

**CHAPTER IV**  
**FINDINGS ON THE COPING STRATEGIES OF THE LEFT BEHIND**  
**CHILDREN**

This chapter describes how the left behind children cope with the situation of left behind by their parents. The conditions of the children in terms of access to education, parent's migration effect on the children's education, their health care and their social relations will be presented. The finding results were obtained from the in-depth interview with the left behind children, their caregivers and the key informants in the community. The children's perspectives on parents' migration derived from the Focus Group Discussion among the children will also be articulated.

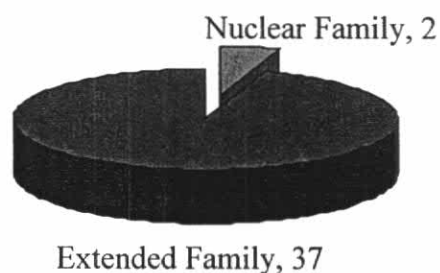
**4.1 Conditions of the Left Behinds**

From the survey findings of 100 households, 39 families were found as having one or both parents migrated to else where. There were 74 numbers left behind children in 39 households of which 38 are boys and 36 are girls. The age of the children left behind varies from one to seventeen years old. The children of the migrants are mainly left with their grandparents, or with the relatives such as aunts, who are outside the nuclear family but living in the same household. This is true especially when both parents are overseas. Children who are left with neighbours and monks can also be seen in this village.

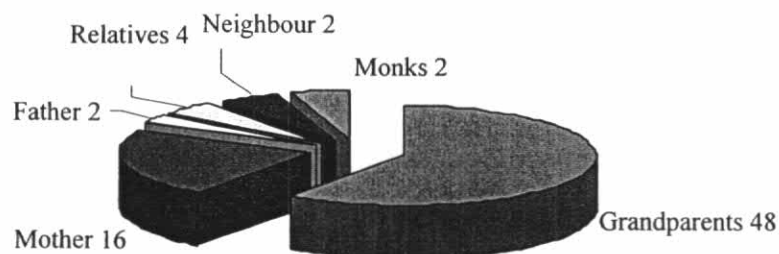
According to the field research, the majority of the left behind children lives in an extended family which parents willingly make a decision to separate from their children and in some case their infant child. The reason for this is that the migrant parents know that their children will be well looked after by those left at home. For children who are staying with their aunts, there is usually at least one of the grandparents at home so the aunt and the grandparent(s) have less burdens by sharing their duty in taking care of the children. In this way, children of migrants are relatively well in terms of physical and emotional well-beings. The first following pie

chart shows the segregation of extended or nuclear families in which the children are left behind with (Graph 10). The second pie chart (Graph 11) shows the number of children left behind with the main caregivers.

**Graph 10: No. of Extended and Nuclear Families in which the left behind children live in**



**Graph 11: No. of Children left with their Main Caregivers**



Among the interviewed caregivers, there were mothers and fathers who were left behind by their spouses. Most of them are living in the extended families. They expressed that they sometimes missed their spouses but they feel secure with the extended family members. One interviewed mother when asked about the way she copes with the situation in the absence of her husband, said that she felt sad and missed her husband. However, she mentioned that she had no worry or stress as she is staying with her parents who are the grandparents of her kids.

Among the left behind spouses, two are mothers of young kids who were migrants and have returned. When asked about their reason for returning home, they mentioned that they returned to get married with their husband whom they met in Thailand. Their husbands have now returned to work in Thailand. Both mothers have plans to re-migrate when their children are three years old. As farming is not an interesting job for them, they have nothing to do but migrate. As for the question of their feelings if they leave their child, both answered that although they do not want to leave the child, they have to do it because of the need in the family. They further mentioned that the child is safe to leave because they will be taken care of by their grandparents. A 23 years old return migrants whose husband is in Thailand and presently lives with her parents and one year old daughter stated as below.

*“I will return to Thailand once my daughter gets three years old. We sold out all the farm land because there is no one to work on farming. Although I don't want to leave my daughter, I have to do it because I have no job here.”* (Nan Hla, Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

Of the migrant's left behind families, the majority are staying with the migrants' extended family. If there are no extended family members to help them at home, the left behind spouses are the major actors for the family and they may feel the burdens of bringing up children alone. In the absence of husbands, wives were found not having difficulties or stress because of the presence of their parents (Children's grandparents). In that way, they did not feel lonely or depressed by being away from their spouses. They go about their daily routine without any anxiety. Elderly people's role in this situation are crucial for the left behinds in order for them to cope with the situation of their absent spouses. With physical and emotional support from them, the non-migrant spouses could overcome the situation of being left behind. This is the role of the extended family that helps the left behind members to cope with the situation of their separation.

Out of 74 left behind children, researchers selected 16 children for in-depth interviews. Those 16 children were thoroughly asked about their living condition with their caregivers and their feelings of being left behind by the parents. The following table is the profiles of interviewed children.

**Table 5: Profile of Interviewed Children**

Sr.	Name	M/F	Age	Education	Stay with	No. of Yr. parents left.	Visit Home
1.	Nan Cho	F	11	Grade 5	GM	F 9 yr, M 7 yr	Short visit
2.	Nan Chit	F	13	Grade 6	GP	M over 5, divorce	Visited once
3.	Nan Ni	F	15	Grade 9	Gm	F 5 yr, M 1 yr	No visit
4.	Nan Tin	F	14	Drop out (primary)	F	1 ½ yr	No visit
5.	Nan Khin	F	12	Grade 6	Aunt	M 9 yr, divorce	No visit,
6.	Nan Mu	F	14	Grade 8	GM	F 9 yr, M 6 yr	short visit
7.	Nan Aye	F	10	Grade 5	GM	both 7 year	Visited once
8.	Saw Win	M	9	Grade 4	GM	F 8 years, divorce	last visit – 6months ago
9.	Saw Ko	M	14	Grade 7	GM	Both 13 years	Short visit every 3 years
10.	Saw Lin	M	11	Grade 4	GP	Over 5 year	no visit
11.	Saw Aung	M	11	Grade 6	GP	Both 8 years	last year visit
12.	Saw Shar	M	8	Grade 3	GP	Both 3 years	No visit
13.	Saw Moe	M	13	Grade 5 Monastic	Monk	Both 10 years	short visit twice
14.	Saw Dine	M	9	Drop out, monastic	Monk	F 7 yrs, M 6 yrs	Visited once
15.	Saw Kyaw	M	9	Grade 3	GM	Both 6 years	No visit
16.	Saw Min	M	16	Drop out (primary)	Father	Over 1 year	No visit

## 4.2 Children's Education in the Researched Community

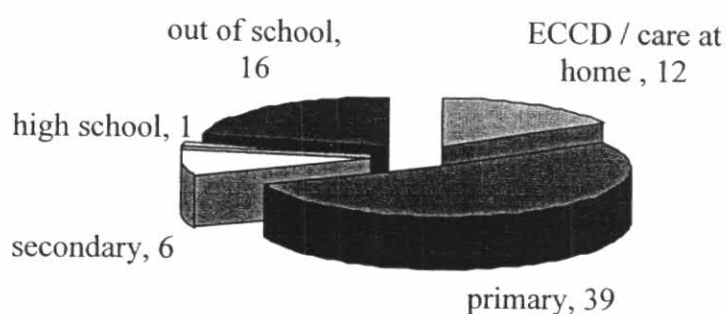
### 4.2.1 Description of Education in the Community

There is one primary school in the community. Children are usually enrolled in the primary school once they reach their fifth birthday. Every year, students have to pay registration fees and others fees such as fees for parents-teachers- association, sports and special events, and funds for the school. This school year (2007-2008), there was a new regulation from the Ministry of Education that primary school students do not need to pay the registration fees, except the fees for the texts and exercise books. This is the government's promotion so that every child can enrol in primary school.

According to the field research, children enjoy attending school because the school is in the village, and it is easy to reach within a few minutes. Although school starts at 9:30 a.m., children are already in school by 8:00 a.m. to play. They are happy to go to school because they can meet many friends and enjoy various kinds of games. Since the school is near and children can return home for lunch, there is no burden for the caregivers especially the grandparents to get up early to prepare a lunch box for the children. According to the interviewed teachers, the majority of children regularly attend the school except when they are sick. However, children do not have opportunity to continue their study in the higher level once they have completed primary school as there is no secondary and high school available in the village.

### 4.2.2 Education of the Left Behind Children

**Graph 12: Education Level of left behind children**



Among 74 left behind children in the surveyed group, 39 were enrolled in the primary school, 6 in secondary school; one in high school, and 12 either went to Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centre or were looked after at home (this is because the ECCD centre has just been opened and the caregivers were still in that space of time trying to get their kids go to the ECCD centre) and 16 are out of school. The majority of these left-behind children are children who had both parents migrate and they have been looked after by their grandparents, particularly grandmothers.

As per the information from the headmistress of the primary school, children rarely drop out from this primary level as lessons are easy to follow and school is also easy to reach. Only three or four children dropped out last year due to the children's lack of interest in learning. There was no case of children dropping out due to lack of financial support because school fees at the primary level are affordable. Assigned teachers in the village are also available for the students in the evening to do homework. This is a good practice for the students as a majority at their homes such as grandparents and others family members, have a low education level and could not support the children in the school work.

In terms of school performance, both the interviewed teachers mentioned that they found no difference between children of migrants and non-migrants. All students can follow the lessons and perform quite well in school. Among the interviewed children, no one has been failed in their grade, except one child now in grade eight who mentioned that he failed once while he was in grade one because he was afraid of the non-Kayin (Karen) speaking teacher. Most of the children finished grade five which is the last grade in the primary level. However, not all children who passed grade five enrolled in secondary school. According to the grade five teacher, for the 2006-2007 school year, there were 24 children who passed grade five and finished primary level. Out of 24 children, there are 11 children enrolled in grade six in secondary school. One of the reasons to explain this is that the lack of secondary school in the village and the difficulty to travel to nearby village have discouraged the children to enrol in the secondary school.

Since the secondary school is in the adjacent village, in order to get to school on time, the children and caregivers have to get up early to prepare a lunch box and do other necessary personal tasks. For the children especially, those who live with grandparents, their grandmothers have to prepare it for them. In some cases, the grandmothers are not able to do it due to their old age. Instead, the children have to do by themselves. As a consequence, some children lose their interest in school due to a double workload; study and work. A combination of the factors such as the distance of the school from the village, time for preparation before going to school and less interest in school lessons, make the children hesitate to continue their education although school fees are not a problem for them.

Migration of parents, in some cases, drives the children to leave the school. The caregivers' lack of ability to take care of household chores at home is one of the barriers that makes children stop going to school. Due to an absence of adults in the family unit, the domestic tasks become the responsibility of the children.

There was a case the migration of the parents affected the children's education. A twelve year old girl and her younger sister were left behind by both parents with the two grandparents who were over 70 years of age. She passed one grade after another every year and her younger sister was also doing fine. She is now in the sixth grade this year. Her school performance is good and she has never been failed. She has a good relationship with teachers and friends, both at school and in the community. Unfortunately, she is unable to attend school this year as she has to take care of her grandmother and do the household chores, as well as takes care of her younger sister because her grandmother cannot work. She broke her arm after a fall. Since the grandfather is too old and there is no extra person at home to do the house work as well as to look after the grandmother, the burden is on the twelve year old grand-daughter to shoulder. She has had to stop attending school. The teacher found out about the long absence and remarked that, if there were parents or other members at home, the girl will not need to interrupt her studies. She could continue her studies without any interference. Her education is being delayed as she has to look after her grandmother because there are no other family members in the family to do so. The

teacher worries that she will lose interest in her studies and will eventually drop out of school.

Not only the parents' migration but also that of other family members can impact the children's education in negative way. There was an incident in a family whose older children are in Thailand at the present time. Only the youngest daughter was left with the parents. Since there was no one to help the parents on the farm, she was the only one who could help them by preparing food for them while they are working. So, she was told by her parents to stop her school and help the parents. The interviewed grade 5 teacher of primary school tried to convince the parents to enrol their daughter and to find an alternative way to solve the problem but the effort did not succeeded. She expressed her view as below.

*“If there were her elder siblings in the family, she will be able to attend school this year and will not have to stop the school to help her parents in the field.”* (Daw Yi, Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

These are some of the consequences of migration on the child's education by either the parents or the family members. Parents and family members' migration creates a shortage of human resources in the families. Elderly people are not always capable of taking care of the children and doing household chores at the same time. Children can lose their interest in studying due to the double work load as well as delays in school continuation. This can lead them to drop out permanently. Half an education will impact the children by their joining the low paid job market when they grow up and eventually they may decide to migrate when they become adults.

#### **4.3 Children's Health**

In terms of physical security, this village has a clean environment. All households have their own latrines. In terms of obtaining clean water, there are many dug-wells in the village and the water is pure enough for daily use as well as drinking purposes. These wells are common wells with one well being used by four to five



families. For sanitation, the village members have habits of using latrines which is a good practice that contributes to a clean and healthy environment. No major health problem has yet occurred in the community except for minor illness such as common cold, influenza and fever. Sometimes, there is diarrhoea but this is due to taking inappropriate food or using unclean utensils.

Overall, all children of both migrant and non-migrant parents were found to be healthy. Only some cases of minor illness were found during the research period. Health status between children of migrants and non-migrants was found to be the same. Two caregivers: one grandmother and neighbour mentioned that the children often got sick such as fever and diarrhoea when they were young. Only one interviewed child was found to be underweight compared to others her age. However, she was smarter than other interviewed children of her age. Even though there is no medical doctor in the village, the midwife can provide essential care for the villagers.

#### **4.4 Relationship between the Caregivers and the Children**

The attitude of caregivers towards the children is important. Children are easily hurt either physically or psychologically. A positive attitude allows children to grow up and be able to adapt to their challenging environment. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, create problem children, children who are aggressive, unable to fit into the environment they are in. They acquire bad behaviours with which they grow up and which becomes the 'norm' for them.

The following information was drawn from the results of in-depth interview with the sixteen caregivers as how they cope with the situation of being left with the children and how they manage to overcome it.

The interviewed grandparents provide the best care for the children. They are concerned about their grandchildren and give full support as much as they can. With good care and support from the grandparents, the absence of the parents is easily accepted by the children. When asked about the differences between staying with

parents or grandparents, the children replied that they did not feel there was a difference and some children even stated that they would rather stay with their grandparents than with their parents.

Among the surveyed children, six were staying with their aunts, neighbours and headmistress. It was found that, these caregivers provided care for the children as if they were their own children. Some caregivers are single women who did not have any experience in looking after a child. Daily care such as cooking, bathing, feeding and clothing was done for younger children. When asked about remittance from the parents, remittance was received once in three or four months and it was mainly used for the children as the caregiver's family took care of the daily living expenses. The caregivers do not see or feel the burden of having to look after other's children. This makes the children feel warm and encourages them as though they were staying with their own parents. Under the good care of the caregivers, these children do not feel dejected and enjoy their lives as any other children do. A 58 year old grandmother who looks after two granddaughters addressed her care giving duty as follow.

*“I don't have time to go to the monastery once I start to look after my two grand daughters. They are cousins and they are left behind since they were under one year old. Now one is 6 years old and the younger one is 3.5 years old. Almost all my times is for them.”*

(Daw Mon, Interview, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

An unmarried woman who is taking care of her neighbour's two children and feel close to the children expressed her feeling as below.

*“If their parents take them back now, I will be very sad and become crazy of losing them.”* (Nan Thein, Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

Monks, although are not used to giving parental care as lay men are, but allow the children to stay freely at the monastery and make them feel like home. Children

stay together with young novices and learn monastic education together at noon time. They have to do work for the monks such as washing the robes and fetching water but the tasks are shared with other friends. Since monastery does not provide dinner for the dwellers, those children are allowed to go out and take dinner at their relatives' home. Although parents' remittances do not directly reach to the monk, children have no worry about staying in any monastery. The interviewed monk mentioned that the children's parents see that staying with monks is better than staying with the relatives because monks can provide close guidance while the relative cannot. Since those children do not receive parental care from the monk, they have a desire to return home and live in a family. However, they try to cope with their situation by learning from the monks and sharing the workload together with other children and young novices at the monastery. (Teaching Monk, Interview, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

The relationship between the caregivers and the children were found to be good. Caregivers act like surrogate parents by providing proper care and adequate support for the children in order to make them feel that they are not abandoned by their parents. Children can cope with the situation of absent parents under the good care of caregivers. Caregivers' attention makes them well adjusted with the situation and the children feel safe. A high level of positive interaction between the caregivers and the children results in emotional support towards the children.

#### **4.5 Children's Coping with the Situation of Parents' Migration**

The following information was taken from the results of face to face in-depth interviews with sixteen left behind children of migrant parents.

Overall, the interviewed children knew that their parents are working either in Thailand or Malaysia. Half of the interviewed children could answer in what sector their parents are working and the duration of their parents stay abroad. About the question of whether they were informed and consulted before the departure of their parents, only four adolescents replied that they were informed and explained about the reasons for departure. Most of the interviewed children were left by their parents

when they were about three or four years old or even one year old. Since they did not understand things very well at the time of their parents' departure, they were not able to give their opinions about their parent's migration. The average duration of working abroad of the adolescents' parents has been more than three years. As 15 years old girl whose parents are in Thailand and who is left with two grandmothers and one younger sister explained:

*"I knew in advance about my parents' leaving. They informed me. I didn't stop them because they said they will go for work to get money."* (Nan Ni, Interview, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

As migrants can communicate with their family through Thai telephones, parents often call their families and give information about their situation and make inquiries about their children's situation. Only the older children talked with their parents but not the younger children. However, their caregivers always inform them whenever their parents call. According to the grandparents, the children were happy when their parents called but did not talk to the parents. This could be for two reasons: they are not familiar with the device or they feel shy talking to their parents who left them when they were very young. As 11 years old girl who was left with two other siblings with her grandmother explained:

*"Before my parents left, they told me that they were going there to work for us. They did not mention any other things. They called once in two or three months. I don't know what to tell them so I let my grandmother talk."* (Nan Cho, Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

In general, the left behind children knew about the situation of their parents although not in detail. Children are not neglected or abandoned in the absence of their parents. Instead, they are well looked after, even better than when with their parents in some cases. Grandparents fulfil their needs as much as they can to the satisfaction of the children. They rarely scold and talk harshly to the children unless the children fail to obey them. The failure of obey the grandparents occurred due of the generation gap

between grandparents and the children especially when they turned to adolescent age (particularly boys). They do not want to follow all the words that the grandparents said. That makes difficulties for the grandparents when dealing with the children.

Most interviewed children mentioned that they are happy living with their grandparents because their parents used to beat them while the grandparents never did that to them. Hence, the children are very attached to the grandparents and do not even miss their parents. They have their role in the family as members and they are well counted. Like so, although they are away from their parents, they can well cope with the situation of being left behind and they do not feel discourage.

#### **4.6 Inspirations for the Left Behind Children in Relation to Parents' Migration**

According to the interviews, left behind children could not express much about their aims when asked about what they want to be in the future. Four interviewed boys answered that they will follow their parents' way – which means they will migrate and work abroad. The rest of the boys were interested in driving a car and farming work. A desire to become teachers or nurses was heard from girls. Two girls could not say what they want to be in future. It is important for the children to have an environment that they can emulate. Children see that adults earn money by migrating and working in Thailand while those who work in the village cannot. There are some migrants who are graduates but they have gone to Thailand to work as domestic and factory workers just like others who are semiliterate or illiterate. As a consequence, most children, especially boys, think that it is not worth studying as they finally will follow their parents in migrating to Thailand. As 14 years old boy left by both parents since he was one year old and at present stay with his grandmother argued:

*“When I become older, I will go ‘up hill’<sup>20</sup>, like my parents. At present, I will continue going to school at most up to grade 9. I like*

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<sup>20</sup> Going to Thailand is locally known as going “up hill”, “up mountain”

*going to school but don't want to study.*" (Saw Ko, Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

According to the field research, children have different views and aims. It depends on the gender and the guidance of the caregivers. Boys, in general, do not usually put much effort into their studies like the girls do, even though they are in the same situation. The children's desire to learn also depends on the education level of their caregivers. The literacy level of almost all the caregivers of left behind children in the study area are at the primary level, (in which case they are unable to convince the children about the importance of learning and acquiring a good education) except those who are left with the headmistress and the monks. This is one of the barriers that make children feel less interest in learning. Parental encouragement is the crucial factor in this case. If they stay together with their parents, they will get encouragement from the parents even if their parents' education level does not make a big difference from the caregivers. One of the community's key informants expressed that, care and support from the parents could not be compare with that of others. The headmistress stated her view that at least mother should be staying with the children. Parental care and support in terms of both physical and emotional kind is very encouraging and strengthening to the children.

The children's desire to learn is related to the parents' migration. In the research area, children saw that parents can earn money without having a higher education. As a consequence many children lost their enthusiasm to learn because they see that education will not make any profit for them. They could migrate like their parents and earn abroad without obtaining education. Children see their parents' migration as a role model and have the desire to do the same which can lead them to the unsecured future.

According to the research, the children imitate what they have seen and learned from their environment. For example, a nine years old boy mentioned about his aim to be a DKBA soldier. He saw DKBA soldiers moving around in the townships holding weapons and fearing nothing. This probably became the desire that

he wants to imitate. In fact, the child did not understand very well about the operation of this group although he mentioned his interest. Since he has to live with his grandmother who is illiterate, the grandmother could not guide him well. A grandmother's inability to guide the right way in an obstructive environment may lead children to have inappropriate visions and goals.

The research found that guidance from adults is essential for the children's future. What the children want to be, their goals and their aspirations, is dependent on what the children are familiar with. It depends on the environment that they live in. The children have uncertain aims if they have a less supporting environment in the family as well as the community. Since there is a lack of role models in the community, children can obtain a wrong perception for their future.

#### **4.7 Social Relations**

In Ta Won Phan Ya, the children seem to be happy as per the researcher's observation. There is a good relationship between the children and their caregivers, teachers, neighbours and friends. Children were able to adapt to the circumstances and they did not isolate themselves from others. The children were always asked to participate in the activities of school and the community.

According to the researcher's field observation, children build a good friendship between friends. They play together, go fishing together, talk together and share their experience together. When asked about what kind of topics they used to discuss in their day to day conversation, both girls and boys mentioned that they talked about actors, actresses and the movies. Most boys said they would talk about sports. The children mentioned that, they sometimes have arguments or minor clash between friends while playing and did not talk to each other for at most two days. However, this is only for a short period and after that, the condition resume as before.

In dealing with the school teachers, according to the field observation, children try to communicate with the teachers although they cannot understand and

speak in Myanmar well. For example, they want to be on good terms with the teachers and try to approach teachers by giving their flowers and greeting the teachers when the teachers arrive in school.

At the education sector, there is a festival called School's Family Day which is held annually at all levels of school. The festival starts with the ceremony of students paying respects to the teachers followed by entertainment. Children are encouraged to be involved in the entertainment and no one is discriminated against. All children participate actively in the ceremony by singing, dancing and playing dramas. According to the headmistress, children also actively participated in all activities held in the community.

In terms of participation in community activities, there are many activities in the community in which every household member including children can participate. For example, the community's common activities are festivals such as Kayin New Year, the water festival and the traditional ceremony (Hand Tied festival<sup>21</sup>). All three festivals are organized and held annually either at village level or township level. Religious festivals for the Buddhist such as Thadingyut<sup>22</sup> and Tazuang Daing<sup>23</sup> are also held annually. The community also has other activities which the members have to do as a combined work of the village. A 14 years old child who has a migrant mother mentioned that he is a member of the youth group. He always participates in the community combined activities such as working in a paddy field and clearing forest land as a group organized by the monk.

For the novitiation ceremony, which is occurred every three years, children themselves are the main actors. Since migrant workers have to pay the broker's fees for every trip, they normally come back every 3 years to host the ceremony and visit home. Children, especially boys, are expecting the ceremony because they can enjoy

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<sup>21</sup> The festival is annually held during the month of August, for children and young people to pay respect to the older people. Older people tie threads on the children's hands and give blessings in order for the children to be secure and free from unexpected danger for the whole year.

<sup>22</sup> lights festival that held during the full moon day to celebrate the end of Buddhist lent

<sup>23</sup> A festival held month after Thadingyut in which people offer yellow robes to Buddha images at the pagodas and monks at the monasteries



the event and are proud not only to become novices but also because they will now have their parents with them. For a child to be a novice, both parents have to be there physically. Thus, parents definitely have to come back if they want their son to become a novice.

There is also often a competition of traditional boxing included in every festival because traditional boxing is a famous competition game for the Kayins (Karens). Adults, youths and children who have an interest in boxing have chance to participate in the tournament. Before the actual competition for the adults starts, children of different ages are allowed to play in order to attract the audience as well as for the children to get familiar with the game. Children were taught this game since they were young and were encourage by the adults to take part in the game. The children's ability to be able to take part in this game is a pride for the parents.

Majority of the "left behind children" who were interviewed participated in every festival from their respective place. Girls involved in the traditional Kayin *Done*<sup>24</sup> dance and boys in playing boxing. They mentioned that they are happy when they have to participate in the event even if in a small part. All children of both migrants and non-migrants are encouraged to participate in every activity that they wish to be involved in.

Generally, the social relationship of the majority of those left behind children were seen as normal. They have confidence to a certain level because of the encouragement from their caregivers, except for the few numbers of children who seem to have a lack of confidence and were shy during interview. Children are not left out due to the absence of their parents. Instead, the caregivers and community encourage them to join the activities as much as they can. All children are equally treated in the community regardless of whether they are the children of migrants or non-migrants.

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<sup>24</sup> Kayin traditional dance and it includes in every festivals held in Kayin state

#### 4.8 Perspectives of Left Behind Children on Parents' Migration

The following information was taken from both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with children. A focus group of nine children of both migrant and non-migrant parents was applied in order to stimulate further discussion and encourage the children to share their opinion among friends who are having the same experience.

Generally, children are happy and they do not feel the difference of having to live only with their grandparents and not with their parents. The reasons behind is because their parents left them at a very young age and do not even remember when they were left behind. Some surveyed children were left behind by their parents at the age of 9 months or one year old where they could not recognize their parents. For example, a 14 years old boy, staying with his grandmother, whose parents have been working in Thailand for thirteen years said:

*“My parents left me since I was very young, so I do not feel attached to them. Last summer, they came back for my novitiation but I did not feel like I want to stay with them. I am happy staying with my grandmother.”*

*“When I start to understand things, I remembered my parents and wonder why they did not come back to me. I sometime dreamed about them and feel don't want to study when I miss them” (Saw Ko , Interview 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007)*

Physically, children seem to be happy with their present life. Nevertheless, when asked about their parents, most of the children stopped momentarily and pondered for a while before giving an answer. It appeared that the questions made them think of their parents. In fact, they miss their parents but being a child, they adapt to the present situation and forget things easily. Although they mentioned that they are happy with the present situation, most of the children still want their parents

to come back and stay with them as per their expression in the interview. A 9 year old boy staying with grandmother whose father left him since he was young and visited him last six months ago explained:

*“I miss my father. I want him to come back and stay with me. I was happy when he was with me.”* (Saw Win, Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

Other example was a sad experience when I interviewed a young girl of 13 years old. When asked about her migrant parents, tears welled in her eyes as she felt sad and almost sobbed out her answers. The same experience occurred with another 9 years old boy who was interviewed. He was left alone with his grandparents. His parents, elder and younger brothers are in Thailand at present. With tears in his eyes, he could not answer well about the questions as he at once remembered his parents and two brothers. He mentioned that it will be happier if he has a chance to stay together with his family. Although children realize the economic benefits because of their parents' migration, they inwardly yearn for the intimacy of family life. As a 14 year old boy whose parents are in Thailand and now live in monastery stated:

*“I have been staying in monastery for over one year and I start to feel bored and unhappy. I want to return home and live in a family but my parents are not here. I prefer more to stay with my mother.”*  
(Saw Moe, Interview, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

Among 16 interviewed children, only four children mentioned that they dreamed about their parents and the rest said “never”. Those who dreamed stated that they saw their parents return home to live with them. An interviewed grandmother who was left behind with three grandchildren mentioned that she saw her granddaughter playing with other friends by holding a toy on her ear as if she talked to her parents. This indicates that, although the children are happy and fine with their caregivers, they miss their parents in their mind.

Low self-confidence can be seen in some children. Most of the interviewed children avoid eye contact with the researcher. Some secondary school children, even they could understand the question in Myanmar language, the answers were in Kayin language through the interpreter. A remarkable difference between a child of migrant and non-migrant parent was found out while doing interview in the monastery. The behaviour of the boy whose parents are non-migrant is notably different from the two left behind. Appearance in their faces was not in the same mood. The two left behind children were appeared to be afraid of the stranger and non Karen speaking people whereas the non-left behind one was not. The latter tried to get familiar with the visitors and seemed to have full confidence in himself and not afraid of anyone. This could be argued that children of absent parents feel dejected compare to the children who has good back up of parents.

According to the interview, the majority of left behind children answered that their parents are working abroad in order to earn money and to host the novitiation ceremony for them. Their parents had explained them about the situation before their departure, particularly to the older children. Their caregivers also made them understood about the cause of migration of their parents. Thus, they are gratified and satisfied knowing that their parents have left them only to work for them.

Through the research's observation, however, these children also saw and felt that their parents' priority was "Money" that is drawing them to migrate. In FGD, children expressed that parent's value money more than their children. Children could not state much about their view and feelings but had a stance about their parents' migration. They mentioned that one of the reasons that wives follow their husbands is because they have less trust in their husbands and afraid that their husband will have affairs with other women. The interviewed children explained that they saw many cases of divorce between the couples due to long separation.

In general, majority of the interviewed children especially adolescents did not prefer parents' migration. They mentioned that parents' migration was not good for

the children and further stated that Parents' migration create difficulties for children. One child of non-migrant expressed his feeling as shown below:

*"I currently stay with my parents and will not let them migrate. If I stay with them, they help me doing the works. My grandparents are also at home and we enjoy our live of staying together."* (Saw Oo, Focus Group Discussion, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

Through the interviews, most of the left behind children want the physical and emotional support of their parents. Some younger children have expressed this in the interview that they miss their parents while sleeping at night. In FGD, some adolescent children stated that they miss their parents especially when they go on pilgrimages with other families and they see that those other non-migrant families do things together as families such as paying homage to the monks and worshipping at temples.

Throughout the field research, it can be argued that children, as seen physically, grow up under the good caregivers and did not seem to be suffer due to the absence of parents. However, according to the researcher's observation, they feel distant from their parents and lose the closeness to their parents. The avoidance to talk with the parents on telephone was one evidence. Parents become strangers to them which should not be happened between parents and children relationship. Due to the long separation from the parents, although children were seen enjoying their present lives with the caregivers, they mentally have a desire to get the tenderness of the parents.

#### **4.9 Community's Supports for the Left Behinds**

The under mentioned information was obtained from the in-depth interview with the key informants in the community such as the community leader, secretary of the village peace and development council, monk, teachers, midwife, social workers in the community and INGO workers.

The community has a custom of lending a helping hand to each other. The members have kin spirit to assist others when they are in need. To facilitate the migration process, migrants need to pay the broker fee which is quite an unaffordable amount for most of the families. The families who do not have money to support the migrant's trip borrow money from their neighbours with low interest rates of 5 per cent. So, the migration process is made convenient through this process. The lending money process was occurred not only during the initial migration process, but also when the left behind families need money in the absence of migrant remittances.

In the community, the neighbours provide support for the left behind families who need help such as looking after the children while the caregivers travel for a day trip to the town or help to repair and renovate houses. In this way, the caregivers, especially grandmothers, do not have much difficulty to take care of the children left behind except when the caregivers themselves are physically sick or injured for a certain period.

Since there is an ECCD centre in the community, caregivers gain more time to work by sending younger children to the centre. This centre benefits both the children and the caregivers. Children have an opportunity to learn many things before they enter kindergarten and will be well prepared for the early years in the primary schools. By sending children to the ECCD centre, children have a safe learning environment, improve their social skills and have good hygiene practices while the caregivers get extra time to do other things such as household chores or participate in social works in the community.

For the children who were born in Thailand and then sent back to the village, the midwife prepared birth certificates for them although they are not originally born in Myanmar. By having a birth certificate, the children are entitled to immunization, access to education and health facilities and citizenship. Normally, only children who are born in Myanmar territory receive a birth certificate. As for the children who have not got any birth certificate, they will find difficulty in getting the National

Registration Card (NRC) when they grown up. Those lack a NRC are not entitled to Myanmar citizen and they could become stateless. The community role in this part is vital and important for the children as it affects their future.

Throughout the field observation, the study found the existence of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in the community such as community-based youth group, social welfare group, religious groups. The roles of those organizations are to manage and facilitate the religious and social ceremonies and festivals held in the community. They also have to take part in the leading role a member's funeral occurs. Those groups are always available to provide assistance to the left behind families and children as and when necessary. International Non-Governmental Organisation – Save the Children – is working in this community in three sectors; Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), HIV/AIDS and Child Protection. The organisation is implementing the activities in collaboration with the community-based youth and social welfare groups. It also works on repatriation, return and reintegration of trafficked victims especially children and young people. The availability of the support organizations in the community as mentioned above have provided opportunities for the left behind families to seek assistants when they need. Therefore, it can be argued that by having a warm environment and supportive mechanisms in the community, the left behinds may be able to adapt to the situation without much difficulties.

Throughout the field research, the study found out that the children and the families were seen well adaptable to the situation of being left behind and they no longer thought that parents' migration was a big issue in the family. It appeared that they could easily cope with the situation with the availability of the supports. According to the research, the left behinds did not realize much about the negative effect that would happen to them since they only noticed the positive return which could tangibly be seen. However, an argument could be put that what they did not aware of such as the side-effect of distance between children and parents could have an intangible impact in the future of the children.