

Moving forward: Mothers fighting for human rights in Burma

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"Toe a ye, toe a ye!"

"Our cause, EiAV5N6-01.jpg our cause!" The voices of thousands of women have been getting louder day by day since the military regime took power in 1962. It is undeniable that women have been taking part in most protests against the military regime for decades. The first question that comes to mind is why are women getting involved in protests or human rights campaigns? A second question follows: who guarantees their lives while they fight for human rights?

Not every woman has such a brave heart. Participating in the human rights movement is highly risky in Burma. Why are these women brave enough to join the human rights movement?

Women, whether rich or poor, whether educated or uneducated, are seen as inferior to men. The low status of women in society does not allow them to enjoy their rights. Women living in any patriarchal society that differentiates gender roles inside and outside the home are excluded from participating in the political sphere. Burmese women are no exception to this, with the traditional belief prevalent that women are inferior to men (regardless of which ethnic community it is). A well known Burmese idiom says, "Thar ko tha hkin, lin ko hpa ya," which means that a woman has to respect her son as a boss, and at the same time her husband as a god. In addition to this, the military regime militarized Burmese society, which further marginalized women in political activities and subjected a large proportion of the population to widespread and gender based human rights violations.

Some women started opposing socially or culturally framed beliefs and taking part in human rights activities in their own corners of the country. This was the time when thousands of Burmese men were imprisoned or forced to flee the country during the 1988 uprising. With compassion and total dedication, women stood by their families while reinforcing the leadership of the weakened opposition movement—a truly heroic undertaking.

Women have always been in the forefront of efforts in Burma to combat oppression and promote democracy, and their involvement has grown deeper and stronger since the late 1990s. They have shown themselves ever more ready to confront the authorities and defy successive crackdowns. They are brave enough to talk back to police and authorities. No matter how dangerous, many women are still going forwards to protect individual rights and reach the destination of democracy. Who are they? They are our mothers.

We find mothers fighting against the dictatorship that has prevented them from leading a dignified life, some of them taking up arms, some taking up pens, some gathering people to take part in discussions and demonstrations; all to bring down the dictatorship, from every corner of the country, in any way that they can.

Most of these women join the opposition party, NLD (National League for Democracy), from where they create campaigns for human rights, farmers' land rights, against forced labour, and join public protests. They also take part in humanitarian work such as helping families of political prisoners, HIV/AIDS patients and victims of natural disasters.

Women want to end the military dictatorship, they want real democracy, complete with personal freedoms and human rights. They want to create a good future for their country and their children, so they may live in a peaceful society, not in fear of state violence. Their hopes are simply for safer, better lives for their children and families, which eventually extends to ordinary Burmese people.

These mothers have a better understanding of why they are struggling for democracy and what their beliefs are. They want democracy in which they can exercise their basic rights, and strongly believe that genuine democracy cannot be obtained without a recognition of human rights. According to them, freedom is the only way to promote Burma's development. At present, people cannot even think about the word 'freedom'. In response, women sacrifice themselves to obtain freedom.

"We do not request, but demand our rights, which are born together with us"--woman activist

While mothers play an important role in human rights activities, they also remain the pillar supporting their home and families. They are likely aware that if they do nothing for authentic democracy in their times, their children will face a worse situation. Instead of pursuing their personal happiness, they serve others who need help. At the end of the day, they believe this is the way to create a happy life for their children.

As mothers, they often face difficulties, including separation from their family and community. Ms Nilar Thein for instance, is currently serving a 65-year prison sentence and separated from her infant daughter, for participating in the 2007 protests. She had to leave her four-month-old daughter and family to escape from the authorities, but she was finally arrested on 10 September 2008, becoming one of more than 400 women prisoners who have fought for democracy in Burma. Before her arrest, Nilar Thein disclosed in The Irrawaddy about where she had been hiding, and that she knew she would be imprisoned and separated from her baby for participation in the protests.

"I want to bring about a bright future for my daughter and I love my daughter. I had to leave her, but I believe she will later understand why," she said. "We will face a more terrible situation in the future if I did nothing. My daughter will not be able to enjoy a good life otherwise."

Nilar Thein is not the only mother who risked the wrath of the authorities and jeopardized her family and her life. Dozens of women from the opposition NLD braved the taunts and brutality of thugs who broke up their peaceful demonstrations.

Burma's archaic Penal Code criminalizes any opinion, assembly or the forming of any group that expresses something against the state. This legalizes the arrest of all activists. Taking part in peaceful marches or even possessing video footage of demonstrations is considered a crime under the Penal Code.

Many mother activists have been charged under section 505(b) of the Penal Code which prohibits making, publishing, or circulating "any statement, rumour, or report... likely to cause fear or alarm to the public or to any section of the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offense against the State or against public tranquillity". Making use of this article, the authorities usually claim that the demonstrations are intended to create unrest.

After being detained, they were reportedly tortured during interrogation. Most of them are then sentenced to a minimum of 2-3 years, and a maximum of 65 years. For political prisoners, there is no fair trial under the military authority. Most trials are held in closed proceedings with restricted public access.

Lawyers who protest against unfair trials and the actions of judges and prosecutors are charged and imprisoned for contempt of court. Accordingly, the victims are denied their right to have legal representation.

Today, after two amnesties in 2011, among the 1800 political prisoners remaining in prison, there are more than 600 women prisoners. They are our mothers.

Experience in prison strengthens feminine empathy

All prisons in Burma contain political prisoners who participated in opposition party activities. The police watch every corner and are always ready to arrest them. The level of human rights violations and the abuse of power in Burma cannot be compared to other countries. As the prisons are far away from home, women political detainees find it difficult to communicate with their family members, particularly their children.

Cho Cho Lwin, 37-years-old, is one of the 10 women activists set free from prison, on 17 May 2011, according to Order 28/ 2011 regarding the amnesty. She used to be a member of the NLD, and participated in many human rights activities. She testified that in September 2009, the police arrested her after she complained against police officers who prevented her and her friends from donating food to monks in a monastery. At that time her son was 6-years-old and her husband was on a trip. On 26 February 2010, a court sentenced her to two-years imprisonment in accordance with section 505(b) of the Penal Code. She was discriminated against and abused in prison by the officials. She said it was the most devastating experience of her lifetime. She did not get proper food and medicines if she clashed with the prison guards. According to her, the women guards treated her worse than the male guards.

Most political prisoners are not allowed to go out for a walk or exercise. Soon Cho Cho Lwin felt uncomfortable and suffocated. She and other prisoners requested to be allowed to take a walk in the prison campus. The reply from the prison officials was negative however: "You all are prisoners, you don't deserve what other people are doing and don't have a chance to make any requests."

After this event, they were monitored by the guards more closely. Even when they took a bath or went to the toilet, the guards kept a close watch on them.

Women prisoners face various health issues due to a lack of hygiene and health services in the prisons. The guards usually suggest the women take care of their sicknesses by themselves, without providing any medicines or allowing them to obtain medical advice. Sometimes the guards would themselves administer injections to the prisoners.

"I tried to take care of my health well," said Cho Cho Lwin. "If I was not feeling well, it would influence my mentality. I will be collapsed otherwise. I miss my son and my family. But, I try not to think about them much. I will not be able to sleep otherwise. Democracy is the only way to give freedom to the people. I have to sacrifice for it."

On 17 May 2011, her name was included in the list of prisoners given amnesty. Seeing her son again was the most pleasant moment in her life.

After her release however, she was unhappy that more than 600 women were left in the prisons. She decided that she would continue working for those remaining in the prisons, and for those deprived of human rights. Her experience in prison strengthened her motivation and feminine empathy, which can only lead to a stronger commitment for the future.

Many women activists went through similar experiences as Cho Cho Lwin in prison. Some might also have lost their property or family members. Even after their release, they are not totally safe as they can be easily rearrested.

This is affirmed by Su Su Nway, an activist struggling against forced labour, soon after being released from prison: "I take my prison uniform with me because I know that I will have to go back to jail until Burma achieves democracy."

Something else that the women take back with them from prison is strong discipline. The challenges they face there make them stronger, and prepare them for any further difficulties life may throw at them.

Although women human rights defenders are put in prison to silence their voices when they come up against the state's cruel system, the state does not realize that perhaps, placing them in prison is not an end but a turning point for their work, and may strengthen their resolve towards democracy.

"Women, with their capacity for compassion and self-sacrifice, their courage and perseverance, have done much to dissipate the darkness of intolerance and hate, suffering and despair," says Aung San Su Kyi, the Burmese political leader and the General Secretary of NLD, always encouraging women in the frontline of human rights and democracy.

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