

# A Personal Story about Statelessness

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## Abstract

Srinuan Soakhamnuan recounts her life as a stateless person growing up in Thailand, her fight to receive an education and her journey to obtain Thai citizenship.

## Keywords

stateless – statelessness – Thailand – Southeast Asia – Thai identification card – Thai citizenship – The Thailand Project

## 1 Family History

My mother never told me much about her story when I was a child. If I hadn't worked on my Thai citizenship case, I probably wouldn't know anything.

My mother and biological father grew up on the border of China and Burma and met there. They were both Shan – an ethnic minority in Southeast Asia. My maternal grandmother is Chinese Shan and my maternal grandfather is Burmese Shan. My mother's family crossed the border between China and Burma all of the time – sometimes her family lived in China, sometimes they lived in Burma. There were a lot of wars, fighting and killing while she was growing up in Burma. If you had a daughter, the Burmese army could take you to be their wife or housemaid, and, whatever they asked you to do, you had to do it without pay. Boys were forced into the army. There were a lot of drugs in the community at that time also, so when my parents began to have children they decided to move to Thailand.

Both of my parents didn't have paperwork from the Burmese or Chinese governments when they came to Thailand. They crossed the river into Mae Sai, the northern-most city in Thailand, by boat. The border has police and army to check your paperwork, but for 150 baht to 300 baht, a boat will take you across the border. It is not a secret. The boat is not far from the border police, but I think that they pay the police to ignore that people are crossing.

My oldest sibling is my half-brother, Jack. His father is Thai, but my brother didn't get citizenship from any country because he grew up with my maternal grandmother in China.

My mother and biological father lived in Thailand when my three older sisters, Wan, Bow and Kik, were born. They lived by the eggplant factory that my parents both worked at. At that time, they could have gotten Thai citizenship because of government corruption, but they didn't have enough money to pay for it. When my mother was pregnant with me, she ran away from my biological father because he was drinking and fought with her often. My biological father passed away soon after my mom left him. He died from liver failure because of his drinking. I was so young, so I don't know anything about him. I have only seen a photograph of him.

Even though my biological father was dead, my mother wished for us to remain in Thailand because she believed that the economy was better and that it would be easier for her to get a job. For a while, she lived with an older woman while searching for work. The old woman would often visit her daughter in a small village 15 minutes outside of Mae Sai called San Grit Tong. My mother sometimes went with the old woman to San Grit Tong and that's where my mother and stepfather met.

My mother and stepfather got married. They knew each other for a short time. They had a ceremony and gathering, but they are not recognized as husband and wife by the government and didn't get a marriage certificate because neither of them have Thai citizenship.

## 2 Village Life

In Thailand, the village of San Grit Tong is considered middle-class because most people aren't homeless – most people go to school, have a job and own a motorbike. 250-300 families live in my village – about 60% are Chinese, 30% are Thai and 10% are stateless, but the community doesn't really mix together.

Every community in Thailand has its own leader in the village and several people that make up a micro-government. This smaller government system helps to control the people and manage village issues. The head of the village is always a Thai citizen. If the city has a new law, if the government has a scholarship for students, if the village needs more money or if the people in the village need help with paperwork, the village leader is the one who speaks with the local government district office. Sometimes, if something happens to the stateless people in a village, the village leader doesn't care as much because

stateless people don't have the right to vote him into power. It depends on the leader, if he is nice, he will help everyone, if he is mean, he might help, but will ask for bribe money. The Thai people know how to read and write, but most stateless people don't know the law or how to read or write in Thai, so if they are told that the police will get involved they are scared that they will be arrested. Luckily, my village's leader was a good person and helped all of the stateless people in my village.

When we were young, my mother just wanted us to stay at home. She was scared that we would get arrested because our home was near a police checkpoint, so we didn't play outside in the neighborhood. Checkpoints in Thailand are in every city, before you pass the city limits. Thailand is small and has a lot of borders, so they don't want to let illegal immigrants enter the country. Each checkpoint has police and army that are on duty 24/7. They check I.D.s, make sure there aren't illegal drugs and monitor drunk driving. They check cars too, especially if they see that the car has a different license plate. Sometimes the checkpoint police also drove their motorbikes or cars around our community and stopped people who didn't look Thai to arrest them or ask them for money. My family always drove all the way around the checkpoint near our village to get to our house.

When I was growing up, Thai government District Officers visited my village and tried to document every family. They wanted to know how many people lived in the village and how many people were stateless – that is how I got a 'family document'. The document has all of my family members' names, birth-dates and pictures on it. The Thai government then gave us pink identification cards. The pink I.D. cards said that we were stateless, but that we were living in Thailand. With the pink I.D. cards, we were able to travel just in the area of Mae Sai, but we could not pass the next city's checkpoint without government permission. When my brother, Jack came to Thailand, he had no documents. My mother tried to put him on the family document, but they did not believe that it was my brother. He had to get a white I.D. card, not a pink card like the rest of the family. The pink card has more benefits than the white card.

My mother was also afraid to have us leave the house because she thought that our neighbors put poison in our water. One day, one of my sisters went to drink water and the water had stuff floating in it. My mother gave it to the chickens and the chickens died. Two weeks later it happened again. We didn't trust anybody. I was so little when it happened. She thought that it was because we were stateless people and that there were four kids in our rented house. Probably we were very loud. In the beginning we didn't feel like we belonged, but even if my family went back to Burma or China, those countries wouldn't have accepted us either. There is no paperwork for my family anywhere.

Both my mother and stepfather worked at my stepfather's family's rice farm. His family bought the land for the farm, but they couldn't own it because they are stateless; they had to have a Thai person sign the paperwork for them, so it's legally not theirs. Sometimes we didn't get to see my mom for a week because she went to work early in the morning and came back home really late when we were sleeping. In the beginning, it was so hard for her when she moved to Thailand. We were very poor, but the longer we stayed it got better.

### 3 Grade School

My mother never went to school. She doesn't know how to read or write any language. I don't know if she really knew how important it was to go to school, but she thought that if you went to school, you would be smart and learn how to read and write. My brother Jack is ten years older than me. Jack went to school until high school. He studied with the monks in the temple. If you didn't have a lot of money, you didn't have to pay anything for your son to study at the temple. My oldest sister, Wan is 7 years older than me. She never went to school. My mother didn't have money to send all of us to go to school. She was the oldest sister so she had to help my mom work and take care of us. My sister Bow is 4 years older than me. She tried to go to high school three times, but I don't think she ever graduated and Kik, who is 2 years older than me went to school until sixth grade, but she never went to high school.

I started kindergarten in Thailand, but I was one year older than all of the other children. I went to a Thai government school from kindergarten until sixth grade. The head of my village paid for my schoolbooks and my uniform. He also signed paperwork for me that I would be a good student, he would take care of me if I caused trouble and that I would go to school every day. Some stateless children missed a lot of school because they had to go back to Burma or because their family got arrested, so if anything happened, he said that he would be responsible for me and take care of me.

I loved going to school. I always participated in sports and every activity that I could attend. I just didn't like it when some classmates were mean to me. They would say, 'You are stateless, you come from nowhere.' That hurt me. The thing that hurt me even more was that there were competitions at school in sports and reading and, even if I won, I never got a chance to go to compete at other schools because I was stateless. The Thai government sponsored the competitions for reading and writing. If you won, they awarded you a scholarship and you got a chance to continue to compete. One time, I won a listening

contest. The teacher would read something to the class and we had to listen very carefully. At the end, the teacher would ask us questions and we had to answer the questions. I won and I got a scholarship – it was not a lot, but I was always proud when I could help my parents even a little bit because I knew it was hard to earn money. I was so excited that I might be able to go to another school and compete. The teacher just said that I did not have Thai citizenship, so I could not go to another school. I hated the word stateless. It always upset me. At that time, it seemed like I understood what statelessness meant, because people were always telling me ‘No, no, no.’ I felt that, I am a human too and I grew up in Thailand; why can’t I do the same things as other people?

#### 4 Sixth Grade

I didn’t really understand statelessness until sixth grade. When I went to sixth grade my friends always talked about where they were going to continue school, which schools had great uniforms and what city they were going to study in. I knew that my parents couldn’t send me to school. I was really jealous. I didn’t care about the uniforms as much as my friends, as long as I could go to school. So when my friends were talking about it, I always ran away and cried. I didn’t want to embarrass myself. I didn’t want them to ask where I was going to school or make fun of me because my parents didn’t have money.

I knew that even if I graduated from high school, I would not get a diploma because I was stateless. Also, I was told I could only work for a farm, factory or restaurant; those places would hire stateless people who had pink I.D.s and would employ you even if you didn’t go to school. My mother asked me questions like, ‘Should you just go work and save money and buy whatever you want – is it worth it?’ In Thailand, stateless people had to pay more for school and uniforms. I think she just thought that she would just be wasting her money sending me there.

#### 5 At the Highest Risk

My mother told us that sometimes ‘businessmen’ came to our village looking for people who wanted to work in the city. They would tell her that her daughters could work in a restaurant or be a housemaid, but who knows if it

was true or not. She said that they paid a lot and my mom took their phone numbers if we were interested. These men were human traffickers. They would pay bribes for referrals. Sometimes girls that went to be prostitutes in the bigger cities got paid to go back to their villages and recruit more young girls to join them. If stateless people work on farms, they get paid a third of what a Thai person would. But if they go to a bigger city and work in a restaurant or as a prostitute, they can earn a living wage.

I saw some stateless people drop out of school and go to work as prostitutes. Some of my friends and my sister's friends went to work in the big cities and came back pregnant or with kids. They would leave their kids with the grandparents and would go back to the city and work again. It is like they would work until they died. Their death was not a good death either. They sent money back to their parents so that their parents could have a good life, but for two of the girls in my village, their dead body was the only thing that came back. They used to live across the street from my house. They got HIV. They only went to school until sixth grade.

## 6 DEPDC

After sixth grade finals, the Development Education Program for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC) staff came to my school. My teachers told us that they were a non-profit organization in Mae Sai and that they were looking for students that would not be able to continue school. The teachers gave me a form to fill out asking why I wanted to go to school. I think I just said, 'I want to go to school. I'm not ready to work. I don't want to work in a restaurant or get married like all of my neighbors. My family is poor and I am stateless.' I wrote the paper, but I thought that they would only support Thai people to go to school. I did not have hope and did not know of any organization that helped stateless people. I knew that the Thai government and other organizations helped poor people or people that didn't have opportunities, but never stateless people.

Seven of my classmates applied. A week later, the staff from DEPDC came to my village. They visited the leader of my village. They visited each family to see who was really poor and who needed help the most. At that time, our house was better than my friends' houses. We had a television and a refrigerator. My sisters were working in Bangkok and Pattaya, cities in southern Thailand, and they sent us money, so I was afraid that DEPDC wouldn't support me. But the head of the village helped me a lot. He told them that I worked hard, studied

hard, always helped the community, and he told them that he didn't want to see me drop out of school and go work like my sisters. I actually asked them if they were only going to support Thai people so that I didn't have false hope. They said that no, they would support stateless people too. My heart beat so fast when they told me that. Every night I prayed that they would choose me.

I found out about a month before school started that DEPDC chose me. They called my mother and told her that they would support me and send me to school. My mother didn't tell me at first. My mother talked to my oldest sister first. They argued for a long time, then my sister told me. She just thought it was a good opportunity for me. I was really excited when I found out – I was running around and telling my friends that I was going to school.

I lived at DEPDC and studied at a government school from seventh grade to ninth grade. All of the teachers loved me and I was a leader in my classroom. I had a lot of friends that understood me. When I thought back to when I was with my family, I missed my home and wanted to be with them, but at home I was not allowed to go outside and play; I had to help my mom with work. At DEPDC, I was able to play outside with friends. I knew I was lucky; only two of the seven students who applied to DEPDC got in.

## 7 'High School'

DEPDC only had the money to support me until ninth grade. When I finished ninth grade, I started studying with the Mekong Youth Network (MYN), a program of DEPDC. Through MYN, I learned about human trafficking, child labor, child prostitution, drugs and other problems around the world. I studied with MYN for one year.

The next year, I worked for DEPDC full-time and got paid. That's how I paid for high school. One semester of school was only 300 baht and I had to pay about 300 baht more for books. All of the money that I earned from DEPDC went to pay for school. The school I attended was a high school for people who didn't have the time or money to go to a regular school or who were stateless. Classes were only on Saturday and Sunday for 2 hours and it took only two years to complete tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades. I studied the same subjects as Thai students, but it was more independent; I did a lot of homework and reading by myself in my room at DEPDC.

Although I always knew that I was not ready to drop out of school, get married and go to work, I didn't really have a dream of what I wanted to do. I was told that because I was stateless, I couldn't do whatever I wanted to do. If I said I wanted to be a teacher, everyone would say, 'You're stateless, you can't have a

dream. You don't know if you can even go to school or get a higher education.' I never told myself 'I want to be this, or, I hope I can be that' I just wanted to go to school and learn what was out there, what people liked to do. That was one of the things that hurt me the most growing-up, when people told me that I could not do something because I was stateless. Only two other stateless people from my village that were my age graduated from high school. No one thinks that they can be stateless and have a good life in Thailand; everyone who is stateless knows that Thai citizenship will help them. After I graduated from high school in 2008, I still didn't have citizenship and I still didn't have options.

## 8 The Thailand Project

I was 19 when I found out about The Thailand Project (TTP), a non-profit based in the United States that helps stateless people in Thailand. The director of DEPDC told me that TTP would give me a scholarship to study at a university in the United States. I was excited. It was the greatest feeling ever, but at the same time, I was thinking, 'How can I go? I don't have citizenship. How will it work for me to go to another country?' Even with my pink I.D., if I just wanted to go to a different city in Thailand, I couldn't go without permission from the government and, even then, they only gave stateless people permission to travel for a maximum of 10 days.

When Joseph Quinnell and Susan Perri, Co-Founders and Co-Directors of TTP, came to Thailand, I remember that we worked really hard. We tried to get paperwork from wherever we could to prove that I grew up in Thailand so that I could get a travel document from the Thai government to study in the United States. Mostly, we collected all of my schoolwork and school papers.

After I gathered all of my paperwork, I had one last meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and Thai Immigration in Bangkok. After our meeting, they didn't say anything for a week. Then, they e-mailed and said that they would send me a travel document. It was a yellow book for Aliens that allowed me to go to the U.S. for one year and re-enter Thailand. They gave me a travel document for aliens because they didn't have any documents that allowed stateless people to travel. I was the first stateless person in Thailand to get an Alien Travel Document and permission to travel outside of the country for that length of time and return. Every year that I wanted to continue to study, I would have to return to Thailand to renew the document. I think that I felt that it was a dream. I couldn't believe it. I told my family everyday that I couldn't believe it.

After I got the travel document, we made an appointment to get a U.S. Visa. The U.S. could only match the permission the Thai government had given me, so I got a student visa with permission to stay in the U.S. for one year. When I got my Visa, it was just a couple of days before we had to go to the U.S. I stayed with my family and talked to them about how excited I was. I tried to imagine what the U.S. was going to be like. I packed only one small suitcase because I didn't know what to bring – just some clothes and my family pictures.

My mother was scared that I was going so far away. She asked me, 'Who will take care of you? If something happens what will you do? Are you going to be able to call me?' The last day before I left, we had a dinner party with family and friends. My neighbors didn't think that I would actually go to school. They asked my mother, 'Are you sure that she is going to school or is she going to be a prostitute? Are they going to sell her? Will she be able to come back home? Why do they want to give her a scholarship to go to school?'

## 9 College

The next day, we took a bus to go to Bangkok. I was scared when I traveled through the Mae Sai checkpoint. I was thinking that they might arrest me. The people at the checkpoint had never seen the document that I had. They only asked me a few questions - why did I have the document and why was I going to the United States - and then let me go. I didn't feel safe until I arrived at Susan's parent's house. I was still thinking that there was going to be a checkpoint somewhere in the U.S.

The day after I arrived in the U.S. I started school orientation at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. I got a student I.D. and met international students from around the world. I started English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The first day of school I had no clue as to what we were talking about. My English was so bad. I could only say, 'How are you,' 'Thank you,' 'I'm fine,' 'Yes' and 'No'. That was scary, but I woke up really early every morning because I was so excited to go to school everyday. I felt that, this is what I want my life to be like. I had never had that feeling before.

I took ESL classes for almost two years, then began taking University classes and working on my degree in Communication: Public Relations. I wanted to study communication because I know it will help me to help people. I think that everywhere around the world, communication is key to solving issues. The more we communicate, the more people will know what is right and what is wrong.

## 10 A Different Kind of Education

Every year, when I went back to Thailand to renew my travel document and U.S. Student Visa, I felt like I was re-entering a nightmare. I would be reminded of all of the opportunities that I didn't have in Thailand and all of the corruption – how much stateless people are taken advantage of. Stateless people know that it is wrong, but we do not have the right to fight the injustices.

On my way home in 2010, a policeman stopped the bus I was on, looked at my travel document and started to ask questions. He asked me to get off of the bus and the bus left. I had just travelled halfway around the world, but I could not pass a checkpoint 40 minutes from my village. I showed him letters from the Thai government in Bangkok, my U.S. Student Visa, my I-20, my student I.D., and all of my paperwork but he didn't believe me that I had permission to travel or that I was studying in the United States. I stayed in the police station for five hours. I called DEPDC, lawyers from Bangkok, everyone I could think of. He didn't want to talk to them. He just wanted me to give him money. He said I had to give him 5,000 baht or I would have to go to jail. I wanted to cry and scream at that time. I didn't want to give him money because I had done nothing wrong. I told him, 'I want to talk to your boss before you send me to jail.' He drove me to the main police station and I talked to his boss. The boss said that he believed me and he would let me go, but he wanted me to take a shower at the police station first. I knew what he was asking. I said 'No. I just want to go home.' I was lucky because he let me go.

When I was in the U.S., people treated me like an equal. Even if I told them I was stateless they still wanted to be friends with me. They didn't think about how much money I had or where I was from. I could travel freely in the U.S. When I was in the U.S., I felt like I was not the same person that I was in Thailand. At the same time that I was experiencing all of these things, I would think, why can't I feel the same way in my home country? Why can't I do something like this in my own country?

## 11 Thai Citizenship

Not having Thai citizenship was the last thing in my life that made me feel like I was still in a cage. I knew if I got Thai citizenship, my life would have freedom. So, when I returned to Thailand to renew my travel documents, Joseph, Susan and I also worked on my Thai citizenship case.

Before the head of the local Thai District Office in Mae Sai would review my case, we had to gather all of the paperwork that identified who I am, where I came from and how long I lived in Thailand. I think my school paperwork was one of the most powerful things that proved I had grown up in Thailand.

To obtain Thai citizenship, I needed witnesses too. My witnesses provided testimony to the District Office that I grew up in Thailand, that they saw me when I was little and that I lived in my village for a long time. My witnesses included my mother, my step-father, the old woman that my mother stayed with the first time she came to Thailand, a couple of neighbors, the village leader from when I was growing up and my village's new leader. My village's new leader was not very willing to help. During the process, he asked many times for bribe money and often would not show up to the District Office for arranged appointment times. Half of my witnesses were stateless. In the beginning, the stateless witnesses were scared to go to the government office. They were afraid that if they said something or if something went wrong, it could affect their paperwork too, but I told them that it would be okay – just go and say what you have seen and what you know.

I went to the District Office everyday to make sure that my case was moving forward, but the officers wouldn't work on my case; they kept delaying. Finally, in 2010, the staff gave the head of the District Office my documents to review. I had a two-minute meeting with him. He didn't even look at my papers. He just said that I had to improve my case and that he needed more witnesses and more evidence.

## 12      **The Final Push**

In 2011, Joseph, Susan and I agreed that it would be the last time that we would work on obtaining my Thai citizenship together. We had all of the documents and witnesses that we could gather to prove that I grew up in Thailand, but the District Office still wouldn't look at my case. Things weren't moving forward, but the main problem was that the process was making me depressed. I don't know how many times I went back home and cried. I always thought, 'Where do I actually belong? Where is my place in this world?'

We got help from an aid worker in Bangkok that wrote a letter that explained the law; the District Office needed to look at my case and respond to me within 30 days. I was nervous. Someone had told me that there was a new head of the District Office. We made an appointment to meet with him. I knew that things were different already because we never could get an appointment with the old head of the district office.

I was shaking and I remember I kept telling Susan that I didn't feel anything. At that moment, I thought that he was a god; he was the only one in the world that could give me freedom and equality. I introduced myself, Susan introduced herself and he just said, 'Tell me about yourself.' He was a big guy and his voice was really scary – really loud. I was panicked. I didn't know what to say first. I started to tell him, 'My name is Srinuan Saokhamnuan, I am stateless and I am 22 years old. I study in the United States.' That was it. He was shocked. He asked, 'How can I help you?' I said that he could give me Thai citizenship. He said, 'Okay, I will give you Thai citizenship. Thailand should support you.' I didn't want to let myself hope. I wouldn't let myself believe until I actually saw my name and my picture on a Thai I.D.

When we were working with the new head of District Office, he told me that my case was the first Thai citizenship case that he had worked on. We discovered that he had no experience giving stateless people Thai citizenship, he had never worked in a city near a border where statelessness is more of an issue and he didn't know how many people statelessness effected in Thailand, but he wanted to learn. We talked to him about why Thai citizenship is important to stateless people.

Less than two months after my first meeting with the new officer, I was standing in the District Office holding my Thai I.D. and crying.

### 13      **Multiplying the Impact**

After I returned to the U.S. my mother told me that they had had a meeting in my community. The new head of the District Office had started an initiative in honor of the King of Thailand's birthday; he wanted to give stateless people citizenship. Thai law already said that whoever was born in Thailand within a particular time frame could get Thai citizenship; he was just going to move cases forward faster. The news spread everywhere in Mae Sai. About 400 people obtained Thai citizenship within a few months and 300 more were in line to get citizenship. A few months later, I heard that the head of the District Office was transferred to a different location.

### 14      **The True Benefit of Education**

I have seen a lot of people in my life, including people in my family, not have a chance to go to school or get a higher education. If children get the chance to go to school, they will learn how to read and write, which will help them to make their own decisions. They will learn what is right and what is wrong.

If children go to school they will see a lot of ways to enter society. I have learned that if people don't have an education, they feel like they have no choices, no rights; they feel like they can't make their own decisions. I feel like I was one child in a million that got really lucky. Now, I allow myself to dream and I know what my dream is: I want to travel and help children around the world have the same opportunities as I did.