

Trapped in Their Own Rings: Padaung Women and Their Fight for Traditional Freedom

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Abstract

The Burmese, Padaung tribe, are known internationally for their long brass rings that collapse their collarbones, creating the illusion of an elongated neck. The tribe has been persecuted for generations, but since they have relocated to Thailand as refugees, they are trapped in their tourism-driven camps. The women now have a decision to make: take off their neck rings so they can relocate, or stay true to their tradition, and provide for their families through tourism. The Thai village officials have refused medical care, education, rightful wages, and technology to keep the camps as primitive as possible for the tourists.

This paper also discusses the Burmese military regime and how they gained power, as well as how the Padaung tribe became Burmese refugees in Thailand. This paper argues that as more individuals view the Padaung refugee camps as simply tourist attractions, more women and their families will continue to suffer. By spreading awareness, the Thai government will be forced to award relocation and essentially release these women from the decision between their freedom and their cultural tradition.

It had been a long day in Chiang Mai, Thailand. As I stepped out of the tour van, I read the sign, "Chiang Dao: Long-Neck Village" and entered the shackled-lined path.

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The first women to greet me were from hill tribes with gaged ears, black teeth, and other piercings. The friendly women spoke English and persuaded me to purchase souvenirs I had now seen at plenty night bazaars and walking streets dotting Thailand. As I made my way into the heart of the village, fabric-draped huts encircled me. The first girl I spoke to was in her early twenties—our small talk consisted of her rings and her items for sale. After purchasing a bookmark, I asked for a photo and moved on to other stands [IMAGE 1]. As I met the older women, with more rings, their difficult lives as refugees began to register. Their days were filled with continuous heat, handwoven scarves, and a desperate desire to make *some* money while posing for pictures.

After buying a few souvenirs and taking more photos, I returned to the van quicker than the tour guide expected. The hill tribe culture I witnessed was beautiful and intriguing, yet the women did not seem proud of their current circumstance or traditions. A sense of family and community was felt in the huts as I took pictures with mothers and daughters with rings, yet walking back to the van, I realized ringless tribe members were hiding in the distance, including the village's men. My experience, anticipated to be genuine, felt fabricated and heartbreaking. I ended my tour with an unexpected sense of curiosity and pity for the women in the village. I could not fully interpret my emotions; the only word I could use to describe it was eerie.

As I learned more about the women, I discovered the famous "long-neck" women of Thailand originated from a branch within the Burmese Kayan ethnic group known as the Padaung tribe. Deemed "one of the modern world's few matriarchal cultures," the Padaung women are known for the brass rings placed on their necks and legs ("The Dragon"). The elders in the tribe typically place the rings on girls' necks as young as five-years-old, the process taking over two hours (Haworth 2). John M. Keshishian, a reporter for the National Geographic, travelled to the villages and x-rayed the women. He discovered, as they continually add more coils every few years, the rings slowly collapse the rib cage and compress the chest down which creates the illusion of a long neck [IMAGE 2]. The rings can be as tall as fourteen inches and weigh as much as twenty pounds (Keshishian 798). But with time, the women "grow accustomed to the bruising and discomfort" and sleep with a pad under their necks to prevent further chafing or sores (Haworth 2).

Questioned concerning the origins of the rings, many Padaung women offer differing responses. Many reporters claim the custom began to protect women from tigers, which typically attack at the neck. Others say the rings would keep the slave traders from taking their women. One Padaung woman explains, "These are stories told by people who don't know. Some tribes have long ears; some have big knees; some have long necks. It depends on your parents. My mother had a long neck, so I have a long neck" (Mydans 1). Mu Ree, another Padaung woman laughs, "People say we wear them to protect us from tigers, not true! It's part of our Kayan tradition, our cultural identity as dragon people. We consider it beautiful" (Cadigan). Like Mu Ree, Khoo Thwe, an educated Padaung who grew up in the deeply rooted Padaung tradition, says the rings are meant to connect them to "the memory of [their] Dragon Mother" (18). Khoo Thwe says the Kayans descended from a "female dragon who mated with male human angel" (9). The elders in his tribe used the rings as a "portable family shrine" as they allowed the tribe members to "touch them only to draw on their magic-to-cure illness, [or] bless a journey" (18).

However, it is agreed the rings have always been considered beautiful by the villages, setting a standard for generations to come. One 12-year-old Padaung girl, named Madang, said, of her almost seven pounds of brass, "I like the rings because they are beautiful and because my mother wears them" (Mydans). Madang further explains some girls even cry because their family cannot afford to buy their daughters rings. Many young girls have expressed an excitement for their rings and this tradition of beauty is still strong today throughout many generations (Mydans).

An older woman in Madang's tribe asserts, "It is most beautiful when the neck is really long. The longer it is, the more beautiful it is. I will never take off my rings. I'll wear them until I die, and I'll be buried in them" (Mydans).

However, this custom shifted with Burma's heinous military history. Back in the early nineteenth century, Britain conquered and settled Burma. Through three horrendous wars, the British slowly possessed more and more of Burma's land. And in 1885, when Britain gained full control, Burma was added to British India. General Aung San successfully acquired Burmese independence from Britain after World War II. With Aung San's victory, a constitution was written in 1947, which guaranteed equal rights for Burma's numerous ethnic groups. However, the new constitution could not protect General Aung San, who was assassinated that same year alongside his cabinet members before Burma's freedom or the constitution went into effect ("History").

During the next twenty years following the assassination, unrest governed the newly independent country. A military coup took over the government in 1962 and the "regime instituted the Burmese Way to Socialism" which expelled all foreign influence and blocked all access to Burma ("History"). Even with limited access into the country for the following twenty years, news of political protests soon leaked into the western world. In Burma's largest cities, democratic protesters, many led by university students, organized peaceful rallies in the late eighties. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the beloved General Aung San, rose in 1988 as a democratic leader with her famous speech demanding a democracy in Burma [IMAGE 3]. At this particular protest, the military regime opened fire, killing an estimated 3,000 unarmed protesters and injuring many. Aung San Suu Kyi's life was spared and she now functions as the symbol for the National League for Democracy in Burma. As the regime grew stronger, the army was flooded with funds to continue their growth and strength. With forty percent of Burma's budget focused on the army, it now includes over 400,000 men ("History").

The government's racist ideology fueled their desire for a pure Burma. This desire was then ignited by the army's manpower to run all "unclean" ethnic tribes out of the country (*Don't Fence Me In*). Over 3,000 villages, lining the Thai border, have been destroyed or displaced in the past ten years ("History").

The villagers were forced to leave their homes and roam the jungle to face rape, disease, starvation, or forceful recruitment by the regime. Protesting students fled to rural areas to assist ethnic militias in their resistance of the Burmese military. And with their help, the Kayan, now the largest tribe in the area, has the strongest standing rebel militia in Burma ("History").

Many Padaung remember fleeing Burma. Two Padaung women, named Zember and Ma Lo share their family's experiences openly. Zember's father was the "headman" of her village and was therefore forced to handpick male villagers to join the regime as porters (1). The soldiers soon took over the town and lived in Zember's home, robbing her family of their already diminishing food supply. The village then fled to the jungle to find food and escape the regime's terror (Zember 1). Ma Lo illustrates, "One day ... we hid under the tree in the bush for about two hours until the army passed" (2). Many Padaung families have similar stories and experiences who also fled to Thailand for refuge. However, coiled, Padaung women have only fled one tyranny to discover another.

Today, more and more padaung women are sharing their experiences of persecution in Thailand years after their flight from Burmese violence. Seeking safety and respect, the women and their families were forced into tourism by the Thai government. Since 2008, young women have chosen to remove their rings simply to leave their camps and become eligible for relocation to another country. Many are now forced to choose between their rings and their freedom. However, the tribes have become so dependent on their minimal income from tourism, many choose to keep their rings on and remain in Thailand. Within this folkloric shift, the rings have lost their cultural beauty. Today the situation has escalated and women are no longer receiving the necessary resources or rights they deserve as refugees. Governmental organizations have been involved and will continue involvement as we raise awareness concerning the injustices of the Padaung tribe that began nearly a century ago and have only intensified with time.

Human Zoos

The longneck women have been on display since the 1930s. Sir George Scott, an early, imperial explorer wrote, "It is the get-up of the women that makes the Padaung the best-known of all the hill tribes.

In fact this has led latterly to their being brought down to Durbars for viceroys and distinguished visitors to look at" ("Hostages"). Khoo Thwe explains "Kayan captives [in his village] were often loaned to officials from Thailand, to be taken across the border and displayed at carnivals, county fairs, and 'beauty contests'" ("The Dragon"). Some were even flown as far as England for show ("The Dragon"). KhooThwe's grandmothers were sent to Europe to make the long journey with the Bertram Mills Circus and exhibited as "freaks" (28) [IMAGE 4]. KhooThwe still remembers them returning home with "English money, photographs of their travels, and accounts of strange sights and customs (moving stairs, tea-time, uncomfortable shoes)" (28). However, the Kayan women did not always return home with exciting stories of adventure. In towns like Mae Hong Son, many teenage girls were auctioned off to the police and other officials at the carnivals and fairs as personal mistresses (Mirante 154).

Over time, the human zoos became a way of life for Padaung women. Edith Mirante, a respected Burmese scholar and journalist, explains her first interaction with the women in 1985:

They posed, expecting the foreigners to photograph them. They also posed because they couldn't help it. Their movements were so restricted and stylized by gleaming brass—not only the neck spirals but coils immobilizing their knees as well—that they carried themselves like languid, elegant fashion models. (Mirante 115)

In the late eighties, not long after Mirante's experience, a man named Moli perpetuated the unjust tourism. He kidnapping three ringed, Padaung women and took them to a restricted Karenni base in Burma near the border. Journalists soon rode wooden motorboats to visit the women; the journalists included a French photographer who published the photos of "les femmes girafes" in magazines and comic books back in Europe [IMAGE 5] ("Hostages"). On the Karenni base, Moli organized a "Miss Hill Tribe" beauty contest. The local Padaung protested, claiming the "women were not 'animals in a zoo,'" but with Thai threats to shut down the trade market in the camp, the pageant continued. The three kidnapped women remained in "a walled enclosure" for the next three days as tourists and Thai officials observed them weave, eat, and sing ("Hostages").

With a request for the women to be sent to the large city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, the women were soon removed from their main tribe and scattered throughout Thailand. The Karenni men refused the initial request, fearing the women would not return. But the Burmese government began to attack their camp, causing them to settle on Thai soil and send women to Chiang Mai. The new settlement, now in Thailand, became the Mae Hong Son Resort. Signs were soon posted which read "Padawn Hilltribe Now Available" and tourists flooded in to see the "real primitive hilltribes in the Thai jungle" ("Hostages").

A craze followed. Foreign tourists flooded the Thai/Burma border to sneak a peek at the now acclaimed long-neck women. "Tribal Trekking Tours" arose where tourists could take Jeeps, bamboo rafts, and buses to visit the Kayan hill tribes. The Padaung tribe soon grew in popularity and the tours spread to the other settlements in Chiang Mai. The trekkers have been said to encourage opium, abuse, and even harassment toward the tribal women ("Hostages"). Some tourists complained about the Padaung women's detached attitude so the women were then forced, by the Thai officials, to sing and play music. As lionization grew, the Padaung way of life was forever altered; ethnic villages transformed into souvenir stands pandering with camera-flashing tourists ("Hostages").

Padaung in Thailand

Since the 1980s, thousands of Kayan have crossed the border and Mae Hong Son now holds over 23,000 Burmese refugees (Zember 1). Chanerin Samintarapanya, Mae Hong Son's public relations officer, informed *The Bangkok Post*, "the long-neck Karen hilltribe, called Padawn, is expected to attract a large number of visitors to the fair" ("Hostages"). With the excitement of a new attraction, the refugee commissioners agreed to place the Padaung tribe outside of the official refugee camp. The ringed families were put in separate areas, a few yards away from the settlement and unfortunately human trafficking continued (Harding 1).

In 1997, *Times* journalist, Andrew Drummond exposed an artificial village in Chiang Mai, which held kidnapped Padaung women. With the entrance guarded by machine guns, the villagers were kept inside with little to no resources (Cadigan).

Local police stated, "We believe that the only purpose for their kidnapping is for exhibition in these tourist camps over the peak holiday season which is beginning now and will continue over Christmas" (Drummond). Andrew Drummond was able to free the town and turn the perpetrators into the government, but the kidnapers were acquitted and shortly after boasted that the long-neck camps in Chiang Mai were their doing (Drummond). Drummond was later quoted to exclaim, "We closed down the camp and the tourism industry condemned the unscrupulous businessmen. But nothing actually happened to the people in charge. All the charges were dropped. And today there are more long neck villages than ever, all working illegally. It's appalling exploitation" (Cadigan).

Currently, the Padaung refugees continue to flood in from Burma seeking protection and stability. Unfortunately, the persecution simply found a new outlet: tourism. The ringed villagers are forced to live in primitive conditions with little to no rights. They do not have access to healthcare, education, transportation, citizenship, or replacement. Trapped in their villages, unable to relocate, the tribes are truly "hostages of tourism" as Edith Mirante claims.

Tourism

With over 40,000 visitors a year (Haworth 1), each village of Padaung charges entrance fees which flows into the Thai economy leaving only a fraction of this charge for the Padaung individuals (Levett 1). Ma Lo, an educated young mother living in Mae Hong Son, said, "Even my friends have to pay to come see me. We do not want people to pay, but it is not us who make them pay" (3). Women who have rings are paid an average of 1500 baht (50\$) a month to be in the village on display, however, during the rainy season there are few tourists, and many receive no salary (Zember 1). These women are then left to sell trinkets and souvenirs for tourists who enter their village to witness their long necks day after day.

The villages are kept primitive so the tourists will feel they have as genuine experience possible. Ma Lo shares that the Thai women who ran her village did not allow her to study or work. Threatened to have her wages and food taken away, she was forced to stay in view of the tourists (4). The women are also punished if they are seen on motor bikes, getting an education, using a cell phone or computer, or leaving the village (Haworth 1).

Zember, one of the first to remove her rings, who also lived in Mae Hong Son, told one reporter her wages were docked if she discussed her "plight," so she "smile[d] and [said] nothing" (Haworth 1). Zember also shared, "The tourists think we are a primitive people; the guides say they don't want to see good roads, or clean villages or anything modern, so we have to live like this to please the tourists" (1). Zember and Ma Lo's village, along with many others, do not have access to telephones, proper sanitation, or electricity (Zember 1). Leaflets are handed to tourists and spread false information regarding the medical and educational assistance to the village (Meo). The villages are designed for tourists to enjoy their visit and not for the Padaung to enjoy their daily life. Edith Mirante shares an example of this: "At one refugee village, a board painted with Kayan likenesses, minus faces, was set up so that tourists could poke their own heads through for a comic photo-op. Thai tour agencies displayed posters and postcards advertising the Padaungs (Kayans) as 'one of the hill tribes of Thailand' ("Dragon"). Funds are spent on keeping the village a delightful experience for tourists, yet no funds trickle down to the villager's health or education.

Education and Healthcare

The Thai officials' tight restraint keeps the women from accessing an education or sufficient medical attention. Zember explains that more and more women are kept from an education due to their rings, "Ours is the first generation who can read and write. Most women have very little education" (Levett 2). The women who are able to attend school must leave early to be in the village when tourists arrive (Zember 1). Zember later expounds on her frustration when she says, "When I stay here in the village, I make money from tourists, and I don't like that way. I don't want to earn money from other people [looking at me]. I want to get my own education, work by myself and own by myself" (Levett 3). Bridget Robinson, a volunteer who has spent substantial time with young Kayans, has blamed the Thai authorities for withholding educational resources from the village. She says, "The tourists want primitive, so they are not allowed to develop in any way. But you have these young women who are ambitious and want to have a future" (Meo).

Along with lack of schooling, Padaung refugees are deprived of decent medical necessities. Zember is still haunted by the death of her friend Ma Da. Zember illustrates, "She complained of stomach pains, but we had no doctor and she died. That could happen to any of us" (Haworth 1). Ma Lo explains that the conditions were so bad at one time that she got Malaria ten times in two years (2).

Hospital care is relatively expensive in Thailand, and non-governmental organizations only aid refugees in official camps, therefore, the Padaung, living in their artificial, primitive villages are outside the spectrum of care (Zember 1). Treatment for refugees only costs around 30 baht (\$1), however the Thai officials in Mae Hong son do not offer this or any other treatment.

Refugee Relocation Rights

In 2005, the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees opened registration for resettlement to over 50,000 refugees in the Mae Hong Son area but Padaung families were unable to leave (Levett 3). Nearly every family applied, three of which were Padaung. Two of these families, including Zember's, were accepted to move to New Zealand where a house was already located for them. In order to leave the country, Zember's family still needed exit permits, which Governor ThongchaiWarianthong would not sign (Haworth 1).

Three years later Abigail Haworth, a *Marie Claire Magazine* reporter, discovered the injustices inflicting the Padaung woman. Haworth exposed the Thai government for denying the Padaung women resettlement, a right all other refugees in Thailand possessed. She sought an interview with Governor Warianthong, but when the purpose of the interview became known, he refused to meet with her (1). The following week, a statement was released by the Governor's office, claiming the Kayan people are "happy and comfortable with their lives." (1). When working with non-governmental organizations the governor was also reported to describe the tribe as: "An endangered species on the verge of extinction which needs protection" (Levett 3).

After the denial of the deserved departures, a plan was announced to "consolidate all three long-neck villages in one place, to preserve their culture and make one tourist centre" (Levett 3). The new project was called Huay Pu Keng and it offered villagers freedom from a Thai controller and foreign tourists. However, Ma Lo testifies Warianthong promised Huay Pu Keng a school, a road, and a bridge across the river, yet no progress has been made. Ma Lo describes Huay Pu Keng as "freer" but, she also says "we have no money" after leaving the tourists and the village struggles to survive (5). Other Thai government officers published statements regarding the resettlement of Padaung women. The Mae Hong Son Governor, Direk Kornkleep, released the following statement to the Chiang Mai News:

A New Zealand non-government organisation has interviewed the long-necks for selection of relocation, and the New Zealand Government will build a village for them. If this is the case, no more visitors would come to Mae Hong Son. The Mae Hong Son administration had requested the Ministry of Interior to withhold their exit permit and set up this Long Neck Cultural Conservation Village (HwayPuKeng). (Levett 1)

Ma Lo moved with her daughter and husband to the village, but Zember remained in Nai Soi with her family. Huay Pu Keng developed a small website where the villages' neglect is discussed openly. Zember and Ma Lo both wrote their life experiences and published them on the website to share their message.

Two years after the UN opened application for relocation, 20,878 refugees had left Thailand to other countries such as Finland, New Zealand, Canada, The United States, and Norway ("Departures").

However, over 124,300 registered refugees still inhabited the borders of Thailand, including Zember's family (1). Zember spoke of her frustration on Huay Pu Keng's website, stating: "One thing we know is that we are really refugees; we are victims of war and we have UNHCR registration papers and the Thai authorities gave us BMN status; this means they accept we are refugees. Why can't they let us leave? We want to escape. I just want to leave Thailand" (Zember 3).

Other officials feel Zember's resentment as well. Kitty McKinsey, the UN Refugee Agency's spokeswoman, declared, "As official refugees, the Kayans have a right either to resettle abroad or to full Thai citizenship. They are being given neither" (Haworth 1). The Thai officials' response to this claim from the UN is that the Kayan are registered as a "Thai Hill Tribe" not refugees, so they "do not have the right to seek asylum" (Levett 2). McKinsey responds, "They absolutely are refugees, it comes as a great surprise that the Thai authorities are criticising them for living outside the camps, when it was the Thai authorities who wanted them to live (outside)" (Harding 1).

Other officials all over the world have added their voices to the discussion. Corien Jonker, a Dutch parliamentarian, speaking of the hilltribes, declares Thailand needs workers. "It is absurd to see these vast open lands around the camps and then to see all these people living in cramped conditions" he says, "It would be much better for them and for Thailand if they could go out and farm to earn a living and support themselves" ("Dutch"). However, the villagers are given only one option to earn money for their families: tourism.

A Shifting of Tradition

Due to the pressures of life in Thailand, the Padaung rings have taken on a new meaning. Girls are now forced to choose between their culture and their freedom. Ma Lo expressed the choice as follows, "If we still keep the tradition they would be very happy, but I also want to be educated and I don't want anyone to control me" (2). In 2006, Ma Lo chose to remove her rings claiming if she kept them on, she would "have no opportunity to improve [her] life or travel anywhere" (4). She loves her tradition still, but she eloquently states, "our tradition is not about tourists" (5).

Zember also removed her rings and feels very similarly to her friend Ma Lo. Zember says, "I want to keep my tradition but we are suffering because of these rings" (Meo). Zember openly discusses her ring removal as a sign of protest of her captivity in Thailand [IMAGE 6] (Haworth 1). However, she and Ma Lo removing their rings is by no means a common practice outside of a few other girls. In fact, more and more young girls are choosing to wear the rings for monetary reasons (Sabatello 86). Many camp administrators pressure the women to keep the rings, and ringed women are the main source of income for their families. Mateu, a Padaung 24-year-old with a 12-inch coil says, "In Burma, if a girl doesn't want a long neck, nevermind. But here it's different. If there are no long-necked women, nobody will come to see us and we will have no money" (Mydans 1). This became the new way of life; extremely young girls now begin wearing rings to remain in Thailand and make money ("The Dragon"). The custom has transformed and no longer holds the beauty it once did for the Padaung people. Ma Lo defined her rings "a prison" before she removed them (4) and Zember hopes her future children will have a better life than hers in the village (2).

Boycotts

Many tourists, government officials, and Thai locals have begun to boycott the Thai long neck villages. Controversy surrounds this decision, simply because the tribe's main source of income is tourists purchasing souvenirs from their stands. However, many believe the Thai government will back down and allow resettlement if the "human zoo" business slowly diminishes. The UN, as well as Kitty McKinsey, both offer this boycott as a solution (Harding 1).

Some tour companies in Chiang Mai and near Mae Hong Son now refuse to offer the long neck trip to tourists ("The Karen People"). Yet, most tourists are completely ignorant of the Padaung living conditions and fully believe the pamphlets and tour-driven information, just as I did. However, in the past years, more and more press has been released concerning the Padaung and other Kayan's long deserved freedom.

As the situation for the Padaung becomes well known, the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) will be forced to right the wrongs of the Padaung refugees. More coiled women will find true refuge in other countries around the world without removing their rings.

These women will be able live lives of freedom with their families in countries that have already accepted their relocation request. With awareness comes change and Zember and her family are an example of the life possible for more Padaung women.

As Zember received more and more attention from international press, she became a figurehead for the Padaung movement. And in 2008, Zember, her sister and brother-in-law were awarded their relocation to New Zealand. She currently lives in a home provided by the Nelson Refugee Services and is studying at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology and taking English classes with other refugees in the area ("Fitting In"). The transition has been difficult but Zember says, "I am really proud of myself. When I go to school, I learn new things. Everyday, I am happy here" ("Fitting In").

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Image 1:



Image 2:

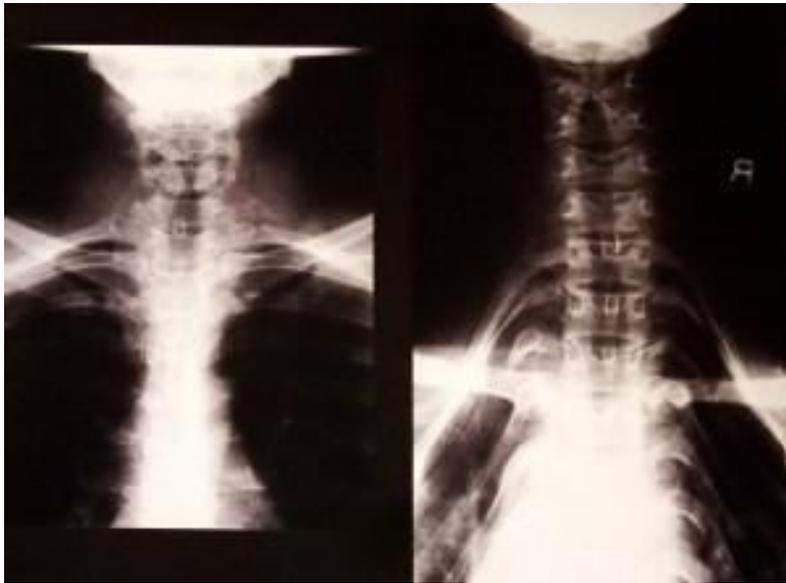


Image 3:



Image 4:

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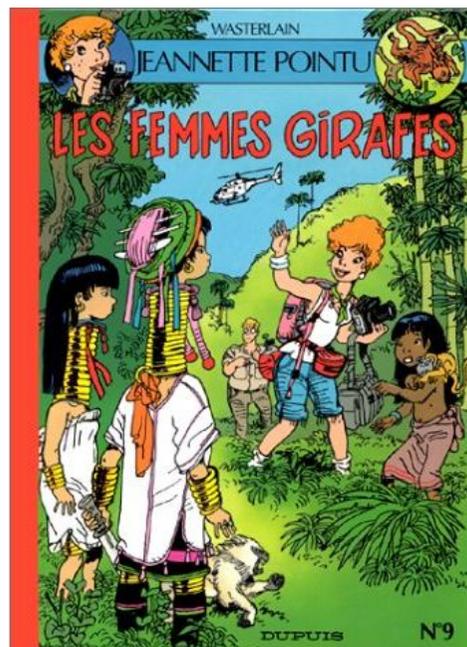


Image 6:



Zember with and without rings, sitting next to her mother.