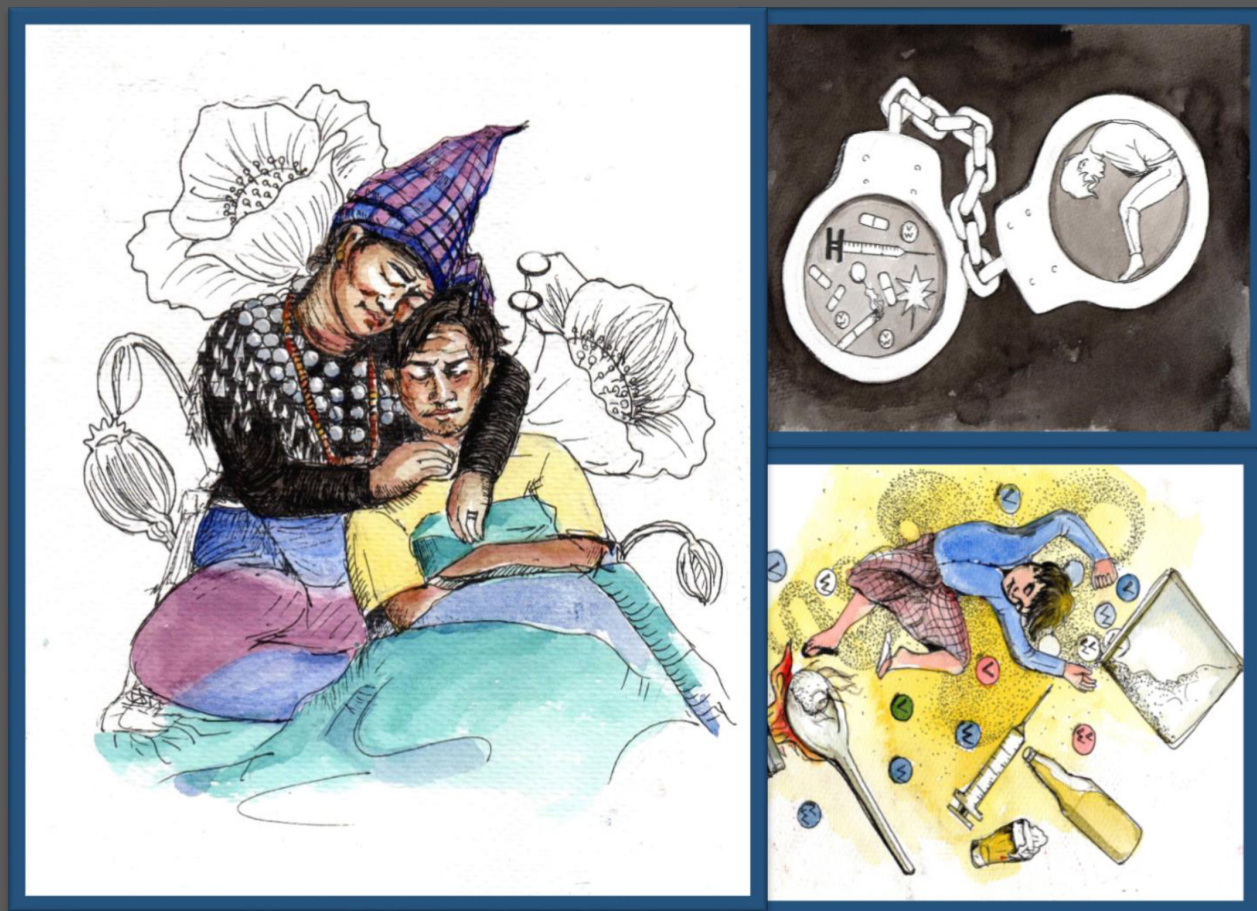
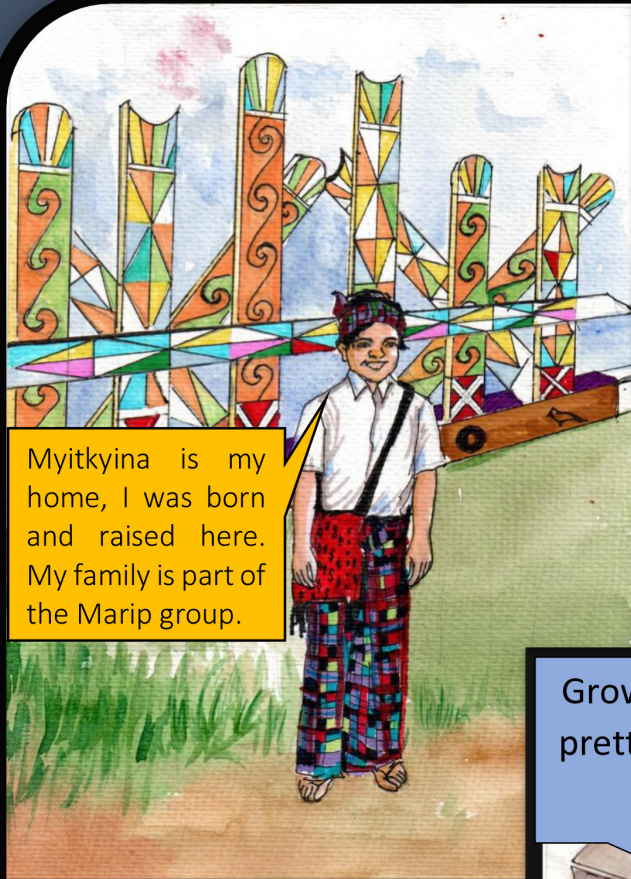


Naw Hkam's Story

Youth & Drugs in the Borderlands of
Myanmar: Kachin State



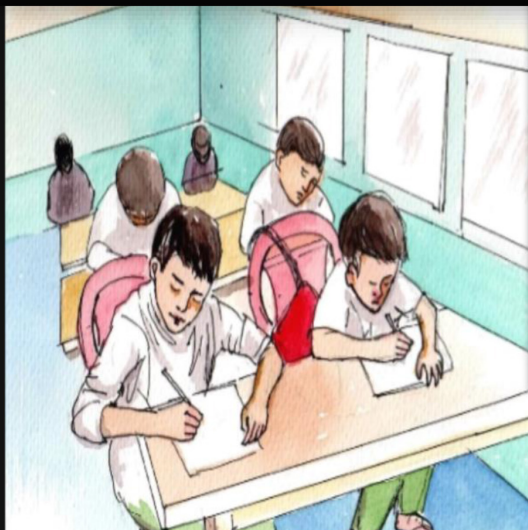


Myitkyina is my home, I was born and raised here. My family is part of the Marip group.



My mom had her hands full with all the children at home. She worked hard to provide for us. She travelled around for work sometimes, but when she was home we were always cared for by her.

Growing up here I had a pretty typical childhood, playing games.



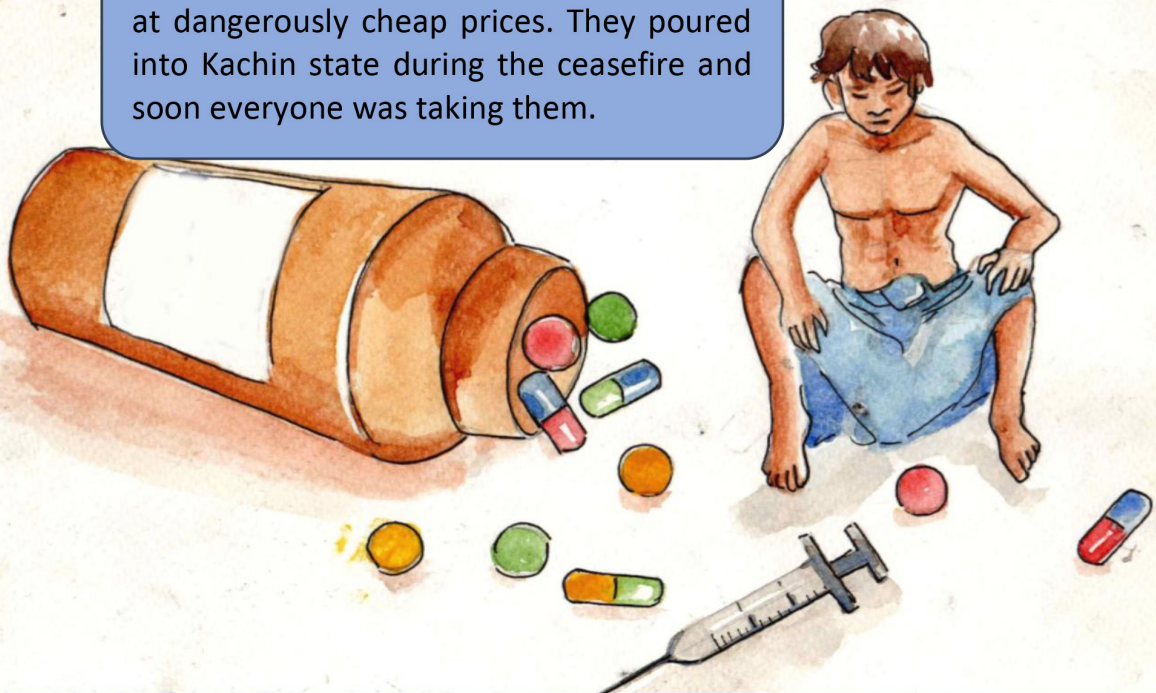
I grew up in Myitkyina until 8th Standard, then I moved around Kachin state to finish the rest of my studies. During the ceasefire, from 1994 - 2011, there was no fighting and it was safer to travel. But we faced new challenges in our lives...



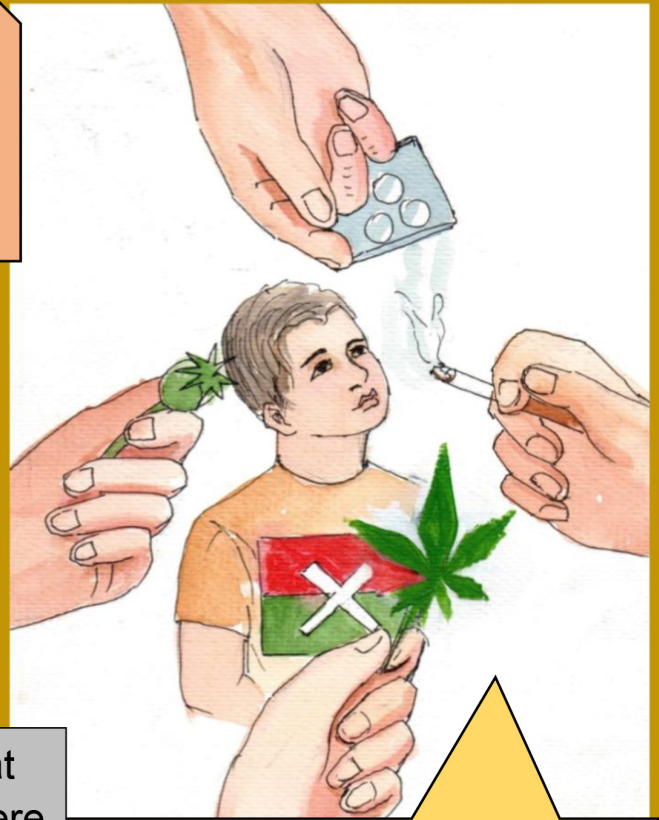
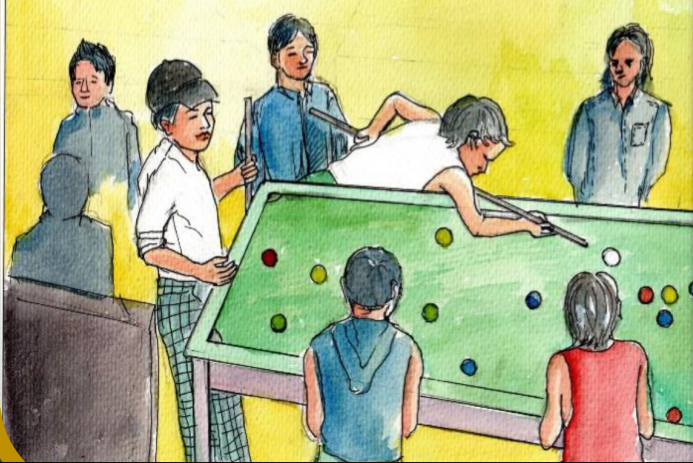


When I was younger, I don't remember there being as many drugs around, not like now. We'd meet with friends and drink together with whatever money we could gather. It was a time before cell phones and drugs flooded Kachin state. Things have changed quickly here.

Soon, drugs started to appear everywhere - at dangerously cheap prices. They poured into Kachin state during the ceasefire and soon everyone was taking them.

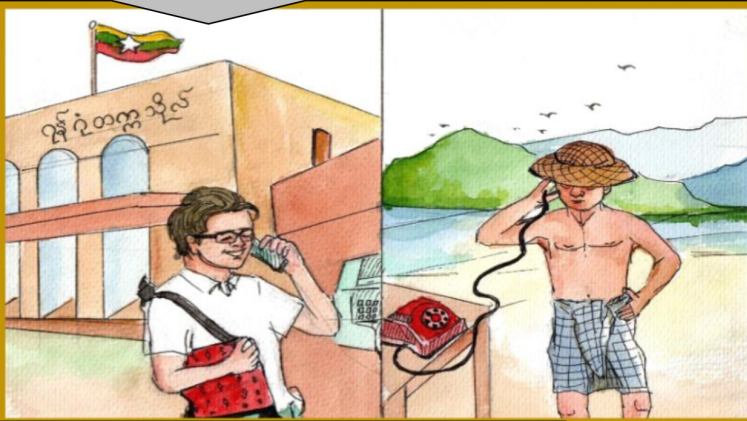


I ended up enrolling in Myitkyina University...But I got kicked out after two years. I didn't study well, I just wanted to spend time with my friends.

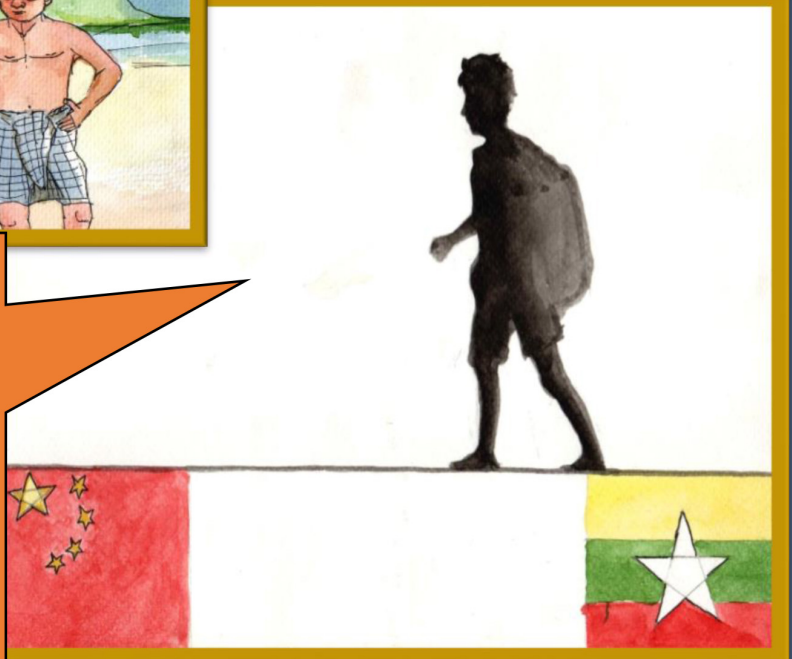


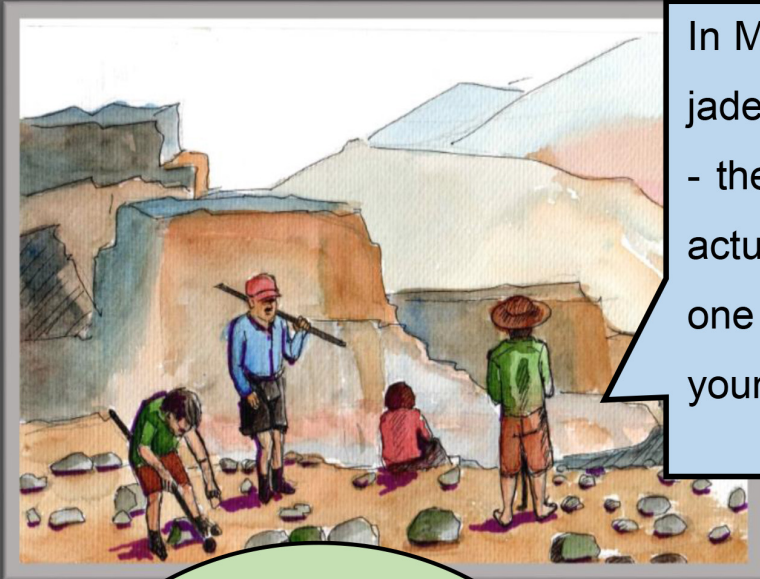
My brother was studying in Yangon at the time. It seemed to me that there were so many more opportunities there.

And then the peer pressure to take drugs got to me. They were just everywhere I went, I felt like I couldn't escape it.



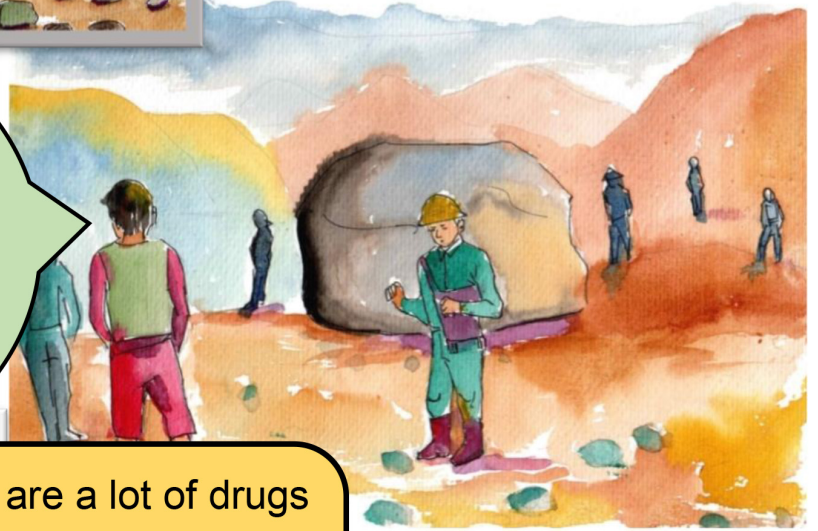
But I decided to go to China for two years because I wanted to start a business. It was the first of many journeys abroad to build a new life. Myitkyina wasn't a good place for me to be because of all the drugs around.



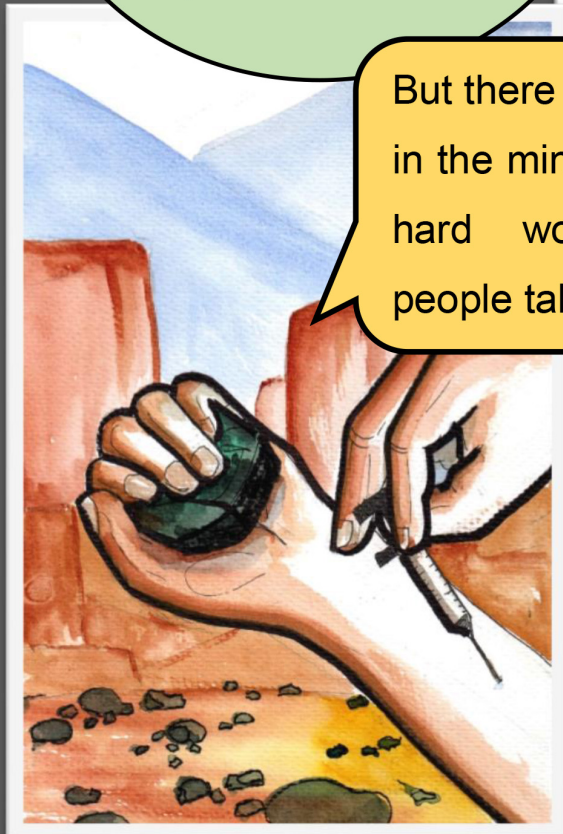


In Myitkyina, a lot of people go to the jade mines in Hpakant to earn money - there's plenty of work there and an actual chance to earn a living. This is one of the only industries available to young men like me in Kachin State.

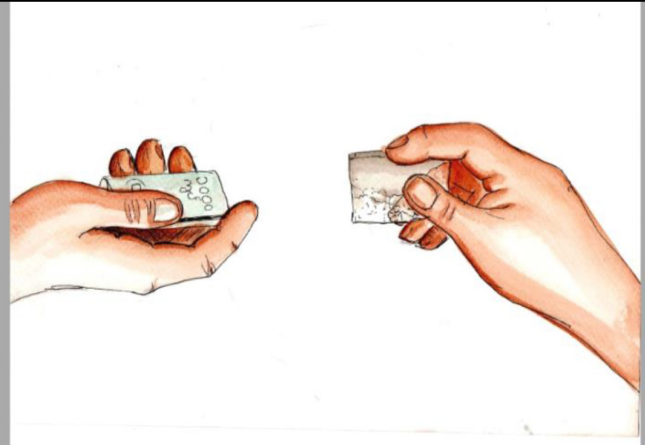
For some lucky few you can even strike it big and get really rich. Many are motivated by this hope.



But there are a lot of drugs in the mines too. Mining is hard work and many people take drugs to cope.



Often, people leave the mines with serious drug problems, which they bring back to their villages, their families. They find themselves needing more money to finance their drug use, but there are still no jobs for them.



I didn't want to fall into that cycle, and my mother encouraged me to go elsewhere to escape the drugs and pursue my studies. That is why I went to China and I also travelled to study. I've studied in 5 different places now, trying to improve my life. But I don't have certificates from any of them.

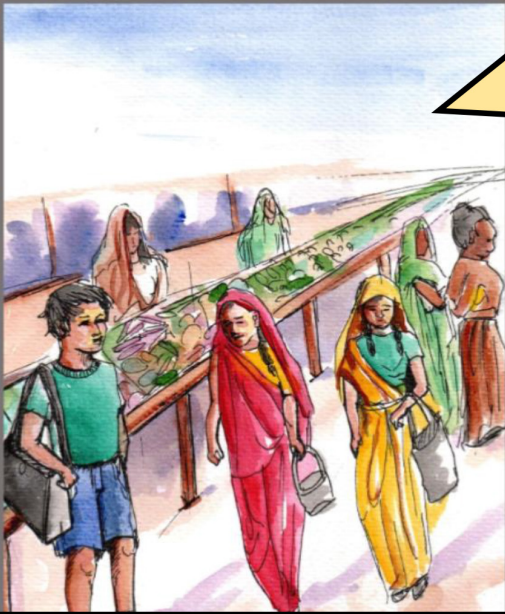


Even if I do finish my degree, what will I do here? There are no jobs for me, so what is the point!



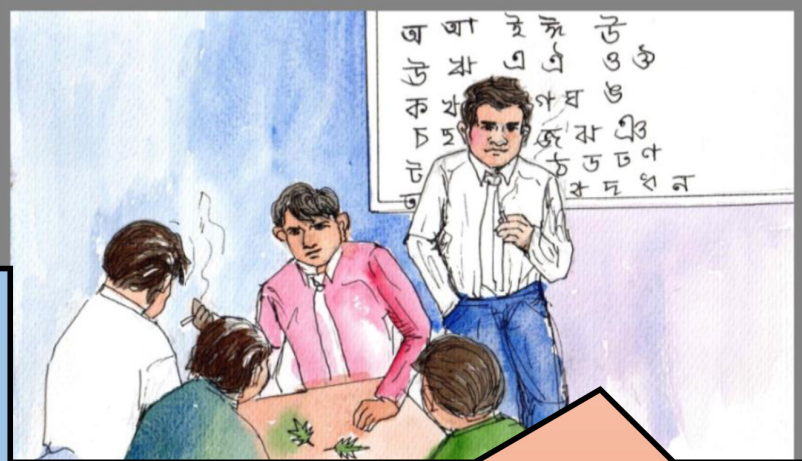
You can finish your studies if you leave Myitkyina, God willing. You know too many people here that use drugs!

My mum wanted me to finish my studies after dropping out of Myitkyina University when I was younger.

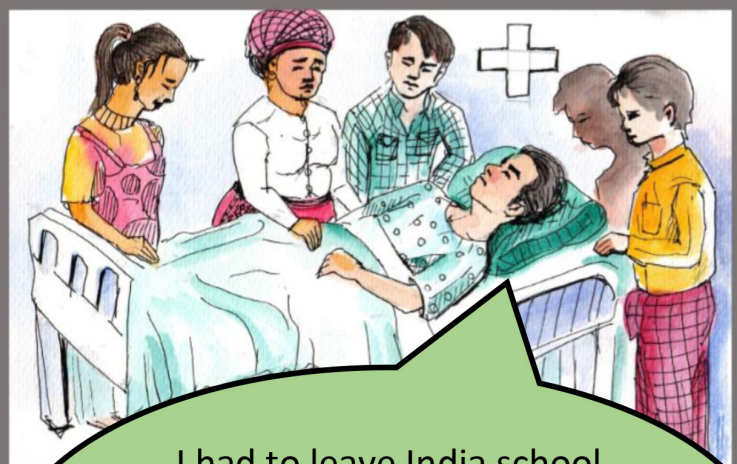
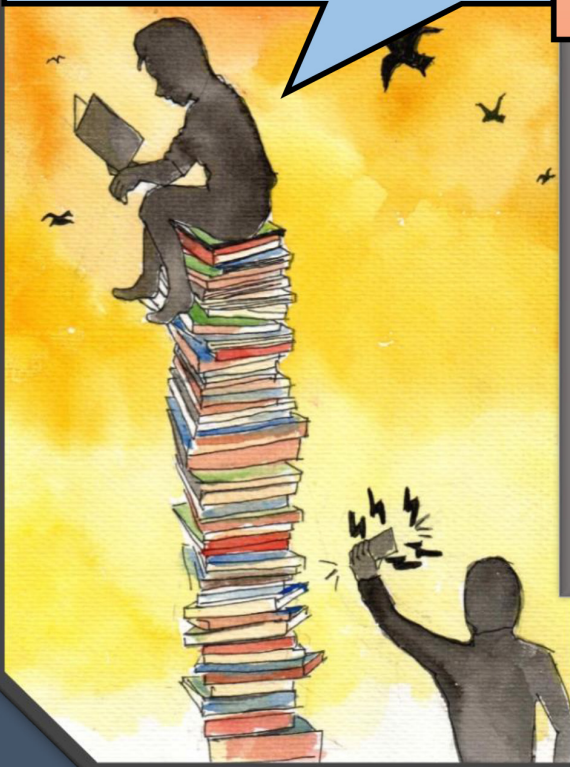


One of the places I studied was India. I remember when I first got there, thinking how hot it was. It can't even be compared with Yangon's heat, it's so much hotter. And it wasn't just the heat, there were other big differences.

Like here in Myanmar, I had different friend groups in India. Some smoked marijuana, others did heroin, also called number 4. I tried to stay away from these groups during exam time to focus on studying, but it was difficult.

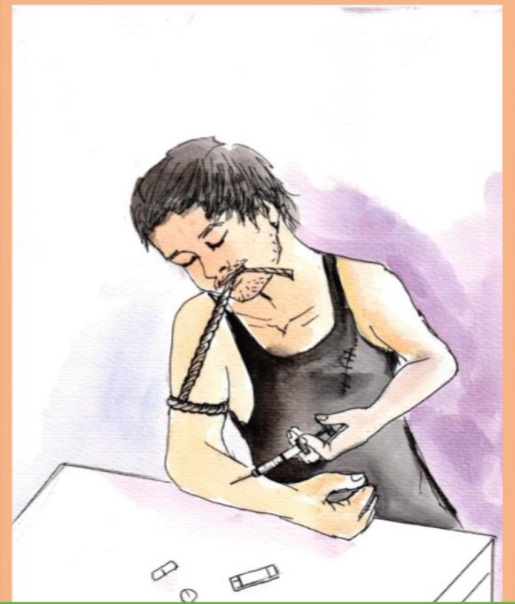


Before going to India, I had used drugs. But India was the first time I smoked marijuana, it's very popular there.

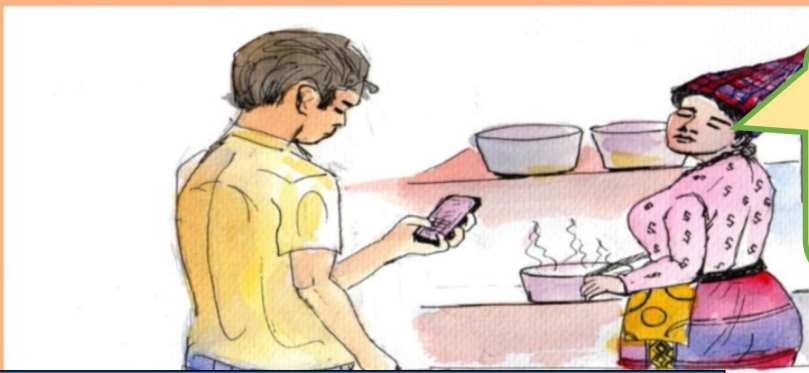


I had to leave India school because of health issues. I had a liver problem that was connected with using drugs. So I stopped and came back

But after recovering, I started to use again.



And, eventually, I began using number 4, 9 (that's what we call heroin) as well. I didn't want to, I don't like number 4 that much, but it's so much



Well maybe you should go back to India then! I have always said that you know too many drug users here!

As always, my mother was worried about my drug use. She tried many different strategies to get me to give up drugs for good.

You should think about sending him to another village!

What more can I do? I have tried everything... He just needs to listen to God's word..



I'm the only one in my family that uses drugs. When the rest of my family found out, they tried to intervene too by sending me away. Like my mum, they also thought getting me far away from this environment would help.

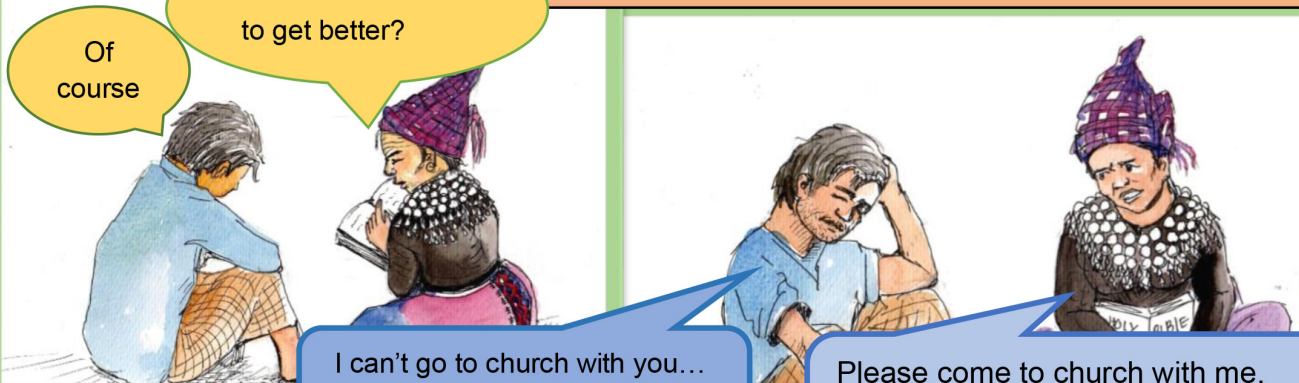
I know my drug use affects the whole family.... One of my friends was caught with drugs by the police. His family had to sell some land to pay for the fine. This is the reality for many families here.



So mothers and families do all they can to solve an issue that impacts everyone in the family.

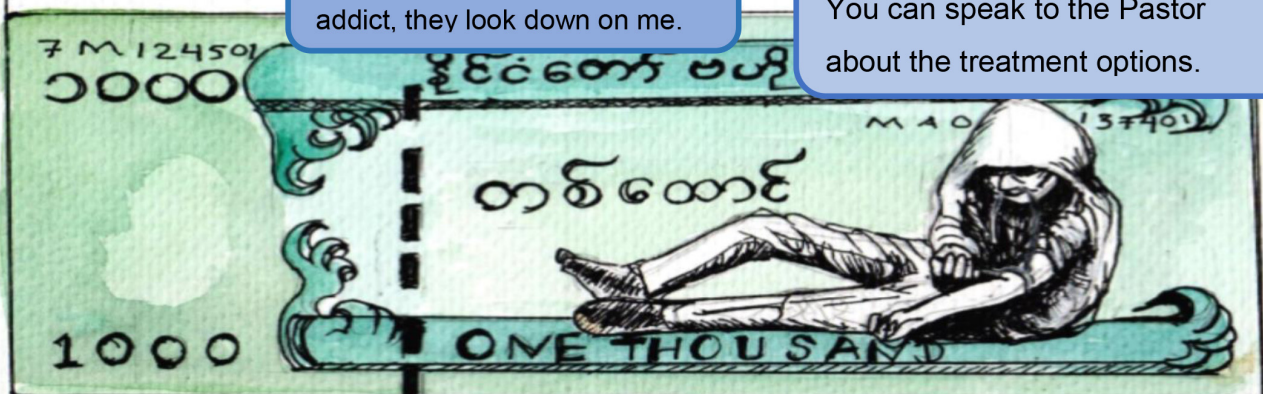
Of course

Do you even want to get better?



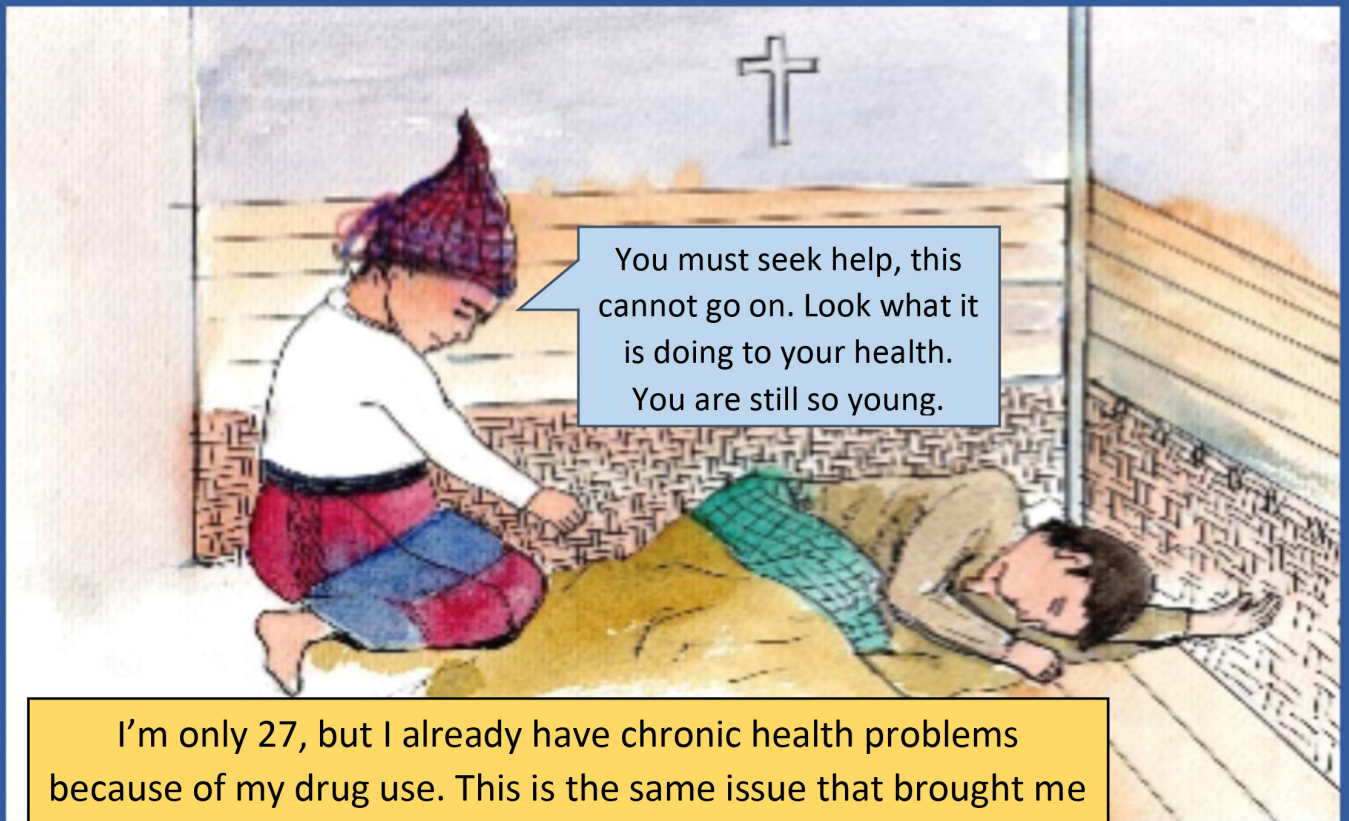
I can't go to church with you... people just see me as an addict, they look down on me.

Please come to church with me. You can speak to the Pastor about the treatment options.



I am in Myitkyina now and I am still using drugs. I smoke opium, I use number 4. Every once in a while I'll use methamphetamine too, which we call yaba.



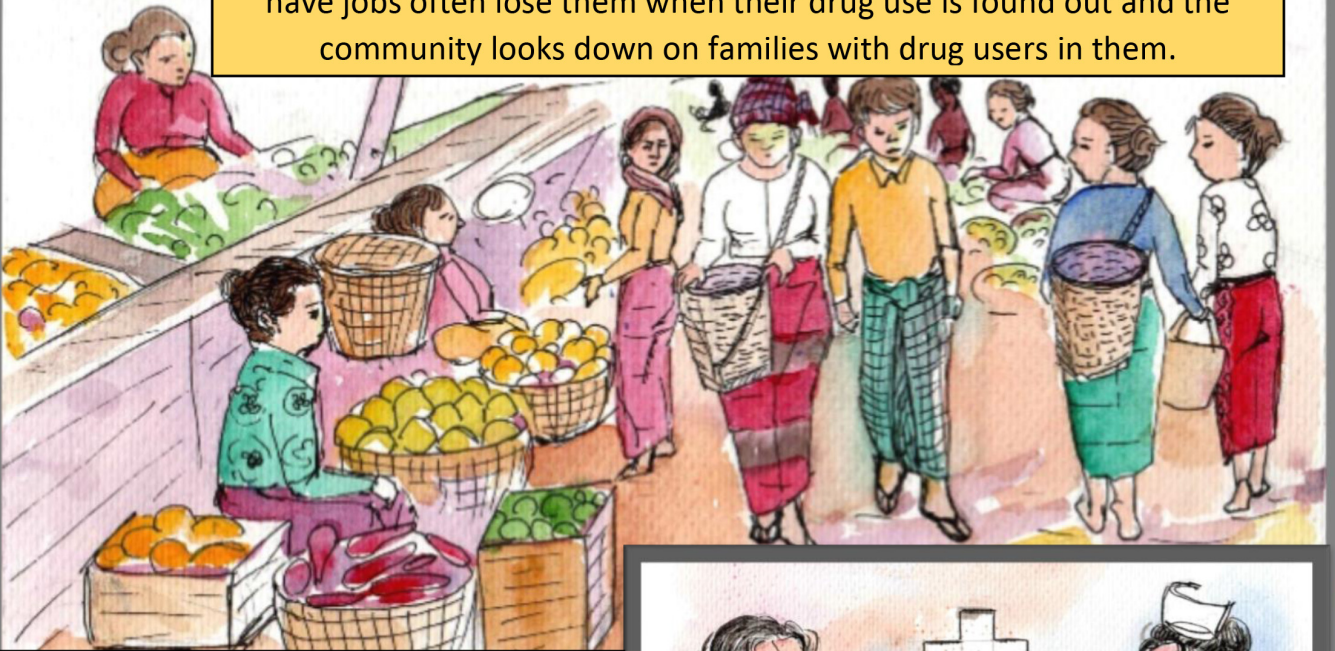


I'm only 27, but I already have chronic health problems because of my drug use. This is the same issue that brought me back from India; it makes it difficult to live a full life.

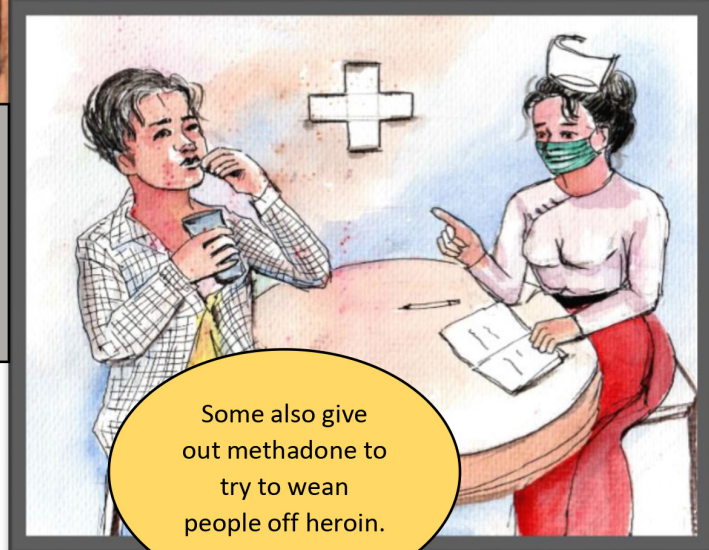


It's very hard to walk away from, because I know the feeling of it. It's a cycle that many people, especially men, find themselves in. We don't have much to do, so we keep returning to it.

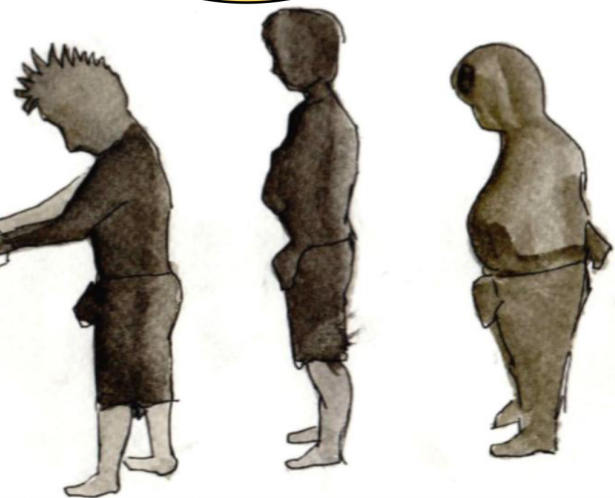
There's so much stigma around people that use drugs. Society forgets that we have skills, passions, hobbies and aspirations. People that do have jobs often lose them when their drug use is found out and the community looks down on families with drug users in them.



The harm reduction initiatives in the area take a different approach than the church-based treatment options. They will give out clean needles to prevent the spread of diseases.



Some also give out methadone to try to wean people off heroin.





There just aren't opportunities for young people in Kachin State. And there are drugs everywhere. Sooner or later, many young people, like me, try drugs, and then it is hard to stop. Without more education, support and jobs, things aren't going to get better for me and others like me.

This research-based comic was produced collaboratively by Kachinland Research Centre, Drugs & (dis)order and PositiveNegatives. The comic was illustrated by Cecilia Ja Seng and based on research with real people in Kachin state. Names and details have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Kachinland Research Centre is a non-profit research organisation based in Myitkyina, Kachin State.

kachinlandrc.org

Drugs & (dis)order is a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

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Drugs and (dis)order is funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).

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