

# Women's League of Burma

The Women's League of Burma (WLB) is an umbrella organisation comprising 12 women's organisations of different ethnic backgrounds from Burma. WLB was founded on 9th December, 1999. Its mission is to work for women's empowerment and advancement of the status of women, and to work for the increased participation of women in all spheres of society in the democracy movement, and in peace and national reconciliation processes through capacity building, advocacy, research and documentation.

## **Aims**

- To work for the empowerment and advancement of the status of women
- To work for the rights of women and gender equality
- To work for the Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women
- To work for the increased participation of women in every level of decision making in all spheres of society
- To participate effectively in the movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation



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# Introduction

In 2006, an external evaluation was carried out to assess the functioning of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the effectiveness of its programs. At that time, there was also a discussion within the WLB regarding using the information collected for the evaluation to write a herstory of the founding of the WLB. At the WLB's 2007 Congress, the participants agreed that the newly elected Secretariat should oversee the writing of the WLB Herstory during the 2007-8 term. They also realized that insufficient information had been collected during the 2006 evaluation to write a complete history, so more research would have to be conducted. However, the Secretariat for the 2007-8 term ended up being unable to implement this decision because of the extra work they had to take on in responding to the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis. At the 2009 Congress, participants reaffirmed the decision to have the Secretariat oversee the writing of the WLB Herstory during the 2009-10 term. It was also agreed that the author of the herstory should be someone who knew about the Women's League of Burma and its member organizations but was not directly involved in any of the organizations. Christina Fink was approached in mid-2009 about writing the herstory and agreed to do so.

WLB members felt that it was important to have the WLB herstory written for a number of reasons. Many members wanted future generations of WLB members and others to know how much energy and effort was put into founding the alliance. They also wanted to ensure that the process of establishing the league was documented so that this piece of herstory would not be lost. Moreover, WLB members felt that it would be useful to have a written herstory which could be read by Burmese and foreigners alike who came into contact with the league and wanted to understand it better.

In January 2010, the steering committee of the herstory project agreed that the herstory should cover the following topics:

- how the idea of having a women's alliance developed
- how the Women's League of Burma was founded
- membership criteria in the Women's League of Burma and reasons for the criteria
- structural challenges the Women's League of Burma has faced and how they were resolved - including organizations which didn't join initially or left the WLB later
- relations with other women's organizations
- relations with other organizations in the movement
- the WLB's major achievements during the first ten years of its herstory
- any other relevant issues which came up in the interviews

Interviews for the Herstory were carried out in person, by phone, and by email between December 2009 and February 2010. The author also relied on documents provided by the WLB, the BWU, SWAN, Images Asia, and BRC for information regarding the founding and development of the WLB. These are listed in Appendix C.

It should be noted that the honorific titles commonly used for women in Burma have not been included because of the number of such titles in a variety of languages and concerns that readers may confuse the titles for part of the women's actual names. Also, when the word "Burmese" is used, it refers to all the people of Burma.

Researching and writing the herstory was a very positive experience, because all the people involved in the period leading up to the founding of the league felt such pride in having been able to contribute to the forming of the first alliance of women from Burma focused on women's rights and women's empowerment.

## The Context

To understand why it was such an accomplishment to form the WLB it is necessary to look at the political context in Burma over the last sixty plus years. Two struggles, one for autonomy in the non-Burman ethnic areas and one for democracy, have been going on for decades, but they have not always been linked. In addition, women were not encouraged to play a role in politics, let alone to champion women's rights. Women who were involved in these separate struggles had very different backgrounds and experiences, making it challenging for them to come together in a formal alliance.

Geographically, the various peoples of Burma are divided. In the past and still today, the peoples that live in the hills have generally had little contact with peoples in the plains and vice versa. Contact between the various hill areas has also been limited. During the colonial period, roads were built into the hill areas, but the administrative structure which was imposed split the central plains from the mountainous areas. Central Burma was ruled directly, while in the hills, local rulers were allowed to maintain power as long as they were loyal to the British. In 1947, the year before Burma gained independence from the British, Burman leader General Aung San and representatives of various other nationalities signed the Panglong Agreement, which promised autonomy over internal administration to the ethnic states of Burma. After independence, however, little power was actually devolved to the ethnic states, and the central government did not give much attention to the development of infrastructure in these areas.

Since the late 1940s, civil war has wracked many parts of Burma, and communist and ethnic nationalist armies have held large swathes of territory particularly in the ethnic states. The ethnic nationalist armies were fighting for a substantial

degree of autonomy in their areas, and they felt that they could only achieve their goals through armed resistance. The Communist Party of Burma also turned to armed struggle in its efforts to institute communist rule. After General Ne Win staged a coup in 1962, what little power the ethnic states had had was taken away, and most independent organizations were forced to disband.

The Communist Party of Burma collapsed in 1989, and between 1989-1995, many of the ethnic nationalist armies made ceasefire agreements with the regime, ending fighting in their areas but failing to bring about desired political changes. However, the civil war continued in much of Eastern Burma. In the civil war areas of the ethnic states, the Burma Army has terrorized the civilian population, destroying food stocks, burning down villages, raping women and girls, and torturing and killing villagers suspected of working for the ethnic resistance armies. Many villagers were drawn into the ethnic resistance armies out of anger at what the Burma Army had done to their families and communities.

Moreover, in many cases, the only Burmans people in the civil war areas have encountered have been soldiers in the Burma Army. This has engendered feelings of mistrust toward Burmans in general, with ethnic resistance leaders having voiced doubts that any type of Burman government would respect ethnic rights. In the less accessible areas of many of the ethnic states, villagers are often not fluent in Burmese, a language which some have regarded as the enemy's language.

After the military took power in 1962, activists determined to restore democracy in Burma sought to bring about change largely through periodic non-violent demonstrations, but these were quickly crushed by the army and arrested leaders were tortured and sentenced to long years in prison. The largest demonstrations took place in 1988, when people from all backgrounds came out into the streets in cities and towns nationwide calling for the



restoration of multiparty democracy. In many areas, the demonstrations were led by university students who felt a historic duty to fight against unjust rule, just as earlier generations of Burmese students had sought to drive out the British in the colonial period. For many who took part in the demonstrations, it was a triumphant moment as soldiers retreated to their barracks for a period of four weeks and people could speak and organize freely for the first time in over twenty years. However, when the army retook power on 18 September 1988, troops poured into the streets, restoring control by force. As many as 10,000 democracy activists departed for the ethnic resistance areas along Burma's borders, in order to escape arrest and continue their struggle. While several thousand ended up returning home, about 3000 remained in the border areas. Most had virtually no knowledge about the ethnic nationalist struggles or the suffering of the civilian populations in the ethnic areas, having only been exposed to the regime's propaganda about the rebels in the jungle. At the same time, people in the civil war areas knew few details of the democracy struggle.

The ethnic nationalist armies allowed the mostly young activists to settle in their territories and establish armed groups despite concerns about their presence and the difficulties this might cause. In 1990, a number of parliamentarians who had been elected in the 1990 election but not allowed to take power also came out to the ethnic nationalist strongholds to escape arrest and continue their struggle. The largest number of activists ended up along the Thai-Burma border and in Thai towns and cities. Some democracy activists and members of ethnic resistance groups sought sanctuary in India and established offices in both the Northeast, near the border with Burma, and in the capital, Delhi. Smaller numbers of ethnic resistance fighters and pro-democracy activists were based along the China-Burma and Bangladesh-Burma borders. In time, political and military alliances were formed between various ethnic and democratic organizations, allowing the various parties to meet regularly

and to seek to work toward shared objectives. The National Democratic Front, a military alliance of ethnic resistance armies, had already been set up in 1976. In November 1988, the Democratic Alliance of Burma was founded to bring together pro-democracy and ethnic nationalist armed groups. The National Council of the Union of Burma was established in 1992 and included both armed groups and political parties from the pro-democracy and ethnic nationalist movements. In 1996, the Students and Youth Congress of Burma, an alliance of ethnic and democratic youth organizations, formed to try to foster greater contact and unity of purpose among younger people in the movement. All of these alliances have had to work to overcome several obstacles including limited prior knowledge of each others' backgrounds and struggles, varying degrees of mistrust, communication challenges because of the diverse languages spoken, and travel difficulties.

Women have been part of the struggles for both ethnic autonomy and democracy, but they did not make women's rights a focus of their efforts until the 1990s. Several of the armed ethnic nationalist organizations had women's wings or closely affiliated women's organizations. These organizations generally worked on social welfare issues and provided support services to their respective armies when called on to do so. The Communist Party of Burma also had a women's wing called the All Burma Women's Union, and its members participated in community organizing work. In the 1988 democracy movement, women participated in various student, youth, and professional associations, and in the ensuing election campaign period, women also joined political parties. The National League for Democracy established a women's wing, but there was no women's party or campaigning specifically for women's rights.

Indeed, until the 1990s, there was little recognition in Burma of the issue of women's rights. Although some women did participate in male-run political and armed resistance organizations, there was almost no encouragement for

them to do so. While urban women are able to take on professional careers and rural women play an active role in farming and marketing, they have faced many barriers to becoming active in politics. It has been generally accepted in Burma that women should be quiet and dutiful, that it is not appropriate for individual women to travel anywhere alone or attend meetings with men at night, and that women don't have an aptitude for politics. Aung San Suu Kyi, the general secretary of the National League for Democracy, has been treated as an exception. She has been granted more respect because of her father's status as Burma's independence hero and because of her self-confidence and vision for the country which she developed in part during her many years studying and working abroad.

In 1991, the regime established the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association to work primarily in areas of health and health education while also publicly demonstrating support for the regime when called on to do so. However no independent women's rights groups were allowed to form in government-controlled areas.

Nevertheless, traditional ideas about women's roles and rights gradually came to be challenged in the border areas. Women and girls began to change their ideas about their status and what they were capable of doing and men became aware, if not always supportive, of this process. New ways of thinking and organizing emerged as a result of numerous formal and informal meetings, community-organized and foreign-organized trainings and workshops, and encouragement from donors and NGOs working on Burmese issues. One of the most significant results is the subject of this herstory, the creation of **the Women's League of Burma.**



# A Chronology of Events leading to the founding of the Women's League of Burma

## 1992-1997: New Women's Groups, New Challenges for Women

Although no one had the idea of forming a formal women's alliance at the time, it seems fitting to begin the chronology in 1992. Late that year, Esther Saw Lone, a Karen woman working for a Chiang Mai-based NGO called WEAVE, organized a meeting of women's groups and active individual women in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Participating women included Mra Raza Linn, who was later one of the founders of the Rakhaing Women's Union and the Women's League of Burma, a Karenni woman from a Karenni refugee camp, two women from the National League for Democracy-Liberated Area (based in areas controlled by the ethnic armed resistance), four members of the Karen Women's Organization, and two women from the Mon Women's Organization. One of the Karen representatives was Mary Ohn, who in 1999 played an important role in galvanizing support for the formation of a women's alliance.

The **Karen Women's Organization (KWO)** was established in 1949 and re-organized in 1985. It was closely affiliated with the KNU and its armed partner organization, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), and had branches throughout KNU-administered territory. In the early 1990s, the KWO was primarily involved in social welfare activities and providing health information and adult literacy classes. The **Mon Women's Organization (MWO)** was formed in 1988. Its goals were to enable women to take charge of their own lives so they could be effective in their communities, to unite Mon women, and to increase solidarity between

Mon women and other women's groups. The Mon Women's Organization was closely affiliated with the New Mon State Party and its armed partner organization, the Mon National Liberation Army.

At the 1992 meeting, the participating women talked about their activities and shared their life experiences. They all agreed that they wanted to help each other, although there was no concrete resolution for how to do so. Also, at the time, contact was only possible by letter, landline phone, or fax, and even this was very difficult because most of the women's groups were based in jungle locations far from each other. However, WEAVE took it upon itself to support women's groups in Karen and Karenni refugee camps by providing financing and management skills and support for nursery schools and weaving projects for income generation.

In 1993, Karenni women in what was then called Karenni refugee camp #5 established the **Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO)**. The organization had existed in parts of Karenni State under the control of the Karenni National Progressive Party in the 1980s, but it had ceased to function actively. Starting from 1989, thousands of Karenni civilians were compelled to flee into Mae Hong Son Province in northwestern Thailand as the Burma Army moved into their villages in Karenni State. In 1995, the organization expanded to include members in two other Karenni refugee camps in Mae Hong Son Province. The leadership of the organization was originally self-appointed, and the KNWO held its first election for senior positions in 1997.

In 1993, a small NGO called the Indigenous Women's Development Centre formed in Chiang Mai. Like WEAVE, IWDC supported income generation projects, nursery school projects, and organizational training for the Mon Women's Organization, the Karen Women's Organization, and the Karenni

National Women's Organization. In 1994, the Mon Women's Organization held a month-long training on community organizing and women's participation, during which IWDC staff presented some basic information about women's rights.

In January 1995, some female members of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) based along the Thai-Burma border decided to form the **Burmese Women's Union**. Most had participated in the 1988 democracy movement and wanted to continue to play an active role in politics. However, the ABSDF, like other political organizations at the time, was run by men and had given women few opportunities to rise to positions of political leadership. In addition, many members in the ABSDF and other political organizations felt that for the time being, everyone should focus exclusively on the larger political goals rather than divert their energies into a struggle for women's rights.

The founders of the BWU, however, believed that it was important for women to have a greater voice in politics and for women's rights to be promoted. After establishing their organization, they sought to expand membership and representation. In order to do so, they reached out to women from Burma who were living along Burma's other borders as well as Burmese women who had resettled in the West. Branches were established on the China-Burma border and the India-Burma border. The members living overseas were able to share what they had observed about women's rights and women's political participation in other countries. The aims of the BWU were and are to increase women's roles in political, economic and cultural affairs, to enable women to work effectively for the restoration of democracy, to establish respect for women's rights, and to join hands with all groups working to end military rule. Over time, the organization became completely independent from the ABSDF.

In February 1995, the **Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB)** was established in Delhi, India. Like the BWU, the WRWAB was open to women from Burma of all ethnicities. The WRWAB was not affiliated with any political organization, and over the next year, the WRWAB expanded to include women from Burma who lived in Northeastern India, particularly in Manipur and Mizoram. While the founding members had participated in the 1988 democracy movement and had fled to India after the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power, many of the other members had come to India to escape the constant demands of the Burma Army and poverty. When the WRWAB was established, the members did not know that the BWU had just been founded in Thailand. After establishing contact with each other by mail, they developed friendly ties but remained separate organizations.

Meanwhile between November 1994 and February 1995, the Burma Army, together with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), launched a major offensive against the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The military campaign culminated with the capture of Manerplaw, the headquarters of the KNU/KNLA, and over 9,000 people fled to refugee camps in Thailand, where there were already over 70,000 refugees from Burma. The KWO leadership was scattered, and Karen women faced new challenges as displaced people in Thailand.

In the ensuing years, the Karen and Karenni resistance armies continued to lose territory to the Burma Army and other affiliated armies, resulting in tens of thousands more women, men and children seeking sanctuary in Thailand. Thailand is not a signatory to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and although refugees were allowed to stay in camps in Thailand, they were not granted legal status. Refugees could not ordinarily travel to other parts of Thailand, nor could they easily

communicate with the outside world or with women's groups in camps in other provinces. As difficult as life was in the refugee camps, there were some opportunities for women in the camps to hold workshops, attend educational courses, and to organize. In the camps, unlike in villages in Karen and Karenni States, almost all girls attended school through high school, and adult women had the time and opportunity to attend literacy classes. Women also sought income generating opportunities in the camps and began to address the issue of violence against women, including domestic violence in the camps.

In May 1995, the **Tavoy Women's Union** was formed. It originated from the Tavoy District Women's Union, which was affiliated with the Communist Party's All Burma Women's Union. In January 1995, the Communist Party of Burma (Tennasserim Division) Committee was dissolved and the small local resistance army reformed as the Myeik-Dawei United Front (MDUF). The Tavoy Women's Union is affiliated with the MDUF but organizes its activities independently. As the Burma Army occupied more and more territory in the areas where the MDUF had operated, active members of the Tavoy Women's Union moved into border towns in Thailand.

Also in 1995, the Commission on the Status of Women organized the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The conference was attended by some 30,000 people (primarily women) from around the world, including a few women from Burma. The BWU sent two members living abroad, namely Hnin Hnin Pyne and Ma Thida, who worked for the Democratic Voice of Burma in Norway. Hseng Noun, who would later become one of the founders of the Shan Women's Action Network in Thailand, and Mra Raza Linn, who would later become one of the founders of the Rakhaing Women's Union in Bangladesh, also attended. The goals of the conference were to place the improvement of women's status high



on the global agenda and to prepare a platform for action. The experience of attending this conference deeply affected the participants from Burma, as they saw how women from around the world were actively organizing to address women's issues and to increase women's participation in politics.

Over the next three years, leading BWU members became more determined to raise the voice of women in politics and to improve the status of women in general, but they realized that greater numbers of women needed to join together to make this happen. Originally, some members of the BWU were interested in recruiting women from all ethnic groups to join their organization, so that the BWU could speak on behalf of all women from Burma. However, there was soon a recognition that this approach would not work. Existing women's organizations needed to be respected and instead, an alliance should be formed which could bring together the various women's groups.

Indeed, many of the non-Burman women felt the need to organize based on ethnicity although they were later eager participate in an alliance that brought together Burmans, non-Burmans, and women of mixed ethnicity. Reasons for the formation of ethnic-based women's organizations included wanting to work primarily for their own communities, being able to use their own languages, and operating within the context of their own cultures. In 1997, some Chin members of the Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma left the organization to found the **Chin Women's Organization (CWO)**. Not long after, some Lushai members of the WRWAB also left to establish the **All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization (ABDLWO)**. Lushai is part of the Chin language family, but the Lushai women preferred to organize separately from their Chin sisters. Both organizations were led by women who had participated in the 1988 democracy movement and were living in Delhi, but the organizations

included many other members who had fled from remote villages in Western Burma and were eking out a living in Northeastern India.

In Northern Thailand, the **Lahu Women's Organization (LWO)** was officially formed after it held its first congress in 1997. Four Lahu women with family connections to the small Lahu National Organization/Army leadership had already unofficially started the organization in 1995. One of these women, Aye Aye Myint, made organizing trips to Lahu communities along the Thai-Burma border and in other parts of Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces, including the city of Chiang Mai. Most of the women who joined came from rural areas of Shan State and had not been politically active previously. The first activity of the organization was to run a nursery school for Lahu children. They later opened an office in Chiang Mai.

In the next few years, more women from Burma established ethnic-based women's organizations in Bangladesh and Thailand. Meanwhile, attacks against KNLA strongholds which drove new refugees across the border and the burning down of a refugee camp in the Mae Sot area prompted three organizations to work together for the first time. Members of Mae Tao Clinic, which had been established in Mae Sot to provide health services for people from Burma, the Karen Women's Organization, and the NLD-LA women's wing joined together to provide emergency services to refugees in need.

## 1998-1999: Organizing to form an Alliance

The BWU held its first congress in Mae Hong Son in January 1998, and they invited representatives of the nearby Karenni National Women's Organization to attend as observers. Aye Aye Myint, one of the founders of the Lahu Women's Organization, also came as an observer in order to learn about the BWU's organizational structure and activities. The congress agreed that the BWU should begin systematically working to initiate the formation of a women's alliance. In order to accomplish this, they agreed that a women's conference with representatives from various women's groups should be held within two years so that the issue could be formally discussed. Three BWU members were assigned to work on this: Aye Aye Lwin, Khin Ohmar, and Nang Yain.

Khin Ohmar had been working in the United States for a few years before returning to the border and had contact with the National Endowment for Democracy, a grant-making organization in Washington D.C. She returned briefly to the United States and submitted a BWU proposal written by Mi Sue Pwint to the National Endowment for Democracy. The BWU requested funding for a seminar for women from Burma and for activities related to making the seminar a success. In order to encourage interest and participation, the BWU planned to travel to various women's organizations to discuss ideas for the seminar and for the formation of an umbrella political organization of women. They also planned to conduct a grassroots leadership training for twenty women from several organizations. In addition, they wanted to resume publishing "Dove", a monthly news bulletin which included information about women from various ethnic groups in Burma, profiles of prominent women leaders, and general knowledge about women's rights.

The BWU began to contact other women's organizations by letter but didn't receive a response from many of the organizations. The WRWAB in India expressed interest, but many of the ethnic-based women's organizations along the Thai-Burma border had concerns about a BWU-organized women's conference. The BWU was understood as being closely affiliated with the ABSDF, and both the BWU and ABSDF were perceived as Burman organizations. Members of other organizations were worried about the intentions of the BWU. Some thought that the BWU might be trying to pull them into a Burman-dominated women's organization or that women who participated might later come under the ABSDF's control.

The BWU leadership realized that if they wanted to hold a seminar which would be attended by a wide range of women's groups and individual women, it would be important to have other respected women organize it. At the BWU's July 1998 Central Executive Committee Meeting, they decided that the following people should be on the seminar organizing committee:

- Louisa Benson Craig, a prominent Karen woman living in the United States,
- Dr. Cynthia, a respected Karen woman who had founded Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot
- Pippa Curwen, a half-Shan half-British woman who was the director of the Burma Relief Centre based in Chiang Mai,
- Thet Thet Lwin, a member of the BWU who had returned from Australia, and
- Molly, a Burmese lawyer who was a member of the WRWAB in India.

Meanwhile, in mid-1998, Harn Yawngnhe, the director of the Euro-Burma Office based in Brussels, contacted Pippa Curwen suggesting that she

should organize a women's seminar with the purpose of increasing women's participation in the movement in the future. He felt that women's participation could strengthen the movement and that women should be involved in politics. At that time, BRC was providing funding and encouragement to various organizations along the border but with regard to women's organizations, had only funded a KWO project. Harn also contacted Louisa Benson Craig to discuss the idea.

Thus, by the time the BWU contacted Pippa, she had already been contemplating the idea of a women's forum. She agreed to be one of the organizers. However Louisa decided that she could not serve as one of the forum's organizers, as she was living too far away. Pippa suggested that Esther Saw Lone take Louisa's place. In the end, the organizing committee consisted of Pippa Curwen, Dr. Cynthia, and Esther Saw Lone, who had been in Australia for a few years but had returned to Chiang Mai and was working as the coordinator of Earthrights International's Women's Rights Project. That Thet Lwin and Molly were removed from the list of organizers before the BWU approached the others, as Thet Thet Lwin had other work commitments and Molly could not communicate easily with other groups from Delhi.

Between September and November 1998, the three organizers contacted representatives of various women's groups, sent out invitations, organized logistics, and planned the agenda for the forum. They agreed that women involved in health, education, income generation, social welfare, and political activities should attend and that the format should be that of a forum, where people could present their views but there would be no pressure to organize an alliance. They very much believed that the forum should be exploratory in nature, and that any future coordination between groups should develop naturally. They also decided that two women from

each organization should attend, along with a handful of active women of various ethnicities, and that one representative from the KWO and one from the BWU should take minutes at the meeting. Pippa Curwen asked Harn if the Euro-Burma Office could provide the funding for the meeting as Harn had originally proposed the idea to her. He agreed to do so, as long as the BWU sent a letter of support, which they did.

Meanwhile, various other activities had been going on that had brought a variety of women from Burma together. In March 1998, representatives from the BWU, the KNWO, and the KWO made presentations at the Asian Indigenous Women's Conference held in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Nang Yain from the BWU met Zipporah Sein and Lydia Tamla Wah from the KWO for the first time and discussed the idea of forming some kind of alliance. In June 1998, Altsean, an NGO based in Bangkok, organized a workshop on issues concerning ethnic women from Burma which a variety of women from Burma participated in.

In early November 1998, the BWU organized a two-week women's empowerment and leadership training with participants coming from the KWO, the KNWO, the Shan community, and Mae Tao Clinic. Issues covered included gender and gender-based discrimination, women and reproductive health, violence against women, women's rights, and an introduction to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Just two weeks before the forum, a few women in Bangladesh formed the Rakhaing Women's Union. Mra Raza Linn, who had played an active role in the 1988 democracy movement in Arakan State and had met groups in Thailand before, became the head of the organization. Meanwhile, in

1998, the KWO had been in the process of reorganizing and Zipporah Sein became the general secretary.

The “**Forum of Women from Burma**” was held from November 24-28, 1998 in Chiang Mai. Representatives from the following organizations and projects (in alphabetical order) attended:

- Baan Plod-Phai (Safe-House), based in Sangklaburi District, Thailand
- The Burmese Women’s Union, based in Mae Hong Son and along the Thai-Burma border
- The Chin Women’s Organization, based in Delhi and later Northeast India
- The Displaced Women’s Welfare Association, led by Karen women in Bangkok who were waiting to be resettled
- The Karen Women’s Organization, based along the Thai-Burma border
- The Karenni National Women’s Organization, based in Karenni refugee camps
- The Lahu Women’s Organization, based in Northern Thailand
- Mae Tao Clinic, based in Mae Sot, Thailand
- The women’s wing of the National League for Democracy – Liberated Area, based along the Thai-Burma border
- The Rakhaing Women’s Union, based in Bangladesh
- Weaving for Women, Sangklaburi, Thailand
- The Women’s Rights and Welfare Association, based in Delhi and Northeast India

A few individual women also attended, including three women who had been active in their communities and went on to help form the women’s alliance. One was Hseng Noun, a Shan woman with many years of experience in Shan politics and migrant issues. She had also provided assistance to Burmese democracy activists who arrived in Thailand

following the Burmese military's coup in September 1988. Two Kachin women living in Chiang Mai, Shirley Seng and Nang Tong, also joined. They had remained in contact with Kachin organizations in northern Kachin State and took part in social welfare activities for Kachin in Chiang Mai. Representatives of the Tavoy Women's Union and the Mon Women's Organization were unable to attend because of transportation difficulties.

The forum provided an opportunity for women from different areas of Burma to meet together, many for the first time. The representatives gave presentations about the work they were doing, and small group discussions were held on the oppression of women under military rule, women's health and education problems, the problems of displaced women, domestic violence, and discrimination against women. The women also discussed what they needed in order to carry out their work more effectively. On the final day, representatives of Thai and foreign NGOs working on related issues gave brief presentations about their work.

While the participants very much appreciated the presentations, the discussions, and the chance to get to know each other, there were challenges as well. Feelings of insecurity, frustration, and mistrust emerged at various points in the formal meetings and in informal discussions in the evenings. Burmese was the main language used, but some of the women didn't speak Burmese well and felt that they could not participate equally. Some women had never participated in a large meeting with so many new people and didn't feel comfortable speaking up. The different backgrounds, life experiences, educational levels, and interests of the participants also sometimes made it difficult to find common ground. Moreover, given the very painful experiences many of the women had gone through in the civil war areas and in the struggle for democracy in cities and towns, the discussions at times became quite



emotional. The organizers and participants had not expected so many feelings to emerge and sometimes found it difficult to handle.

Although the BWU had hoped that by the end of the forum, the participants would agree to form an alliance, many of the women did not feel ready to do so. The WRWAB agreed with the idea, but several of the ethnic women were worried that any alliance would be dominated by Burmans. Equally important, most of the women had come without any agenda except to meet other women and learn more about their work, so the idea of forming an alliance seemed premature to them. Nevertheless, they were eager to meet again, and felt energized by hearing about all the other women's groups' activities. They all agreed that they wanted another women's meeting to be held in late 1999. After differences of opinion emerged regarding who should organize the second forum, a vote was taken, and the majority voted to have NGOs organize it.

In late January 1999, the BWU held a central executive committee meeting in which they reviewed the results of the first forum and began planning activities to help create greater trust and understanding among the women's organizations so that the second forum would result in the formation of a women's alliance. In the months before the second forum of women from Burma was held, many women's groups did begin to think more seriously about the idea of forming an alliance of women's organizations, and the various meetings, trainings, and conversations that took place during this period all contributed to the crystallization of the idea.

In February 1999, Mi Sue Pwint from the BWU and members of the WRWAB and the Chin Women's Organization were able to meet each other at the first World Movement for Democracy conference in Delhi India, which was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy.

They discussed their work and their difficulties as well as ideas regarding the formation of a women's alliance in the future. The CWO had very few resources at the time, and asked Mi Sue Pwint whether BWU could help them obtain funds for a phone and fax. After contacting the National Endowment for Democracy to see if they could revise their grant proposal, the BWU was able to use some of the funding they had received for this, facilitating communication between the CWO and other organizations.

In late March 1999, Shan women in Thailand and Shan State established the **Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)**. Between 1996 and 1998, approximately 300,000 Shan had been forced out of their villages by the Burma Army, leading to a large scale influx of Shan people into Thailand. Others stayed in Shan State Army controlled territory close to the Thai-Burma border. Refugee camps were not established for Shan who arrived in Thailand, so members of the Shan community sought to establish much-needed services where possible. By 1999, a number of Shan women along the Thai-Burma border were running or participating in education and health projects for displaced Shan people. Some of the women had originally been members of the Women's Association of Shan State, which had been set up in 1993 as a closely allied organization to the Mong Tai Army. The association collapsed in 1996 when the leadership of the Mong Tai Army surrendered to the regime. In Chiang Mai, there were also some individual Shan women who had left Burma earlier and were working for NGOs and other Burma-related projects. Hseng Nong, who had already had the idea to form a Shan women's network for some time, had also just moved from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. Together, all of these women formed a network to address displaced Shan women's practical and strategic needs. They were also very much interested in participating in a broader network of women's groups from different parts of Burma, believing this would give them a stronger voice and result in greater effectiveness in all their work.

In April 1999, four Kachin women, including Shirley Hseng and Nang Tong who had attended the first forum, met to discuss the founding of a Kachin women's group based in Thailand. They were encouraged to do so by Pippa Curwen of the Burma Relief Centre and Hseng NOUNG of SWAN. They too wanted to participate in a women's umbrella organization where they could benefit from the collective strengths of the group. Although there was a Kachin Women's Association based in areas of Kachin State under the control of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), it could not participate in any anti-regime political activities since the KIO had made a ceasefire agreement with the regime in 1994. Kachin women in Thailand came to the realization that it would be useful to have an independent Kachin women's organization in Thailand which could speak more freely and could assist Kachin who had moved into Thailand. The women agreed to form the **Kachin Women's Association Thailand** at that meeting but decided that 9 September 1999 would be a more auspicious day for the organization to be formally established.

In 1998 and particularly in 1999, women from groups based along the Thai-Burma border (and to a lesser extent, women based in India and Bangladesh) had opportunities to participate in regional and international conferences, local trainings and workshops, and special events that helped develop relationships between women from different organizations and increased their awareness of women's rights. These were also very important factors in helping create a climate in which a variety of women were ready and eager by late 1999 to establish a women's umbrella organization.

In late 1998 and throughout 1999, female staff members at Images Asia, a Chiang Mai-based NGO, were engaged in interviewing women and compiling information for a shadow report to be presented to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

committee in 2000. The regime would be sending its representatives to report on the country's progress toward ensuring women's rights, but the regime's report would not include the many violations of women's rights that were routinely committed in the country. Thus, Images Asia thought that a counter report should be written and presented. Images Asia originally approached the BWU about doing it, but the BWU decided that they could not take such a big project on at the time. Images Asia proceeded on its own with many individuals from Burma involved in the interviewing process. Whenever possible, the Images Asia team conducted workshops on women's rights, CEDAW, and the CEDAW reporting process before engaging in interviewing. Images Asia found that the workshops made a big difference in helping the female participants to analyze women's rights abuses in Burma and to think about their lives in new ways.

In March 1999, the BWU, together with the Human Rights Documentation Unit of the NCGUB, Images Asia, and Earthrights International, organized a women's leadership training in Mae Sot. Twenty-eight women from various refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border participated. The training covered human rights and women's rights, CEDAW, community leadership, and trust-building. Then in June 1999, the BWU organized a training on how to counsel female survivors of violence for female leaders in refugee camps and other women working with refugees. This was an issue which affected women from all communities but had largely gone unaddressed.

Every training helped cement connections between women of different ethnicities and made the participants feel that they could work together. In addition, the trainings introduced ideas about strategic planning and the need for collaboration in order to achieve gender equality.

International women's day celebrations were also organized for the first

time, and women from various backgrounds participated. The commemoration of Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday in Mae Sot in June 1999 brought a number of women together as well, although there were disagreements regarding whether her birthday should be called Women of Burma Day. Differences of opinion emerged over what occasion would be most meaningful for all women of Burma to celebrate as Women of Burma Day as well as the process for making such a decision.

Other parallel activities were also important in developing women's readiness to participate in a women's alliance. Non-governmental organizations in Bangkok and Chiang Mai had begun running internship programs at their offices, bringing in a few young women at a time to broaden their views and impart new skills. The interns came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and for most, it was the first time they had worked together with women from other ethnic groups. Since 1997, Altsean had been organizing six month internships for young women from women's groups, introducing human rights and women's rights as well as basic office skills. In Chiang Mai, the Burma Relief Centre and Images Asia also hosted female interns, giving them an opportunity to develop office skills, to work in ongoing programs, and to meet with people from a wide range of organizations and backgrounds. Some of these interns went on to take leading roles in their women's organizations.

In March 1999, the Migrant Assistance Programme, a Chiang Mai based NGO, began to organize women's exchanges in Chiang Mai with funding from the Australian-based International Women's Development Agency. These monthly get-togethers provided an opportunity for informal discussions among women of different ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. As women shared their personal experiences and talked about issues of relevance to them and their communities, cultural and generational barriers were broken

down. In addition, they began to develop confidence in their ability to speak in public and they came to understand that women needed to work collectively to solve their problems. Later, women who had been interning at organizations in Chiang Mai returned to locations along the Thai-Burma border and introduced women's exchanges in these areas as well.

Equally important were the many informal discussions that took place when women happened to meet at other events or travelled together. For instance, in 1999, Hseng NOUNG and NANG LAO LIANG WON (Tay Tay) from SWAN and ZIPPORAH SEIN from KWO (and one male ABSDF representative) went on an advocacy trip through Europe together, giving them an opportunity to talk more about how an emerging women's alliance could be organized and could function. During this trip, they were frequently asked by the people they met why so few women had a voice in Burmese opposition politics and whether anything was being done to change this. Such conversations abroad and with donors and NGO staff who visited Burmese organizations in Thailand also spurred the women's groups to think more seriously about pushing for a greater role for women in all levels of politics.

As these activities were going on, the BWU decided to take the lead in moving plans forward for a second women's forum. By this point, other women's representatives seemed prepared to organize the second forum in conjunction with the BWU. Also, the organizers of the first forum felt that it was important for the interested women's groups to find a way to work together on their own, with NGOs playing a supporting role for various types of women's groups as appropriate. The BWU decided that a preparatory meeting should be held in September 1999 during which an organizing committee consisting of women from several organizations would be established to organize the second forum. Invitations were sent to various women's groups and included a proposed agenda for the

meeting. One of the items on the agenda was to discuss whether they could agree in September that a women's umbrella organization would be formed at the second forum in December 1999. Another was whether the women could agree to work together on a shadow report to the CEDAW committee. In May, the BWU followed up by meeting in person with women from the KWO, the KNWO, and SWAN.

Although women from many of the invited organizations wanted to attend the September meeting, some were concerned that they might not be able to express themselves fully or achieve the results they desired. They were also worried that the meeting could become quite emotional, as the first forum had been, or that it could end with no agreement. Some of the leaders of ethnic-based women's organizations decided that they wanted to hold a smaller meeting first to discuss their interests, concerns, and goals before going on to the BWU-organized meeting. As a result, SWAN organized a two-day meeting in early August 1999 in Chiang Mai, with funding from the Burma Relief Centre. Women from the following organizations attended:

- The Kachin Women's Association Thailand
- The Karenni National Women's Organization
- The Tavoy Women's Union
- The Karen Women's Organization
- The Lahu Women's Organization
- The Shan Women's Action Network

At the meeting, women who had attended the first forum explained what had been discussed there, and all the participants shared their ideas regarding working together in the future. Some BWU members felt hurt that women from ethnic-based organizations had felt the need to organize

a pre-meeting without them and sent a letter expressing their feelings. The participants at the SWAN-organized meeting responded by explaining the purpose of the meeting and naming the participants. In fact, later, many of the participants in this meeting felt that it had been crucial in leading them to decide to participate in the emerging women's alliance. After being able to talk in a setting that felt more comfortable to them, they were able to better define their positions and to envision more clearly what the benefits of participating in an alliance might be.

In September 1999, the preparatory meeting for the second women's forum was held in Mae Hong Son. The participants arrived with feelings of uncertainty about how it would go, but many of the women from the BWU and other organizations had done a great deal of preparation in order to make it a success. At this meeting, Mary Ohn, from the Karen Women's Organization, played an important role in convincing women from other ethnic-based women's organizations that forming a women's alliance was essential. A high ranking military officer in the Karen National Liberation Army and a passionate speaker, she had great clout among the other women. She argued that all women in Burma were oppressed and that they must work together to achieve equality with men.

By the end of the meeting, the participants agreed that a women's alliance should be formed at the second forum of women from Burma in December. They also decided that one of the main aims of the alliance would be to work for the greater participation of women in national politics. They were clear that they wanted to form an alliance of women's groups rather than bringing together individual women, as they thought an alliance of women's groups would be more powerful and would be able to strengthen the individual women's groups. In addition, they did not want to include a wide range of types of member organizations, or create a loose network of groups, as they



were worried that such an alliance would not be focused or effective.

Specifically, the participants agreed that the following organizations could send at least two women to the forum:

- The Burmese Women’s Union
- The Chin Women’s Organization
- The Karen Women’s Organization
- The Karenni National Women’s Organization
- The Kachin Women’s Association Thailand (note: mistakenly written as the Akha women’s group in the September meeting decisions),
- The Lahu Women’s Organization,
- The Mon Women’s Organization
- The Rakhaing Women’s Union
- The Shan Women’s Action Network
- The Tavoy Women’s Union
- The Women’s Rights and Welfare Association of Burma

It was also decided that representatives from certain groups which had been present at the first forum would be allowed to attend as observers only, although time would be set aside for them to express their opinions. These included Mae Tao Clinic, the Safe House in Sangklaburi, Weaving for Women, the Displaced Women’s Group from Bangkok, and the women’s wing of the NLD-LA. These groups were seen as not focused on expanding the space for women in politics, or operating as more of a single program than an organization, or not sufficiently independent from male-dominated political organizations.

Another factor was the desire to not have a number of member groups representing one ethnic group as this could lead to conflict between them or the domination of women of one ethnic group over the alliance as a

whole. Several of the above groups were run by Karen women, and it was felt that the Karen Women's Organization was the most appropriate organization to focus on Karen women's political rights. Similarly, if the NLD-LA women's wing came in, other pro-democracy parties might also form women's wings which would apply for membership, increasing the number of perceived "Burman" women's organizations.

In addition, the NLD-LA women's wing was not a separate organization with its own constitution and was not considered sufficiently independent to become a member. Some women were concerned that if women's groups without some degree of independence were allowed into the alliance, male politicians could potentially be able to exert control over the women's alliance.

The participants also came to a consensus regarding the general aims and work of the emerging alliance. It was to have sub-committees focusing on education and culture, health and social welfare, refugee affairs, international relations, and organizing and capacity building. They also proposed that there should be a constitution drafting study committee to consider what other countries had included in their constitutions regarding women's rights. The National Council of the Union of Burma, an alliance of pro-democracy and ethnic nationalist organizations based on the Thai-Burma border, was in the process of drafting a constitution for Burma, and many of the more politicized women felt that it was important for women to participate in this process. In order to do so, they wanted to have more knowledge about other countries' constitutions.

In addition, the participants decided to form a committee to research and write their own shadow report for the CEDAW committee. Many of the September meeting participants felt that the CEDAW committee should

receive a report that was authored by women from Burma as well as the Images Asia report. Given that the CEDAW committee meeting date was set for early 2000, the women could not wait until the founding of an alliance to begin the interviewing and writing, so they decided to starting work together on the project immediately.

Women from the following organizations signed the September meeting agreements on behalf of their organizations:

- Mi Sue Pwint and Aye Aye Lwin for the Burmese Women's Union
- Mary Ohn and Sanda Waine (note: spelled Wai in other documents) for the Karen Women's Organization
- Bwee Paw and Ah Mu Doe for the Karenni National Women's Organization
- Mra Raza Linn for the Rakhaing Women's Union
- Harn Fha and Hseng Moon for the Shan Women's Action Network
- Tin Tin Khaing for the Tavoy Women's Union
- Thin Thin Aung for the Women's Rights and Welfare Association

An organizing committee was also established to organize the second women's forum. It consisted of the following women:

- Aye Aye Lwin from the Burmese Women's Union
- Bwee Paw from the Karenni National Women's Organization
- Hseng NOUNG from the Shan Women's Action Network
- Zarni Maw from the Tavoy Women's Union
- Zipporah Sein from the Karen Women's Organization
- one representative from the Kachin Women's Association Thailand
- one representative from the Lahu Women's Organization

Women from KWAT and the LWO were unable to attend the September meeting but had been at the August meeting, so it was decided that a

representative from each of their organizations should also be on the organizing committee.

The September meeting then, was critical in laying the foundation for the founding of the women's alliance in December. The women who participated felt a great sense of accomplishment, because they had come so far in the space of less than a year. They were all ready to participate in an alliance, and they believed they could make it work.

The participating organizations wanted to ensure that the other women's groups which fit their criteria would be ready and willing to join the emerging alliance. As a result, they sent letters to the Mon Women's Organization and the Chin Women's Organization expressing regret that representatives of the two organizations were unable to attend and hoping that they would be able to send representatives to the December forum.

Soon after, Hseng Nong from SWAN met Marie Smith, the project officer for Trocaire, an Irish organization which had funded various Burma activities. She had first met her during an advocacy trip to Europe earlier in the year. She asked Marie if Trocaire could provide funding for the forum. Trocaire agreed, and the funding was channeled through the National Reconciliation Program in Chiang Mai. Among other things, this program promotes the participation of women and youth in politics.

A few Pa'O women in Mae Hong Son Province with connections to the Pa'O People's Liberation Organization were aware of the coming women's forum through their contacts with the women's groups based there. They wanted to assist female Pa'O migrants in Thailand, promote Pa'O literature and culture, and participate in the emerging women's alliance. They formed the **Pa'O Women's Union (PWU)** in early November 1999. The Pa'O Women's Union, like many of the other women's groups, was able to

obtain initial funding from the Burma Relief Centre, allowing them to set up an office and a phone line and begin developing activities.

From mid-November to early December, the women selected at the September 1999 meeting were busy working on the CEDAW shadow report. Because of the tight security at the time and the amount of information they had to compile, they were holed up together for weeks in a Chiang Mai guesthouse. Working in such stressful circumstances helped bring them closer together and made them even more committed to women's rights. Moreover they realized that to prove that violence against women by the regime's security forces is systematic and widespread, they had to work together and create a joint report. Ultimately, those who participated actively in the various CEDAW related activities came to understand that women's participation in politics was essential to women being able to ensure their rights.

The Second Forum of Women's Organizations from Burma, was held from 7-9 December, 1999 with 42 women participating, including a few observers and recording and accounting assistants. The women who attended discussed the goals of the alliance and work areas specified by the participants in the September meeting and were able to come to a consensus regarding those. However, differences of opinion emerged regarding membership criteria and the name of the organization.

Some of the ethnic-based women's organizations, particularly the Mon Women's Organization (MWO) and the Chin Women's Organization (CWO), asserted that membership should be based on ethnicity. Representatives from the much smaller Mon Women's Rights Organization shared this point of view. The MWO and the CWO also wanted to have only one women's organization representing each ethnicity. This posed a problem for the BWU and the WRWAB, both of which had members of

many ethnicities as well as members of mixed ethnicity. Also, these two organizations did not feel that they could combine into one organization, because they had already been working separately for four years. The BWU and the WRWAB felt that all independent women's organizations which had an interest in women's rights should be able to join the alliance.

At one point, the discussion became so heated that representatives of the BWU and the WRWAB said that if it was so important for the alliance to be ethnic-based then the ethnic-based women's organizations should go ahead and form the alliance without them. However, some of the other participants argued that to form an alliance without the BWU and the WRWAB wouldn't make sense. Moreover, some ethnic-based women's organizations didn't have very strong feelings regarding the basis for membership, believing that as long as there was an alliance they could participate in, their organization would benefit. In the end, it was decided that membership would not be based on ethnicity.

The Chin Women's Organization accepted the majority decision, but the Mon Women's Organization and the Mon Women's Rights Organization said they would not be able to join the alliance. Before coming to the forum, their organizations had already decided that if membership in the alliance were not ethnic-based, they would not participate.

It should also be noted that the Mon women's groups' circumstances were quite different from the other women's organizations which largely operated in exile and in ethnic resistance areas where the civil war continued. The New Mon State Party and its armed partner organization had made a ceasefire agreement with the military regime in 1995. This largely ended the civil war in Mon areas and opened up space for the Mon Women's Organization to operate throughout Mon State. However, it



also meant that the Mon organizations had to demonstrate a more conciliatory approach toward the regime. Open participation in an alliance based in exile would be difficult. At the same time, members of the two Mon women's groups had not had an opportunity to participate in the earlier women's meetings or the trainings and events that had helped build greater understanding between many of the other women's groups. Their geographical separation and tight Thai security in their area had cut them off from the other women's groups.

The decision to exclude the NLD-LA women's wing was also reaffirmed at the December meeting, although the representatives of the NLD-LA women's wing were very disappointed. They felt that it was not fair for women's organizations which were closely affiliated with armed ethnic nationalist organizations to be granted membership while they were not. However, other members argued that the ethnic women's organizations were more independent. They had their own constitutions and ran their own programs, even if they did consult the male leaders on political issues.

The other thorny issue that came up was what to name the alliance. Some participants wanted the name to reflect that the members represented the different ethnicities of Burma and felt that the word *taiyintha* (*taiyinthu* if just referring to women) referred to all the ethnic nationalities of the country, including Burmans. Others felt that *taiyintha* referred to ethnic minorities only. In addition, some representatives did not want to use "Myanmar" in the name, or at least not at the beginning of the alliance's name, because they felt that the term either didn't include them or that their people were independent from the country of that name. Others felt that if the name of the country were not in the alliance's name, people from other countries wouldn't know where the alliance came from. A compromise solution was suggested with *Myanma Nainngan*, the formal name for the country in Burmese, put in parentheses at the



end of the name. Given the inability to come to a consensus on the main part of the name, it was decided that a vote should be taken, and three names were proposed:

1. Ahmyothameemya Apwegyoke (Myanma Naing-ngan), which could be translated as “Women’s League (Myanmar)”
2. Taiyinthu Ahmyothameemya Apwegyoke (Myanma Naing-ngan), which could be translated as “League of Ethnic Nationalities’ Women’s Groups (Myanmar)”
3. Lumyobaungson Ahmyothameemya Apwegyoke (Myanma Naing-ngan) which could be translated as “League of Women of All Nationalities (Myanmar)”

The first name received 18 votes, the second name 17 votes, and the third name 3 votes, so the first name was selected. The name was translated into English as the **“Women’s League of Burma”**, with the usage of “Burma” instead of Myanmar seen as unproblematic in English and not needing to be put in parentheses. This was because Burma had been the English name of the country since independence, and the opposition movement didn’t accept the regime’s decision to change the name to Myanmar in 1989. The decision had been made without consulting the people and was therefore unacceptable.



**The alliance wasn't just thrown together lightly.  
It came from our deepest feelings.**

– Nang Yain, BWU.

On the last day of the forum, 9 December 1999, the Women's League of Burma was founded with the following 12 member organizations:

- The All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization
- The Burmese Women's Union
- The Chin Women's Organization
- The Kachin Women's Association Thailand
- The Karen Women's Organization
- The Karenni National Women's Organization
- The Lahu Women's Organization
- The Pa'o Women's Union
- The Rakhaing Women's Union
- The Shan Women's Action Network
- The Tavoy Women's Union
- The Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma

The participants were very excited with the result, and everyone who had been involved in the numerous steps and complimentary activities along the way felt proud. So many women had contributed in so many ways to bring about the alliance, and without the efforts and the commitment of all, it couldn't have been formed. Despite the many differences between the women's representatives, all ultimately believed that much more could be achieved for their own groups and for all women in Burma by working together than by remaining apart. This unity of purpose is what has held the alliance together until today.

During the last day of the forum, representatives of NGOs based in Thailand met with the forum participants to discuss future networking possibilities. The following NGOs were represented: Earthrights International, Empower, Images Asia, the Migrant Assistance Programme, the Open Society Institute, and WEAVE.

That day, two other important decisions were made: who would write the constitution and who would run the WLB for the first year. Five women were assigned to draft the WLB's constitution before the first congress. They were Hseng Nong from SWAN, Mi Sue Pwint from the BWU, Mra Raza Linn from the RWU, Sanda Wai from the KWO, and Thin Thin Aung from the WRWAB. Three women were also elected to serve on the steering committee to run the WLB until the first congress would be held in January 2001. They were Zipporah Sein from the KWO, Hseng Nong from SWAN, and Mra Raza Linn from the RWU.

The following day, the Steering Committee held a meeting and appointed women to the WLB's sub-committees, which were as follows:

- Organization, Training, and Education
- Social and Refugee Affairs
- News and Information
- International Relations
- Finance

Before and after the forum, and until the WLB could establish its own office, SWAN served as a meeting place and coordination center. SWAN also provided accommodation and assistance for women traveling from other areas for alliance-related activities.

## Reflecting on the Foundation of the Alliance

The fact that the WLB was founded in December 1999 was a great achievement for many reasons. The geographical separation of the women's groups made communications and relationship-building very difficult. The 1998-9 period was also a time of great insecurity for Burmese organizations based along the Thai-Burma border. The Thai government permitted a number of Burmese organizations to stay quietly in the country, but members did not have any legal documents and could be arrested as illegal migrants at any time. Travel in Thailand was very tricky without documents, and the police sometimes raided Burmese organizations' offices and conferences. Thus, bringing women from a number of locations together for meetings was very challenging, and women felt particularly vulnerable as they weren't sure what might happen to them if they were arrested along the way.

In addition, it was not easy to overcome the mistrust that had been engendered through decades of political conflict and the tendency to see the struggle of one's own community as taking precedence over the struggles of other communities in Burma. Also, it took time for women who had had little experience in political organizing or political advocacy work to develop a sense of urgency regarding the need for women to improve their status and to realize that only by working together could they ever hope to achieve this. The confidence to voice opinions also came slowly for some, particularly when speaking in a language that they weren't fluent in.

There were not only tensions between organizations but new tensions also arose within many women's organizations during this period. Within the BWU, for instance, some members felt that too much time and

resources were being devoted to the founding of an alliance at the expense of the needs of BWU members. In other women's organizations, those who participated in the women's forums and capacity building activities began to develop a broader and more political agenda while other members who had not had the same degree of exposure were not always convinced that these women were moving in the right direction. These tensions made it hard for the women who took a risk and pushed for the formation of the alliance.

Meanwhile, some men in the Burmese opposition movement were unhappy that women were increasingly talking about their rights and organizing to achieve a voice in politics. There were men who made dismissive or even angry comments and were resistant to having women create their own space. Pressure from the male organizations sometimes came out in personal relationships as well, creating tensions between husbands and wives. On the other hand, the dismissive comments made by some men made the women even more determined to ensure that the League would succeed.

Finally, at the time of the second forum, the size of each of the women's organizations, the focus of their work, and the degree to which they operated independently varied markedly. Given all these factors, the fact that the women could agree to found the League was a remarkable achievement. It was only possible because of the determination and hard work of many women, with strong support and encouragement from a number of respected individuals, donors, NGOs, and friends.

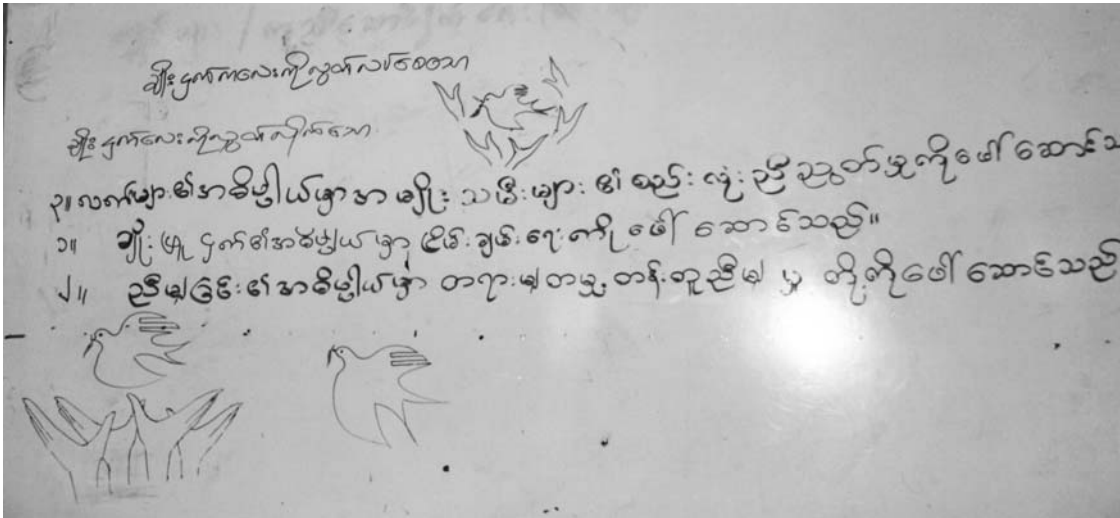
**“Starting the WLB was a good idea. The member organizations are like the branches of a tree. We needed a trunk.”**

- Ah Mu Doe, KNWO

## The First Congress

The first Congress was held from 22-26 January 2001, with 28 representatives from 10 member organizations attending. The draft constitution was presented and reviewed line by line by the Congress participants. It had been drafted by Mi Sue Pwint, who used the constitutions of other Burmese opposition alliance organizations as references. She had then consulted with the other constitution drafting committee members, who had made suggestions for how to improve it. After some further changes were made during the Congress, the constitution was approved and the new leadership bodies of the WLB were formed. The Congress participants also agreed that the WLB should focus on the following four issues during the first term: capacity building, international advocacy work, peace and reconciliation, and refugee affairs.





In addition, the logo for the WLB was adopted at the first conference. Congress participants first suggested the concepts they wanted symbolized in the logo, with everyone agreeing that gender equality and peace should be the central themes. Then Hseng Nong from SWAN and San San Cho from the BWU drew various designs on the white board based on the ideas they were given. One of Hseng Nong's designs was eventually adopted by consensus. It consisted of a white dove with outstretched wings being released from several joined pairs of hands and flying up into the sky. The liberated dove symbolizes peace and independence. On the left wing, it has a circle and linked cross symbolizing women, and on the right wing, it has an equal sign signifying equal rights. The joined pairs of hands below the bird represent the unity of women of Burma.

A month after the first congress, the Secretariat office was opened in Chiang Mai, and it has continued to be located in Chiang Mai ever since. Following the first congress, congresses were held every two years, with the number of participants in each congress gradually increasing.





## Main Points in the Constitution

The constitution explains the aims, mandate, and structure of the League and outlines the criteria for applying for membership and for being suspended from the League. Changes to the constitution can be made in the congresses, and some amendments have been passed in order to improve operational effectiveness and better manage new membership applications and the handling of problems within member organizations. The main points are described and explained below, as are the changes that were made over time.

## Aims

**The constitution defines three aims for the WLB; namely:**

1. to work for the social development and advancement of the status of women
2. to work for the increased participation of women in all spheres of society
3. to work for the increased participation of women in the movements for democracy, peace and national reconciliation

Later, the League formulated a more detailed working definition which reflected their programmatic priorities. In the WLB's tenth anniversary publication written in 2009, the aims of the League were specified as:

- To work for the empowerment and advancement of the status of women
- To work for the rights of women and gender equality
- To work for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women
- To work for the increased participation of women in every level of decision-making in all spheres of society
- To participate effectively in the movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation

## Structure

The constitution stipulates the structure of the WLB, which included a Congress, Presidium Board, Secretariat, and Program Coordinators. This structure closely resembles the structure of the opposition political alliance organizations. The Congress meetings include an equal number of representatives from each member organization, and these representatives are selected by their own groups. The Congress lays out the priorities for each two-year term, with the Secretariat having the responsibility to carry out the Congress' decisions. Originally, ninety percent of the representatives to the Congress were required to attend the meeting for it to be able to make any decisions. Later this was lowered to seventy-five percent of the representatives, because travel difficulties and other unforeseen circumstances sometimes made it difficult for everyone to attend.

The Presidium Board consists of one representative of each member organization, and the representative serves as the liaison between the WLB and her respective organization. The Presidium Board is required to hold a meeting at least once every eight months, and at least seventy-five percent of the members must attend for any decisions to be made. The Presidium Board generally meets four times a term: immediately after the Congress finishes, twice during the two-year term, and right before the new congress convenes. The Presidium Board oversees the work of the secretariat and must give approval for any important decisions made during the two-year term.

Originally, it was decided that Presidium Board decisions had to be made by consensus. However, it was later agreed that when the board members could not come to a consensus, decisions would be made by voting. If

seventy-five percent of the board members voted in favor of a motion, then it would pass. The reason for this change was to make it easier for the WLB to move forward with its work. Otherwise, a single organization could block decisions.

The constitution specified that at any given time, four members of the Presidium Board must serve as Acting Board members. Acting board members are responsible for coordinating between the Secretariat and the rest of the Presidium Board members. Over time, the number of active Presidium Board members was reduced to three and then to two, so that the Secretariat would only have to contact two board members who would then communicate with the other Presidium members.

The Secretariat consists of three positions: the General Secretary, Joint General Secretary 1, and Joint General Secretary 2. The three women holding these positions are elected by a secret vote at the Congress, with each member organization having to nominate one candidate. The secretariat implements the work plan made by the Congress, oversees the program coordinators and permanent office staff, and manages the League's budget. The secretaries also act as the primary spokeswomen for the alliance.

The constitution did not specify which decisions the Secretaries needed to get approval from the board for and which they could make on their own. Later, detailed operational guidelines were drawn up to clarify what the Secretariat could and could not do on its own. As a result, the Secretariat would not have to consult the Presidium Board on smaller decisions, which helped to make the decision-making process more efficient.

The secretaries, Presidium Board members, and the Congress serve for a two year term. The reason for not having a longer term is that many of the

women taking these positions are also needed in their mother organizations. The founders felt that it wouldn't be possible to expect all of the women who were elected to give more than two years at a time to the WLB. Nevertheless, some women have served for several terms in the same or different positions in the WLB. Thus, in 2007, it was decided that the positions in the Secretariat and in the Presidium Board could only be held twice consecutively, but after a break of one term, individuals could serve again. The League has had to try to balance keeping experienced individuals in some leadership roles while also bringing in fresh blood.

Full-time program coordinators run the WLB's main programs and operate under the supervision of the secretariat. One problem that came up was that some program coordinators were also serving concurrently as Presidium Board members. This was later prohibited, because it was awkward for the Secretaries to have to supervise a coordinator who was also overseeing them as a Presidium Board member.

Member organizations are required to send women to the League to serve in a variety of positions. However, it has been difficult for many of the organizations to send sufficiently qualified people as they have struggled to develop enough capacity to manage their own programs. As a result, sometimes the member organizations have not sent the most appropriate people to the WLB. Strategic workshops were held before the 4th and 5th Congresses in which proposed lists of ideal criteria for the Presidium Board members, the Secretariat members, and the program coordinators were formulated. In general, these had to do with ensuring that the women in these positions had sufficient maturity, commitment, and experience to carry out their duties effectively. These criteria were passed as guidelines in the Congresses, but full implementation still requires the development of human resources within many of the member organizations.

# Membership

The constitution specifies the criteria for applying for and retaining membership in the League. According to the constitution, member organizations must be independent organizations which are free from the influence of political organizations. In practice, some member organizations have not had absolute independence from political organizations, but at a minimum, they should have their own constitution and structure and be able to plan and implement their own activities. After the founding of the League, new organizations applying for membership were originally required to have been in existence for at least one year before applying. In the 2003 Congress, this was amended to two years.

As of 2003, new member organizations were also required to have a minimum of 50 members, a condition that some of the existing member organizations didn't meet. However, the hope was that new members would all be active, stable organizations which could be considered as representing a sufficiently large constituency. Finally, faith-based organizations were not allowed to join, because of concerns about tensions emerging over religion.

One of the fundamental principles of the WLB is to maintain unity among the member organizations; thus, the constitution specifies that member organizations should not have been involved in conflicts based on race, area, or name. In addition, the WLB is not allowed to interfere in member organizations' affairs except if the organization is acting in a way that could cause harm to the League. In another measure to prevent tensions from emerging within the League, organizations applying for membership must be recommended by two member organizations which are based in

the same area or which have a working relationship with the applying organization. Decisions to admit new members are generally made in presidium board meetings, and seventy-five percent of the Presidium Board members must agree with the decision for the applying organization to be accepted.

The constitution also specifies how to handle conflicts within member organizations. The League can temporarily suspend any organization that is experiencing internal conflict and set a time frame for it to resolve the issue. During that period, the organization's representative to the Presidium Board will not be allowed to participate in the Board's work, but the other members of the Presidium Board will make efforts to help the organization resolve the conflict through negotiations or mediation. If, after the agreed time period has elapsed and efforts within the organization and by the League to solve the problem have failed, the Presidium Board can vote to terminate the organization's membership. Such conflicts have broken out a few times in the League's history and have been dealt with according to these rules.

The Constitution also gives a mandate to the League to build the capacity of its member organizations and to make it possible for members to be able to coordinate with each other. The purpose here is to work toward the equal capacity of all member organizations, to build unity, and to ensure the effectiveness of the League in achieving its aims. The League has made capacity building a priority, and some progress has been made.

## Changes in WLB Membership: 2000-2010

All but two of the founding members were still members of the WLB ten years later. In a few cases, members were suspended because of internal divisions within their organizations. In these cases, the WLB congress participants and presidium board members carefully considered how to handle the situation and sought to respond in a constructive way. One organization also withdrew but was later readmitted. Meanwhile, three new organizations were admitted to the League.

The Karenni National Women's Organization formally became a member of the Women's League of Burma at the conclusion of the second women's forum. However, in 2000, the KNWO asked to withdraw from the WLB and its request was accepted at the WLB's first congress in January 2001. Although the KNWO wanted to participate in the WLB, some members of the Karenni political leadership were opposed to participation in any organization working specifically for Burma. The KNPP position at the time was that Karenni State was an independent territory and not part of Burma. This was based on the fact that a treaty between the British and the king of Burma in the mid-1800s stated that Karenni territory was a separate area. Participation in the WLB seemed to be in conflict with the KNPP's policy as the name of the alliance included the word Burma. In addition, the WLB was planning to send two representatives to the opposition groups' federal constitution drafting committee, which the KNPP itself had decided not to participate in. Thus, the KNWO decided that it must withdraw from the WLB. In 2002, after the KNPP changed its policy to support the creation of a genuine federal union of Burma, the KNWO reapplied for membership. Letters of support were provided by the BWU and the Pa'O Women's Union, and the WLB agreed to reinstate



the KNWO at their second congress in December 2002.

The Chin Women's Organization (CWO) was one of the founding members of the WLB but the organization later split into two groups. One group was based in Delhi, while the other was based in Mizoram State in Northeast India. Women in the two different locations were not focused on the same activities, and given the lack of resources at their disposal and the great distance between the two locations, it was difficult for them to coordinate effectively. The Delhi-based group continued to call itself the Chin Women's Organization while the Mizoram-based group named itself the Central Chin Women's Organization. Both groups of Chin women asked the WLB to recognize their group exclusively, putting the WLB in a difficult situation. The WLB suspended the CWO from representation in the Presidium Board in 2001 and then gave the CWO three months to reunite. Throughout this period, the WLB encouraged the two groups to resolve their differences, but they were unable to do so. As a result, at the August 2003 Presidium Board meeting, they were suspended indefinitely.

The All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization, another founding member based in India, also split into two factions for largely the same reasons as the CWO did. Like the CWO, one group was based in Delhi and while the other was based in Mizoram State. Both groups claimed to be the sole legitimate representatives of the organization. The participants at the first WLB Congress in January 2001 decided that the ABDLWO representative to the Presidium Board would be suspended until the two factions of the organization could come to an agreement about who the representative should be. However, the two factions were not able to come to any agreement, and in the August 2003 Presidium Board meeting, they were suspended indefinitely.

At the same meeting, the Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) and the Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO) were both accepted as members of the League. The PWO was established in 2000 in Mae Sot, Thailand, after Lway Aye Nang, one of the founders of the Palaung Women's Organization, had attended the second women's forum as an observer. Another Palaung woman, E-Muang, had been working at the Burma Relief Centre and was also interested in forming a Palaung women's organization. More Palaung women arrived in Thailand in 2000, and together, they established the PWO later that year. The founders did not immediately apply for membership in the WLB as they wanted to build up the organization's capacity first so they would be in a position to participate actively in the League. In 2003, they felt ready and were recommended by the KWO and the BWU.

The Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO) had also been founded in 2000 in Manipur State, Northeast India. The Kuki and Chin are related ethnic groups, but the Kuki women preferred to form their own organization. The Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization has close relations with the leadership of the Kuki National Army, an armed resistance group based along the India-Burma border. Some members now live in Delhi while others have remained in Manipur, where income generation is one of their main priorities.

In the ensuing years, several other Chin women's organizations formed. Chin State is a mountainous state with poor communication and transportation links. In each district, a different dialect is spoken. As women from various parts of Chin State have continued to seek safety and employment in India, they have tended to organize by dialect group and by location in India.

In December 2004, several Chin women's groups joined together to found the Women's League of Chinland. They had been encouraged to work together by the Chin National Front/Chin National Army, which is based along the India-Burma border. The following groups became members of the Women's League of Chinland at that time: The All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization, the Central Chin Women's Organization, the Chin Women's Organization (Delhi), the Chin Women's Union, the Khumi Women's Advancement Organization, the Mara Women's Association, the Matu Women's Union, the Zomi Women Union, the Zotung Women's Development Network. The Lai Women's Progressive Association joined in 2007.

The Women's League of Chinland (WLC) applied for membership in the Women's League of Burma in 2008 and after a group of WLB members visited the organization to obtain more information about its objectives and activities, it was accepted as a member in 2009. Nevertheless, as of March 2010, the Women's League of Chinland had not nominated a representative to serve on the Presidium Board in the Women's League of Burma because of differences of opinion within the WLC regarding whether they should participate in the WLB and on what terms. As a result, the WLB's Presidium Board suspended the WLC at its April 2010 meeting with the hope that further discussions could lead to the WLC's reinstatement in the future.

Meanwhile, the Kayan Women's Organization applied for membership twice, but as of 2010 had not been accepted. They applied the first time during the second term of the WLB, but they did not meet all the criteria. They reformed the organization in 2007 and reapplied in 2008, but the Presidium Board noted that they had not been in existence for two years (since reforming) and still had only limited activities.

In early 2009, a split within the Lahu Women's Organization led the Presidium Board to decide to temporarily suspend the organization until the members could reunite. They were able to do so later in the year and their suspension was lifted.

As of April 2010, the Women's League of Burma consisted of 12 member organizations: the Burmese Women's Union, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand, the Karen Women's Organization, the Karenni National Women's Organization, the Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization, the Lahu Women's Organization, the Palaung Women's Organization, the Pa'o Women's Union, the Rakhaing Women's Union, the Shan Women's Action Network, the Tavoy Women's Union, and the Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma.

# Relations with Other Organizations in the Movement

## Relations with other Women's Groups and Programs for Women

The Women's League of Burma has made a conscious effort to reach out to other women's groups and members of women from other types of organizations by welcoming their participation in its programs and activities. In particular, women who come from groups that are not WLB members have participated in the women against violence program and the peace-building program. They are also invited to join annual celebrations of International Women's Day, Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday, and other events. This happens at WLB events in both Thailand and India. It is particularly notable that even women from organizations which did not choose to join the WLB or were suspended from the WLB frequently participate in various WLB-sponsored activities. Both women inside the WLB and in other women's organizations have valued the opportunity to interact with each other and to learn how to collaborate effectively.



## Relationships with Political Organizations and Alliances

**If we speak alone, the men in the movement will never listen to us. If we gather together, we can make them listen.**

– *Mra Raza Linn*



Ten years after its founding, the WLB is regularly asked to participate in the strategic seminars and political activities of the broader political movement. However, this hasn't come easily. The WLB had to push to be included in high level seminars and has had to work hard to demonstrate its political relevance. Nevertheless, after ten years, it is widely recognized in the movement that the WLB is active and effective. The WLB has been particularly successful in demonstrating its ability to advocate internationally, with WLB representatives being able to access government leaders and UN bodies and representatives. Over time, the WLB representatives have also been able to improve their ability to discuss not only the

abuses women have suffered in Burma but also to talk competently about all of Burma's political issues. In addition, male politicians realize that donors and the international community in general expect women's involvement. As a result of all of these factors, the WLB is recognized as an organization which must be included in major decision-making processes, even though some men still may not value women's participation. In some cases, the WLB has been able to persuade and in other instances, compel male politicians to include language regarding women's rights in important political documents. Still, WLB members must take more steps to develop members' capacity, so that they can introduce their own ideas for bringing about political change in Burma, for national level peace-building, and for transition planning.



## Achievements and Challenges

Despite the challenges in the lead-up to the founding of the WLB, ten years later, the League has become well established, with the member groups able to work together cooperatively and effectively. The WLB has managed to bring women of different generations, ethnicities, and life experiences together. The participating women have worked hard to understand each other, no one group has dominated, and the WLB has been able to function independently of male-dominated organizations.

The WLB has created space for women to act. Women's groups want to be part of the WLB and see membership as bringing many benefits, including being able to gain knowledge, experience and ideas from other members and generating positive energy from working together with other motivated women.

**“We should praise and appreciate everyone’s effort. The WLB’s foundation is so strong now that it can’t be cracked easily.”**

– *Khin Ohmar*

During its first ten years, the Women's League of Burma focused on three main issues and developed programs and engaged in advocacy work to address these priorities. The three aims are to promote peace and reconciliation in Burma, to stop violence against women, and to politically empower women. The League has made some headway on all of these challenging issues and intends to continue to pursue these aims in the future.





The WLB believes that women from Burma can and should be actively involved in the peace-building process at many levels. They have been particularly inspired by the roles that women have played in peace-building in Rwanda and Sudan, and many WLB members have had a chance to meet with women peace-builders from both countries. In the WLB, the focus so far has been on training women as peace-builders at the community level. In the future, the WLB may be able to develop the capacity of women to take a leading role in peace-building at higher levels as well.

Regarding stopping violence against women, the WLB has produced several reports documenting the systematic and widespread nature of state-sponsored violence against women in Burma and analyzing women's needs and women's inequality in Burma. In its extensive international advocacy efforts at various UN meetings and in other fora, it has also





relied on member organizations' reports which document similar issues in specific areas. While state-sponsored violence against women has continued in Burma, the problem is now widely recognized internationally and possibilities for bringing the perpetrators to justice are being considered. The WLB's Women Against Violence program has also tackled the problem of domestic violence and sought to provide assistance to women who have suffered from violence. Women and men in the communities which WLB members can reach are now more aware of international norms regarding these issues.

The political empowerment of women involves changing men's and women's attitudes, and creating space for women to participate in politics,



and developing women's knowledge and skills. The Women's League of Burma has engaged in extensive advocacy work within the communities they can reach in order to persuade men and women that women can and should participate equally with men in politics at all levels. They produced *Constituting Our Rights*, a brief position paper, and *Looking through Gender Lenses*, a longer position paper, on how constitutional mechanisms, and specifically quotas, can be used to help bring about gender equality. With much concerted effort, the WLB was able to get language regarding gender equality and a 30% quota for female representatives in the national parliament put into the opposition's draft constitution for Burma.

In order to successfully implement its programs and to prepare women for political work, the WLB has put substantial resources and time into

capacity building. Given the poor quality of the education system in Burma today and the fact that many women in the country haven't had much access to higher education or other relevant educational opportunities, capacity building has had to start from a very basic level. The WLB has run internships at the WLB office, brought in foreign volunteers and trainers to help develop particular skills, periodically run six-month political empowerment courses for women of member organizations, and provided some funding for member organizations to run their own internship programs. The WLB has also organized numerous workshops and short trainings to raise awareness or develop skills on particular topics.

The WLB has also paid attention to organizational development. The League had an evaluation carried out in 2006 and since then, has been gradually working on improving its management and efficiency. Strategic workshops were held before the fourth and fifth congresses specifically to work on this. The League is also determined to equalize the levels and abilities of the member organizations, although this will take time and commitment. Nevertheless, the determination to improve women's status has continued to move the WLB forward.



**We have limited resources and limited freedom of movement, but we've come so far.**

– Nang Lao Liang Won (Tay Tay), SWAN.



The Women's League of Burma has received three awards for its work. Together with the Shan Women's Action Network, the WLB was awarded the Peter Gruber Foundation's Women's Rights Prize in 2005. The prize is awarded to groups that have made significant contributions, often at great risk, to furthering the rights of women and girls.

In 2008, the Women's League of Burma received the Madeleine K. Albright Award, given by the National Democratic Institute, a United States-based organization which promotes democracy around the world. Also in 2008, the WLB was one of three recipients of the Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick award, established by the US-based International Republican Institute's Women's Democracy Network. The award is given to women who have made outstanding contributions to the advancement of women in politics and civil society. One of the other recipients was Charm Tong of the Shan Women's Action Network.

## The Future

Notably, many of the challenges that made it so difficult to found the WLB have been overcome. The younger women now active in the WLB tend to have similar levels of confidence and experience and are fully committed to women's political empowerment.

Also, advances in communication technology have made it possible for the women to stay in touch with each other much more easily, facilitating relationship-building and decision-making.

While the League has had noticeable impacts within the opposition movement and in raising awareness about Burma internationally, it has been much more difficult for the League to have an impact inside Burma. Member organizations have been able to carry out a number of trainings and workshops related to the WLB's aims in parts of Burma not under the regime's control. In addition, many of the WLB's advocacy efforts, public events, and program activities have been reported in the Burmese opposition media. However, the WLB has not been able to reach deeply into Burma or influence the thinking of large numbers of women or men living in the country. This challenge is not easy to overcome given the restrictions on independent organizing and private media in Burma. Nevertheless, it's something WLB members very much hope will change in the future.

## Appendix A: List of Acronyms

ABDLWO	<i>All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization</i>
ABSDF	<i>All Burma Students' Democratic Front</i>
BWU	<i>Burmese Women's Union</i>
CWO	<i>Chin Women's Organization</i>
EBO	<i>Euro-Burma Office</i>
KIO	<i>Kachin Independence Organization</i>
KNLA	<i>Karen National Liberation Army</i>
KNPP	<i>Karenni National Progressive Party</i>
KNU	<i>Karen National Union</i>
KNWO	<i>Karenni National Women's Organization</i>
KWAT	<i>Kachin Women's Association Thailand</i>
KWHRO	<i>Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization</i>
KWO	<i>Karen Women's Organization</i>
LWO	<i>Lahu Women's Organization</i>
MWO	<i>Mon Women's Organization</i>
NLD-LA	<i>National League for Democracy Liberated Area</i>
NMSP	<i>New Mon State Party</i>
PWO	<i>Palaung Women's Organization</i>
PWU	<i>Pa'O Women's Organization</i>
RWU	<i>Rakhaing Women's Union</i>
SLORC	<i>State Law and Order Restoration Council</i>
SPDC	<i>State Peace and Development Council</i>
SWAN	<i>Shan Women's Action Network</i>
TWU	<i>Tavoy Women's Union</i>
WLB	<i>Women's League of Burma</i>
WLC	<i>Women's League of Chinland</i>
WRWAB	<i>Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma</i>



## Appendix B: List of People Interviewed

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization (in 1998-9)</b>	<b>Place of Interview</b>	<b>Date</b>
Ah Mu Doe	KNWO	Chiang Mai	9 Dec 2009
Pippa Curwen	BRC	Chiang Mai	13 Jan 2010
Dr Cynthia Maung	Mae Tao Clinic	Mae Sot	15 Jan 2010
Khin Ohmar	BWU (later NDD, BP)	Mae Sot	17 Jan 2010
Naw Laydee	BWU	Mae Sot	15 Jan 2010
Tin Tin Khaing	TWU	Mae Sot	16 Jan 2010
Naw Zipporah Sein	KWO (later KNU)	Mae Sot	16 Jan 2010
Naw Sanda Wai	KWO	Mae Sot	16 Jan 2010
Thin Thin Aung	WRWAB	Chiang Mai	21 Jan 2010
Hseng Nounng	SWAN	Chiang Mai	22 Jan 2010
Shirley Seng	KWAT	Chiang Mai	22 Jan 2010
Mi Sue Pwint	BWU	Chiang Mai	25 Jan 2010
Naw Bwee Paw	KNWO	by phone	25 Jan 2010
Linda	KWAT	Chiang Mai	26 Jan 2010
Nang Yain	BWU	Chiang Mai	26 Jan 2010
Harn Yawnghwe	EBO	by email	26 Jan 2010
Tay Tay	SWAN	Chiang Mai	27 Jan 2010
Mi Kun Chan Non	MWO	by phone	30 Jan 2010
Hseng Moon	SWAN	Chiang Mai	1 Feb 2010
Lway Aye Nang	PWO	by phone	1 Feb 2010
Esther Saw Lone	Earthrights	by phone, email	2 Feb 2010
Debbie Stothard	Altsean	by phone, email	2 Feb 2010
Betsy Apple	Earthrights	by email	2 Feb 2010
Brenda Belak	Images Asia	by phone	3 Feb 2010
Aung Myo Min	HREIB	by phone	3 Feb 2010

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization (in 1998-9)</b>	<b>Place of Interview</b>	<b>Date</b>
<i>Jackie Pollock</i>	<i>MAP</i>	<i>by phone</i>	<i>3 Feb 2010</i>
<i>Mra Raza Linn</i>	<i>RWU</i>	<i>by phone</i>	<i>5 Feb 2010</i>
<i>Mary Okane</i>	<i>volunteer with BWU</i>	<i>by phone</i>	<i>15 Feb 2010</i>
<i>Aye Aye Myint</i>	<i>LWO</i>	<i>Chiang Mai</i>	<i>18 Feb 2010</i>
<i>Nang Aein</i>	<i>PWU</i>	<i>by phone</i>	<i>18 Feb 2010</i>
<i>Sang Pui</i>	<i>ABDLWO</i>	<i>by phone</i>	<i>21 Feb 2010</i>

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G.P.O. Box (413)  
Chiang Mai 50000 Thailand

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