

Moreover, we would be able to network with other women's organization from Burma, as well as GOs and NGOs working with women locally, nationally and internationally.

At the same time, it was aimed to address the rights of suffering Shan refugees fleeing from Shan State into Thailand and to expose systematic human rights abuses committed by the Burma's military and its oppressive policies towards Shan people.

Through the discussions, we reached a consensus on the name of the organization, its objectives and our symbol, a stylized image of the "kenneri", dancing in a martial arts posture.

At the meeting we discussed working in different sectors such as education, health, fundraising and networking. We all agreed that we would work independently with no influence from any outside individuals, organizations and political groups, and that we should work as a team of equals. We decided that we should be community-oriented: prioritizing the best interests and safety of women and the community, remaining accountable to them at all levels.

Hence, approximately 40 Shan women active in Thailand, inside Shan State and along the Thai- Burma border successfully established The Shan Women's Action Network, also known as "SWAN".

Mission statement

SWAN is committed to strengthening gender equality and justice for all women of Burma in their struggle for social and political rights through community-based actions, research and advocacy among Shan communities and through networking with local, national and international women.

SWAN's Objectives

Promoting women's rights and the rights of children.

Opposing exploitation of violence against women and children.

Working together for peace and freedom in our society.

Empowering women for a better life.

Raising awareness to preserve natural resources and the environment.

Programs and Department

- Education Program
- Women's Empowerment Program
- Women's Well-being Program
- Information and Documentation Department



“SWAN”

The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) was established on 28th of March 1999 by an informal network of Shan women active along the Thai-Burma border responding to the needs of displaced Shan people with the aim of working together for social and political change in Burma.

SWAN is one of the founding members of the Women's League of Burma (WLB), an umbrella women's organization comprising 12 women's groups from Burma.



Background of SWAN

Shan Women's Action Network

Due to the mass forced relocation of approximately 300,000 Shan ethnic people from over 1,400 villages in central Shan State by Burma's military regime and its massacres and systematic rape used to subjugate and terrorize the Shan communities, hundreds of thousands of Shan people have been fleeing into Thailand. Many stayed in the Shan State Army controlled territory close to the Thai-Burma border. Unlike the Karen and Karenni refugees, the Thai government did not recognize the Shan people as refugees nor allow them to set up refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Therefore, members of the Shan community sought to establish much-needed services where possible. In order for their own survival as well as to support their family members, from very young to very old, the Shan refugees were forced to enter Thailand's unskilled labor market as migrant workers doing 3 D jobs – Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous. Many lack legal status in Thailand and are therefore extremely vulnerable to labor exploitation and abuse committed by unscrupulous people in Thailand.

Such horror, turmoil, painful experiences and exploitative situation have been the drive to form the Shan Women's Action Network, also known as SWAN

Before the formation of SWAN, Shan women in various locations on the border and in Thailand had already been active in assisting Shan displaced people through a number of projects including education, health and refugee relief in particular for women and children:

- In Bangkok women members of the Tai (Shan) Welfare Association, "Kher Thai Mai Soong" had been involved in HIV/AIDS education, health and welfare assistance, legal advice and emergency support to Shan migrants, and Shan girls trafficked to Thailand, and networking with other Thai and international NGOs to raise awareness about the issue of trafficking.

- In Chiang Mai, Shan women working for various organizations, such as the Migrant Assistance Program (currently known as MAP Foundation), the Burma Relief Centre (BRC) and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF), had been involved in assisting women through Shan and Thai literacy projects, health programs, production of health and life skills materials and human rights publications in Shan.

- Along the Shan-Thai border, in Northern Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai province, Shan women had organized Shan literacy classes and Shan cultural activities, and had published Shan literacy textbooks and posters.

Even though informal networks were in place it was believed that more could be achieved in addressing both practical and strategic needs of Shan women if a more concrete network among the various women could be formed.

On the morning of 28 March 1999, approximately 40 Shan women of different ages and backgrounds came together for a meeting. The aim was to form a Shan women's organization.

Some women had already been involved in giving emergency assistance to displaced Shan refugees. Some had been documenting and publicizing human rights abuses in Shan State, some working in the programs for Shan migrants and refugees, and others had been organizing Shan literacy classes and Shan cultural activities along the Thai-Shan border, and publishing Shan literacy textbooks and posters. Some had been involved in the Women's Association of Shan State (WASS), which had been set up six years earlier in a liberated Shan area, but which had been unable to operate independently and therefore became defunct when the Shan Mong Tai Army surrendered in early 1996.

All felt that by establishing a formal organization we could more effectively address not only the practical needs of displaced Shan women and children but also their strategic needs.