

MIDWIVES

Premiere World Cinema Documentary Competition @ Sundance 2022

Director Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

Producers Bob Moore, Ulla Lehmann, Mila Aung-Thwin, Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

Runtime 91:26 mins

Production Companies EYESTEELFILM, AMA FILM, Snow Films

Countries of Production Myanmar, Canada, Germany

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Logline

Two midwives, one Buddhist and one Muslim, defy strict ethnic divisions to work side by side in a makeshift clinic in western Myanmar, providing medical services to the Rohingya of Rakhine State. Over five years we witness their struggles, hopes and dreams amidst an environment of ever-increasing chaos and violence.

Synopsis

Hla and Nyo Nyo live in a country torn by conflict. Hla is a Buddhist and the owner of a makeshift medical clinic in western Myanmar, where the Rohingya (a Muslim minority community) are persecuted and denied basic rights. Nyo Nyo is a Muslim and an apprentice ze who acts as an assistant and translator at the clinic. Her family has lived in the area for generations, yet they are still considered intruders. Encouraged and challenged by Hla, who risks her own safety daily by helping Muslim patients, Nyo Nyo is determined to become a steady health care provider for her community.

Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing's remarkable feature debut was filmed over five turbulent years in a country that has long been exoticized and misunderstood. The filmmaker's gentle, impartial gaze grants unique access to these courageous women who unite to bring forth life. Filled with love, empathy, and hope, Midwives offers a rare insight into the complex reality of Myanmar and its people.

- Ania Trzebiatowska

Bios

Director/Producer/Editor

Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

Snow has worked as a freelance filmmaker in Myanmar since 2006, acting as director, producer, editor and sound recordist after attending film Schools in both Myanmar and Germany. Her short, BURMESE BUTTERFLY played festivals in over 20 countries, and PERIOD@PERIOD won for best short at the Wathan Film Festival. MIDWIVES is her feature documentary debut.



[link to download headshot](#)

Producer

Ulla Lehmann

Producer Ulla Lehmann was born in Berlin and has lived in Germany and France. Together with film director Andrea Roggon, she founded AMA FILM. The company focuses on the development and production of creative documentaries and films of artistic and social relevance, e.g. MÜLHEIM TEXAS by Andrea Roggon (Max Ophüls Preis, Crossing Europe), THE INNER LIGHT by Stefan Sick (Berlinale, Shanghai IFF), WOOD AND WATER by Jonas Bak (Berlinale, New Directors/New Films N.Y.) and MIDWIVES by Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing (Sundance Film Festival). AMA FILM also acted as distributor and released THE INNER LIGHT to over 70 German cinemas.

Producer/Editor*Mila Aung-Thwin*

Mila Aung-Thwin is co-founder of the Montreal documentary production company EyeSteelFilm. He has produced more than 40 feature documentaries including Last Train Home (winner of 2 Emmy Awards); Up the Yangtze (Independent Spirit Award Nominee; Golden Horse Award winner); Rip: A Remix Manifesto (Webby Award Honoree; IDFA audience choice prize winner); and I Am the Blues (Canadian Screen Award winner). He is the executive producer and editor of Softie (Sundance World Cinema Documentary Special Jury Award winner for Editing). He directed, produced, and edited Let There Be Light (Big Sky Film Fest's Artistic Vision award winner) about mankind's epic quest for fusion energy. He has worked with broadcasters around the world, including National Geographic, BBC, ZDF/ARTE, NHK Japan, PBS, etc. He served for five years as President of RIDM, Montreal's international documentary festival and has served on the juries of the Sundance Film Festival, the International Emmy Awards, and the New Zealand Screen Awards. He frequently mentors and gives documentary storytelling seminars to upcoming filmmakers - recent workshops include Guangzhou, China; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; and Yangon, Myanmar.

Producer*Bob Moore*

Bob Moore is Co-President and Creative Producer at EyeSteelFilm in Montreal where he has produced over 40 feature documentaries since 2008. Together with his talented partners and collaborators, he has been the recipient of over 100 international awards, including Emmys, Cinema Eyes, Golden Horses, Owls, Phoenixes, and a variety of other celebratory animal-themed prizes. He's been the subject of a Producer's Spotlight at the Cannes Marché du Film, is currently an advisor and mentor working with the Sundance Film Festival, IDFA, DMZ Docs South Korea, QUMRA, Tokyo Docs, Dhaka DocLab Bangladesh, Hot Docs, and RIDM.

Director's Statement

I was born in Rakhine State, Western part of Myanmar. When I was a kid, it seemed to me that Buddhist and Muslims were able to live peacefully side by side. As an adult, I was living and working as a filmmaker in Yangon in 2012, when the news of Rohingya conflict started to come out. I refused to believe that the hate speech I was hearing in the media at that time was reflective of reality. So I went back to my hometown to better understand myself, my people, where all this anger and hatred was coming from. On that visit I met two extraordinary women, a Buddhist Midwife and her young Muslim apprentice. I made this film in order to represent myself and my country's story – a story that I really want to tell using the film language. It took 6 years to finish this film.

The Rohingya have lived in Rakhine State, Myanmar, for hundreds of years, but are officially "stateless". The government officially has declared them recent illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even if they have lived in Myanmar for generations. As a result, they have no identification cards and can be barred from any internal or international travel. Often described as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, thousands of Rohingya Muslims have been displaced or have fled the country by sea.

Inter-communal violence between the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist communities and the Muslim minority Rohingya broke out in 2012. In 2017 sectarian violence erupted again, forcing almost one million Muslim Rohingya to flee into neighboring Bangladesh. Within the country the government is attempting to conceal the conflict. The government of Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya issue has been subject to criticism by the international community and many observers have accused the country's security forces of crimes against humanity. Meanwhile in Bangladesh, where Rohingya came from centuries ago, they are not accepted as part of the population. There are almost 600,000 Rohingya who remain in Rakhine, who have been largely forgotten. My film represents those Rohingya who stayed behind in Rakhine, alongside the Buddhist community.

I decided this story needed to be told and committed to shooting it over 5 years.

A strength of my material is that we get emotionally very close to the two main protagonists and begin to see the world through their eyes. I perceive the two women in conditions of hopefulness and hopelessness, of joy and of deep sadness and we can perfectly feel with them.

I believe providing a human face to this story often portrayed in pithy news postings is crucial to a real understanding of the situation, of the condition of the Rohingya and of the Burmese people more broadly. The story also provides crucial context to the eventual collapse of Myanmar's move towards democracy and the attitude and actions of the military.

My original idea was to observe two midwives, one Buddhist and one Muslim, who defy the brutal ethnic divide while working side by side in a makeshift medical clinic, one of the only services available to the Rohingya population being persecuted by the Buddhist majority confined to a small region in Western Myanmar. Also to focus on whether Nyo Nyo will make it to the city to see her sister in Yangon. Unexpectedly she got pregnant and the story was changed which I didn't expect. Then civil war happened in the region, one conflict after another, and I had to incorporate that into the film. The new civil war in the region added new layers to the story.

A year later, another unexpected tragedy happened that affected the whole country with the military coup in February 2021. My original idea was to amplify women's voices from the conflict region of Western Myanmar. And then another message and layer was added, that the voices of the people of Myanmar needed to be heard to the world against the inhumane attack and injustice, and to hold the military accountable and to restore democracy in Myanmar. Rohingya and many people in Myanmar are in need of emergency assistance due to the violence of the military council.

The first two years when I started filming, it was not safe to bring camera and sound equipment to the village. The police station is just opposite Hla's clinic and there are checkpoints along the road to the village. So I went as a one woman crew and brought only an iPhone and a small HD camera. In order not to get attention from villagers and patients in the clinic, I had to shoot predominately with an iPhone for two years. At that time, I focused my shoots mainly in the clinic and also at Nyo Nyo's house. When a new conflict arose between the ethnic Rakhine Army and the Burmese Military, the soldiers and police station opposite of Hla's clinic suddenly disappeared. So from then on I was able to return with my cinematographer and we had a chance to shoot Rohingya villagers in the village and on the road.

My cameraman and I didn't feel safe the whole time. If we were to get caught with all the data and gear, we would be arrested. It was a big challenge for us. We had to travel everyday to Nyo Nyo and Hla's village from Mrauk U, the larger town where we were staying. On the way there are military checkpoints and heavy fighting between the Rakhine Army and the Myanmar Military. We traveled the road between the two camps. Most people didn't use that road at that time. There could easily have been an accidental bomb or mortar shell that hit us. Our back and body didn't feel safe when we used the road to travel for the filming.

Everyday on the way to Nyo Nyo and Hla's village, we had to pass a military checkpoint and inform them the name of the village we were traveling to and the reason we were going there. Luckily, we had an amazingly helpful Toke Toke driver, who would hide our equipment inside his vehicle. The driver would have to stop in front of the military gate and only the driver would be allowed to walk to the Military gate to inform them which village we're going to for what reason. He gave different village names to the police station that we are visiting around the villages. The Toke Toke driver didn't mention that we went to the same village everyday. We couldn't only focus on the story and we were working with fear in the location.

Also when we filmed with a drone, we didn't bring the drone with us. The day before we would shoot with the drone, we would order the drone to be sent with the bus. Next morning we would pick up the drone and shoot the whole day and in the evening send it back on the bus. These were some of the very particular safety measures we had to take.

Before I made this film, I didn't fully understand why all these long civil wars were happening in my country and why the Buddhist Rakhine and the Rohingya conflict happened in Rakhine State. After observing for a long time in Rakhine state and witnessing the voices of women, children and the life of people inside a war zone, I came to understand a clear message about all the unkind, inhumane, ethnic cleansing, injustice and violence happening in my country, and how so much of it has been engineered by the Military council.

But the real success for me is that I have made deep friendships with my characters Nyo Nyo and Hla. They have become a part of my life and they show me to understand struggles of women and people living in conflict regions. All the experience and processes that I've learned from my filmmaking journey gave me strength, growth and awareness, and empathy for

Rohingya peoples' lives, and all minorities in my country. My two main characters inspired me a lot. With support from my film team and producers, others who supported me, I've finally made this film and a wonderful chance to screen this story at Sundance film festival.

Women have a lot of layers, they are multitalented and out-spoken – they have humour. It's about courage, community. There are brave and strong women living in the war zone and seeking to better their lives.

These films and filmmakers inspired me the most; Iranian woman director, Hana Makhmalbaf who filmed by Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame; Palestinian farmer and filmmaker, Emad Burnat and his film Five Broken Cameras; Abbas Kiarostami's films; War Dance documentary; Learning to Skateboard in a Warzone If You're a Girl.

- Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

Historical Information

Myanmar (formerly Burma) is a Southeast Asian country neighbouring Thailand, Laos, Bangladesh, China and India. Since achieving independence in 1948, the country has been ruled by military dictatorship almost the entire time. In 2011 the Military transferred leadership to a civilian government, but retained de facto control over many areas, especially in its active armed conflicts with ethnic minorities throughout the country.

The majority of the population of Myanmar (approximately 54 million) is ethnically Burmese, with 90% of the country practicing Buddhism. In Rakhine State, in Western Myanmar, there lives a Muslim minority known as the Rohingya who have faced decades of violence, discrimination and persecution. In 1982, the Rohingya lost their right to hold citizenship, making them one of the largest stateless populations in the world.

In 2016, the Myanmar Military began a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya Muslims. Villagers were set on fire and destroyed. Tens of thousands of Rohingya were killed. Close to one million fled the country. Currently, close to one million Muslim Rohingya remain exiled in refugee camps outside of Myanmar, mostly in neighbouring Bangladesh.

On February 1 2021, the Myanmar Military ended the country's brief experiment with democracy. A coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing overthrew the democratically-elected party NLD (National League for Democracy) and the leader Aung San Suu Kyi was imprisoned. The country erupted in nationwide protests, and over 1300 unarmed protesters, including 50 children, were killed, 11,120 imprisoned, and arrest warrants issued for 1964 others.

Still 1 - [link to download](#)



Still 2 - [link to download](#)



Poster - [link to download](#)

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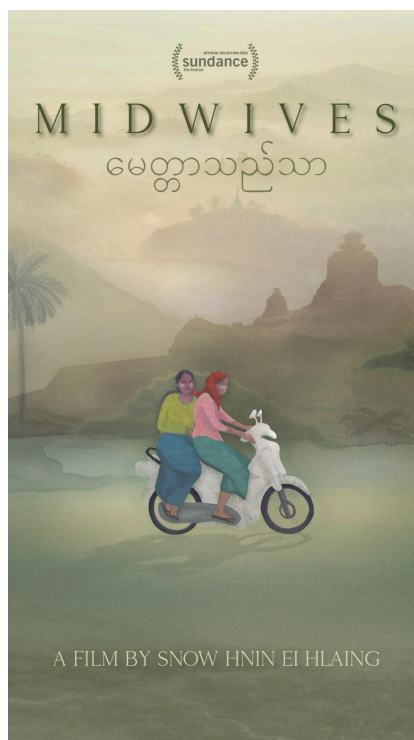
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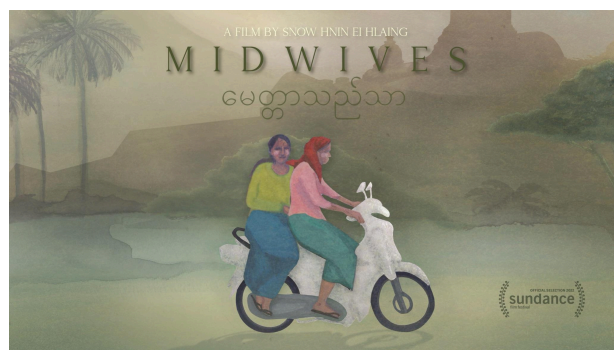
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[1x1 square - link to download](#)



[16x9 vertical - link to download](#)



[9x16 horizontal - link to download](#)

Credits

Featuring Hla Nyo Nyo Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Tin BiBi
Producers Bob Moore Ulla Lehmann Mila Aung-Thwin Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing
Executive Producers Ken Pelletier Shizuka Asakawa
Executive Producers Daniel Cross Andrea Roggon
Executive Producers Erika Dilday Justine Nagan Chris White
Executive Producer Vijay Vaidyanathan Executive Producer Inmaat Productions
Cinematographer Soe Kyaw Htin Tun

Editors Mila Aung-Thwin Ryan Mullins Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing
Original Music Olivier Alary Johannes Malfatti
Line Producer Valerie Shamash Co-Producer Katie McKay

A co-production of American Documentary | POV



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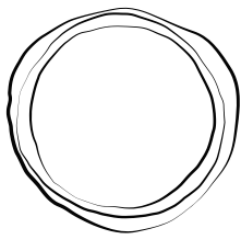
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Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

Location sound recording

Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

Post Production Supervisor

Samantha Neboschizkij

Colorist

Hamed (Ed) Aleali

Assistant Editor

Samantha Neboschizkij

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Omar Majeed

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SONO2

Supervising Sound Editor

Andreas Mühlischlegel

Sound Design / Dialogue Editor

Andreas Mühlischlegel

Re-recording Mixer

Marc Fragstein

Foley Artist

Luis Schöffend

Foley Recordist

Marc Fragstein

Foley Editor

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Ja Roi Aung Lashi

Mi Mi Kyaw Lwin

Kyaw Za

Aye Mon Mon Zin

English Translation

Lynn Htoo

Eh Doh Poe

Nang Mhwe Ngin Seng

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John Corban: Viola
Jean-Christophe Lizotte: Cello
Thaung Htike Ko : Pat Waing, Gongs
Johannes Malfatti: Piano, Balalaïka
Olivier Alary: Guitar, Ukulele

Music Courtesy of

"Pundela"
Traditional / Thierry Robin
Performed by Titi Robin
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"Ta Toe Chay Pyaw Mal Ta
Tain Chay Ner Htaung"
Performed by Su Myat Htet

Lyrics by Gi Ta Sar So
Thakhin Tun

"Yin Twin May"
Performed by Hlwan Moe
Lyrics by Naing Myanmar

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Snow's family members
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