

# **The Experiences of Young Karen People Living in Melbourne**

## **Honours Thesis**

**Written By: Rebecca Singh**

**Social Work Unit  
Victoria University**

**2007**

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



3 0001 00911 9159

**FTS**

THESIS  
305.895  
91053  
SIN

~~WER~~

STA THESIS

305.89591053 SIN

30001009119159

Singh, Rebecca

The experiences of young  
Karen people living in  
Melbourne

# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	1
<b>Abstract</b>	2
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	3
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>	7
2.1 Culture	7
2.2 Living in two cultures	8
2.3 Theoretical approaches	10
- Migration	10
- Acculturation and Adaptation	11
- Biculturalism	12
2.4 Conceptual framework	13
2.5 Research questions	15
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b>	17
3.1 Qualitative data	17
3.2 Data collection	18
3.3 Data analysis	19
3.4 Ethical considerations	19
3.5 Limitations	20
<b>Chapter 4: Findings</b>	21
4.1 Participants	21
4.2 Life in Burma	22
4.3 Travelling from Burma to Australia	24

4.4 Experiences living in Australia	25
- Culture	25
- Language/Education	27
- Making Friends	28
- General	29
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion</b>	32
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b>	38
<b>References</b>	41
<b>Appendix A</b>	44
<b>Appendix B</b>	45
<b>Appendix C</b>	46

## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY AND ETHICS APPROVAL**

This work has not previously been submitted, in whole or part, for a degree or diploma at this or any other university. It includes no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text and notes.

This research was approved by the relevant Victoria University Ethics Committee.



**Rebecca Singh**  
**December 2007**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Among the people I wish to thank are my wonderful partner Alex Martin and my family for their love and endless support.

I would also like to thank my friends, who have shared difficulties and joys with me throughout the course.

I am very grateful to all the young Karen people who shared their experiences with me and offered their support. Their contributions were very valuable and are acknowledged. I would not have been able to do this if it was not for them.

Many thanks to Ron Browning who helped me to access and get in touch with the Karen community, who are wonderful and interesting people.

Many special thanks to Dr. Marty Grace, who helped me to shape my research paper. Thank you for all the guidance you offered me and all the valuable suggestions on my honours proposal.

Thank you Professor Carolyn Noble, my supervisor, for being there and for the guidance and support, as well as giving useful comments on the drafts.

Thank you.

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study focuses on the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne. It examines the experiences of the young Karen living in their homeland Burma and their experiences resettling in Australia. Five Karen born young people aged from 18 to 26 years old participated in this research. They have been living in Melbourne for 1½ to 13 years and left Burma through the Thai-Burma border. Three of them lived in the Karen State of Burma, while the others moved from inside Karen State of Burma into refugee camps where they lived for 12 to 14 years. The purpose of this study is to document the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne; what has their experience been like in their homeland, and what have their experiences been like resettling into a new country from their own perspective.

This research is based on five in-depth interviews with young Karen people who live in the Western region of Melbourne. Their experiences were varied, from their life in Burma and travelling from Burma to Australia, to resettling into Australia where themes such as culture, education/language and making friends arose. The two major recurring themes were culture and language.

This study allowed five young people to recount their experiences in their own words and the results of this study have shown the importance for social workers and other professionals to understand and know where the people we work with are from. There needs to be an understanding of people's cultures and to attend to the cultural meanings of our clients otherwise we may find ourselves engaging in oppressive practices.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Australia's population includes a large number of immigrants and this has helped to create our modern multicultural society. Australia has embraced multiculturalism both socially and in Government in response to increasing cultural and racial diversity. Australia has had multicultural policy statements and programs at National and at the State and Territory levels since 1970 (Doyle 2001). Looking at recent statistics the estimated resident population of Australia at September 2006 was 20,674,400 persons which was an increase of 269,600 people since September 2005 and there have been 69,000 people since June 2006, of those 69,000, the number of people who have immigrated here was 37, 260 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). This shows that Australia's population is growing every year; large parts of these numbers are migrants including those who are seeking refugee status, fleeing civil war and human rights violations.

One of these groups is the Karen people of Burma. They were a quiet, peaceful group of people that had their own culture, language, lands and economic system (Karen people 1996); however they have lived under military rule since 1962, where oppression and fear are constant in their lives (Kaw Lah 2004). According to Kaw Lah productions the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) have spread fear, hatred and war forcing the Burmese to live in third World conditions (Kaw Lah 2004).

An organization called the Karen Women's Organisation has reported the terror that the Karen women are suffering today. One section of the report documented the systematic rape being committed by the Burmese military against the Karen women. It showed that rape is being actively used by the SPDC military as a method of intimidating, controlling, shaming and 'ethnically cleansing' Karen groups (Karen Women's Organisation 2007). Many other human rights violations



are happening against the Karen people. According to Kaw Lah, the Karen people have been struggling for basic human rights and freedoms in their homeland for over fifty five years (Kaw Lah 2004).

As a result Karen people have been fleeing their country to find a better life for themselves and their families. Many are fleeing to the Thai-Burma border a small town called Mae Sot. A place many Karen people have fled to and established refugee camps (Browning 2006). Here they receive food, education and shelter. The number of Karen people fleeing Burma into neighbouring countries and refugee camps is growing; the world community is starting to take notice. Australia is taking notice, with an intake of two hundred Karen refugees last year, on top of those already here, with more to come (Browning 2006).

Resettlement for the Karen people is very difficult. They are community minded people and leaving behind their family, friends, social networks and a way of life is an immense challenge. As Ron Browning put in his article 'One family recently came to Melbourne after many years of hoping and waiting for a visa. Standing inside their new western suburbs home, they wept for friends they had to leave behind in the camp' (Browning 2006, pp. 16).

In some nations, multiculturalism and cultural diversity are taught in schools and homes, and accepted within the broader community. However it is still hard for migrants to feel welcome at first, because their way of life is different from the norm and they need to establish where they fit into their new community. Gary Grumpert and Susan Drucker (1998) believe that when a person immigrates, they come across new and unfamiliar aspects of life especially cultural change. The experience of immigration is traumatic for many, especially refugees as they have fled their homeland to come to another country to escape violence and human

right violations rather than relocate of their own free will (Grumpert & Drucker 1998).

This particularly affects young people. Young migrant people grow up in a social environment that is at times quite different from the one their parents grew up in (Butcher & Thomas 2003), in other words the cultures they live in overlap leading to some degree of cultural clash. Culture for young people can often be hard to define. Individuals can be connected with many different cultures including their native heritage, the broader Australian culture and a particular youth culture, for example surf or hip-hop culture. Each of these cultures has a different set of values, practices and relationships (Butcher & Thomas 2003).

Young people from different backgrounds need to find a way to manage the cultural transitions when moving between their cultural spaces, when moving from their parent's traditional environment to that of a group of friends. Due to social changes, their parents' culture may not be of much help for the younger generations who must establish their own culture to fit into current social conditions. As a result there may be tension between young people who want to adopt different values and a lifestyle that is quite different from their family's expectations, and the older generations, who may be worried about these changes (Butcher & Thomas 2003). All these different social pressures can have an impact on how young migrants' identity is formed.

Social workers need to gain a great understanding of people's culture and identity if they want to work effectively with particular groups. To date, there has been little research conducted into the experiences of the Karen people, as social workers we need to understand people's experiences if we are to work effectively with them. The Karen people are a group from Burma, they have suffered

oppression at all levels and have come to Australia through refugee camps to better their lives for themselves and their family.

As social workers we need to understand all issues to help make the migration process as easy as possible for all the people we work with. Social workers need to commit themselves to bettering people's lives; working with people to achieve the best possible outcomes for their personal and social well being; and to help individuals, groups, families and communities to gain equal access to social, economic and political resources (AASW 1999). Through doing this we need to make their stories known and to teach the community about their experiences.

Chapter 2 will explore notion of culture, and existing studies that have examined young people and their experiences living in two cultures. This chapter will also examine theoretical approaches to migration, biculturalism, assimilation and acculturation theories, as well as the conceptual framework that I will be using and the research questions that will guide my research.

Chapter 3 will present the research design and approach that I will be using for this research project. It will also show the type and methods of data collection, as well ethical considerations and limitations of this research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter will examine the notion of culture, and existing studies that have examined young people and their experiences living in two cultures. Furthermore it will discuss the similarities between the experiences of young Karen people and other young people living in two cultures. This chapter also examines migration, and the impact it has on people, biculturalism in addition to assimilation and acculturation theories. Lastly it will examine the conceptual framework that I will be using and the research questions that will guide my research.

### **2.1 Culture**

The Karen community are a relatively new group to Australia; however like all communities, the Karen people have their own identity and culture, and hold it as dearly as other groups.

People's identity is their cultural identity; culture is the way that we view ourselves the way we were brought up, how we behave in regards to love, work, decision making and so forth. It is our way of life; culture defines who we are and how we act (Thomas & Schwarzbaum 2006).

Culture is 'knowing the rules by which we live in a society. Culture is learnt and transmitted from one generation to another. Culturally based values, norms and behaviour are transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of socialization and enculturation' (Sonn & Fisher 2005, p. 351). Socialization is the formal process of learning rules and behaviours through education and child-rearing where enculturation is the informal process of learning through our experiences of everyday life (Sonn & Fisher 2005).

To make a person's experience easier, we as social workers need to have a greater understanding of people's culture and the way people live. Thomas and Schwarzbaum (2006) believe that if we do not attend to cultural meanings with our clients we may be engaging in oppressive practices rather than therapeutic ones. As the Karen are a new community not much is known about their culture, so in working with the young Karen we need to have a greater understanding of what defines them as young people, in other words, we need to understand their culture.

## **2.2 Living in two cultures**

This section discusses previous research that has been conducted into youth issues. Many young people feel some conflict with their parents as well as their social groups in society; they try to strike a balance between the two, however many problems arise.

A major theme did arise over these studies discussed below which was the relationships that the youth had with their parents, parents had different ideas of what their children should or should not be doing compared to that of their children who felt that their parents were 'controlling'. There is some degree of conflict that the young people experience between their family life and their greater social networks which both have different cultural settings.

Research into experiences of immigrant background and young people in Australia were carried which included the Filipino-Australian youth. A youth camp was held for the Filipino of Australia. The camp identified some prominent issues such as 'identity crisis, delinquency, racism, intergenerational conflict, peer pressure and the problem of handling two cultures' (Soriano 1995, p. 111). The camp also explored other problems that the Filipino-Australian youth faced including dealing with the authoritative view of parents in regards to going out with friends,

curfews, career decisions and high academic performance. The Filipino youth identified problems with fitting in and feeling accepted by peers, and they felt some degree of negative peer pressure; including activities as drinking, smoking, taking drugs and cutting classes (Soriano 1995).

A study was also carried out by Feldman and Rosenthal (1990) which looked at the cultural emphasis on autonomy and independence. They believed that adolescents who are newly arrived immigrants, or whose parents were migrants, face the difficulty of dealing with two cultures at the same time. The two cultures are the 'old' culture which is represented by the person's parents and family, and there is the 'host' culture which is represented by peers, schools, and the dominant culture (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1990). The results showed that there are differing views on independence within a person's culture. The older people saw that they were giving some autonomy to independence, where the younger people did not see this as the case, causing some conflict as both generations view things differently. However for those in their host culture, not much conflict arises as a common culture is shared.

The Karen community and the Chinese community share some similar values. These include the importance of family and respect of elders; traditional Chinese society has a shared orientation that supports the family not the individual as the major unit of society (Mak & Chan 1995). Each individual's identity is defined in terms of their role and interpersonal relationships within the family rather than their own identity (Mak & Chan 1995). Respect for members 'higher up' in the family order conserves order, dictates appropriate behaviour, and maintains the status quo in family relationships. People who are seen to go against this are severely criticised for their indiscretion (Mak & Chan 1995).

These studies are a few years old, as it was hard to come by more recent studies that have been carried out in regards to living in two cultures; however they do illustrate that young people do have some difficulty living between two cultures. As no previous or recent research has been carried out with young Karen people, I aim to illustrate the experiences of the Karen living within two cultures, with reference to previous studies that have been carried out with other 'cultural groups' and the findings of those studies.

### **2.3 Theoretical approaches**

For many people coming to a new country they are leaving behind the only way of life they have ever known and they may feel scared of what their future holds for them. The Karen has had to flee their homeland because it is under military rule; many have lived in refugee camps before arriving in Australia. The uncertainty associated with coming to a new country under these circumstances may cause problems for them, during settlement they face challenges such as assimilation and acculturation, adaptation of two different cultures and cultural conflict.

#### ***Migration***

The Karen people have very traditional ways of life; it is part of their culture. The traditional aspects of the culture includes; their language, Karen or Thai; and their clothing which holds deeper cultural significance than just their appearance, for example unmarried women wear white. In their homeland, the Karen traditionally live in close-knit communities, where they have a strong community spirit and place great importance on moral and religious values. Within each community an elder is elected to represent the village, however the community work together to make decisions. Karen families are cross-generational, where the grandparents, parents and children live together (The Karen Hill Tribes Trust 2006).

These are the very traditional ways of life of their homeland, and in moving to a new country some of these may be lost. However, the Karen still have a strong community spirit and they do work with one another here in Melbourne to maintain their traditional way of life to some degree.

Berry (1990) believes that refugees and asylum seekers can go through many issues and problems when they re-locate to a new country; many face psychological and social problems. Berry sees that many people come from homelands that are under military rule, ethnic, racial and religious conflict, political violence, deliberate torture and so forth; these all have an impact on a person's life. Also when relocating to a new country, the trauma can still remain as the uncertainty of coming to a new country, and what is there for them also has a psychological impact on a person's life. The settlement and adaptation to a new country can either be a good or bad experience for people, but those who have had a history of torture and trauma find it harder to settle into a new country. As Berry (1990), Bieser (1990) and Diller (2007) believe, services need to be available for those who need it especially those who have a history of torture and trauma.

### *Acculturation and adaptation*

There have been many theoretical models developed to describe experiences, processes and outcomes related to acculturation and intercultural contact. These include mainly acculturation and social identity (Sonn & Fisher 2005).

Acculturation is used to define 'culture change that results from continuous first hand contact between two distinct cultural groups' (Berry 1990, p. 91).

Berry's (1997) (cited in Sonn & Fisher 2005) model of acculturation and immigrant adaptation includes four common responses to intercultural connection; assimilation, integration, separation and marginalisation. Assimilation is where the person moves away from their culture of origin and moves towards the



dominant culture. Compared with separation, where the person maintains their culture of origin and has little contact with the dominant culture. Integration was seen as the most favourable, where people maintain their culture of origin and also participates in the dominant culture. Marginalisation is where the person has little interest in their culture of origin or the dominant culture (Sonn & Fisher 2005). When working with people from other cultures acculturation is important in two ways. Firstly to know how much acculturation has taken place with an individual or within a family and to see what traditional values still remain. Secondly 'acculturative stress' can become an issue where acculturation can cause emotional strain. Take for example a newly arrived Vietnamese family; the children have learned English quite quickly and as a result they have become spokespeople and translators for their family. Traditionally it is not the role of children who are brought up to be dutiful to their elders to hold so much power. As a result children may become less bound by traditional ways and this would place a big strain on the family as traditional cultural ways are comprised or lost as result of immigration and acculturation (Diller 2007).

This could apply for the Karen people as, like the Vietnamese, the younger people do not have power; they are brought up to be dutiful. As the young people start to adapt to their new host society they may start to lose their traditional ways.

### ***Biculturalism***

Biculturalism is defined as 'a person is bicultural when he or she is able to identify with two cultures and successfully function within those two cultures' (Ford 2006, p. 2277). There is a common agreement with conceptual models 'that those who are better rooted in their home culture report better social and psychological well-being' (Sonn & Fisher 2005, p. 353).

Many people are more than likely to identify with more than one culture, in other words immigrants and ethnic or cultural minorities are absorbed into a multicultural society. They can define themselves along multiple ethnic or cultural boundaries or they can view that living with different cultures creates uncertainty, confusion and marginality (Devos 2006). Many current studies into ethnic identity, acculturation, and cultural orientation show that people can successfully internalise or identify with more than one culture (Devos 2006, Berry 1990, Padilla & Perez 2003).

The biculturalism model encourages people to adopt elements of the new culture as well as maintaining their own culture, and be able to blend and function in both the cultures, their own and the host society. Those that do draw from both cultures benefit in many areas such as schooling (Feliciano 2001) and in everyday life.

## **2.4 Conceptual Framework**

This research project will be drawing on anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspectives. I will be drawing on Mullaly's, Dominelli's, Payne's and Young's theories. These theories challenge the current structures in society while highlighting the oppression, racism and lack of power that exists.

Many groups within society face different forms of oppression including racism, violence and discrimination. These occur at the three levels of oppression; the personal/individual level, cultural level and the structural/institutional level (Mullaly 2002). Each of these levels is embedded in the other; personal is embedded into the cultural which in turn is embedded in the structural.

Personal level oppression includes thoughts, attitudes and behaviours that portray a negative pre-judgement of a particular subordinate social group, this normally relates to stereotypes. Cultural oppression includes the norms, values and belief

systems of how the dominant culture sees subordinate groups in society and this is portrayed through the media, books, movies, stereotypes humour and popular culture (Mullaly 2002). Structural oppression refers to the means by which oppression is institutionalised in society. It is made up of ways that work together to keep the dominant group dominant at the expense of subordinate groups such as social institutions, laws, policies, social processes and practices, economic and political systems (Mullaly 2002).

Young (1990) discusses five faces of oppression which include; exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Exploitation is the process where one group works to benefit the other, and the class division which occurs where one group has wealth and the other has little (Young 1990). Marginalisation is the process where groups in society are left out of mainstream society that is they can not participate in society or have input as other groups might (Young 1990). Powerlessness is where groups lack any power within society to make decisions or have input into the way society operates. Cultural imperialism is where the dominant group try to force their values, beliefs, experiences as the norm onto other oppressed groups (Young 1990). Lastly is violence, which is the most extreme in cases where acts of violence such as random attacks, destroying of property and unprovoked attacks on people who are not in the dominant group (Young 1990).

The Karen like many other ethnic groups may suffer from racism in our society. Dominelli (1997) defines racism as 'the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance' (pp. 7). Dominelli goes on to discuss 'multi-racialism' which is where 'white people obscure the real problem that needs to be tackled – racism – and focus instead on discovering one another's different lifestyles' (pp.9). Here Dominelli means that the construction of social relationships within society is based on the assumed inferiority of 'non-

Anglo-Saxon ethnic minority groups' and as a result their exploitation and oppression occurs (Dominelli 1997). It is not enough to know about one another's culture we need to be able to overcome the thought that one culture is more dominant than another, this will not occur until all groups get to have a voice within society.

Payne (2005) discusses the theory of 'cultural pluralism' where this view sees that there are many ethnic groups in society. These groups all maintain to some extent their cultural beliefs and systems and this should be encouraged and all the different cultures valued. This in turn leads to a policy of multi-culturalism, where spreading knowledge and experiences of different cultures is encouraged. Sanders (1978) (cited in Payne 2005) defines multi-culturalism as 'allowing individuals to keep much that is distinctive about their cultural traditions and integrating diverse cultural traditions in society, thus opposing a single, dominant culture' (pp. 271). By doing this it would make services appropriate and responsive to people's needs.

Thompson (2001) also believes that cultural awareness promotes ethnically sensitive practice and helps to prevent devaluing minority cultures or seeing them as inferior to the dominant culture, and in so doing alienating the people who share those cultures. Fernando (1989) (cited in Thompson 2001) takes it a step further by saying that we as workers need to recognise elements of racism in ourselves, our practices and agencies, then can we move towards an anti-racist practice.

## **2.5 Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to document the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne; what has their experience been like in their homeland, and what have their experiences been like resettling into a new country.

The questions guiding my research are:

- What are the experiences for young Karen people living in Australia from their own perspectives?
- What was it like living in their homeland?
- What has been like coming from their homeland to Australia?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne, and to understand what their experiences have been resettling into Australia.

In this study I used a 'critical social science paradigm' (Rubin & Babbie 2005), which sees part of the purpose of social research, is to empower oppressed groups. I believe that we as social workers need to have greater awareness of a person's culture if we are to work effectively with them. Ife (2001) believes that social workers need to understand the importance of culture when working with people, and that an understanding of an individual, family or community and the culture from which that person or group comes from is quite significant.

I used qualitative research as I was interested in the experiences of the young Karen and how they tell their story. As Darlington and Scott (2002, p. 20) say about qualitative research 'we are interested in how others see and experience the world'.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Research**

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this research into the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne. Qualitative research allows the researcher to directly observe participants in an environment in which they are comfortable. It gives the researcher the opportunity to talk to the participant one-on-one and to listen to what they have to say in a detailed, individual way (Neuman 2006).

### **3.2 Data Collection**

I examined the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne by carrying out in-depth interviews. Darlington and Scott (2002) say that 'in-depth interview takes seriously the notion that people are experts on their own experience and so best able to report how they experienced a particular event or phenomenon' (pp. 48). A total of five in-depth interviews were carried out with young Karen people aged 18 to 26 years old.

There are many advantages to using in-depth interviews. It allows the participant to be interviewed where they feel comfortable, it also allows the participant to be open without fear of others, and also allows the researcher to gain the opinions of the participant. This method aims to understand the participant and not to judge them (Sarantakos 2005).

However there are some disadvantages of using in-depth interviews. The sample size is not large and therefore does not give a representative result. It is also time consuming and information gathered does not produce enough data for comparisons (Sarantakos 2005). For this study however it allows the researcher to get an in-depth look at people's experiences and allows the participants to speak freely. A semi structured interview schedule (Appendix A) was used; however they were structured in a way that it is flexible. Furthermore, the researcher asked for permission from the participants to use a tape recorder.

The participants were recruited through the Australian Karen Organisation, where I was carrying out a community development placement. I recruited young people who were not involved in the Community Development project. I gave written information (Appendix B) about my research to the young people who are fluent in English whom I met in the course of my contact with the Karen community.

I invited them to contact me about participating if they would like to. This approach, including the content of the written information emphasised that participation is voluntary and non-participation will not be held against individuals in any way. I let participants know that they can withdraw at any time they want to and if they chose to withdraw it will not change the relationship that we have. As I recruited people to participate I organised a time and place with the participants where they felt comfortable to carry out the interviews.

Each interview took about one hour. The researcher provided a brief introduction to the participant and answered any questions. An agreement was reached with the researcher and the participant on how the interview will be conducted, and a signed consent form was collected (Appendix C). Demographic information was gathered at the start of the interview.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The researcher listened to the tapes and transcribed the interviews. The information was coded and analysed, thematically (Darlington and Scott 2002). The researcher examined patterns in the data as well as the non-verbal expressions which was included in the data collection process.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Before any information was collected the researcher explained to the participants that all information collected will be kept confidential. The data will be held at the premises of the Social Work Unit at the St Albans campus (locked in a filing cabinet) for 5 years. Also the researcher explained that when writing and speaking about the research all identifying information will be changed so they can not be identified; the researcher used pseudonyms (Neumann 2006). The researcher followed the AASW (1999) confidentiality and privacy ethics.



The researcher was also available if the participants wanted to ask anything, and before each interview the researcher answered any questions that were asked. Also the researcher explained that they will not be judged by anything that they say and the researcher emphasized that whatever they say will stay confidential.

The information and informed consent procedures will minimise the likelihood of any problems that may arise during and after the interview process. However if a participant showed signs of distress while carrying out the interviews the researcher will stop the interview and give them a chance to withdraw from the research or reschedule the interview if they wanted. This would be done in an empathic way and would include an offer to refer the participant to a relevant agency; Foundation House.

### **3.5 Limitations**

A limitation for this study is the sample size; by interviewing only five people the findings will not give great scope on the issue. However by only interviewing five people and carrying out in-depth interviews the researcher will gain greater in-depth understanding of young Karen people's experiences living in Melbourne and how it has been for them resettling into Australia. This will also help make people in the broader community aware of the experiences of some young Karen living in Melbourne.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter presents the experiences of the young Karen people. It discusses their life in Burma and their journey from Burma to Australia as well as their experiences resettling into a new country.

The main themes that arose from the interviews include:

- ❖ Life in Burma
- ❖ Travelling from Burma to Australia
- ❖ Resettling and their experiences living in Australia which include:
  - Culture
  - Education/Language
  - Making friends
  - Other

In this chapter, these themes will be examined separately. Quotes taken from the interview transcripts are written in italics or indicated by quotation marks.

### **4.1 Participants**

Five Karen born young people aged from 18 to 26 years old participated in this research. They have been living in Melbourne for 1½ to 13 years and left Burma through the Thai-Burma border. Three of them lived in Burma the Karen State, while the others moved from inside Burma the Karen State into refugee camps where they lived for 12 to 14 years. Every one of them were sponsored to come to Australia by a family or family friend and had to wait for 1 to 4 years to get their visa. They all had to go in Thailand before they came to Australia. They all had limited or, no English at all when they arrived in Australia.

All names have been changed to keep the identity of the participant confidential.

## 4.2 Life in Burma

Each person has had different experiences living in their homeland Burma. Both Eh who is a twenty year old female and Day Day, who is an 18 year old female, lived in Burma in the Karen State. Their parents had left Burma and moved to Thailand to work so that they could send money back home and they also applied for a visa while they were living in Thailand. Eh points out that many parents go over to Thailand to work and send money home to help with taxes and education as well as other daily expenses such as food.

Eh explains that due to the Burmese Government the Karen culture is slowly disappearing, for example *“We are not allowed to study Karen we have to study Burmese...but all the children prefer to study Burmese as they are better at Burmese so they don't really want to learn Karen. Burmese has become a first language, we talk Karen but many people can't write Karen, almost everyone can write Burmese”*.

Eh did not live in a refugee camp she lived within Burma in the Karen State in a small village called Hpa An township. Eh points out that life in the Karen State was quite hard *“our lives are harder than refugees because refugees they get support from somewhere else like food or clothes or something but in Burma we don't have any support, if we don't work we are starving we don't have any food to eat”*.

Day Day lived with her grandparents on their farm, where she helped them after school. Day Day's experienced difficulty and hardship living in her homeland. Day Day did not give me much information about living in her homeland but she did say that *“we had to find our own food and our own money”*. Also while living in her homeland she did not know much about the Karen people. However, since living in Australia she is learning more about the Karen people.

U Sein is a 26 year old male who lived in a refugee camp. He lived there for 12 years where he studied in the camp and worked in the community church. U Sein explains that inside the refugee camp it is very crowded and he did not think much about his future. U Sein points out that every month they have to ask for food and clothes, and that while the camp is safer than in the Karen State, it is still dangerous. *“The camp is safer than the Karen State...we live in refugee camp we don't have much chance. We don't have a chance because it is controlled by the Thai authorities; we are not allowed to leave the camp we have to stay in”.*

Through talking with U Sein and others I found out that many people who do leave the camp can get severely beaten or even at times people have been shot and killed. Many people living in the camps are very frightened of the Thai people who are guarding and patrolling the outside of the refugee camps.

Paw Eh Moo is a 21 year old female who lived in Burma in the Karen State in an area called Mamerplaw for 7 years and then lived in a refugee camp for 1 year which was called ‘Meh ta reh ta lor thaw’. When she lived in Mamerplaw she lived with her family it was at the military headquarters for the Karen.

*“I remember my mum was pregnant and we were in our house and we heard aero planes. Aero planes were bombing the place and people were running and they hide in a cave that was freezing and overcrowded for a couple of hours till the bombing stopped and everything calmed down”.* Paw Eh Moo also points out that life was hard and that *“It (Mamerplaw) was never really safe”.*

Saw Saw is a 24 year old male who lived in Burma in a village called Tan Da Bean. Saw Saw went into a refugee camp when he was 9 years old; he lived in the camp with his parents for 14 years, growing up in the camp. Saw Saw does not really remember much from when he was a boy, but he remembers that the Burmese soldiers always entered their village and that *“one day when my father was on the farm the Burmese soldiers burst into our village and since then we ran.*

*My sister and mum and brother were separated from my father after that 2 days we meet again. We have no place to go back too”.*

After this they headed towards the Thai-Burma border to the refugee camp. While he was living in the camp he studied as he dreamt of becoming a doctor, but there was little chance of studying past year 12. He finished his studies and then taught in the camp at the secondary school for three years. In 2004 an Australian Karen Organisation leader sponsored and applied for a visa for him and his family. They had to wait one year as Saw Saw says he was “*very excited but afraid to come to a new country*”.

### **4.3 Travelling from Burma to Australia**

Experiences were similar for the young Karen people. Eh and Day Day were sponsored by their parents, they had to go to Thailand where they were met by their mothers. Their parents had organized everything for them, so the transition was made a little easier for them. They both expressed that they were scared as they did not know English very well and all they could really say was ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Paw Eh Moo was very excited when she was to leave Burma to come to Australia, her family were sponsored by a family friend who was living in Melbourne. Paw Eh Moo was 8 years old when she came to Australia; she remembered the weather and wondered why it was warm when she left her homeland but cold when she arrived in Melbourne.

U Sein had to apply for the visa and wait for two years, however he considered himself lucky compared to others, who had to wait for four to five years. U Sein had to stay in Thailand before he came to Australia, however the authorities did not treat him very well. He found it quite hard to communicate to the Thai people as he did not speak Thai, so he did not know what was happening. When he finally did get on the plane to come to Australia he had mixed emotions as he says

*"I felt very happy at first and I also think back about my family and feel sad. I have to change my life in a new country because it is a developed country". U Sein is the only person in his family to leave the camp; his family is still in Burma living in a refugee camp. "When arriving in Melbourne looking out of the plane I remember my family....I am in a new country".*

Saw Saw remembers that he had to wait in Thailand with his family for five days before leaving. He remembers that eating the food on the plane was hard as well as he says *"we could not eat food...never see a knife and fork, we eat food by hands. I sit close to someone...I said I don't know how to eat and she showed me then I eat. My parents and sister sit on other side of me and they look at me and I showed them and they copy me"*. (Saw Saw says this while laughing) His family relied on him because he could speak some English; they were all scared and anxious as they were not sure what they needed to do.

#### **4.4 Experiences living in Australia**

##### ***Culture***

Eh at first found Australian culture a little difficult to get used to. In Burma there many cultures like there are in Australia; however those cultures are not as diverse, *"At the beginning it was hard because here people have different cultures but now I am use to it so it is o.k."* Eh has made a conscious decision that she will keep her culture and traditions but yet she will also live with the other cultures in Australian society, as she says; *"I still keep my culture I still like Burma culture but I think we should still follow where we are from and also follow where we are now. We are living in two different worlds...but this is a great experience for me to live in two different cultures I can fit in to both of them"*.

Eh has also found some cultural differences quite funny for example *"seeing people with bikinis for the first time I'm like why would you do that oh my God!"*

*You know I don't want to watch that but now it is nothing...I am use to it", she says this while laughing. Eh also gives another example of cultural differences such as "when you go to station or something you see school students are like kissing and smoking...because there (Burma) we are not allowed to and especially in my place the people marry very young because they have nothing to do....boy and girl are not allowed to touch one another".*

U Sein also feels that in regards to culture people should keep their own but also look at others *"we have to keep our own traditions and maybe we have to copy them, some of the Australians have good traditions"*, the good traditions U Sein mentions are manners in regards to saying excuse me when you want to talk to someone. U Sein feels he needs to have his own culture and traditions.

Day Day found the cultural differences quite hard at first *"the culture is different too because I went to school and study with different people when I go back (home) I have to be in my culture so it was between two cultures, it was hard for me"*. Day Day also found it hard because she would worry what other people would think. *"I have to think about my culture what my people will see"*, so Day Day felt that when she does one thing in one culture she worries about what people will say or think in the other.

Saw Saw also finds cultural differences a problem, he feels that here respect to elders has diminished. *"When I went to the movies and I was waiting, some boys they speak and swear to older people, like the age of my father...that is why swearing is very bad and rude as I understand...a man said 'do I have to call the police' and the boys speak back, and his friend pulled him back...I was with my friend...who grew up here and he said 'don't go, this does not belong to you', 'why' I said 'because we grew up like this if someone disrespect older people we can go and fight back' but you can't do that here"*. He is finding it hard to let go

of some cultural traits of his homeland, such as standing up for his beliefs and practices that seem at odds with the dominant culture.

### ***Language/Education***

Eh gave some examples of when she was worried about speaking English and when she found it quite hard. *"When I went to school I don't want to speak to anyone because I don't know how to speak English so I am scared"*. Eh also discussed catching the train *"me and my sister when we were on the train we ran away from people because if someone talks to us we don't know what they are talking about so I got scared so I told my sister not to go near the people if they talk to you, you don't understand so don't go near. But now it is alright"*.

Another major area of concern was going to school. As she did not speak English she found it quite difficult initially, *"it was really hard the first year because everyone knew how to speak English except me and I had to start at the beginning. I don't understand what the teachers were saying I don't know how to read books I don't understand English so it was really hard and I was scared"*. Eh only had 7 months of language school when she came here, before moving into mainstream school.

Day Day makes a point regarding education in Burma and how they have to be quiet in class and are too scared to ask questions, but here in Australia you can talk and ask questions *"so when I came here I was scared and too shy to talk in class"*. Day Day also went to language school before she went into mainstream school. *"I remember when I went to language school I was so scared as I could not speak English but when I went there people came from other countries as well, I thought people spoke English as their first language but not really so that was o.k."*.

When Day Day went into mainstream school she thought everything would be fine, but when she went she felt she had to start from the beginning because people spoke quickly and she remembers that she was crying a lot.



Paw Eh Moo remembers that when she went to school there were only two Asians and that was her sister and herself, but also remembers everyone was nice to her. She also found it difficult *“also learning English and at home Dad was teaching us how to write our language”*. Her father did not let them speak English at home and she found it quite difficult. Paw Eh Moo did not go to any English schools she went straight into mainstream school.

Saw Saw also discussed schools in Burma *“teachers compared to our country the teacher hit us here they don’t hurt us”, “teachers here encourage us”*, in Burma he and many others were scared of the teachers.

### ***Making Friends***

Eh did not find it too hard to make friends, but it was a little difficult initially mainly because of the language barrier. When she started school she went into Year 10 and found everyone nice and helpful. She had made some friends in Year 11 because she had taken language classes and there were people from different countries for whom English was their second language so they related to one another. Eh also found it a little harder to make friends because of the cultural difference *“if I get home after 6 or 7 they (parents) get angry and ask where I go, yeah it was hard that is why it is sometimes hard to make friends here because when you are friends with someone you go out and see them for us it is not like that...that is why I just make friends at school or something I don’t really have friends I go out with”*.

U Sein does not have many non-Karen friends because of the language barrier, which does not make him feel very good *“difficult to talk to each other...they don’t won’t talk to you because our English is not good but some others talk to us and we talk some words but don’t understand other words”*.

Paw Eh Moo did not find it hard to make friends. When she reached higher school year levels she was allowed to go and see her friends in more social settings such as friend's birthdays. However she always had to be home by a certain time and she could not stay the night, until she was older. It got more and more difficult to go to parties as she got older as her parents got stricter, but she also did not have much time for parties because she played netball at a representative level and that took up her time and energy. She does however remember a story about a party she went to *"my parents picked me up one day and they saw a punch on...throwing empty bottles...mum is like 'you are not going anymore' ...at the end I ended up lying otherwise they would not let me go so I was, saying 'I'm going to a friends house to watch a movie'"*.

Also dating was an issue for Paw Eh Moo *"when I dated an Aussie boyfriend it was hard to bring him to the house for family dinners as they (parents) had never done that before, they did not know what to do"*. Another aspect she found hard was inviting her friends to traditional events *"tradition, the daughters birthday you invite the community, other close families and you have a prayer thing just a session it is hard if I want to invite my other nationality friends, as it is all in Karen"*.

### **General**

When Eh arrived she was amazed by many items we take for granted as 'the norm', such as buildings, bridges and even electrical equipment like a TV. *"When I got here I saw the bridge, it was so different. I want to share my experiences with my friends and family back home because they have not seen these things before"*. Also moving into a new house *"when I get here with the house you can see everything, TV, electricity, phone, everything it is like oh my God! This is not even in my dreams before"*.

U Sein had never travelled on a train or bus, it was quite an experience for him. The first time he did he had a friend who helped him, for example buying the ticket, where and when to get off and so forth. *“When I was on the train I feel very excited I go to Melbourne zoo”*.

Saw Saw had a bad experience on a train when he had only been in the country for 2 months. He was on the train and he put his feet up on the seat as he was tired. The train inspector came and gave him a ticket, as he did not speak English very well he just paid the ticket, not knowing the process to fight the ticket. However the public transport system works really well for him.

Eh was amazed at the food and the supermarkets when she came here. In regards to food she can not get such a selection back home like she can here. *“We can only have a good meal at the rainy times because there are a lot of fish...sometimes we have pork...we don't have a supermarket...we live in a village with about one hundred families when someone killed a pig we buy some maybe every two or three months...but here five minutes to supermarket and you can eat whatever you want...when I come here I did not like McDonalds, pizza, chips but now I love it”*. She also spoke about the first time she went into a supermarket, *“it was so scary for the first time it was nice, I was so scared to touch, if I touch what would happen because you never see pasta bake, everything is different...we don't know how to eat that because it is not our food...it take me a long time to know how to eat the food here”*.

I asked each person ‘what was the hardest thing for you when resettling into Australia?’ U Sein replied *“to apply for a house or to apply for anything”*. The biggest issue for Eh for when she arrived was not being able to speak English. *“I feel very low when I get here because I can't speak English and I don't know how I am going to make friends, I missed my friends, I have a lot of friends and family*

*we were very close (back home)”. Day Day too found the hardest things for her was “not speaking English very well and studying”. For Paw Eh Moo the hardest thing was the “culture clash”.*

Every one that was interviewed all had support when they moved to Australia which made the resettling process easier for them than those who have to find their own way around.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This chapter will discuss the findings from the interviews conducted; it discusses the participant's experiences, it explores identity, culture, biculturalism, the Karen's traditional values and ways such as respect to elders, as well as discussing normalisation, oppression and language.

The Karen all came from Burma a country that is currently under military rule where they are being persecuted and their culture, people and way of life is being slowly wiped out. They are leaving their land in the Karen State and moving into refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border to feel safer and flee attacks, rapes and murder, however the camps are still not a safe option, they are still living in fear and poverty. From the refugee camps they have to apply for a visa to go to a new country and they have to wait for a few years to find out if they will get a chance for a new life in a new country. The participants who were interviewed came from both within the Karen State and refugee camps.

These experiences of their homeland would have some impact to the way that they view coming to a new country. All the participants were happy and excited to leave Burma however they were also scared and anxious, they are leaving a way of life that is known to them. This life that is known to them is not a life that is full of opportunity, it is a life where they are scared and fear others. However their culture and traditions do run deep in their homeland, despite the efforts of the Burmese military and government trying to eliminate their people, culture and way of life.

Aroche and Coello (1994) (cited in Bowles 2001) believe that refugees face three main challenges when moving to a new place which are past torture and trauma issues, migration and resettlement issues and normal lifecycle stages including personality and family issues. The participants that I had interviewed all had

positive things to say about their resettlement and experiences of living in Melbourne, they all too some extent did suffer when they were in their homeland in some way or another. The reason that perhaps the resettlement process was not as bad as it could have been was because they all had supports already here which made it easier for them. If those who do not have someone or supports set up for them would the transition been harder for them?

All the participants faced many issues and concerns in relation to their cultural identity and the cultural differences between themselves and others in the community. However they all appeared to have adapted to both cultures. As Thomas and Schwarzbaum (2006) believed that people's identity is their cultural identity, and that culture defines who we are; it is the way that we are brought up and how we behave.

Looking at Saw Saw's example he is finding it difficult to separate from some of the cultural ways that he was use to back home such as fighting or standing up for what he believes in compared to the ways here where you are not allowed to just fight in the streets. As Sonn and Fisher (2005) believe that culture is being knowledgeable about the rules by which we follow and live by in society. We all learn from one another and from previous generations about culture, this process is seen as socialization and enculturation. Saw Saw had a friend to help him with some of the ways here in Australia, even though he finds it hard to get his head around things he does have some social supports to help him, which is making it easier for him to feel more part of society and to understand.

Everyone that I interviewed had decided that it was important for them to keep their culture however they all have taken in living in Australian multicultural society. Berry (1997) (cited in Sonn and Fisher 2005) looked at different methods that people adapt to a new society, he saw four common responses to intercultural

connection which are assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. The participants for this study all had decided that integration was best for them; integration is where people maintain their culture of origin and also participates in the dominant culture (Sonn & Fisher 2005). All the participants were quite clear that they were not going to give up their own culture, but they do like the culture of Australian society. They all struggled with it at first like Eh who could not understand why girls here in Australia wear bikinis but as she lived here longer she understands. Also Eh and others at first were a little taken back with young kids holding hands and kissing in public as this was unheard of in their homeland people got married and then they could hold hands in public.

Another aspect is biculturalism where a person can identify with two cultures and successfully operate within the two cultures (Ford 2006). This is the case with the people that I had interviewed, they could identify with both cultures, some more than others but the ones who could had been living in Australia for longer and were younger when they arrived. As Sonn and Fisher (2005), believe that 'those better rooted in their home culture report better social and psychological well-being' (p. 353). In regards to the people that were interviewed it can be seen that the experiences that they spoke about and the way they presented they are happy and glad to be living here, this is not to say that they have had problems and hardships in the process of coming and living in Australia.

An additional area that emerged was when someone is moving into a new culture the roles within the family can change. For example with Saw Saw, because he could speak some English his family relied on him to do the communicating; this could have changed the dynamics of the family and caused some 'acculturative stress' (Diller 2007). Where traditional ways are lost or compromised as a result of immigration and acculturation. Also respect to elders was another aspect that came up in discussion with others. They felt that respect to elders is slowly

diminishing in the community; however others are still carrying on this cultural tradition. Mak and Chan (1995) discuss that respect for elders in the family and community conserve order dictates appropriate behaviour and maintains the relationships in the family and community. Also they discuss that people who appear to go against this are criticised for their indiscretion. An example of this is when Day Day discussed that she felt that she had to be careful when doing things as she was conscious of what the Karen community may say or think of her.

One other area that could be seen is that of normalization and the importance of it to people. Bob Mullaly (1997) believes that normalisation assists people to see that their problems and issues as well as situations are not unique. It can help people to see that many others who are in similar situations, social groups and so forth can experience the same problems and that they are not the only ones who can experience these problems or issues. Looking at Day Day when she went to language school she was scared as she could not speak English, when she arrived at the school she become conscious that there were others there who could not speak English as well and she realized that she was not the only one and felt better. The fact that she realized that she was not the only one with the same problem she felt better about herself and made the process easier for her. It shows the importance of normalization in working with people, to make them realize that they are not the only ones. This realisation can help them to get through their problem, issue or situation.

A further area that is quite important that did arise when working with the Karen was oppression and the structures that are in place for them and many others, to make them feel that they have no power or say about their lives. As Mullaly (1997) states “oppression is perpetrated and perpetuated by dominant groups and is systematic and continuous in its application” (p. 139). I have spoken to many young Karen whom have felt that they do not belong and feel pressured to do



things that they are not comfortable with, such as one young man felt he had to go and get a job even though he is not ready and is still learning to speak English. Mullaly (1997) goes on to say that “oppression carries out certain social functions for the dominant group by ensuring that society reproduces itself and maintains the same dominant-subordinate relationship” (p. 139). The participants that I had interviewed were happy and life was going well for them, however looking at previous groups that have arrived in Australia before them, they have in some way or another faced oppression. For the people that were interviewed will they face oppression later in life for example when they go for jobs? When speaking to a young Karen man who wanted to get a job, he was not confident in getting one due to his English. However he got a job taking newly arrived Karen people around to show them where things are, he was a community guide for the Karen. Speaking to many young Karen people who have jobs they were more confident in social settings and are the ones who could speak English better. But for those who could not speak English very well are they to be left behind and left out of society?

U Sein spoke about the fact that he does not have many non-Karen friends because of the language barrier, some people don't talk to him because of the language while others they talk to him but they don't understand what he is saying, he says that it does not make him feel good about himself. One thing that was interesting was the fact that all the participants only had a short time in language school, which really did not help them much when they went into mainstream school as they still found it difficult to keep up with the others. With only a short period of time to learn how to speak English how can U Sein and many others like him learn the language and feel that they do belong and are comfortable to go out and talk to others without feeling bad about themselves.

Language was one of the major issues that all the participants and others in the community were and are having problems with. As Howe (1994) states “those

with power can control the language of the discourse and can therefore influence how the world is to be seen and what it will mean. Language promotes some possibilities and excludes others; it constrains what we see and what we do not see” (p. 522). It appears that for many of the Karen that I spoke to they had problems with filling out forms, catching public transport, ringing and having to speak to people about important things, found it quite hard without help. Even though places are making it easier for people from diverse speaking backgrounds it is still hard to know what they have to do. I spoke to one young lady and she said it was hard to get a Karen interpreter as there are not many Karen speaking interpreters available. Then how can someone ring someone or need to speak to someone and get the help that they need if they can not understand. This makes them feel that they can’t do things or as Howe says to feel excluded. It excludes them to the point that they feel that they should not go near people in case they have talk to them, for example Eh who said that she and her sister use to avoid people in the fear that they may be spoken to. Also another example is that of Saw Saw who got a ticket on the train for having his feet on the seat, when he had only been here for a short period. This does not appear fair as he did not fully understand and as he could not speak English he could not really communicate with the men who gave him the ticket.

It is important for us as social workers to understand the experiences of the Karen, they may not have the same experiences as other refugee groups before them but they may face the same oppressions and structural disadvantage that others have faced. However we need to understand their cultural ways and their life experiences if we are to work effectively with them.

As Thomas & Schwarzbaum (2006) and Ife (2001) believe that we as social workers need to understand people’s cultures and attend to cultural meanings of our clients otherwise we ourselves are engaging in oppressive practices.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to document the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne; what has their experience been like in their homeland, and what have their experiences been like resettling into a new country. There were three questions guiding my research which were; what are the experiences for young Karen people living in Australia from their own perspectives; what was it like living in their homeland, and what has been like coming from their homeland to Australia.

This study was carried out was through using the 'critical social science paradigm' (Rubin & Babbie 2005), which sees part of the purpose of social research, is to empower oppressed groups. Through letting the young Karen talk about their experiences coming from Burma to Australia and what it has been like for them has given them given a voice; a voice that can teach many about what it has been like for them. However every experience is different from person to another, this study has allowed five different people to tell their story and each person who told their story had different experiences back in Burma, which has been under military rule since 1962.

Many studies have been carried out before on other immigrant groups who have come to Australia, and these studies have helped for us to learn the importance of culture and identity and how it is for a newly arrived group to settle into a new country. This study has allowed us to see the importance of how we as social workers need to have greater awareness of a person's culture if we are to work effectively with them. Ife (2001) believes that social workers need to understand the importance of culture when working with people, and that an understanding of an individual, family or community and the culture from which that person or group comes from is quite significant. Many different studies have been done in

regards to culture and most of these studies do show similarities with the younger generations and how it has been for them to resettle in to a new country. However each culture is different, that is the way that they interact with one another to how they behave and interact with others. If we as social workers are to assume everyone from different cultures are alike we will only just continue the oppression cycle, we need to work with each culture differently and within each culture, each individual differently. This study has shown that the participant's experiences have been different even though they are from the same culture.

Robert Doyle (2001) believes that social workers who are concerned 'for social justice and community relations have ... to keep the issues in the forefront of their own work and of society. In their direct service, and community, organizational, and social policy work, social workers will need to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural and racial diversity as they develop an anti-oppressive practice'(p. 68). Doyle points out that we need to be concerned at both the regional and international level where major issues such as mass immigration and human settlement; as well as ethnic and racial conflict with characteristics such as 'ethnic cleansing'. Doyle also believes that 'in spite of a history of progressive legislation and strategies, multicultural and multiracial policies and strategies are now for the most part ignored in Australia'(p. 68). We as social workers need to fight for those who do not have a voice and to help fight for our clients.

Another area that has arisen from this study and previous studies with people from different backgrounds is that it is important for these studies to continue. We as social workers will always need to change the way we work with people if want to work effectively in the community. Also, for us to learn as much as we can about the world and the different cultures in the world, as the world is always changing and Australia's face will continue to change. For social workers to advocate and

help empower the people we work with we need to learn as much as we can and to do whatever we can to help those who are oppressed or for those who need it.

Further research is needed, in which the researcher needs to gain a better understanding of the needs of the young Karen and to research what these needs are. This will also be able to help social workers and other professionals get an understanding of what the young Karen need in the community and for them to feel that they have more power and a voice within society. Such research can contribute to creating changes and influencing policy and practice as well as promoting social justice for the Karen at a structural level. This research has allowed five young Karen to share their experiences in their own words of what it has been like for them to resettle into Melbourne, leaving behind family and friends and a way of life that they know to a completely new way of life.

Once Australian society has a better understanding of the Karen people and the issues and problems that they face, hopefully it will allow for better and healthier relationships with one another and the wider community.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006, Australian demographic statistics, ABS, viewed 26 March 2007,  
< <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>>
- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) 1999, *Code of ethics*, AASW, Australia.
- Beiser, M. 1990, 'Mental health of refugees in resettlement countries', in Holtzman, W. H & Bornemann, T. H (eds.), *Mental health of immigrants and refugees*, The University of Texas, Texas, pp.
- Berry, J. W. 1990, 'Psychology of acculturation', in Brislin, R. W. (ed.), *Applied cross-cultural psychology*, Sage Publications, USA, pp. 232-253.
- Bowles, R 2001, 'Social work with refugee survivors of torture and trauma' in Alston, M & McKinnon, J (eds), *Social work: fields of practice*, Oxford University Press, Australia, pp. 220-236.
- Browning, R 2006, 'Burma's hidden diaspora', *Library Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp 16-17, viewed 22 March 2007, retrieved from Australian Public Affairs full text.
- Butcher, M & Thomas, M (eds) 2003, *Ingenious: emerging youth cultures in urban Australia*, Pluto Press, Melbourne
- Crotty, M. 1998, *Foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*, Allan & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW
- Darlington, Y. & Scott, D. 2002, *Qualitative research in practice: stories from the field*, Allen & Unwin, Crow's Nest, NSW.
- Devos, T. 2006, 'Implicit bicultural identity among Mexican American and Asian American college students', *Library Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 381-402, viewed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2007, retrieved from PsychInfo database.
- Diller, J. V. 2007, *Cultural diversity: a primer for the human services*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Thomson Brooks/Cole, Belmont, USA.
- Dominelli, L 1997, *Anti-racist social work: a challenge for white practitioners and educators*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Macmillan Education Ltd., London.

Doyle, R 2007, 'Social work practice in a ethnically and racially diverse Australia', in Alston, M & McKinnon, J (eds), *Social work: fields of practice*, Oxford University Press, Australia, pp. 58-69.

Feldman, S. S. & Rosenthal, D. A 1990, 'The acculturation of autonomy expectations in Chinese high schoolers residing in two Western nations', *International Journal of Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 259-281.

Feliciano, C. 2001, 'The benefits of biculturalism: exposure to immigrant culture and dropping out of school among Asian and Latino youths', *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 4, pp. 865-880.

Ford, A. I. 2006, 'The bicultural experience: description and theory', *Library Journal*, vol. 67(4-B), pp. 2277, viewed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2007, retrieved from PsychInfo database.

Grumpert, G & Drucker, S. J (eds) 1998, *The huddled masses: communication and immigration*, Hampton Press Inc., USA

Howe, D 1994, 'Modernity, postmodernity and social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol 24: 513-32

Ife, J. 2001, *Human rights and social work: towards rights-based practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.

Kaw Lah 2004, *Cease fire: Karen self-determination and the military regime, the politics of peace in Burma*, DVD recording, Kaw Lah Films

The Karen Women's Organisation 2007, *State of terror: the ongoing rape, murder, torture and forced labour suffered by the women living under the Burmese military regime in the Karen state*, viewed 23 March 2007, <<http://www.Karenwomen.org/Reports/state%20of%20terror%20report.pdf>>

Karen people 2004, *Who are the Karen?*, KarenPeople.org, viewed 22 March 2007, <<http://www.karenpeople.org/>>

The Karen Hill Tribes Trust 2006, *The Karen people*, The Karen Hill Tribes Trust, viewed 23 April 2007, <[http://www.karenhilltribes.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=21](http://www.karenhilltribes.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=21)>

- Mak, A. S & Chan, H 1995, 'Chinese values in Australia' in Hartley, R (ed.), *Families and cultural diversity in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, NSW, pp. 70-95.
- Mullaly, B 1997, *Structural social work: ideology, theory and practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Oxford University Press, Canada.
- Mullaly, B 2002, *Challenging oppression: a critical social work approach*, Oxford University Press, Canada.
- Neuman, W. L. 2006, *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn, Pearson Education, Boston, USA.
- Padilla, A. M. & Perez, W. 2003, 'Acculturation, social identity and social cognition: a new perspective', *Hispanic Journal of Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 25, pp. 33-55.
- Payne, M 2005, *Modern social work theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Macmillan Press, London.
- Rubin. A. & Babbie, E. 2005, *Research methods for social work*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, Brooks/Cole, Belmont.
- Sarantakos, S. 2005, *Social research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Sonn, C. C. & Fisher, A. T. 2005, Immigration and adaptation: confronting the challenges of cultural diversity', in Nelson, G. & Prilleltensky, I. (eds.), *Community psychology: in pursuit of liberation and well-being*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Soriano, G 1995, 'Filipino families in Australia' in Hartley, R (ed.), *Families and cultural diversity in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, NSW, pp. 96-120.
- Thomas, A. J. & Schwarzbaum 2006, *Culture and identity: life stories for counsellors and therapists*, Sage Publications, California.
- Thompson, N 2001, *Anti-discriminatory practice*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Palgrave, New York.
- Young, I. M. 1990, *Justice and the politics of difference*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey



## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions:**

Can you tell me about yourself?

How long have you lived in Australia?

What were your experiences like living in your homeland? (Did you live in a refugee camp?)

How was it for you when you travelled to Australia? (Can you tell me about it?)

What have your experiences been like living in Australia? (How has it been resettling into Australia?)

## Appendix B



**VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**

**A NEW  
SCHOOL OF  
THOUGHT**

### Information to Participants

We would like to invite you to be part of a study about the experiences of young Karen people living in Melbourne.

Previous research has documented the experiences of various groups that have resettled in Australia. Particular difficulties are faced by people who have moved here from refugee camps. They may find it hard to settle into a new environment as they have many issues that they have faced and disturbing memories from their homeland. Young people experience particular tensions as they must relate to their parents' culture and the host culture. However no research has been conducted with the Karen community in Australia and their resettlement experiences.

For this research I will be conducting seven in-depth interviews with participants. The findings of this study will be useful to social work to inform work with young Karen people living in Melbourne. The interviews will explore participants' experiences in their homeland as well as their experiences in Australia (attached is the interview questions). I realise that talking about some of your experiences could be distressing for you, if at any stage of the process you feel distressed, it is important to let the interviewer know so measures can be taken to alleviate your distress. I would stop the interview and give you a chance to withdraw from the research or reschedule the interview. Relevant referrals to counselling can be made at any stage of the interview process if you require.

If you are interested in participating in this research we will organise a convenient time and place to interview. It will be the intention of the researcher to tape the interview, this will be kept confidential, and the interviews will be transcribed, coded and analysed. The results will be written up for this research paper. All identifying information will be changed so the identity of the participant will not be known by anyone except the researcher.

This research is voluntary and at any time if you the participant wish to withdraw that is acceptable and it will not be held against you in any way.

For further information contact:

Rebecca Singh on 0403 106 370 email: [rebecca.singh@students.vu.edu.au](mailto:rebecca.singh@students.vu.edu.au)

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact Professor Carolyn Noble, Social Work Unit, St Albans Campus, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 291

## Appendix C



**VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**

**A NEW  
SCHOOL OF  
THOUGHT**

### Consent Form for Interview

I \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_  
(Participants Name) (Address)

certify that I am 18 years old and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

‘Experiences of Young Karen People living in Melbourne’ being conducted at Victoria University by Rebecca Singh, an Honours Social Work Student.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by Rebecca Singh.

- Semi-structured interview

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Witness other than the researcher:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher (Rebecca Singh, phone number: 0403 106 370; email: rebecca.singh@students.vu.edu.au).

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact Professor Carolyn Noble, Social Work Unit, St Albans Campus, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 phone (03) 9919 2913