

What Does it Take to Leave Home?



Karen refugees from Burma play an active role in managing their own camps.

KEVIN MALSEED

Picture a Refugee

BY KEVIN MALSEED

Picture in your mind a migrant. Now picture a refugee. Now an internally displaced person. Did the picture change?

Last year the media reported on “migrants” fleeing to Europe. Only when their stories gained attention did they become “refugees”, and the public response completely changed. Labels have this kind of power worldwide, including in Burma, where displaced people have many faces and stories, but with common threads.

In Burma’s northwest, over a million Rohingya Muslims suddenly found themselves labelled “resident foreigners” or “Bengalis” when a 1982 law removed recognition of their long history in the country. Since then,

repeated waves of attacks – sometimes by Burma’s military, sometimes by radical Buddhist mobs with government backing – have killed many, and displaced most from their homes and land. “Go back to Bangladesh,” Rohingyas are told, a country to which most have no connection. Many have paid traffickers to take them by boat to southern Thailand and smuggle them into Malaysia. Along the way many are killed or ransomed by traffickers, or towed out to sea and set adrift by Thai authorities. Almost no one, it seems, wants these people.

Across Burma, people of other ethnicities have been displaced as a result of human rights abuses conducted by military [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

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Honduras: When staying is not an option

What would it take for you to leave the country you call home? In Central America, the constant flow of departing men, women, and increasingly children has become “normal.” But from Guatemala to El Salvador, Chiapas, and now Honduras, Inter Pares counterpart Project Counselling Service (PCS) believes that people often leave because they have no other choice.

Forced uprooting is the way PCS views migration. PCS accompanies grassroots organizations that address the many facets

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of this phenomenon, such as the role of women, disappeared migrants’ families, international protection during migrants’ journey, and temporary migrant work.

Fanny Polanía is PCS’ migration program coordinator for Central America. An expert in the field, she also has


first-hand knowledge of migrants’ reality, having left her home country of Colombia at an early age.

PCS’ migration program follows the patterns and trends of the region. For example, Honduras has seen dramatically increased levels of migration since the 2009 coup.

Every year, 80,000 to 100,000 undocumented men and women leave the country, out of a population equivalent to that of Quebec.

The country is rocked by violence, but in the absence of an official war, Honduran migrants are deemed “economic migrants.”

Once outside the country, Hondurans’ rights are regularly violated throughout their journey. According to Fanny, “across Central America and Mexico, migrants are persistently subjected to theft and extortion. They are assaulted, kidnapped, beaten, and are victims of smuggling, trafficking, assassinations, forced disappearances and even massacres. Women are also raped and sexually assaulted.” In order to shed light on this under-reported situation, PCS organized a delegation of six international experts to investigate the situation of Honduran migrants. Taking their report to national and international authorities in the summer of 2014, PCS helped reveal these horrendous realities, pressuring local governments and international institutions to address those issues.

Whether they are fleeing because of war, poverty, inequality or violence, and whether we label them as refugees or migrants, people will always try to survive – and leaving is often their only short-term solution. Migrants need effective international protection mechanisms that are adapted to their needs and the challenges they face. This is why Inter Pares collaborates with PCS and has been supporting for decades its work to promote migrants’ human rights, but also individuals’ ability to make the choice to stay. 

ONLINE Read the report at interpares.ca/IVM

Mothers of Honduran migrants looking for their missing relatives.



Central American migrants about to board *la Bestia* (the Beast), the infamous train that will carry them across Mexico.



Why Women Seek Asylum: The global pandemic of gender-based violence

Toronto's Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic provides legal and other services to over 4,000 women annually who have experienced violence, many of them asylum-seekers. In 2014, Amanda Dale, the Clinic's Executive Director and Inter Pares Board member, participated in an exchange with our counterpart SORD (Sudanese Organization for Research and Development) to strengthen the work of its legal clinics for women. She recently spoke with us about the challenges for women seeking asylum in Canada.

The most interesting myth about asylum law," Amanda began, "is the notion that it is universally applicable. In fact, it was designed with a male model of migration in mind, of a lone political dissident. What primarily drives women's migration is the experience of violence against them." Women experiencing gender-based violence – who are so numerous that the United Nations calls this situation a "global pandemic" – are forced to adapt and contort Canada's refugee laws if they wish to gain asylum here.

Many factors can compromise women's safety. They include the continuum of violence from family members or intimate partners to state conflict. Where there is social upheaval or war, whatever protections are normally offered to women by laws or policing can become ineffective. In abusive situations, denying women reproductive choice can also be a form of control. Once they get to Canada, Amanda sees many women "driven by a single-minded duty to protect their children out of necessity," organizing their entire existence around ensuring the next generation's survival.

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Despite the vast challenges in assisting women and their families to gain refuge in Canada, the Clinic has seen success as well. In Amanda's experience, "most people place their hopes and joys in the integration of their children" into Canadian society. She



Amanda Dale (back left) and the staff of the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic.



Amanda Dale and Fatima Abualgasim, prominent women's rights legal activist and founder of SORD's legal clinics.

related the story of a mother and her daughter "whose lives have been about escape," but in Canada the daughter has blossomed into an assertive and opinionated individual. "Even if those same qualities make her hard to parent, this mother sees it as her duty to nourish that independence and nurture her agency." The Clinic is committed to all women's agency, envisioning a world where all women build lives free from violence – a vision that SORD and Inter Pares share. 

Inter Pares is proud to have Amanda as a member of our Board of Directors.

Picture a Refugee

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forces with impunity. Many communities respond by remaining mobile in their home areas to evade military control. I once asked a woman, seven days after soldiers had burned her house, how long she had been displaced. Expecting to hear “seven days,” I was surprised when she said “seventeen years.” Hundreds of thousands are still internally displaced.

Over a hundred thousand people with similar stories are still in refugee camps in Thailand. About half are “registered” refugees because they arrived before 2005. The other half are “unregistered”, simply because Thai authorities stopped registering refugees after that. The “registered” have had access to third-country resettlement, including to Canada. The “unregistered” have not. Registered refugees found working outside the camp are sent back to the camp. Unregistered refugees doing the same are deported.

A million others who fled to Thailand are living outside camps as “migrants” working illegally in homes and sweatshops. For another 150,000 people in Malaysia, includ-

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We say, *not yet.*

the only option, because Malaysia refuses to sign the UN convention on refugees or allow camps. Regularly arrested and

detained, they don't get much international interest or help.

Inter Pares uses your donations and Canadian government funding to support health care, livelihoods, capacity-building, human rights, and relief for Burma's displaced people living in all of these different situations.

Through local counterparts, we support refugees to run their own camps, and community-based organizations that are led and staffed by displaced people. The Canadian government has just approved five years of new funding for such initiatives, making it one of the few governments still doing so. Many funders have stopped supporting Burma's displaced people, believing Burma's displacement issues are over. We say, *not yet.*

Labels are almost unavoidable, but they have a disproportionate impact on marginalization, solidarity, and assistance. At Inter Pares we believe in challenging labels and standing in support of people who are building more just and inclusive societies. 



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Top: Inter Pares' Jack Hui Litster talks to Karen refugees in a camp in Thailand.

Bottom: Ta'ang people in an internal displacement camp in a conflict zone, northern Shan State.

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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