

The logo for POV Community Engagement & Education. The word "POV" is in a large, bold, sans-serif font. The letter "O" is replaced by a circular graphic consisting of many small, vertical black bars of varying heights, creating a sunburst or camera lens effect. To the right of "POV", the words "Community Engagement & Education" are stacked in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.

**POV** Community  
Engagement &  
Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A large, dark silhouette of a woman and a young child is centered within a circular frame. The woman is on the left, looking towards the child on the right. The child has their right arm raised. The background within the circle is a sunset or sunrise over a body of water, with a warm orange and yellow glow. The entire scene is set against a dark background with stylized white lines radiating from the circular frame, suggesting a window or a lens.

**MIDWIVES**

a film by Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

[www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov)



## MIDWIVES

*Midwives* chronicles two women who run a makeshift medical clinic in western Myanmar, a region torn apart by violent ethnic divisions. The owner is Buddhist and risks her safety daily to treat Muslim patients. The apprentice is part of the Muslim minority group denied basic rights—but is still determined to become a reliable healthcare provider for her people.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Film Summary
3	Using this Guide
4	Key Issues and Participants
5	Background Information
8	Discussion Prompts
11	Closing Questions
12	Taking Action
13	Resources
14	Credits & Acknowledgments

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Midwives* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing experiences and viewpoints and actively listening to one another in a care-forward environment.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

## KEY ISSUES AND PARTICIPANTS

### KEY ISSUES

*Midwives* offers insight into two midwives' lives in the middle of government strife, military occupation, and poverty. It will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Midwifery
- Women's health
- State violence
- Economic inequality
- Social issues
- Religious conflict
- Ethnic conflict
- Civil rights
- Human rights
- Public health

### KEY PARTICIPANTS

- Nyo Nyo - Rohingya Muslim apprentice
- Hla - Burma Buddhist midwife

## MUSLIM PRESENCE IN MYANMAR

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is an ethnically and religiously diverse country in Southeast Asia. Myanmar is home to the Rohingya people, the largest stateless group of people in the world. Approximately one million Rohingya people live in Myanmar, mostly concentrated in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The Rohingya have lived in Myanmar since the 15th century and have their own language and culture. The majority of Rohingya people are Muslim, and the majority of Muslims in Myanmar are from the Rohingya community. It is important to note that there are other ethnic groups in Myanmar whose members practice Islam, and the state religion in Myanmar is Buddhism.

Muslim and Buddhist people have lived in Myanmar for centuries. While there was previously historical conflict, religious strife intensified during British colonial rule beginning in the early 1800s. After Myanmar declared its independence from the British in 1948, various nationalist movements angled to determine future relationships between Buddhists and Muslims. Once Buddhism was declared the state religion several attempts were made to disenfranchise the Rohingya community. In particular, a 1982 law made the Rohingya community stateless, meaning they were suddenly no longer recognized as citizens and were no longer legally protected. The impact of this 1982 law further marginalized Rohingya communities socially and economically.

In the last few years, Myanmar has received much global attention, with the focus on military force, genocide, and sexual violence against members of the Rohingya community. Recent military actions and violence have forced Rohingya people to flee, leaving them displaced globally and under constant threat of violence and dehumanization in Myanmar.

### SOURCES:

Kim, Eunice E., et al. "Health Disparities among Burmese Diaspora: An Integrative Review." *The Lancet Regional Health—Southeast Asia* (2022): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2022.100083>.

Nare, Hilary. "Political Restructuring, Bureaucratization, and Minority Groups in Myanmar: The case of Rohingya from 2011 to 2018." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 49 (2021): 16-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2020.09.002>.

## ROLE OF MIDWIVES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Midwives* are healthcare workers who provide care for women, infants, and children. Public health organizations, evidence-based studies, and community members often note that midwives are essential to improving maternal, newborn, and child health outcomes. For many centuries, in Southeast Asia and around the world, midwives did not attend formal schooling or undergo formal training. Most women learned about midwifery practices from their community leaders, family members, and elders. Midwives were (and still are) regarded with high respect in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar.

Presently, in Myanmar, especially in rural areas like Rakhine, midwives mean the difference between life and death for many women and children. It is estimated that 282 women die for every 100,000 live births in Myanmar, and the majority of these deaths are preventable.

In Myanmar, 70% of the population is rural, and midwives are often the only healthcare workers in rural communities. There are several movements to streamline midwifery education and training for community midwives in Myanmar and Southeast Asia. However, a lack of formalized infrastructure in midwifery education and a large rural population mean that high-quality midwifery education and services will take time to develop.

### SOURCES:

Adnani, Qorinah, E., Gilkson, Andrea, and McAra-Couper, J. “A Historical Narrative of the Development of Midwifery Education in Indonesia.” *Women and Birth* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wombi.2022.06.007>. Bogren, Malin, et al. “Facilitators of and Barriers to Providing High-Quality Midwifery Education in South-East Asia—An Integrative Review.” *Women and Birth* 35 (2022): 199–210, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wombi.2021.06.006>.

Rogers, Everett M., and Solomon, Douglas S. “Traditional Midwives and Family Planning in Asia.” *Studies in Family Planning* 6, no. 5 (1975): 126–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1964747>. Than, Kyu Kyu, et al. “The potential of task shifting selected maternal interventions to auxiliary midwives in Myanmar: a mixed-method study.” *BMC Public Health* 19 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-5020-2>.



## HISTORY OF DIFFERENT ETHNICITIES IN MYANMAR

As mentioned, Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is an ethnically and religiously diverse country. There are approximately 135 known ethnic groups in Myanmar with unique languages, beliefs, diets, and cultural norms. Currently, the largest ethnic group is the Burman or Bamar people. The Rohingya people are the largest Muslim ethnic group. Other ethnic groups include the Kachin, Shan, Mon, Karen, and Wa. Because of Myanmar's geographical location and history of war, trade, and migration, several peoples in Myanmar can trace their heritage to the Middle East, South Asia, China, and beyond.

Before British colonization, Myanmar had several regional kingdoms over present-day Southeast Asia. When the British started their rule, interpersonal conflicts and nationalism between white British people, Indian people, and people already living in Myanmar and Southeast Asia increased and gave rise to several nationalist movements. After Myanmar gained independence from the British, the first prime minister of Myanmar, U Nu, wanted all groups to live in harmony and have the same rights and access to resources. However, U Nu's desire for unity and peace was never fully realized.

### SOURCES:

Kim, Eunice E., et al. "Health Disparities among Burmese Diaspora: An Integrative Review." *The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia* (2022): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2022.100083>.  
Nare, Hilary. "Political Restructuring, Bureaucratization, and Minority Groups in Myanmar: The case of Rohingya from 2011 to 2018." *Asian Journal of Social Science*. 49 (2021): 16-20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2020.09.002>.

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- Why do you think the film is titled *Midwives*?
- How are you feeling after viewing this film? What did it bring up for you that feels present?
- What did you learn from this film? Did you gain new insight?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
- Did anything in the film surprise you? Was anything familiar?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you want to know?

### STATE VIOLENCE AND MILITARY

- What are some roles that the international community could play in responding to a state's violence against its own people?
- One of the complexities of prosecuting state violence is that the state controls the criminal justice system. What role do you think citizens play in pushing back against their own government?
  - What are some ways people can collectively resist state violence and state power, particularly if no one is coming to their aid?
- How do you feel about the violence people experience as a result of military forces?
- In *Midwives*, there are mentions of sexual violence, bombings, murders, and other forms of violence toward Rohingya Muslims. What influence do you think this will have on Rohingya communities and their relationship with the military and government in the future?
  - What influence will learning about the violence have on other disenfranchised communities in Myanmar and globally?



## PRIVILEGE AND PREJUDICE

- There are several instances in *Midwives* in which Hla (the Buddhist midwife) and Nyo Nyo (her Rohingya Muslim midwife apprentice) enjoy each other's company and then exchange harsh words. Hla often remarks on Nyo Nyo's darker skin tone and obsession with money. Nyo Nyo often does not speak up against her. What sort of role do you think past and present ethnic and religious tensions play in their interpersonal dynamics?
  - What ways have they found to overcome some of these tensions for the sake of community wellbeing?
- Rohingya refugees have been forced to leave their land and relocate to different parts of Myanmar and globally. What do you think is the effect of separating members of communities when they resettle? What is the value of keeping these communities united and eventually resettled together? What else would you want to know about Rohingya community relations?
  - Can you think of any similar issues of family and community separation in the United States?
- What was one striking scene or comment in *Midwives* that highlighted religious or ethnic conflict?

## THE ROLE OF THE MIDWIFE

- Through her relentless community efforts and health services, Hla works to provide health to women, their babies, and other community members. She also helps Rohingya Muslims to earn income, such as by getting food for them to sell. Have you ever had to support a community in more ways than one?
  - What was that experience like?
  - What motivated you to offer your support?
- What did you learn from each woman's story about the reasons they decided to become midwives?
- In several communities, midwives play a role in promoting maternal, infant, and child health. In *Midwives* Hla states, "No one dies in my clinic." What sort of roles do you see midwives and other birth workers in your community playing?

## GENDER ROLES IN MYANMAR AND GLOBALLY

- There are several times in *Midwives* when both Hla and Nyo Nyo comment on their unhappiness in their marriages. Even Hla's mother makes remarks about it being preferable to stay single. What are some similarities you see between their marriages and marriages and relationships in your social circles and communities? What are some differences?
- Despite strong patriarchally determined gender roles, both Hla and Nyo Nyo work directly to provide care for Rohingya Muslim patients. They experience financial strain, community shame, and threats from law enforcement. What sort of influence do you think their work will have on future generations in their communities?
  - Would you consider these women "feminists"? Why or why not?
- Oftentimes, women carry the burden of maintaining cultural and social norms for a community. In a time of state violence, both Hla and Nyo Nyo work to provide care in conflict zones and put their lives on the line to help others. How do you think people perceive women who defy social norms to pursue their passions?
  - In what ways can caregiving be an act of resistance? In what ways does this film invite you to consider "care" through a political lens?

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose from these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Complete this sentence: The story of *Midwives* is important because \_\_\_\_\_.
- What question(s) do you think the filmmaker was trying to answer? Do you think she found the answers she was looking for?
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to \_\_\_\_\_.
- Additional media literacy questions are available [from POV](#).

If the group is having trouble generating ideas, these suggestions can help get things started:

- Ask political representatives for a briefing on what's happening in your community to end ethnic and religious conflict in Myanmar and what you could do to help.
- Provide support for organizations in your community that provide services to Rohingya refugees and other disenfranchised populations.
- Inform yourself on the role of state violence and media in your community.
- Learn more about the challenges survivors of state violence face, including mental health issues and poverty.
- Continue to research and learn about the struggles in Myanmar.
- Learn more about the history of the place in which you live, including untold stories and uncommon histories. Visit local libraries to guide you in finding information that may not be easy to gather.
- Talk with friends, family, peers, or acquaintances to learn more about religious, racial, or ethnic discrimination they might have witnessed or experienced.
- Stand up against persecution in your own community when you encounter it. Report acts of violence against ethnic and/or minority groups.
- Organize storytelling circles to instill a culture of sharing experiences and truth.
- Learn about the work of midwives, community health workers, and birth workers in your community.
- Participate in a workshop on active listening to develop skills to be able to listen deeply without judgment to other people's stories.

- Explore content related to *Midwives* on the [POV website](#), where you'll also find other relevant features, shorts, and digital projects, such as descriptions of the film, screening information, and interviews with the filmmaker about the process of making this film.
- [Amnesty International - Myanmar](#) helps fight abuses of human rights in Myanmar and globally. Its goals are to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws, and free people jailed just for voicing their opinions.
- [HEART Women and Girls](#) promotes sexual health and sexual violence awareness in Muslim communities through health education, advocacy, research, and training.
- [Human Rights Watch](#) investigates and reports on abuses around the world. It consists of roughly 450 people of 70-plus nationalities who are country experts, lawyers, journalists, and others who work to protect the most at risk, from vulnerable minorities and civilians in wartime, to refugees and children in need.
- [International Center for Transitional Justice](#) works with victims, civil society groups, and national and international organizations in countries that have endured massive human rights abuses to ensure redress for victims and to help prevent atrocities from occurring again.
- [International Confederation of Midwives](#) is an accredited non-governmental organization that supports, represents, and works to strengthen professional associations of midwives throughout the world.
- [United Nations Fund for Population Activities \(UNFPA\) - Myanmar](#) provides education and support regarding maternal health, reproductive health, sexual health, gender equality, and gender-based violence.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE WRITER

[Sadia Arshad](#) is a women's health nurse practitioner, reproductive justice advocate, and public health educator. She has extensive experience in reproductive and sexual health education and authentic community outreach among historically disenfranchised populations.

*Discussion Guide Producer:*  
Courtney B. Cook, PhD | POV, Education Manager  
*Copyeditor:* Natalie Danford