

ARTICLE

# ‘We walk, we laugh, we dance’: refugee experiences of older Chin women in Kuala Lumpur

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## Abstract

Older persons are among the most vulnerable of refugees seeking protection in Malaysia, yet seldom are they the focus of the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, local charities or non-government organisations. In-depth ethnographic research with a group of older Chin women in Kuala Lumpur demonstrates both the vulnerability and resilience of older refugees in urban environments. Older refugees play a crucial role in sustaining families and communities. They provide much-needed support to refugee communities who struggle to meet the needs of everyday life in the absence of protection protocols.

**Keywords:** ageing; refugees; life narrative; older migrants; urban refugees

## Introduction

Older people are an unseen population in humanitarian crises. In 1997, Sadako Ogata, then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), spoke of the plight of older refugees: ‘The elderly are among the most invisible groups of refugees and displaced persons. I hope to change that’ (Ogata, 1997). Some 20 years later, older refugees remain peripheral in both policy and practice. Old age, Karunakara has shown, remains ‘grounds for exclusion from humanitarian assistance’ (2015: 4). The distinct needs of older refugees are unrecognised in the majority of humanitarian programmes and activities (Delgado *et al.*, 2013). Malaysia is host to one of the largest urban refugee populations in the world, yet UNHCR Malaysia does not deliver any targeted activities that address the needs of older people.

The stories of older refugees in Malaysia are seldom heard and women’s narratives are scarcer still.<sup>1</sup> This article draws on one year of ethnographic fieldwork with the refugee populations of Malaysia’s urban capital, Kuala Lumpur, to illuminate the lives of older refugees. Ethnographic work provides rich insight into the

everyday lives of older women as they await resettlement. Oral history and ethnographic fieldwork are important tools to elicit the perspectives of older people. The life narratives of older Chin women in Malaysia tell us what they think is important. The stories recorded allow older refugees to be seen not as the passive subjects that humanitarian programmes often take them to be, but as important actors in their own life stories. While acknowledging the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of older refugees in Malaysia, this article reveals the rarely recognised strengths and capabilities of older refugees in a protracted refugee situation.

There exists little information on how older people experience life in refugee camps or urban settings. There is a dearth of scholarly research on the lives of those who are ageing in displacement. The ageing of the world's population means that increasing numbers of older people are being affected by humanitarian crises (Charta *et al.*, 2013: 3). The most significant work in this area has been undertaken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that advocate for the rights and needs of older people in humanitarian disasters. The substantial work of HelpAge International forms a strong evidence base for the distinct needs of older persons in humanitarian crises throughout the world (Day *et al.*, 2007; HelpAge International and Age UK, 2011; HelpAge International and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2012; Shami and Skinner, 2016). The research conducted by HelpAge International and other NGOs is critical to inform the design and delivery of programmes developed and implemented by humanitarian organisations and NGOs. Given the advocacy purpose of this work, it tends to take as its focus aspects of refugee life that align with service provision; the housing needs, access to medical care, mental health status and nutritional status of older refugees. The legal frameworks, along with the policy and practice issues affecting older people's access to humanitarian protection, have also been the focus of a number of studies (Wells, 2005; Murphy, 2012).

Missing from much of the existing work are the perspectives of older refugees. How do older people experience and make sense of displacement and protracted refugee situations? Paul Clayton Perrin writes that 'the experience of older people in displacement and disaster settings is poorly understood' (2013: 17). This is because older people are so rarely the primary subject of study in the existing literature on refugee lives. There is a scarcity of older voices in the existing body of work undertaken with refugees in camp, rural and urban settings. A 2016 report by HelpAge International, based on 300 interviews with older people in Lebanon, South Sudan and Ukraine, is a rare source that allows the reader to hear directly from older people in the midst of humanitarian crisis (Ridout, 2016). This kind of unmediated access to older people's perspectives is missing from much of the current scholarship on refugee lives. What is more, there exist just a few studies that take the lives of older refugees in a particular place or region as their focus (Motsisi, 1995; Perrin, 2013). Ilana Feldman's (2017) anthropological work in Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East is a rare exception in the recent scholarship.

The dominant representation of the refugee is, Nando Sigona writes, 'as an agency-less object of humanitarian intervention' (2014: 370). This article positions ageing refugees in Kuala Lumpur not simply as recipients, but, equally, providers of care. Adrienne Boyle notes the failure of development discourse 'to acknowledge

the remarkable cultural, social and professional capacity of older, more experienced, people' (2011: 131). Ethnographic work with refugee communities can play a significant role in interrogating simplistic representations of the refugee. Our work with older refugees reveals the diverse and important roles Chin women played within their communities. Older women took on a range of paid and voluntary functions, including child care, household chores, visiting the sick and maintaining culture. This article takes a critical view of the trope of the dependent, burdensome older person in refugee crises and reveals how older women negotiate everyday life and make a place for themselves in Malaysia's capital, with little or no assistance.

### An urban refuge

Malaysia is host to more than 150,000 refugees and asylum seekers registered as persons of concern with the UNHCR, and tens of thousands more who are unregistered. The significant number of refugees in Malaysia means that registering with the UNHCR is a complex task (Hoffstaedter, 2015). The majority of the persons of concern in Malaysia originate from Myanmar, accounting for more than 133,000 of those registered. Malaysia, like many Asian nations, is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. As such, Malaysian authorities consider refugees and asylum seekers to be illegal immigrants.

As undocumented entrants, refugees in Malaysia are not permitted to work. Yet, the majority, who receive no financial or in-kind assistance for housing, food or medical treatment, must work to support themselves and their families. Without documentation, the only employment opportunities available to most refugees are in the lowest paid, most physically demanding, and sometimes dangerous, jobs. Employment is commonly secured in restaurants and bars, construction and maintenance, and sanitation. Refugees working in such jobs are vulnerable to a range of exploitations (Hoffstaedter, 2014a; Muniandy, 2014). Those who attain refugee status with the UNHCR are afforded a small amount of protection. Most refugees in Malaysia are hoping for resettlement in a safe third country, though this will only become a reality for a small minority. Many refugees find themselves in an indefinite state of limbo, unable to return to their place of origin, or settle permanently elsewhere. One narrator, Pi Nein Sung,<sup>2</sup> aged 65, cried as she described her experience of limbo; of being caught in-between: 'We are in the middle of the road, trying to cross, but we find ourselves caught, unable to go forward, unable to go back.'

Harassment by the authorities is the primary challenge to the livelihoods of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. Refugees are subject to arbitrary arrest and extortion by the local police, who routinely conduct operations in neighbourhoods with significant refugee populations, often on payday. Refugees registered with the UNHCR and carrying a UNHCR identification card are permitted to live freely in the community while they await resettlement; in practice this does not exempt them from the extortion practices of local police. Those who are unregistered and cannot pay a bribe to secure their release are faced with indefinite detention in Malaysia's immigration detention network.

In both voluntary and forced migration contexts, younger people migrate in greater numbers than older people. Ken Tout (1990), who analyses the ageing dimension in global refugee contexts, points to the 'deep cultural roots' that tether older people to their homes. 'An older person', Tout finds, 'may be much more reluctant than a younger family member to forsake a known and loved environment' (1990: 6). For those older people who do make the journey, it is usually a delayed decision taken at the latest opportunity. Nevertheless, there exists a largely unseen and unknown population of older people amongst the refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. It is impossible to estimate their numbers with any accuracy, given that many are unregistered and do not access services. The older refugees surveyed for this project commonly left Myanmar when the last of their family members were fleeing or, after remaining behind for some years caring for grandchildren, travelled to Malaysia to reunite with their family.

This article will focus on the experiences of one particular ethnic community; the Chin people of Myanmar. While there are commonalities in experience across the refugee population, the refugee experience in Malaysia is often defined by one's ethnicity and religion (Hoffstaedter, 2014b, 2015). In early 2017, the Chin accounted for almost 40,000 of the registered refugees and asylum seekers recorded by the UNHCR in Malaysia. People aged over 60 accounted for less than 1 per cent of the registered Chin refugee population. Older people, many of whom arrived after mass registration exercises conducted in 2010, are significantly under-represented in official statistics. Due to the large number of people from Myanmar seeking protection in Malaysia, the UNHCR office does not allow individuals from Myanmar to access the office without an appointment. The number of people from Myanmar scheduled for registration interviews with the UNHCR was so large in 2015 that people were receiving appointments for 12 months in the future. For families with older members who arrived after their initial registration, the UNHCR advises that those additional members attend with the family for Refugee Status Determination and be added to the case at that time. In the meantime, these older people remain uncounted and unknown by the UNHCR. Older people's invisibility in registration data is not uncommon and has been noted in similar contexts of displacement (Calvi-Pariseti, 2013: 76).

## The Chin

In order to understand their experiences as refugees in Malaysia better, it is useful first to understand something of the lives of Chin people in their homeland. The Chins represent one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. The designation 'Chin' is, Lehman writes, 'imprecise' (1963: 3) and that vagueness of definition remains so today. This is because the term Chin encompasses a linguistically, and some argue ethnically, heterogeneous population, divided among a large number of tribal groups. There are believed to be 63 Chin sub-tribal groups and 42 distinct dialects (Gravers, 2007: 4). Historically, the category of 'Chin' has developed in contrast to the Bamar, or Burman, people, who are the dominant ethnic group in Myanmar. Chin State is the only state of Myanmar with a majority Christian population. American missionaries began arriving in the Chin Hills in the late 19th century, converting

formerly animist tribes to Christianity. It is Christianity, Chin scholar Lian H. Sakhong (2007) argues, that forms the basis of a modern, unified, Chin identity.

Historically, the Chin tribes have resided in the mountain ranges in the country's west. This hilly region makes up the modern Chin State that borders India and Bangladesh. The Chin Hills are remote and the region has seen little development. Poor roads and the unforgiving terrain have meant that contact between the Chin hill tribes has been limited to such an extent that language varies significantly between neighbouring villages. Throughout the 20th century, the majority of the Chin practised shifting cultivation, producing rice, corn, millet and sweet potatoes. Agricultural work was performed entirely by hand; the steep land does not allow the use of animals or machinery. Farming in this environment was difficult and seldom yielded any surplus (Leach, 1960: 52).

Between 1962 and 2011, Myanmar was ruled by successive military regimes. Under military rule, the Chin, along with the country's other ethnic minorities, faced targeted persecution. The human rights abuses perpetrated by Myanmar's military government were wide-ranging and systematic. Members of Myanmar's ethnic minorities were subjected to forced labour, conscription, extortion, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, physical and sexual violence, torture, religious repression, restriction of speech, assembly and movement, and destruction and appropriation of homes, property and villages (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Such persistent abuse and repression has led large numbers of ethnic minority members to escape to India, Thailand and Malaysia.

Older people, children and the sick were not exempt from conscription for forced labour (Human Rights Watch, 2009: 42). Older people who remained alone in Myanmar were especially vulnerable to the demands of the military when there were no younger members of the household to contribute manpower. Older villagers also faced harassment from the military in an attempt to seek the return of their children whence they had fled. The arduous path from Myanmar to Malaysia prevented many older people from undertaking the journey along with their families. The migration out of Chin State is reflected in the composition of villages in recent years; in some villages only the very young and the very old remain (Fink, 2009: 144). Older men and women in Malaysia told of the tiring route overland through Thailand to reach Malaysia, requiring days of travel on foot through thick jungle. Pi Thanmawii and her family recounted their 2010 trek through the borderlands with Thai guides. Pi Thanmawii, then 74, struggled to stay with the group in the dark, her vision affected by cataracts. When she strayed off the path, one of the Thai guides struck her across the face. The hardship of the journey was still clear in Pi Thanmawii's mind some six years later. 'I felt like I would die on the journey [to Malaysia]', she said simply.

### Research setting and methodology

The narratives that form the core of this article were recorded in Kuala Lumpur during one year of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by the authors in Malaysia. This research forms a small part of a large-scale project on refugee life in Malaysia conducted by the second author. The methodology employed to

undertake research with older refugees combined ethnographic and oral history methods. The themes discussed here are those that emerged across a range of interviews, and which narrators returned to time and again during the months we spent visiting them.

Older refugees in Kuala Lumpur are difficult to locate, older women even more so. They seldom presented at community meetings or community organisations, but rather relied upon their children to relay important news. A multi-pronged approach eventually led us to the doors of older refugees, who in turn led us to the homes of their friends and neighbours. We sought out older community members through ethnic community organisations, church congregations and our existing networks in the Malaysian refugee community. Pi Thanmawii, a particularly active older woman, was able to refer us to half a dozen other older Chin women in her neighbourhood. All those who we approached agreed to be interviewed. This article focuses on the narratives of six older Chin women, whose experiences of life in Myanmar and Malaysia are broadly representative of the range of accounts recorded. The women were each interviewed multiple times and the first author continued to visit the women to observe their daily activities.

The initial interview with each participant took the form of an oral history interview. Each interview began with the simple invitation for the interviewee to 'tell us about your life'. Guiding questions prompted interviewees to remember their lives in Myanmar and narrate their everyday life in Malaysia. Decades of life under an oppressive regime meant that storytelling did not come easily. At the end of the interview, narrators were invited to sketch a pictorial representation of their life in Malaysia. This sketch was an important tool in drawing out the everyday activities of the women. Women who had claimed to stay at home all day, every day, drew detailed depictions of their neighbourhood and the people within it. The interviews were conducted by the first author with the assistance of two female research assistants, each of whom spoke a number of Chin dialects. The research assistants employed were both refugee women who worked in health care, one in the refugee community and the other in a private practice. These research assistants were selected to assist in this particular interviewing task for their interpersonal skills and rapport with older people.

Interviews were conducted in the homes of narrators at a time of their choosing; this was usually the late afternoon or early evening as is the customary time for idle conversation in Chin culture. In Myanmar, villagers gather together after the day's work to share stories. Although they no longer live in rural Myanmar, older people's use of time often remained the same. All those interviewed lived in low-cost apartments among migrant workers, often just blocks away from luxury apartments, tourist bars and high-end shopping malls. Living conditions varied: those who lived in less sought-after areas, further from the tourist cluster of restaurants, bars and shops, and thus employment, were able to afford a one- or two-bedroom apartment. Refugee families who lived close to centres of employment, and as such did not risk traversing the city without documents, rented small rooms in apartments partitioned by plywood for maximum occupancy. These rooms were often less than two square metres. Kitchen and bathroom facilities in such apartments were shared by up to ten families.

The older women interviewed identified as belonging to the Mizo, Falam and Zomi tribes. Each originated from Chin State in Myanmar. These women represent the many ordinary villagers whose lives have been disrupted by decades of military rule. Five of the women were small-scale farmers in Myanmar and one had served as a missionary. At the time of interview in 2016, the length of time the women had been in Malaysia ranged from one to six years. The women were aged between 56 and 79 years old and each lived with family members in Kuala Lumpur (Table 1). The six women were Christian, representing a number of evangelical denominations including Baptist, Methodist and Jehovah's Witness. Of the women, three were registered with the UNHCR and had been found to be refugees, two were registered as asylum seekers but had not had their cases assessed, and one was unregistered. Those who had been processed had all come to the attention of the UNHCR through medical crisis. For the purposes of this article, old age was self-defined. Each of the women identified herself as a 'grandmother', whether or not she had biological grandchildren.

The oral history interviews conducted with each of the women form the core data source for this paper. This approach, which considers the experiences of older people in their homeland, anchors the experience of displacement to an individual's life history. Each interview was transcribed and the translation cross-checked for accuracy. The sketches the women drew during the initial interview were an important point of reference for thinking about older people's social and geographic connections. These sketches provide a visual illustration of the women's everyday lives in Malaysia, depicting the people and places they viewed as most significant to their daily life. Some of these sketches are rich depictions of urban life, others are telling in the lack of people or places depicted, suggesting a lonely life in Malaysia. These sketches also revealed people and places in the women's lives that they had not deemed important enough to mention. 'What is this here?', the second author is heard asking Pi Nu Nu Than upon inspecting her sketch. 'Oh, that there? (Pi Nu Nu Than laughing) Do you like my drawing? That is me. I am selling vegetables. See there, that is the vegetables that Myanmar people like to eat'. Pi Nu Nu Than had not mentioned her occasional role as an intermediary – selling the produce of refugees who farmed plots outside the city for a small profit – because she did not really consider this to be work. The field notes of the first author who continued to visit and observe the women undertaking their daily routines provided significant detail that complemented the interview data.

The authors undertook a thematic analysis of the transcribed life narratives to identify key factors that shaped the experience of displacement for older Chin women. This work was undertaken alongside research on the lives of younger refugees in Malaysia, allowing the researchers to identify elements of the narrated experiences that were particular to the lives of older refugees. The dominant themes that emerged in the women's storytelling – health, relationships, place and gardening – provide critical insight into ageing in displacement. These features of the women's narrated lives in Malaysia are examined in the context of the norms of ageing in Chin culture in order to understand the continuity and change experienced in displacement.



**Table 1.** Details of the Chin women interviewed

Name	Age	Year of arrival in Malaysia	Status with UNHCR
Thanmawii	79	2010	Registered
Nein Sung	65	2011	Registered
Niang Sian	66	2015	Unregistered
Ngun Hlei	56	2010	Registered as asylum seeker
Ruat Nu	70	2010	Registered
Nu Nu Than	66	2012	Registered as asylum seeker

Note: UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

### Cultural norms of ageing in Chin culture

Old age is culturally constructed; it is thus necessary to think about how this life-stage is defined in Chin culture. A consideration of the characteristics and expectations of old age among the Chin provides a lens through which to examine the experience of becoming an older refugee in Malaysia. In the developed world age is understood and measured on a linear trajectory. The age of 65 is the widely accepted indicator of old age. The UNHCR defines old age as above 60 years old, but such a marker fails to take into account the varying measures of age across cultures. For many refugee communities, 50 or 55 years and above may be more appropriate. Life expectancy in Myanmar is among the lowest in the region and life expectancy in rural areas is even lower. Chin State is one of the least developed states of Myanmar, with high rates of poverty and poor access to health care. Under these conditions, people aged over 50 may be considered elders in the community. For the women who are the subject of this paper, their lifetime of agricultural labour, lack of medical care and displacement meant that 50 years old was considered an advanced age in their communities.

The transition to the role of elder in Chin society is dependent upon an individual's children. Once one's children are married and the eldest son assumes economic responsibility for the household, his parents are considered retired, although they will still continue to contribute their labour. Old age, in traditional Chin culture, correlates with being 'taken care of' by one's children. According to this model, a Chin person may be considered to have transitioned to the role of elder in their early forties, an age that would be considered middle-age by Western concepts of ageing. Barbara Yee's (2009) work with South-East Asian elders in the United States of America (USA) similarly finds that the Hmong may retire at the age of 35, once their children are capable of taking economic responsibility for the family. It was a surprise to them, Yee writes, that they were not considered elderly in the USA (2009: 3).

The experience of displacement represents a disruption in the lifecourse that necessitates a review, and revision, of expectations for the future. The experience of becoming a refugee, Becker and Beyene note, may affect how an individual understands the ageing process (1999: 296). Each of the older Chin women interviewed had expected that her final days would be lived in the same hills where her



life began. Their expectations of advanced age and death were modelled on their parents' and grandparents' experiences of ageing. Pi Ruat Nu's narrative of life as an older refugee in Kuala Lumpur emphasised the incredibility of ageing in any place other than the Chin Hills: 'I did not know any other place. We lived in a *very* small village in the mountains. We loved our place and we loved each other. That is what we knew.' In Malaysia, Pi Ruat Nu has been forced to reimagine what old age as an urban refugee might mean, including death. 'Sometimes, I feel like I might die here', she sighed.

Displacement often forced older Chin refugees in Malaysia to reflect on their role as an elder. For women, some of their responsibilities remained the same despite their relocation, but others were transformed. A number of the women pointed out that in Myanmar they would have continued to work until death, but found that in Malaysia they are considered too old to perform heavy work. Being an older person has taken on a new meaning for them. While some older men can obtain employment in Malaysia, older women find employment only within their own communities. This is in contrast to Myanmar, where the women believed they would still be performing arduous physical labour. Pi Niang Sian asserted that she had expected to work in the fields until she died, as her mother had. 'In Myanmar we never stop working. My mother was 84 years old. She went to the field in the morning and in the evening she died.' Farming, of course, is an occupation with no prescribed retirement age. Displaced from their land, the women were presented with an unexpected opportunity in Malaysia for rest and leisure activities.

Narratives of older Chin women emphasise that old age in the Chin Hills is a shared experience. According to our interviewees, older people in Myanmar 'sit together', 'talk together', 'tell stories together' and 'share work'. The loss of a peer group in Malaysia was a keenly felt change in the everyday experience of ageing. Pi Zopuii lamented, 'I miss seeing others who are the same age as me, there is no one here who can share that with me.' Each of the women commented on the scarce opportunities to socialise with other older people.

## Health

Advancing age is often characterised by a decline in physical condition and cognitive function. The health needs of the older refugee women interviewed were varied and complex. Each of the women suffered from multiple complaints. Some conditions were age-related, others were the result of refugee living conditions in Malaysia and others still were the product of remote living conditions in Myanmar with no access to medical care. The conditions reported included stroke, diabetes, kidney failure, cataracts, urinary incontinence, arthritis, hypertension, cancer, tuberculosis, hepatitis, pneumonia, asthma and eczema. There were a number of barriers that prevented women from accessing treatment, including affordability, location of services and language. Most of the women accessed the two primary care clinics that are free to refugees in Kuala Lumpur, but were unable to afford secondary or tertiary care. Registered refugees in Malaysia are charged at 50 per cent of the rate for foreign citizens when they access government hospitals, a cost that remains prohibitive for many.

The medical care required to treat the chronic and life-threatening diseases of the aged is beyond the limited financial capacity of humanitarian organisations (Feldman, 2017: 44). Feldman points out that while humanitarian actors 'are concerned about the lives of the elderly ... many see the services that cohort needs as belonging to a different care regime' (2017: 44). Assistance for age-related illnesses in Kuala Lumpur often came from the community, rather than humanitarian providers. An urban refugee setting offers the possibility of aid outside the humanitarian framework. Pi Nein Sung was just one interviewee who received help directly from the community. After a stroke, she received low-cost physical therapy from a suburban rehabilitation clinic. The organisation made a discretionary decision to treat her at a subsidised rate reserved for Malaysian senior citizens, although she was not eligible as a non-citizen. A neighbour whose own mother had been treated at the clinic acted as an intermediary to help Pi Nein Sung access assistance. Such strategies allow older refugees to access treatment that is beyond the parameters of primary care. The rehabilitation Pi Nein Sung received was critical to her quality of life and her partial recovery allowed her to continue to carry out her daily activities independently.

Aside from physical health problems, older women raised concerns about mental health and wellbeing, though none had received any professional assistance in this area. Older women reported feeling depressed, sad, lonely, hopeless, worried and confused during their time in Malaysia. Pi Ruat Nu felt the loneliness acutely. During the day, the other residents of her shared apartment were at work and did not return until late in the evening. Those who worked in the evenings were asleep during the day. When her grandson returned home from the refugee school he attended, she asked him to stay at home to keep her company. There were very few older people from her community in Malaysia, and none who lived nearby. Even for those who enjoyed more social connections, the experience of refugee life in Malaysia took a mental toll. Pi Nein Sung described the range of emotions she felt about her life in a place she could not call home. 'Sometimes I am sad and I cry. Sometimes I am joyous, I throw my hands in the air and I cry out "Hallelujah!"', she laughed. Religion provided an important solace for the women in displacement. Although Malaysia is a majority Muslim country, the women were able to practise their religion freely. 'I feel closer to God here in Malaysia', asserted Pi Niang Sian, 'Even though the people here are Muslim, they do not bother us Christians.' A number of the women reported that reading the bible reduced their stress.

Older refugees are at greater risk of social isolation in Malaysia than their younger counterparts. Older women rarely had any proficiency in English or Malay. Moreover, employment held by older women was likely to be within the home, which meant there were few opportunities to learn the local language. Pi Ruat Nu lamented, 'It is very difficult without other people of the same age to socialise with. I feel so lonely; I just sleep all the time. So my daughter bought me a small television so I can watch Korean soaps in Mizo language.' Older people were also less likely to engage with the UNHCR registration process or humanitarian programmes and activities. Among the older Chin women interviewed, none were engaged in UNHCR-sponsored livelihood activities, though they were aware of the initiatives. A number of women had attended English or sewing classes

once or twice but had not continued. Pi Nein Sung pointed out that the sewing group she had attended was scheduled at 1 pm, a time of day that she found much too hot to walk to the class.

### Ageing without a place

Stories of dislocation in older refugees' narratives poignantly capture a loss of place. Existing literature has examined the lives of refugees 'ageing out of place' from a variety of perspectives. Research to date, however, has primarily been conducted with refugees who have been resettled and thus have a permanent place in which to age. Refugees in Kuala Lumpur may be viewed as ageing in limbo, or ageing without a place. Ageing in place in the broad context of displacement 'implies growing old in a familiar home, environment, or community that offers support, meaning, and security to elderly adults' (Karunakara, 2015: 2). Pi Nu Nu Than elucidated the disparity between ageing in Myanmar and Malaysia: '[Myanmar] is the place of our childhood. Our life was there. It is where our community is. We know all the people there. Only because of the army we had to come here.' A common refrain among older women seeking to convey their experience of life in Malaysia was: 'this is not *our* place'. The experience of everyday life, whether good or bad, was peripheral because this place was not their own. 'Our place' in this context, does not simply refer to the physical environment, but to a neighbourhood with friends, a home anchored by memories and a familiar landscape.

Pi Ruat Nu, a widowed Jehovah's Witness, had been reluctant to leave her land in Myanmar. Her only child, a daughter, had fled in 2007 after she was ordered by the military to undertake forced labour and a soldier attempted to rape her. Pi Ruat Nu was left to care for her young grandson alone. She had no desire to leave her home, but the military began to harass her, ordering that she force her daughter to return. When her daughter did not return, the army began to threaten that Pi Ruat Nu would be imprisoned and she began to worry. If she were sent to prison, who would care for her grandson? 'I had this small boy and the army was making life unbearable, so I had no choice but to come to Malaysia', she explained. So, in 2010 she made arrangements for an agent to smuggle her and her then six-year-old grandson into Malaysia. Leaving her homeland at an old age represented a significant disturbance in Pi Ruat Nu's life narrative. She explained, 'For us old people, we are like old trees fixed to our place. Our roots are deep, strong.'

Studies of older refugees and migrants ageing out of place find that the experience is often characterised by a reversal of roles, economic dependence on children, loss of status as a respected elder, feeling uncared for, loss of authority, intergenerational conflict, lack of social support, isolation and loneliness (Becker and Beyene, 1999; Choudhry, 2001; Kalavar and Van Willigen, 2005; Yee, 2009; Dubus, 2010). The narratives of older Chin women in Kuala Lumpur did not reflect these findings. Instead, the women's stories illustrated a range of strategies and tactics that enabled them to survive and make a place for themselves in transit. The South-East Asian context – from Myanmar to Malaysia – does provide a semblance of continuity of culture, but the shift from rural to urban represents a dramatic geographic and cultural change.

Older women in Myanmar played a significant role in providing care for their grandchildren. Pi Niang Sian outlined the role of older women in Chin society with frankness: 'If you are confined to bed, then, *maybe* you will not have to do anything. But if you can eat and you can stand, then you will be looking after grandchildren.' Older women continued to provide care for children in Malaysia, though the role was altered. In Malaysia, where older women in the Chin community were fewer and young people were engaged in wage labour, older women were able to monetise their time. In a setting where many younger refugees work 12 hours a day, six days a week, the time of an older person is extremely valuable. Pi Zopuii, Pi Ngun Hlei and Pi Nu Nu Than each cared for children who lived in their buildings. Pi Zopuii cared for three small children six days per week, making available the labour of two mothers who were able to engage in paid employment as a result. She received a small wage from the mothers, 'some pocket money', as she called it. Payment for child care was commonly 10 Malaysian Ringgit (US \$2.30) per day.

Older Chin women usually provided child care for families known to them through kin, clan or village networks. Pi Nu Nu Than lived with her son and daughter-in-law who did not have children. She cared for her neighbours' baby 12 hours a day, six days a week while they worked. The infant's mother and Pi Nu Nu Than shared the same natal village. She received 200 Malaysian Ringgit per month (approximately US \$45). The organisation of the Chin population in Malaysia facilitates such child-care arrangements. Chin communities in Kuala Lumpur have reconstructed their villages within an urban jungle, at least superficially. There exist apartment buildings inhabited almost entirely by Chin, all linked through intricate village and kin networks. These villages, reconstructed in transit, lack the stability of an authentic village. Frequent arrivals and departures remind residents of the temporariness of their Malaysian refuge. Nevertheless, within these quasi-Chin villages, older women's roles appear to be maintained. Pi Nu Nu Than is the most senior Chin resident in her apartment building. 'The other people who live around here they pay me respect because I am the eldest here', she tells us matter-of-factly.

Even in the case where an older person had ostensibly joined their children because they required care, they played a role in providing care. Pi Nein Sung, who suffered multiple health problems, and did not have any grandchildren, served as a *de facto* mother and grandmother to other young refugee women and children in the apartment complex. During our initial interview, a number of young women visited the apartment seeking her out. Pi Nein Sung's neighbour, a Chin woman aged in her twenties, joined us as we chatted on the stairway after our interview. '[Pi Nein Sung] is like a mother for me here, because my mother is in Myanmar', she explained. Pi Nein Sung often spent her evenings teaching the younger women to knit and leading them in bible study.

While the roles of elder women might be preserved within the domestic sphere, outside the home this was often not the case. Older Chin women believed that advanced age should bring them respect and deference in wider society. While Malaysian culture provided some continuity for Chin expectations, there was a conflict in Malaysia between the high status of older people and the low status of refugees. Pi Ruat Nu felt the loss of status as a respected elder acutely when she was

treated in a public hospital in Kuala Lumpur. '[Malaysians] look down on us so much', she explained. Pi Ruat Nu told of her anguish when a young nurse scolded her for not following instructions correctly. She had not understood the doctor's direction, given in English. 'I felt embarrassed, I felt ashamed', she told us, 'Sometimes I feel like we are not human here.'

Despite the lowly status assigned to refugees in Malaysia, narratives of everyday life recorded occasions where older women continued to assert their position as elders as they negotiated life in the city. When Pi Thanmawii travelled by public bus, she brazenly attempted to pay the reduced bus fare. In Malaysia, senior citizens (aged 60 and above) receive a 50 per cent discount on metropolitan bus routes. Pi Thanmawii did not attach this discount to citizenship but to advanced age and believed that it was her right as an elder to also receive discounted travel. She simply offered the driver the discounted fare price. If the driver demanded verification of pension status, Pi Thanmawii would grudgingly pay the full fare.

Friendships, even irregular ones, were significant to the lives of older women. Pi Thanmawii had formed friendships with a number of other older Chin women; most the result of chance encounters on her morning walk through the neighbourhood. During one of her walks the previous year, Pi Thanmawii met Pi Ngun Hlei, an older Chin woman who walked daily to reduce the symptoms of her arthritis. Recognising one another as compatriots, the two women regularly began to walk together. Pi Thanmawii laughed as she summed up the nature of the friendship between the two women: 'We walk, we laugh, we dance.' Narratives of resettled Cambodian refugees recorded by Becker and Beyene reveal friendship as a significant factor in older people's wellbeing (1999: 311–312). Pi Ngun Hlei explained the importance of her friendship with Pi Thanmawii. 'We don't have our family here, so we share our lives with each other. As old people we miss other old people around, we like talking about our young age, it is nice for us.' Reminiscence was an important feature of friendship among older people. On these walks, Pi Ngun Hlei explained, 'We talk about life in Myanmar, our life when we were young, life in Malaysia, our illnesses.' Friendships with other older people hold special significance in the context of displacement. Becker and Beyene write that 'Relationships with peers enable elders to maintain a sense of continuity in the midst of change' (1999: 311–312). This is underlined by the narratives of older Chin women who talked about their youth and life in Myanmar in the past when they came together. Such friendships play an important role in maintaining identity and reconstructing Chin notions of ageing among a community of elders.

Pi Thanmawii and Pi Ngun Hlei also felt part of a larger community of elders as they walked through the neighbourhood. They had become familiar faces to the older Chinese residents who also took the opportunity to exercise before the heat of the day made walking outdoors unbearable. Pi Thanmawii recounted how older Chinese spoke to her as she passed. She would pause, listen politely, smile and continue on her way. She did not know what they said, or in what language they were speaking. Nevertheless, these brief connections with other older people made an impression on her. Pi Nein Sung told of an older Chinese couple in her apartment block who looked in on her occasionally. The older woman regularly gave her second-hand clothing and furniture. Pi Nein Sung gave the Chinese

woman cuttings from her plants. Pi Nein Sung cried as she told us of the sorrow she feels that she will never meet her friends again in Myanmar.

### To plant something in the ground

The narratives of older Chin women reveal a strong connection to the land. Their narrative production of home, place and displacement evoke images of the landscape and its flora. Lehman characterises the Chin people's attachment to their land as a 'deep emotional association [with] the natural environment' (1963: 11). This characterisation is borne out in older women's narratives of displacement and life in a Malaysian metropolis. Pi Ruat Nu described the feeling of being away from her homeland as a kind of madness. Recalling her first days in Malaysia after leaving Myanmar five years prior, she remarked: 'I almost went crazy after leaving the hills. This place is so big.' The women's narratives demonstrate that making a place that resembled the landscape of home, within the relentless clamour of Kuala Lumpur, required land, even the smallest amount.

For 79-year-old Pi Thanmawii, home is a place 'where you can plant something in the ground'. Pi Thanmawii lived on the fifth floor of a former social housing complex. Malaysia, she explained, cannot be considered home. During our first interview I asked her why, after five years, she could not consider Malaysia even a temporary home. She raised herself suddenly from the cushion on the floor where she had been seated and conspiratorially took me by the arm. She led me to a bedroom window where on a small ledge outside she had fashioned a makeshift garden. In plastic pots, three *Aloe vera* plants and two citrus trees balanced outside the window, secured with twine so they would not topple to the ground below. She laughed at her own simple rebellion, asserting her presence by growing something in a place where she could not own any land. The plants, like Pi Thanmawii, could not take root in the ground, but were able to exist nonetheless.

Farming the land was important to the identity of the older Chin women interviewed. Anthropologist H.N.C. Stevenson, after spending time with Chin tribes in the first half of the 20th century, wrote that 'an understanding of what agriculture means to [the hill peoples] is essential to an understanding of their lives and characters' (1944: 36). Indeed, narratives of older Chin in the 21st century demonstrate that working the land is still fundamental to the maintenance of Chin identity. The wide, open-air walkway leading to Pi Nein Sung's apartment was crowded by the potted plants she propagated. Cultivating a garden was not simply a means of food production for older Chin women. The women spent their time planting and maintaining not only edible gardens, but also ornamental plants. Flowers reminded Pi Nein Sung of her garden in Myanmar. The Chin people, Lehman writes, 'tend to think of their country as a landscape of beautiful flowers' (1963: 11).

Gardening was an important therapeutic activity for a number of the Chin women. Airriess and Clawson (1994) have written of the market gardens established and maintained by older Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans. The gardens, they argue, serve to recreate a familiar landscape reminiscent of rural Vietnam. In addition to reproducing a familiar environment, such gardens, Airriess and Clawson show, also improve self-esteem because they require daily care and thus provide older people with 'a sense of responsibility, commitment, and



accomplishment' (1994: 19). The gardens improvised by Chin women in Kuala Lumpur serve a like purpose. For Pi Niang Sian gardening provided one of few reprieves from the mental anguish she felt in Malaysia. She was 66 years old when we met and she had been in Malaysia for one year. Her son-in-law had fled Myanmar in 2009, her daughter followed in 2012, and finally, in 2015 Pi Niang Sian had accompanied her five grandchildren to Malaysia to be reunited with their parents. The family lived in an isolated apartment complex on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Pi Niang Sian's daughter had sought permission from her Chinese boss – who lived in a freestanding house nearby – for her mother to work the unused land surrounding his home. Each morning, Pi Niang Sian woke early and walked to her plot to water and weed the garden. Visiting her garden provided her with relief from her stress, she explained. According to Pi Niang Sian, 'Life in Malaysia is like a prison. Not for my body – we are free to go around – but for my mind.' Stories of police raids and immigration detention frightened the grandmother, who was not registered with the UNHCR. As a result, she seldom went outside the apartment other than to tend her plot. If anyone knocked on the door during the day while she was alone in the apartment, she did not respond. Sometimes she joined her family and neighbours to take the bus to church on Sunday, but when we met she had recently ceased attending. Traversing the city made her anxious. She preferred, instead, to study her bible quietly at home.

The narratives of older refugees demonstrate that there are key differences in the refugee experience according to age. While the older women each told stories of extortion practices of local police, muggings carried out by local thugs, and arbitrary arrests and detention, none of the women had been the victim of these common occurrences. These were the experiences of their children, grandchildren and neighbours. Unlike many refugees, Pi Thanmawii was undaunted by the threats of her temporary place. She knew that her advanced age shielded her from the harassment and extortion that characterised the everyday lives of younger refugees in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>3</sup> She navigated the suburbs with relative ease; Pi Thanmawii's days were spent visiting other community members to study the bible, shopping at the local bazaar and knocking fruits from a cluster fig tree in the neighbourhood with a large stick. Those who showed visible signs of old age seemed to be invisible as they traversed the city. 'I am old, I have white hair, the police never check me. I have protection from God', laughed Pi Nu Nu Than who walked long distances to save money on bus fares. Pi Nein Sung's sketch of her life in Malaysia illustrated the route she took through the neighbourhood to deliver homemade preserves. She regularly prepared fermented and pickled mustard leaves that she sold to other Chin refugees. A younger neighbour accompanied her to criss-cross the neighbourhood to make deliveries to her customers. Pi Nein Sung's daughter worried because her mother, whose life had been lived almost entirely in the most isolated region of the Chin Hills, could not distinguish between police officers, traffic police and security guards in Malaysia. She implored her mother to slow down, to stay at home and rest. Instead, Pi Nein Sung placed her UNHCR card in a lanyard, fastened it around her neck as though it were an amulet and ventured out into the neighbourhood.



## Conclusion


There is a persistent tension in the recorded narratives of the older Chin women interviewed. Life in Malaysia offered religious freedom, a more modern life, a better diet, basic medical care and, unexpectedly for the women, more time for rest. Still, without a permanent place to put down roots, the women could not feel at home. Pi Niang Sian's effort to make sense of this contradiction was explicit in her narrative:

In Myanmar we had to work hard. Every day. Even under the hot sun. We came home exhausted. [In Malaysia] I do not have to work. I have nothing to do. I am staying at home. But I have no friend. I feel I am in a prison. I am not tired. My body is not tired. I can eat as I please. But my mind is not free.

Women's narratives demonstrate that leaving the land they have known intimately for a chaotic and modern city like Kuala Lumpur is an unsettling experience. The women have sought to recreate a familiar landscape, to make a place in a country where they have none, with varying degrees of success.

The narratives of the Chin women illustrate how older refugees produce resources and provide support in an urban refugee environment. For older women, there is some continuity in the role of elder from Myanmar to Malaysia. The contributions of older refugees in Malaysia range from practical assistance such as child care, domestic chores and food production to the less tangible undertakings of maintaining culture. Their narratives demonstrate the resilience of older women in protracted situations of limbo and the critical role they play as elders in their community. Yet the lack of tailored programmes and services for this unacknowledged population makes them both vulnerable and under-utilised. Livelihood projects and empowerment activities that do not take into account older people's limitations are unlikely to engage with this population effectively. Boyle writes that 'The stereotype of older people as a "burden" versus a "resource" seriously hinders opportunities to harness the contribution of an active older generation to development' (2011: 131). Indeed, understanding and acknowledging the strengths and capabilities of older persons would allow humanitarian providers to draw on these assets in assisting refugee communities.

The experiences of older Chin women are relevant to older refugees living in protracted refugee situations globally. The stories recounted, however, also point to the diverse ways in which individuals negotiate places of temporary refuge. Where some may be overwhelmed by despair, others boldly make a place for themselves. This article makes a modest contribution to knowing and understanding the lives of older refugees in Malaysia. Still, there remains much work to be done to address the void in older people's voices in refugee studies. As the world's population continues to age, older people will be increasingly represented in humanitarian crises. As such, it is critical that academic research adequately explores the ageing dimension of forced migration.

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## Notes

- 1 See e.g. Lemere and West (2011), an edited volume of accounts of persecuted ethnic minorities, recorded both in and outside Myanmar. The stories included from Malaysia are all from male narrators, and none of them is of an advanced age.
- 2 To maintain confidentiality of interviewees, all of whom at the time of writing remain in Malaysia awaiting resettlement, names have been changed and any identifiable descriptors removed. 'Pi' means grandmother and is the respectful way to address an older woman.
- 3 On the everyday lives of younger refugees in Malaysia, see Hoffstaedter (2014b).

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