



FRAMING THE TRANSITION

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INTRODUCTION

A documentary photo essay project

12 Burmese photographers 'frame' the transition in Myanmar: addressing some of the burning human rights issues confronting their country during this time of historic transition.

They give a powerfully intimate look at subjects as varied as migrant workers, rural poverty and inadequate education, land grabbing, environmental degradation, the lack of transitional justice, drug abuse, ethnic conflict, and LGBT rights. All stories told against the backdrop of a country trying to manage against the wave of economic globalization now pressing against its shores.

They show the persistent necessity of urgent change in Myanmar, a country beginning to emerge from its dark past.

Framing The Transition is the result of a workshop tutored by Czech/Canadian filmmaker Petr Lom and Dutch Photographer Dana Lixenberg. The project is produced by Corinne van Egeraat of ZIN Productions, with production manager Constant van Panhuys.



MY LAND IS NOT MY LAND

BO THET HTUN

Bo Thet Htun is cameraman and photographer from Magway region. His essay is about land grabbing in a village near his home.

Unlawful seizure of land remains extremely common in Myanmar, despite recent legal reforms. Villagers still report that local land offices are inaccessible, that officials refuse to register land, or fail to uphold rights against moneyed interests.

Bo's story is about U Tin Pyone and his wife Daw Mya, small landowners, whose land was confiscated in 2000 by the Ministry of Health in order to build a hospital and medical campus. Most of the land is still unused, but U Tin Pyone now has to rent the land from the government to farm it. In 2015, when he could no longer afford the rent, the Ministry simply fenced off the rest of his land. When he complained to local authorities, he says he was intimidated by the police and threatened with arrest.

For Bo the story is important, because "the majority - still around 70-80% of all Burmese are farmers today." And in this generation - U Tin Pyone is in his sixties - "it is still common to accept things the way they are." Bo wants to change that.



JADE MINE

LEAHCIM DU

Leahcim Du has recently begun a career in documentary photography. From Kachin State, in Northern Myanmar, he decided to return to his home state to document the desperate plight of jade miners.

His main character is thirty-year old Maung Bwar, from a middle class family who dreamt of wealth in the jade mines. Instead, like many, he has been caught in a trap of drug addiction and poverty. "Drugs, particularly heroin, is endemic here", he says. Drugs are everywhere here. The streets littered with empty syringes. A fix costs as little as one dollar. "Initially, many take it to help them cope with the long hours and hard work of mining. Then they get hooked, and soon they are mining just to make money for their next drug fix. That is Maung Bwar's story."

Leahcim Du is hopeful that the new government of Aung San Suu Kyi might be able to tackle both the jade mining industry and drug addiction in Myanmar. "But the subject is very complex," he says. "It is not just about stopping corruption and greed. It's also related to our civil war." For the ongoing civil war in Kachin State, in which thousands have died and more than a hundred thousand have been displaced since it flared up again in 2011, is funded on both sides by both the jade industry as well as the drug business.

Leahcim Du thinks that the fact that he was able to even take his photographs - something that would have been impossible even a year ago - is at least an indication that things might change in Myanmar. He says, "it is finally possible to show the world the injustice happening in my home state."



SEEKING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

LETYAR TUN

Letyar Tun is a former political prisoner. He spent nearly twenty years in prison, of which fourteen were years on death row, for his student activism against the regime. He was pardoned in the 2012 Presidential Amnesty.

Letyar was so inspired during the teaching seminars with which *Framing the Transition* began, that he decided to quit his job as a newspaper editor to dedicate himself to becoming a fulltime documentary photographer.

His photography essay is about the lack of transitional justice in Myanmar. There are thousands of people like Letyar in Myanmar – former political prisoners. Today they are forgotten, for until now, there have been very few official steps to recognize their past suffering – not even symbolically – nor to make their jailors accountable. The reigning political dialogue is of national reconciliation and looking forward.

Protesting against this historical amnesia, Letyar says, “our country has long been traumatised, we must give ourselves a long time to heal. We can forgive, but we can never forget.” And so he has decided to make a photography essay that is a living memorial, taking portraits of the surviving family members of those political prisoners who died in Myanmar’s prisons.



THE LONG WALK TO SCHOOL

NAI HONG SAR

Photojournalist Nai Hong Sar was born in Karen State in Eastern Myanmar. Because of the ongoing civil war against the Burmese regime, his family fled to Thailand when he was ten years old. As a Burmese refugee, he learned first hand about the difficulty of going to school. He returned to Myanmar in 2010.

For *Framing the Transition* he decided to focus on this subject, very close to his heart: education.

Today, Myanmar still spends the smallest percentage of its budget on education of any country in South East Asia - roughly 6% - at the same time that it spends about 25% of its budget on military spending.

“Education is one of the biggest problems we face in Myanmar,” he says. “One of the problems has been terrible mismanagement, the legacy of sixty years of misrule by the military.” As a result, access to education is difficult for many rural children, who have to walk miles and miles to get to school.

“That might sound tough,” he cautions, “but wait until the monsoon comes - which lasts four, sometimes five months in this country. When the roads are turned to mud, this walk often becomes impossible.”



COUNTRY GIRL -CITY GIRL

PYAW KYAW AUNG

Pyaw Kyaw Aung is a journalist from Myanmar's Delta region.

Those who live in the Delta are typically poor farmers, many of whom are now becoming urban migrant workers. Pyaw Kyaw Aung decided to follow one of these workers, 23-year-old Thaw Tar San.

Thaw Tar San is a seamstress in a Yangon garment factory where she is paid \$100 a month. She has worked there for four years. To make more money, she also works as a seamstress at home in the evening. She does not have enough money to buy her own sewing machine, so she rents it from a local owner for \$10 a month. With this extra work she earns another \$30 per month. She is able to save \$35 a month to send back home to her family. She lives in a dormitory that houses hundreds of girls like her, all migrant workers. For now she can afford the rent, "but things are becoming more and more expensive" she says, echoing the worry of many as the cost of living soar in Yangon.

Myanmar is still one of the few countries in the world with a predominantly rural population. But Thaw Tar San's generation is quickly changing this statistic.



THE MUSLIM FREE HOSPITAL

PYAW KYAW MYINT

Pyaw Kyaw Myint is a photographer and project manager for both *Framing the Transition* and the Yangon Photo Festival.

For his photo essay, he decided to focus on the Muslim Free Hospital in Yangon. Founded in 1937 as a small dispensary, it has grown into a 160 bed hospital that has as its main objective to help the poor, needy and sick without regard to caste, creed or color. The hospital is run on a purely voluntary basis and through voluntary contributions.

Pyaw Kyaw Myint's fiancée is a physician working at the hospital, which inspired him to take photographs there. He says, "I wanted to find a way to challenge the increasing polarisation I often find in my country when it comes to interfaith relations. Instead of intolerance, I wish more would focus on beautiful and inspiring things - like the Muslim Free Hospital."



PRIDE

RITA KHIN

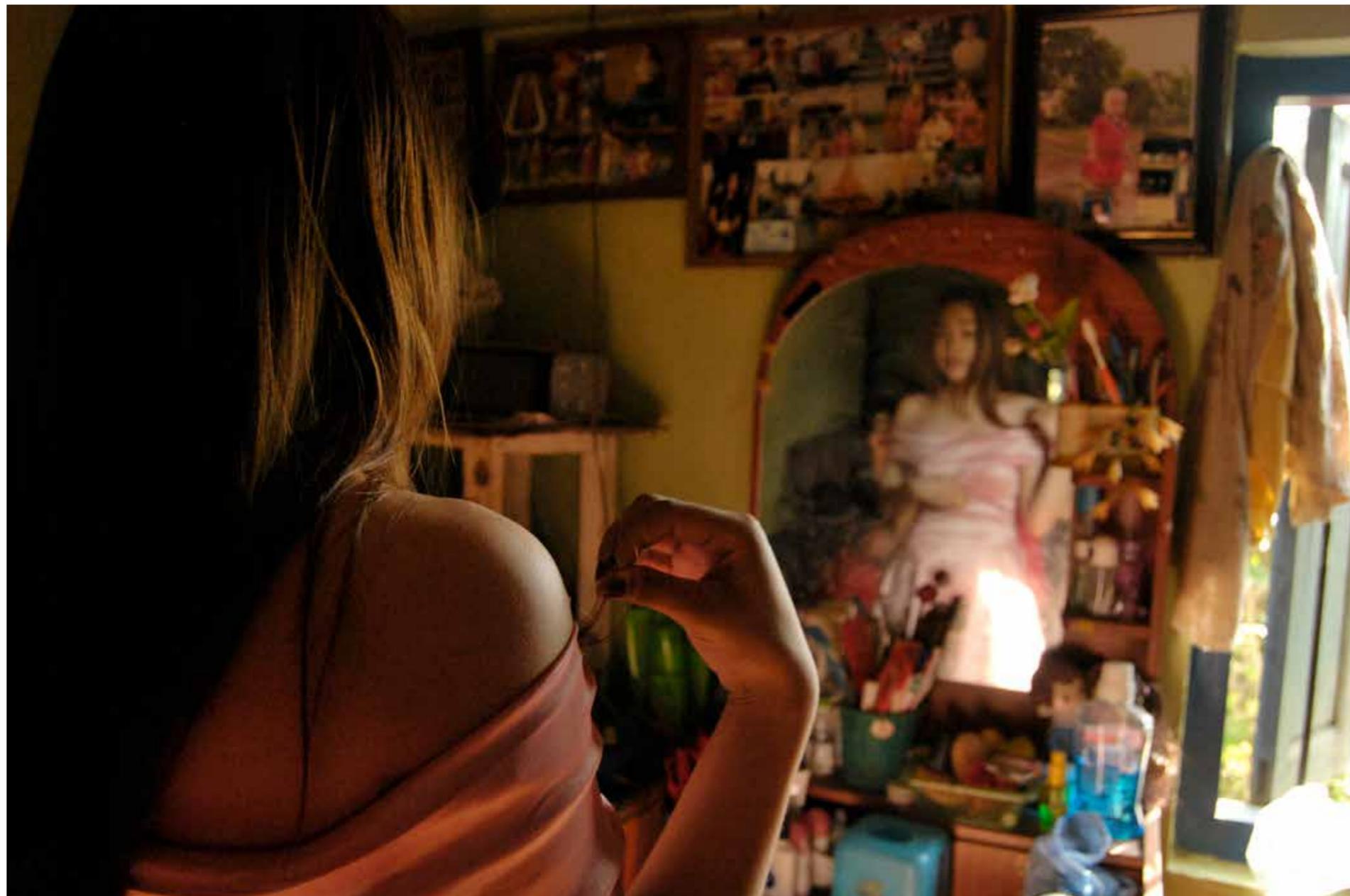
Rita Khin is a photographer based in Yangon. For *Framing the Transition*, Rita decided to do a series of portraits of transgender women from throughout Myanmar.

“Gay rights is a brand new topic of discussion here,” she explains, “so there is endless work to do.” Cultural and religious norms in Myanmar take a very dim view of gay rights. “Our Buddhism sees being gay as a form of karmic punishment. You are gay in this life because of your sins in past lives.” There is still a colonial-era law in Myanmar’s books that can punish same-sex acts with up to ten years in prison.

Now community organizations are proposing a new anti-discrimination law that would include specific provisions against discrimination on the grounds of gender expression or sexual orientation. Rita realizes change will not come overnight, “but if the transition in Myanmar is to be successful, it has to be based on an inclusive society.”

Rita speaks with a tremendous passion about LGBT rights, and justly so, for she recently came out as a lesbian. She concludes:

I hope the viewers of my portraits might find parts of me in them too. As one who is reluctant and sometimes scared, yet full of pride for her portrait subjects, and looking forward to be proud just like them for who she really is.



THE SECRET MY VILLAGE WOMEN SHARE

SHIN MYINT MO

Shin Myint Mo is an amateur photographer from Eastern Shan State in Burma, working for the NGO World Vision.

Her essay is about the plight of young women in border towns of Shan State, where half of all young women become prostitutes in Thailand to escape rural poverty. She met her subject – who remains anonymous in this photo essay for her own safety – while teaching grade school in a village near the Thai border. The girl was fourteen years old. “I thought of her as my little sister,” she says.

The girl, however, ran away from home to Thailand and became a prostitute. The girl recently returned to her village in Myanmar now, eight years later, as Thai policy towards illegal and under-age sex workers has become more strict. Upon her return, she threw a big party, inviting all the villagers, at her expense, as is expected – a sign of her new economic status in the village, returning home with substantial savings.

Shin decided to photograph the girl in order to tell a story about dignity and awareness. She says, “Everyone knows, and most have older relatives who had the same fate as sex workers, but the subject is taboo. It is a hard tradition to break. I hope to raise awareness with my photo essay.”



FIGHT FOR FOOD

THET HTOO

Thet Htoo is a fine art photographer and photojournalist based in Yangon. He is deeply concerned about industrial deforestation and lack of care for the environment, a worry that is entirely appropriate as according to the UN, Myanmar has the third-highest rate of deforestation in the world today.

His story is about how deforestation disrupts the relation between human beings and animals. In the Pegu mountain range, villages are now threatened by wild elephants, who need to forage closer to human habitation as logging destroys their natural habitat. The villagers put their hopes in superstition and elephant hunters who try to lure the animals away from their homes, and if that fails, to protect them with nets and handmade spears.

Many inhabitants have fled, and more than fifty people have died from the attacks in the last few years. Those remaining built tree houses to protect themselves from the elephants.

The Htoo says, "I hope my story makes us think long and hard about our attitudes towards nature. We have to change, for sooner or later, our survival will depend on it."



STREET KIDS HANGING OUT

THIHA LWIN

Thiha Lwin is a reporter and photojournalist living in the town of Pyay. He spent several months in 2015 following an eleven-year-old street kid, Khaing Win.

International sanctions have been removed from Myanmar, investment is pouring in and its economy is growing at the fastest pace in Asia. But this boom has a long way to go to help the most vulnerable in Myanmar's population, where more than 40% of all children suffer from chronic malnutrition and resultant stunting of growth.

Thiha did not want to make a conventional essay about poverty and victimhood. He says, "every human being has tremendous dignity. If you take photos of people as victims you'll miss that."

When the banks of the Irrawaddy overflowed in the summer of 2015, following one of the worst monsoon seasons in the country's history, Thiha Lwin found his story. Khaing Win and his friends volunteered with a local NGO providing disaster relief for the thousands who had lost their homes. They built rafts from plastic bottles and paddled to those left stranded in their homes, distributing food and water. "Children who have nothing, absolutely zero. And they end up showing that they have a bigger heart than anyone I know. Where did they learn that?" wonders our photographer, left in awe.



MY GLOBALIZATION GENERATION

THURAIN AUNG

Twenty-year old Thurain Aung is the youngest participant in *Framing the Transition*. For his photo essay for the project, he decided to look at his generation and how it is adapting to all what is new that is coming to his country. "I'm curious to see how people my age are reacting to globalization," he says. "My generation is thirsty for everything that is new and from abroad, but at the same time my country is a very conservative, traditional one."

And what is Thurain Aung's motivation for his photographs? "All this change around me is just super exciting," he explains. A remark not surprising coming from Thurain Aung, who likes to take his photographs on burst mode, shooting hundreds of images at a time, editing later. He concludes:

The most important thing I see in the portraits I took is not about the change, whether good or bad, it is about sharing cultures from different worlds in all respects. It is about listening to the other and understanding his or her own identity. It is about making this world smaller and humankind larger.



UNBROKEN FRIENDSHIP

YU YU MYINT THAN

Yu Yu is a former photojournalist who until recently worked for a Myanmar newspaper. She has now left her job to focus on independent documentary photography.

She has also worked as a schoolteacher in Meiktila, a city in central Myanmar infamous for ethnic violence. In 2013, violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims there, left dozens death and more than 12 000 displaced, primarily Muslims.

Yu Yu believes that religious intolerance is mainly a tool used by political powers to foment instability and maintain power by sowing division. In her experience as a schoolteacher, she saw few examples of intolerance. Instead, she was most impressed by interfaith friendship. And so she has made a series of double portraits, showing Buddhist and Muslim friends in Meiktila. She she says her goal is “to show the long-standing connection between the two religious communities.”



BO THET HTUN



LEAHCIM DU



LETYAR TUN



RITA KHIN



SHIN MYINT MO



THET HTOO



NAI HONG SAR



PYAW KYAW AUNG



PYAW KYAW MYINT



THIHA LWIN



THURAIN AUNG



YU YU MYINT THAN

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COLOFON

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