

Bua's* Story

Bua* has lived in the same mountainous village for all her life and her brother is the village leader.

Everyone knows the family, and yet, Bua has repeatedly been denied basic rights her entire life because she didn't have the citizenship papers to which she was entitled under Thai law.

Bua's parents died tragically when she was a baby—before they were able to register her birth. Like most children in the village, she was not born in a hospital, and therefore there was no immediate record. Even though Bua's older brother was registered and recognized as a Thai citizen, she was not.

There are about two million "stateless" people living in Thailand—meaning they do not technically belong to Thailand or any other country. Bua is Karen, an ethnic minority group that is one of the "hill tribes" living along the Northern Thai border and surrounding countries.

Bua is mute and lives with learning disabilities, and she communicates mostly through signs and with her bright smile. She is in her mid-thirties now, and she works hard as an agricultural labourer. Growing up, she never received adequate medical care since doctors can choose to deny treatment to stateless people.

She and her daughter, Mali* , live in a sturdy two-room hut. Their house is like their neighbours', but Mali said she always knew there was something different. Her teachers didn't treat her the same as other students, giving her more basic work and refusing to mark it. She was never allowed on school trips with her class because, without paperwork, it is illegal to travel outside the district.

IJM first heard Bua and Mali's stories from a Compassion International worker. Both organisations worked on their case, gathering all the paperwork to fill out the citizenship application.

Recent laws in Thailand make clear pathways to citizenship for stateless people like Bua, but many local and district officials do not know about these laws or how to implement them.

The process of proving Bua's right to citizenship was straightforward and should have taken three to six months. Instead, it took 18 months for Bua and two and a half years for Mali.

Bau and Mali now live very different lives. They have access to medical care, are free to travel and Mali is getting the education she deserves. Wherever they go they proudly carry their identification cards.

**A pseudonym.*