women's leadership and environmental protection. She also leads a women's group to do campaigns and non-violent protests related to environmental protection.



In 2009, many villagers suffered from a sand-dredging project in my village. Villagers had to move their houses and I had to drop out of high school. A company took away our land to do sand mining and then gave us very little compensation. My family faced hard times and all of these difficult experiences encouraged me to protect



*Koh Srolao village, Koh Kong Province*

*Photo credit: Gigi*

the land, environment and women's lives. Even though my family discouraged me from taking these risks because they were worried about my safety, I insisted on my goals and carried out my mission to fight against the social inequalities in my life.

In November of 2016, I joined a 10-day workshop organized by Weaving Bonds Across Borders. In this workshop, I shared a lot of my work experience and life experience with the other participants. After the workshop, I received a small grant from Weaving Bonds to organize a



*Making a video to post on Facebook about protecting mangrove forests from sand dredging*

*Photo credit: Gigi*



project in Koh Srolao Island, Koh Kong Province, Cambodia. There are 3 villages and 700 people on Koh Srolao Island. They are facing the problem of sand dredging and have suffered impacts such as damaged mangrove forests, impacts on their fishing, and water pollution. The villagers don't know how to protect their environment and what their rights are.

That's why I wanted to provide trainings to give awareness about the impacts of sand dredging, how to protect the environment, women's leadership, women's rights and non-violent campaigning to the villagers, especially the women.

However, I didn't know how I could do these activities until I met Weaving Bonds Across Borders. After I joined the Weaving Bonds workshop, I decided to work for the organization Mother Nature in my hometown again, and encouraged my boss to hire more woman



*Non-violent campaign about to protect the mangrove forests from sand dredging*

*Photo credit: Gigi*





*Workshop to raise awareness about women's leadership and women's rights*

*Photo credit: Gigi*

staff because we didn't have many woman staff in our organization before. I think that adding women staff to our organization is very important, because in this way we can promote gender equality in our organization first and then we can work with communities. Every time I try to become familiar with communities and try to understand their livelihood situation. My aims are to create peaceful communities in Cambodia where women can lead each other, achieve self-empowerment and get awareness about women's rights, women's leadership, and organize by themselves to do campaigns, advocacy, and non-violent protests related to sand dredging and environment protection. I hope that more women participate in community issues and raise their voices in public spaces in the future.



I think the best role models for women are people who are fruitfully and confidently themselves, who bring light into the world.

— *Meryl Streep*



# The Journey of a Little Girl to Professional Director: Bindu Majhi, an Indigenous Woman from Nepal

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*Photo credit: Bindu*

## Author Background

Ms. Maw Thoe Myar is from Myanmar. She is a 2016 alumni and intern at Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Currently, she is pursuing her MA degree in Development Studies at Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

This story is about Bindu Kumari Majhi, a young professional women and leader of indigenous communities. She is 29 years old and is from Nepal. Bindu is her name, and she was born in a remote mountainous area called Sahan village, Sindhuli District, Nepal. She is from the Majhi minority ethnic group and she has a degree in Social Sciences and Film Studies from Oscar College.

Bindu is interested in film making and she is now volunteering at the Indigenous Film Achieve (IFA). Before that, she worked at the Nepal Majhi Upliftment Association as a filmmaker. At that time, she didn't know about her identity, rights and even what was going on in her life. After she joined the National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF), she started to think, "no one has made a film about my



Photo credit: Bindu

## Where the Rivers Meet: Our Future Community Leaders

community, and as a film maker, I should do something for my community.” Finally she decided to introduce her ethnic culture and language to other people through filming. In this way, she also could preserve her culture and language.

Bindu found that indigenous women are not only experiencing gender discrimination but also racial discrimination. They are largely excluded by society and other Chhetri and Brahmin communities. Bindu is thus dedicated to her work with her community and works on gender equality by promoting the national constitution, law, cultural and economic rights and traditional rights for Nepalese indigenous women.

In 2016, she has established her own organization called Majhi Filmmaker Association, with 7 members. In the beginning, she faced



*Photo credit: Bindu*



*Photo credit: Bindu*

many obstacles and challenges, and no one believed in her. No one wanted to support her because she had no money. However, she never gave up and she tried to prove that she could do it. Bindu produced 2 long movies and 5 short movies to promote the Majhi Indigenous people's livelihoods, indigenous women's rights and the Majhi ethnic background, culture and language. She showed these movies at film festivals and tried to promote them throughout the country. Gradually, she had the chance to make films not only about her Majhi ethnic group but also other marginalized ethnic groups such as Sindhuli, Morang, Ramechhap and Sindhulalchowk in her region.

Now, Bindu is a Weaving Bonds Across Border's alumna. She participated in the Peacebuilding and Gender Regional workshop in 2017, which was organized by Weaving Bonds Across Borders.





*Photo credit: WBAB*

Before she joined this workshop, she thought that peacebuilding and gender skills were important subjects for her. They will help her to build her capacity and leadership skills, and improve her knowledge to fight for women's rights and defend indigenous people's rights. During the workshop, she was an active participant and shared her experiences and movies.

Bindu believes that media and movies are one of the most powerful weapons to fight for women's rights and indigenous people's rights, and to work on community awareness raising to access legal knowledge and gender knowledge. In the future, she will continually work on movies to advocate around gender issues and indigenous people's rights in her region and will exhibit these movies not only around her country but also around the world.





“It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent.”

— *Madeleine Albright*




# A Girl from a Land Called "Kun Heng"— Thousands of Islands

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## Author Background

Ms. Noon is from Shan state in Myanmar. She is a 2017 alumna of Weaving Bonds Across Borders, and worked with Weaving Bonds Across Borders from 2017 to 2018.



Imagine one day you have to leave your own home and separate from your beloved land. You don't know what happened and why the villagers need to move out of their own land. There was only an order from the Burmese military that said, "all villagers must move out within 3-7 days and if not, you will all be killed." That was the real situation I faced 20 years ago, during the period from 1996-1998. It happened in Southern Shan State of Burma. My home village, 'Keng Kham' in Kunheng Township, was one of the villages that was forced to relocate during that time.

My name is Noon. I was born in a rural village of a beautiful township called "Kunheng" (meaning a thousand islands in Shan language). Kunheng is located in the southern part of Shan State, Burma. It



*Photo credit: Jai Jai*

used to be a peaceful land where a child like me could go everywhere and not need to care about security and safety. My home village is near the Pang River, a river that has many different kinds of fish. This river flows through Kunheng township and has created thousands of small islands. That is why we call this township “Kun (Island) Heng (thousand).”

Back in 1996–1998, the residents of my home village and neighboring villages were forced to move into the town by the Burmese military. I still remember what they told us, “You have to move out of your village within 3–7 days. If we see you after 7 days, we will shoot you dead. No matter what!” That was what they told us. The armed soldiers forced us to move out of our village without



*Pang River*

*Photo credit: Jai Jai*

providing any information or reason why we had to move. They also did not tell us where we should go. Therefore, we had no idea where we should go or what we should do, and we had to move out as quickly as possible. A number of villagers fled to Thailand, some of us moved to the city, and others decided to stay in the jungle secretly. Villagers who resisted the order were shot dead by the Burmese soldiers. It was a terrible and horrible time for me and my family. I was young, but I cannot forget what happened to me during that time in my life.

Afterwards, a beautiful and peaceful land that used to be “thousands of small islands” for many people was completely destroyed by the Burmese military. Villagers’ beautiful memories from their lives and hopes for their livelihoods were lost under the forced relocation.

The peaceful land that used to belong to us fell into the hands of others when the military proposed a huge dam along the Salween River. If this dam is built, it will not only affect small villages along the Salween River but also villages along the Pang River.

There is one of my favorite quotes by Lao Tzu: “[The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.](#)” Another quote from John Wooden says, “[It’s little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen.](#)” Therefore, I have my own mission to bring peace back to my community one day.

In 2017, I had the opportunity to participate in the Weaving Bonds workshop. I learned about peacebuilding and realized that peacebuilding can help many people who are in conflict areas. It can also help to find solutions to resolve community issues. This workshop not only focused on indoor classes, but also included outdoor classes. We had a chance to meet villagers and we had a



Photo credit: Jai Jai

## Where the Rivers Meet: Our Future Community Leaders



*Photo credit: WBAB*

chance to build a strong network for future cooperation among youth from across Asia including Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Nagaland, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Each participant had a different story to share due to the different social, economic and political contexts we are facing now.

Having been a participant in the Weaving Bonds Regional Workshop, I had the opportunity to be an intern at Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Being an intern there, I gained a lot of new knowledge, experience and opportunities. One valuable opportunity that I got



was a chance to join the Asia Pacific Youth Exchange, which took place in Bangkok, Thailand from July 17-30, 2017. I got support from Weaving Bonds Across Borders and Oxfam to join this program. Oxfam provided financial support for all costs of the workshop, including the application fee and transportation fee. In this exchange program, I built a strong network with youth from the Mekong Delta Youth in Vietnam and learned environmental and gender issues at the Asia Pacific level and over 170 participants who attended the program.



*Photo credit: Ms.Noon*

From this exchange program, I gained knowledge on project proposal development, and learned the importance of including a gender perspective in proposals. I also produced some articles about the program. In Nov 2017, I joined the Weaving Bonds team as a staff member and I hope I can help more people through the Weaving Bonds network. I will make my dream come true one day with other activities, and I believe that collective power can bring peace to my community where I was born. I hope that one day there will be no wars, no weapons, no blood, no nightmares, and no victims in their own land.





One of the most courageous things you can do is identify yourself, know who you are, what you believe in and where you want to go.

— *Sheila Murray Bethel*



# When the Veil Unveiled: A Story of a Girl and her Hijab

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## **Author Background**

Minh Chau is from Vietnam, she has been a Weaving Bonds Across Borders alumni since 2017, and she did a three-month internship at the Weaving Bonds Across Borders office in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Summer 2017, Chiang Mai, Thailand. A group of young people gathered and met through a great opportunity— a “Peacebuilding and Gender Skills” workshop held by Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Twelve workshop participants all lived under the same roof in a small village in Mae Rim for three weeks. During the training, all the participants spent time and talked together after class everyday. We learned about conflict – transformation methodologies and shared our stories, which really made huge impacts on our lives, as one participant said, “I have never been listened to, loved and inspired like this before.” As one of the participants, I was so impressed with my classmates’ experiences, skills, and dedication. When I was asked to write about one of my new friends, it was hard



Photo credit: WBAB

to choose one person among them. However, from time to time, when I was talking to a Muslim girl, who always covers her hair with a hijab, I realized there were many big things inside her humility. That's my special friend –Wening.

### ***A girl with big eyes, a bright smile, and an open mind***

Those are words that a person would think of upon meeting Wening Fikriyati. When I first met her, I did not pay much attention to her appearance since she was very quiet and she did not talk much during the first couple of days. One day during lunchtime, I sat next to her and we started to talk. I realized she has an unforgettable charisma, with all her stories, dreams and devotion dedicated to gender issues and women's positions in her religious community.

Wening is a Javanese and a Muslim lady. She was born and grew up in Yogyakarta City, an administrative capital of Yogyakarta Special Region, an island in the middle of Java in Indonesia. Yogyakarta is still governed by a pre-colonial monarchy, the Sultan of Yogyakarta. Fortunately, Wening was raised under the caring guidance of two great parents, who were progressive and open-minded enough to let her grow and develop herself freely.

In her community, people follow and practice Islam. Wening told me that people still believe in “hijab” according to its original concept. Hijab – a religious symbol, shows people’s belief in God, and people believe that hijab will protect women from unexpected attention. “However,” she said, “hijab should not tie women to the concept of “housewife” or “men’s property.” Also, the conservative Muslim people in her community confidently believe that they will go to heaven as Muslim followers. “It is really funny to think that all the good things you have done will not work out just because you are a Christian or a Buddhist, and not a Muslim,” Wening expressed her feelings with a smile.

Before attending college, although Wening is naturally a curious person who is always questioning things going on around her in society, she did not really focus on women’s issues or gender issues. At a turning point in her life, when she joined a journalism club at her University- the Islamic University of Indonesia- she began to take first steps toward gender issues. She noticed those issues



Photo credit: WBAB



*Photo credit: Xuelian*

were happening in her community everyday, and she realized she had to do something to change the situation. Wening started to get involved in social work and voluntary activities. She joined Interfaith activities (an organization that focuses on gender and women under an interfaith approach) because she thinks religion plays an important role in her country. Also, she realized that prejudice among believers may lead to discrimination and acts of violence, in that women and children are vulnerable due to their physical abilities and less power in the social hierarchy.

### ***A woman dedicated to her work on gender issues***

Wening's first job was at the Institute of Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia, a local non-government organization that uses interfaith dialogue to build peace, protect human rights, and promote democracy. Also, she is a member of a women's activist network in Yogyakarta called Javingan Perempuan Yogyakarta (JPY) whose



*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*

concerns are female labor, sexual violence, discrimination, and oppression of vulnerable groups.

Even though Wening has been involved in gender issues for a while, she is a humble activist. She still considers herself lacking in experience and knowledge, so she applied for the Weaving Bonds workshop in order to learn more and continue working for gender equality. Wening once said to me, “the rise of radicalism puts women and children in danger because religious radicalism also tries to ‘normalize’ acts of violence in the name of God.”

During her time in classes and on a field trip to a refugee camp in Wieng Haeng, Thailand, Wening was touched, and sympathized with other participants. She heard a lot of stories, and saw the unpleasant reality at the refugee camp. She wondered about the refugee situation and how it is related to her country’s problems.





*Photo credit: Ka Ji Jia*

Therefore, after traveling back home from the workshop, she wrote an article about the refugee camp.

In our Gender session, Wening shared a lot about the issues that women in her community are facing. “Women in my community are expected to be good daughters, then good wives. We do not have any encouragement to go to work after getting married. We have to work in a “men-friendly environment,” where men are free to smoke, show their power, or simply join in a late night party or take classes while women have to go back home and rarely hang out at night time.”

She also said, “It’s really ridiculous when we are told to not have physical contact with strangers, but all the doctors are men, and the idea of a women studying and becoming a doctor still not accepted.” Also in that class, when our teacher talked about equality, fairness, and empowerment of women, Wening was truly immersed in thought about the narrow path of being a feminist. The road she has choosen requires a strong spirit to keep moving forward. Besides the gender session, Wening also loved the mindfulness and healing part, because it will be useful at her workplace, where women are trying to overcome a lot of challenges as women activists. Mindfulness and healing will help them to release, and to be strong for all the hard things they will encounter in the fight for the equality of women.

***“All I can do is keep walking and doing everything possible. I will devote myself more.”***



Photo credit: WBAB

## Where the Rivers Meet: Our Future Community Leaders

After joining the workshop, Wening has more belief and strength in her mind to continue learning and working for women in her community. Here in Chiang Mai, she has met friends from across Asia to build a network and inspire one another, so she can keep the faith to dedicate herself. Sharing her future plans, Wening said, “I really want to do more. I want to conduct a workshop and start a campaign against violence against women and children.” She will institute a non-violent parenting workshop in a women’s community and also run a campaign to prevent sexual violence against women and children by using social media and raising awareness in local communities.

Wening admits that she faces many challenges and difficulties that come from the community she is fighting for. She has also been feeling exhausted and wants to give up, as everything she has done



*Photo credit: Jai Jai*

still cannot change the problems she sees. Sometimes she feels lost and struggles to find a balance between work and family. She is afraid that if she has children she will not have time to spend with them. However, she told me, “All I can do is keep walking and doing everything possible. I will devote myself more”.

People only live once, so what would make you remember your youth if you had not devoted it passionately and entirely? For me, youth is about giving, and the results will return in a way that you do not expect. The butterfly effect that shows us that “small causes have larger effects,” and this is a beautiful thing. Togetherness really matters in our lives. Then, why we do not plant a flower or give a smile every day? And as long as Wening does not give in to hardship, though she is facing a lot of challenges, she will win her strength and huge success in fighting for women and social justice in her community.



Women are always saying,  
'We can do anything that men  
can do' but men should be  
saying, 'We can do anything  
that women can do.'

— *Gloria Steinem*





# A Story from the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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*Mekong Delta*  
Photo credit: Xuelian



## Author background

Mr. Doan Minh Sang is from the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. He is a 2017 alumnus of Weaving Bonds Across Borders, and a member of the Mekong Delta Youth Group in Vietnam.

My name is Doan Minh Sang. I was born and raised in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. I graduated with a degree Natural Resource and Environmental Management at Can Tho University. I joined and became an official member of the Mekong Delta Youth Group, carrying out projects to support young people and protect the environment. Through working with young people in the Mekong Delta, I realized that environmental issues are closely related to



*Mekong Delta*

Photo credit: Xuelian

other issues in life such as gender, equality, and poverty. However, my skills on these issues are still very limited. In addition, the conditions for participating in activities in the Mekong Delta are lower than in other regions in the country. Also, my English ability is limited, so I can't refer to foreign documents or participate in international programs to improve my knowledge.

In July 2017, I participated in a training about gender and peacebuilding by Weaving Bonds Across Borders. Although my English skills are still limited, they always support me and provide training, skills and knowledge in a way that is easy to understand. I learned about gender and equality, useful knowledge that helped me link to problems in the Delta. The training program also supported my leadership skills, and I used that to organize a project for youth to help them have more opportunities to access software skills and environmental knowledge in the Mekong Delta. I also exchanged with other youth in the Asian region. We shared and



*Photo credit: Jamon Sonpednarin*



*Photo credit: Chau*

learned from each other, which gives me a strong belief in my work and provides more determination. Since joining the Weaving Bonds Across Borders training, I have a stronger belief in my work. I also know more about international programs, giving me more motivation to improve my English skills so that I can participate, learn and share not only in Vietnam but also internationally. After participating in Weaving Bonds Across Borders, I became a student at the EarthRights International School (ERS). With the background I got from Weaving Bonds Across Borders, I have continued to study and improve my knowledge at ERS to be able to improve my skills, to become a youth leader in my hometown.

In the future, I will return to my hometown and use the knowledge I have learned to help young people develop their skills, continue their environmental projects and support their communities. I hope to support communities to protect their livelihoods from negative impacts such as climate change and hydropower projects on the Mekong mainstream. At the same time, I will continue to improve my knowledge, leadership skills, and understanding of the environment. I will bring my experiences and knowledge to share in international workshops and will build a strong network in my area.



I raise up my voice—not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.

— *Malala Yousafzai*



# A Youth Leader's Story from Cambodia

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*Photo credit: Yeang*

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## Author Background

Mr. Yeang is from Cambodia and he is a 2017 alumnus of Weaving Bonds Across Borders. He is a member of the United Nations Youth Advisory Panel, the Steering Committee of UN Joint Program on Youth Employment in Cambodia. Currently, he is working as Program Director and Peacebuilding Trainer for Sarus Cambodia.

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I was born in a rural province of Cambodia with parents who always instilled in me an understanding of the importance of knowledge and dedication. I moved to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia in 2003. With a background that required much struggling and with motivational parents, I have grown up to be a very active individual in my community.

As a university student, I co-founded a youth organization working on children and youth empowerment with my friends. In 2014, I started working as a freelance project officer on gender and sexual reproductive health rights and as a debate mentor/trainer. I have won several debate competitions, and at the end of 2015, I was recognized as a Youth Champion for Child Rights in Cambodia by UNICEF Cambodia. Then I moved to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum where I worked on PR and fundraising communications for their peacebuilding project.





*Lake Tonle Sap*

*Photo credit: Xuellian*

I have been through so many life-changing experiences. One of them was when I joined a peacebuilding and gender workshop by Weaving Bonds Across Borders (WBAB) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and I became a member of WBAB and its partner organization Mekong Youth Assembly (MYA). I started to have a very strong interest in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. So currently, I am working as Program Director and Peacebuilding Trainer for Sarus Cambodia to fulfill my passion for peace leadership. I have also joined many regional programs such as an Environmental Symposium in Thailand, the ASEAN Youth Forum, the ASEAN Peoples Forum and a Youth and Sport Taskforce in the Philippines.

Last but not least, I joined an international conference on the ECOSOC Forum in New York, United States. Besides joining international programs, I have also led many regional programs in Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Since then, I have become a member of the United Nations Youth Advisory Panel, the Steering Committee of the UN Joint Program on Youth Employment in Cambodia, the National Committee on Cambodian Youth Development Index, and a regional member of the Youth and Sports Taskforce of UNESCO.

In the future, I want to work as a consultant on gender, peacebuilding and youth empowerment. With my experience, I believe that I can bring inclusive voices to policy-making processes, promoting diversity so that no one will be left behind.



*Lake Tonle Sap*

*Photo credit: Xuelian*







*"A woman with a voice is,  
by definition, a strong woman."*

— Melinda Gates