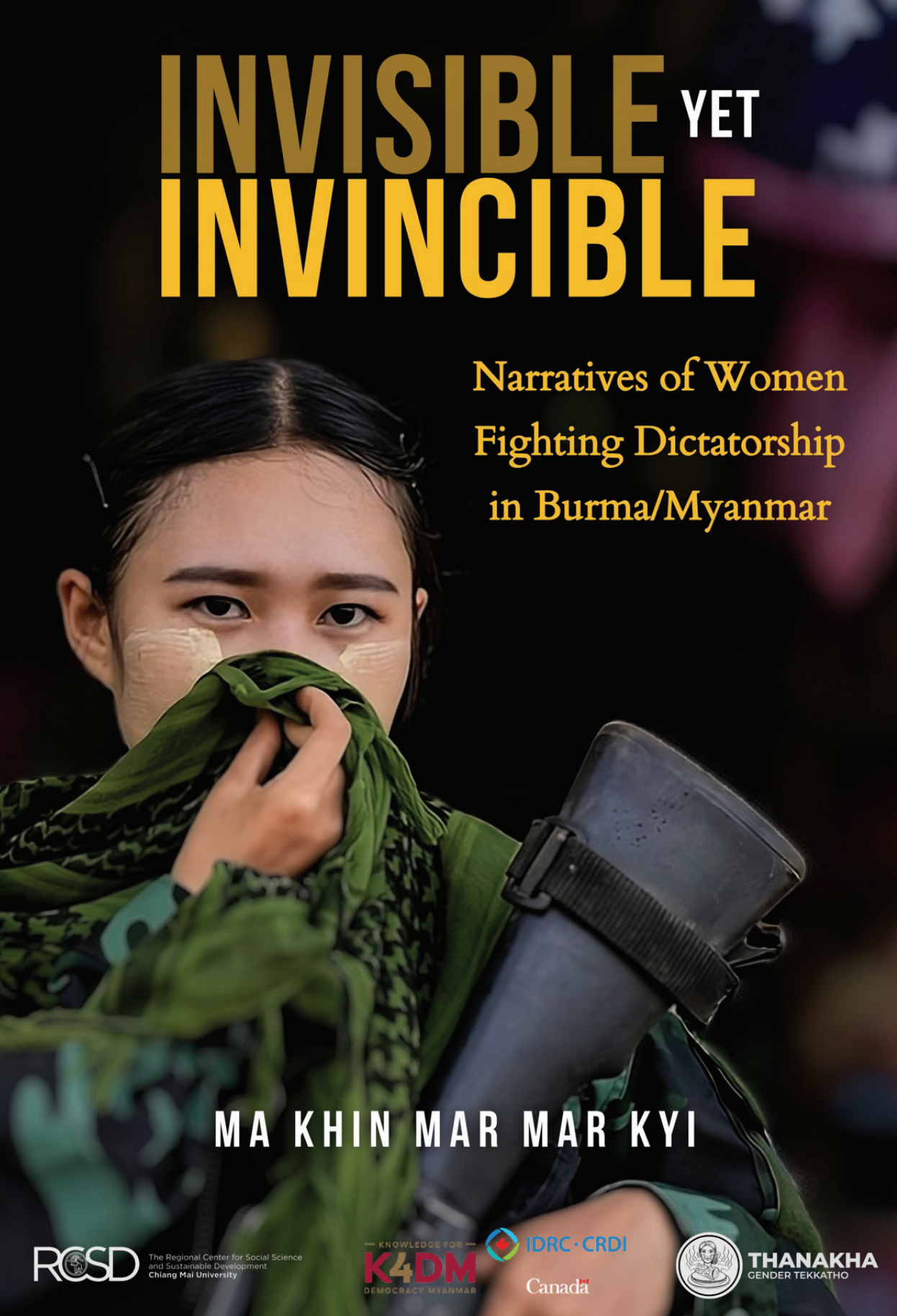
INVISIBLE YET INVINCIBLE

Narratives of Women Fighting Dictatorship in Burma/Myanmar



MA KHIN MAR MAR KYI

RCSD The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development Chiang Mai University

KNOWLEDGE FOR K4DM DEMOCRACY MYANMAR

IDRC · CRDI Canada

THANAKHA GENDER TEKKATHO

INVISIBLE YET INVINCIBLE

Narratives of Women Fighting Dictatorship in Burma/Myanmar

Review Comments

Written, assembled, and contextualized by the redoubtable Dr. Mar, this is a magnificent testimony to the heroines of its title. *Invisible yet Invincible* will stand as a monument to the struggle for freedom it describes. More than that, it is a part of this very struggle itself. My gratitude, and the awe in which I hold these women, is without limit.

—Prof. Sean Turnell, *Macquarie University, Australia*
former economic policy advisor to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi
and author of An Unlikely Prisoner

Invisible yet Invincible stands as a rare and invaluable work. What makes this volume particularly unique is its perspective. It dispels the claim that the push for gender equality in Myanmar is merely a recent foreign import, making it clear that the local feminist movement has been birthed from a demand arising from women who have been systematically marginalized for far too long. Perhaps most powerfully, it disrupts the dominant patriarchal discourse by reclaiming women's agency in Myanmar. It is a call to action, urging readers to acknowledge and amplify the voices of women who, though historically invisible, have proven to be invincible. This volume is groundbreaking as a scholarly resource and an essential contribution to women's history, feminist theories, Southeast Asian studies, and the broader discourse on gender and social movements.

—Prof. Miemie Wynn Byrd, *The Daniel K. Inouye*
Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, USA

Extremely valuable historical evidence of women's history in Myanmar, as well as of the 2021 coup and its aftermath…A treasured resource.

—Dr. Petra Mahy, *Melbourne University, Australia*

Among refreshing and original contributions, this book is unusual in many ways, most notably with its centering of Burmese women's history with which Dr. Mar aims to remediate the omission of women from official histories. She reveals that even over hundred years ago Burmese women collaborated with world-acclaimed feminist leaders including Carrie Chapman Catt. The narratives of the invisible yet invincible heroines featured in this book reveal a long overdue chronicle. For gender and women's studies, women's history, and other courses concerned with global movements for equality, I highly recommend this book.

—Dr. Tobe Levin von Gleichen, *Hutchins Center for African*
and African American Research, Harvard University, USA

ISBN:

Copy Editor and Layout Design: Garrett Kostin
Cover Design: Suphaloek Kaeokula
Cover Photo © Antonio Ponce Aguilar, Deutsche Welle (DW)
Back Cover Artwork © Chuu Wai, Art Director, Thanakha Gender Tekkatho
Printed by: Wanida Press, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Thanakha Tekkatho Gender Studies Publication Series
Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University
239 Huay Kaew Road, Suthep Sub-district, Muang District,
Chiang Mai, Thailand 50200
Telephone: 66 (0) 5394 3595-6
Fax: 66 (0) 5389 3279
Email: rcsd@cmu.ac.th, drmaroxford@gmail.com
Website: www.rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th

INVISIBLE YET INVINCIBLE

Narratives of Women Fighting Dictatorship in Burma/Myanmar

MA KHIN MAR MAR KYI

This book is a critical component of the Thanakha Tekkatho Gender Studies publication series, which endeavors to compile the first comprehensive record of Myanmar women's leading roles in political and social revolutions for gender equality, peace, and justice in Burma/Myanmar. The Thanakha Tekkatho Gender Studies publication series includes volumes on both Women's Ancestry History and Women's Oral History.

Thanakha Tekkatho Gender Studies Publication Series
Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)
Faculty of Social Sciences
Chiang Mai University

THANAKHA
GENDER TEKKATHO

About Thanakha Gender Tekkatho

Research, resources, and resolutions in support of knowledge-based dialogic democracy for social change and gender equality

Thanakha is a natural cosmetic and one of the most prized forms of Myanmar's tangible cultural heritage. People of all ages, genders, religions, ethnicities, and political affiliations use the ground bark of the *thanakha* (sandalwood, *Limonia acidissma*) tree to create a paste with which to adorn their faces. It is believed that *thanakha* not only has healing properties, but can prevent harmful elements from affecting the wearer, as well as rejuvenate and revitalize their skin. *Thanakha* represents the values of inclusiveness and non-discrimination amongst the peoples of Myanmar regardless of differences.

Thanakha Gender Tekkatho, also known as Oxford Thanakha International, was established on February 5, 2021 as the first formal dialogic initiative in response to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Employing *thanakha* as a metaphor, Thanakha Gender Tekkatho aims to cultivate and regenerate the shared values of inclusion, equality, and belonging in Burmese culture and society through research-based transformative actions utilizing knowledge and dialogic education for social change. In collaboration with international universities, organizations, and individuals—including the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University—Thanakha Gender Tekkatho organized a series of 67 international webinars within the first six months following the coup. These online seminars were broadcast through various Myanmar media and attracted more than seven million viewers.

Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's contributors include female university professors and senior researchers, anthropologists, members of parliament, young activists and scholars, community leaders, and student volunteers from Burma/Myanmar, as well as international scholars from the UK, US, Australia, and Asia. While our research director Dr. Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi is responsible for overseeing research, publications, and activities of applied education and anthropology for gender equality and social change, our research team is led by H.E. Daw Aye Mya Mya Myo (spokesperson of the Women's MP Network), Prof. Mya Aung, Prof. Moe Lay, Prof. Lei Shwe Sin Myint, Prof. Hla Hla Kyi, Dr. Cathy Tun, Dr. Htura, Saya Phyo Wai, Teacher SS, Daw Ketumala (Uppalavan), Khaing Lay (Yu Mon Khaing), and Billy Minn (Ph.D. candidate, Manchester University). Chuu Wai serves as art director, while Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's extensive library is managed single-handedly by Saya Nay. We are grateful to have the assistance of Scott (Paing Paing), Ma Nwe, Thet Thet, Natalie, and many other scholars and students whose names are ommitted for security reasons.

The Thanakha Tekkatho Gender Studies publication series of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University aims to publish a collection of publications focusing on issues of gender in Burma/Myanmar and beyond with the goal of engaging, educating, and inspiring those who are interested in gender studies and empowerment for all. Forthcoming titles in the Women's Oral History series include *Scholars of the Spring Revolution: Education, Gender, and Social Change*, *Fearless: Narratives of Intergenerational Female Political Prisoners for Liberation*, *Women who Lead: Female Politicians in Liberation and the Sarong Revolution,* and *Iron Ladies: Women Politicians in Myanmar*. As part of the Women's Ancestry History series, the next titles planned are *Threads Under Threat: Activism, Feminism, and the Politics of Patriarchy in Burma/Myanmar* and *'Main-Ma-Nyan': Burmese Women's Wit and Wisdom for Liberation and Peace.*

www.facebook.com/TheOxfordThanakhaInternational
email: Thanakha.Team@gmail.com

DEDICATION

For each and every woman fighting for peace, equality, justice, and freedom with courage, resilience, and main-ma-nyan *in Burma/Myanmar and beyond!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi (Dr. Mar) is the University of Oxford's inaugural Burmese Female Senior Scholar focusing on gender studies. Dr. Mar previously served as the convener of International Gender Studies at the University of Oxford. She is the winner of the Australian Gender Institute's 'Excellence in Gender Research' award and is the sole recipient of the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Trust Gender Scholar award. In 2013, Dr. Mar produced the acclaimed documentary film *Dreams of Dutiful Daughters* about female migrant workers from Burma/Myanmar.

As research director, she leads the Thanakha Gender Studies publication series of the Regional Center for Sustainable Development and Social Science (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University (CMU). Currently, she is a Senior Visiting Scholar at CMU's Women's Studies Center. Apart from teaching and research, she also serves as a senior gender consultant, country advisor, and board member of numerous organizations and institutions working on Burma/Myanmar issues. Dr. Mar can be contacted at drmaoxford@gmail.com.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Seeds of a democratic spring have been sprouting in Burma/Myanmar for the past four-plus years since the 2021 military coup largely due to the bravery, strength, and sacrifices of females. First and foremost, I would like to express deep gratitude and respect to all women of Myanmar throughout the generations who have fought valiantly without being fully appreciated or properly recognized in the histories of our country. As these women warriors have sacrificed their lives and livelihoods for equality, peace, and freedom for all, whether historical revolutionaries or modern-day CDMers, I acknowledge their courage, convictions, and commitment for our country and our future generations.

I would like to deeply thank Ajarn Chayan Vaddhanaphuti at Chiang Mai University, who I have had the good fortune to know for over 20 years. Ajarn Chayan has long served as a strong pillar of support not only for research on Burma/Myanmar, but also for scholars and students from our country. He is an inspirational mentor and I am eternally grateful for his generosity, wisdom, unwavering leadership, and personal support to me and to Thanakha Gender Tekkatho. Since 2021, he has served as an esteemed advisor for Thanakha Gender Tekkatho.

I thank the wonderful staff and associates of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University, including Chanida Puranapan and Chongnang Likittraka. I would especially like to thank Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen for her advice, collaboration, and support of our busy activities since we initially started as Oxford Thanakha International. Saya Kyaw, I very much appreciate your kindness and wonderful support.

The initial success of Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's Women's Ancestry History and Women's Oral History initiatives would not have been possible without the generosity, wisdom, and support of Mr. Matthew Pietz, who helped us grow. Together with his colleague Choo Phuah, Matt Pietz, now Chief of Party of the Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program (DISP)

at the Institute of International Education, deserves much credit for the early success of Thanakha Gender Tekkatho. With the support of Dr. Edgard Rodriguez and the Canadian government's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Thanakha Gender Tekkatho has been able to facilitate numerous gender studies classes and a well-received webinar series in addition to two Myanmar women's symposiums and an exhibition ("Threads Under Threat: Myanmar Women Out of the 3-Year Coup Shadow") in Bangkok. Both Dr. Rodriguez and the IDRC are deeply appreciated.

I owe a debt of gratitude to our editing team. First and foremost, Richa Parikh who volunteered to edit many women's narratives patiently and compassionately while maintaining an inspiring interest in the stories of these brave women, as well as Ko Phyo Wai, who has always been always a great brother to Thanakha Gender Tekkatho, for his translation work. Particular appreciation goes to the RCSD editorial team ably headed by Charlotte Trenk-Hinterberger, who not only provided guidance and advice, but also emotional support. Additionally, I am very grateful to Garrett Kostin, director of Burma Study Center in Chiang Mai, who not only passionately and carefully edited the manuscript, but also led the layout and design of this volume with extraordinary generosity. He treated this project as if it were his own. This publication has been greatly enhanced due to Garrett's generous concern and attention to detail. Thank you.

Gratitude is also due to the reviewers of early drafts of this book, including Dr. Petra Mahy of University of Melbourne and Dr. Tobe Levin von Gleichen of Harvard University, who took time out of their busy schedules to provide helpful comments and suggestions. Dr. Mahy has been a scholar whose passion, integrity, and intellect has inspired me greatly, while the friendship of Dr. Tobe is priceless. I am also grateful to my dearest sister, Professor Miemie Wynn Byrd (Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center, Honolulu), for her commitment, sacrifice, and generosity. Additionally, my one and only dearest brother, a great scholar and friend of Burma, Professor Sean Turnell (Macquarie University, Australia): thank you for finding time in your extremely busy schedule to carefully read and review this volume. It is such an honor for the women of Burma to know how much you admire and respect females from our country. Thank you, Sean! You are our man!

I would like to thank Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's board of directors, senior advisors, and supporting institutions that have contributed to the work of our organization since it was first established at the University of Oxford as Oxford Thanakha International. First and foremost, thanks to my sister Prof. Miemie Wynn Byrd and her husband, Dr. John Byrd (director, U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency) for their continual support. Thanks also goes to the wisdom and experience of Dr. Tin Myaing Thein (executive director, Pacific Gateway Center, Hawaii). I have learned so many lessons from you. Lady Sian Crisp (former board member, the International Gender Studies Center at University of Oxford) has always been a role model and a dear sister to me in Oxford, as was the late Dr. Lidia Sciama (former director of Oxford's International Gender Studies Center), who treated me like her own daughter. I shall always be grateful for your wit and wisdom and miss you dearly. Naw Esther Kyaw also deserves recognition and gratitude as one who has long assisted refugees from Burma rebuild their lives in Australia.

I am forever in debt to Dr. Wendy Asche (University of Queensland and Northern Land Council of Aboriginal, Northern Territory, Australia). Wendy, it is an honor to have you as a lifelong friend as you never fail to inspire me with your intellect and generosity. You are my hero.

Addtionally, I would like to thank the Women's Studies Center at Chiang Mai University for hosting and supporting many of Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's activities, including the 1st and 2nd Myanmar Women's Symposiums.

Assembling the narratives in this book has been a long, emotionally exhausting, and tedious journey, and this work would not have been possible without the trust of our extensive network of grassroots women from Burma. I am humbled by your strengths and sacrifices, as well as your courage, conviction, and commitment. I am proud of each and every one of you. Thanakha Gender Tekkatho has been able to interviews hundreds of female revolutionary soldiers, scholars of the Spring Revolution, political leaders, and political prisoners because of the hard work of our brilliant research team. I am particularly grateful to the senior research team of our Women's Oral History series, especially those who directly contributed to this volume, including twice-elected MP H.E. Daw Aye Mya Mya Myo (spokeserson, Women's MP Network). I remain astonished with your commitment, intellectual curiosity,

scholarly instinct, and hard work! You consistently champion the value of our women's history research with your tireless assistance with publishing these women's stories. Another research team member and CDM anthropologist, Dr. Cathy Tun, has tirelessly worked to record the narratives of our fellow CDM scholars and anthropologists whose stories must be part of history. Dr. Cathy, I deeply respect your courage and steadfast commitment to choosing *Dharma* (justice) over *A-Dharma* (injustice) in your work and personal life.

Your Stories are Our History

Above all, this volume simply would not have been possible without the courage and trust of each heroine who was willing to share intimate and often painful details of her incredible life story as a daughter, student, professional, and revolutionary. I am profoundly grateful to all of you who entrusted me with your dreams, aspirations, struggles, and strengths. This book stands as a testament to the strength and resilence of ten remarkable women whose lives exemplify what it means to be a strong woman of Myanmar. As a result of their sacrifices, sheer determination, principles, and commitment to creating a better Burma for future generations, may their stories become engraved in women's history and the modern history of Burma in order to inspire others.

Teresa and Myat, although we have lost contact, I truly hope we shall be able to return home soon to celebrate your brave achievements together. I am extraordinarly grateful to Captain Daw Khin Pa Pa Tun for courageously sharing her story as a former military insider. You have illuminated for us what it is like to be a member of the Myanmar military as a woman, a wife, and a mother. I am humbled by your profound trust.

In addition, I must thank the scholars of the Spring Revolution—Professor Law, Professor Soe Soe, and Professor Ellen—all of whom graciously shared their personal and professional journeys for inclusion in this volume. Special credit and appreciation for these women's chapters goes to Kathrine Khaing (Khaing Lay), the 'everything coordinator' of Thanakha Gender Tekkatho, without whom many of the powerful narratives included in this publication would not have been collected.

Along with the above, I am indebted to Ma Thinzar Aye for being an inspirational role model who demonstrates the potential and value of a woman

able to serve and uplift her community with her own bare hands. I am humbled by your invaluable and inspiring work. Similarly, Ma Khaing Khaing Zaw, a former healthcare officer and single woman who joined the CDM early on, must be thanked profusely for her dedication and commitment to helping others by establishing and managing a safehouse soon after she herself fled from Myanmar.

Among those suffering at the hands of the Myanmar military, female opposition politicians are in an utterly unenviable category. Still, many exiled female MPs continue to demonstrate extreme resilience and daring courage in the face of oppression and personal threats to their safety. I am eternally grateful to 72-year-old Daw Ni Shwe Lyan of Chin State who has never wavered from her work to bring peace to the communities she represents. Another female MP, Daw Hnin Khing Soe of Sagaing Region, deserves special recognition for her lifetime of sacrifice, goodwill for others, and incredible personal fortitude. I thank each and everyone of you. I am honored to have been entrusted to present your narratives, experiences, and insights in this publication so that they shall never be erased or forgotten from history. More importantly, I bow in gratitude to Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's extensive network of women fighters who, although unable to be named or recognized directly, continue to work on the ground in every part of Myanmar and its borderlands for peace, stability, and freedom.

Dr. Mar

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)	An ongoing civil resistance movement against the 2021 military coup. Initially a mass strike of public sector workers who refused to work for the junta, the objective of the CDM is to deny the junta any legitimacy or ability to govern, and to send a strong signal that the people of Myanmar will not accept a military dictatorship.
federal schools	On-site and online chools established by the exiled National Government of Myanmar (NUG) to support students whose education has been disrupted since the 2021 coup, as well as provide courses for the foundation of peace, democracy, and human rights in Burma. Many CDM teachers provide education services for little or no salary.
National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG)	A Myanmar government in exile formed by the Committee Representing *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*, a group of elected lawmakers and members of parliament ousted as part of the 2021 military coup.
People's Defense Force (PDF)	The armed resistance of the NUG against the Myanmar military junta, which designated PDF as a terrorist organization on May 8, 2021. Four months later, the PDF announced the launch of a defensive war against the military junta.
Red Ribbon Campaign	A widespread symbol of resistance against the Myanmar military regime in which people wear red ribbons to express their opposition to the 2021 aoup, essentially signifying a non-violent protest against the military takeover.
Spring Revolution	A resistance movement that aims to unite the country's citizens in strong rejection of the 2021 coup and a call for the return of democratic rule. It encompasses all forms of resistance, including the CDM, PDF, and UG. The Spring Revolution follows the tradition of previous anti-junta movements such as the '88 Pro-Democracy Uprising in 1988 and the Saffron Revolution led by Buddhist monks in 2007.

State Administration Council (SAC)	The military junta currently governing Myanmar, established by Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services (now Prime Minister) Min Aung Hlaing following the 2021 coup. The legitimacy of the SAC is contested by the exiled National Unity Government of Myanmar.
Underground Movement (UG)	Secretive underground force inside Myanmar's CDM- and PDF-led resistance employing tactics of violence and non-violence in opposition to the Myanmar military junta.
8.8.88 / '88 Uprising	Refers to the large-scale pro-democracy uprising initiated on August 8, 1988 against the military regime of Ne Win, primarily led by students across the country demanding political change and an end to military rule.
88 Generation	Student activists and others who actively took part in the '88 Uprising and subsequent resistance against the former military regime in Myanmar.
Non-English Terms	
baht (THB)	Thai currency; 1USD=33.7 baht as of January 2025
hpon	traditional Burmese belief in the innate spiritual superiority of men that is used to justify societal oppression structural violence against women
main-ma-nyan	'women's wit and wisdom'; traditional Burmese concept of feminine strategies and tactics used to overcome structural inequality; often negatively depicted in society
kyat(s) (MMK)	Myanmar currency; 1USD=2,101 kyats as of January 2025
Tatmadaw	Myanmar's military, administered by the Ministry of Defence and composed of the Myanmar Army, the Myanmar Navy and the Myanmar Air Force.
tekkatho	university
thanakha	traditional, natural Burmese cosmetic made of the ground bark of the sandalwood tree and used to protect the skin

ACRONYMS

ABSDF	All Burma Students' Democratic Front
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BEHS	basic education high Sshool
CAN	Chinland Army
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CDMers	those active in the Civil Disobedience Movement
CNF	Chin National Front
CSO	civil society organization
EAO/ERO	ethnic armed organization / ethnic resistance organization
FGWM	Federation of General Workers - Myanmar
IDP	internally displaced person(s)
IR	international relations
KNDF	Karenni Nationalities Defence Force
KNDP	Karen National Democratic Party
M2M	Myaung Women Warriors Troop
MMK	Myanmar kyat (currency)
MOD	Ministory of Defense
MOE	Ministry of Education
MWPN	Myanmar Women Parliamentarians' Network
NGO	non-governmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's Defence Force
SAC	State Administration Council
RHC	rural health center
THB	Thai baht (currency)
UG	Underground Movement
VOA	Voice of America

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Burma, Myanmar, or Burma/Myanmar?: What's in a name?

Prior to 1989, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia was officially and exclusively known internationally as "Burma", the name that colonial British rulers used after consolidating the central plains and previously autonomous mountainous regions in the mid-1800s in reference to the country's largest ethnic and linguistic group, the Burman or Bamar. The international use of "Myanmar" to refer to the country dates only to 1989, when the country's unelected military rulers of the time declared the change of the nation's name to *Myanmar naing-ngan*. In addition, the official names of many ethnic groups, regions, cities, and villages were also changed, including that of the former capital city from "Rangoon" to "Yangon".

The name changes were purportedly an effort on the part of the military regime to remake Burma into a more inclusive, multiethnic country and to fully cast off the vestiges of the colonial era. However, many critics have pointed out that these changes failed to address the root causes of problematic Burman/ethnic minority relations, and historians have demonstrated that both "Burma" and "Myanmar" were used among the Burmese themselves prior to British administration. In addition, the use of "Myanmar" in English presents a grammatical challenge, as there are no standard adjectival or demonymic forms.

While international organizations including the United Nations have adopted the use of "Myanmar", academic, journalistic, political, and activist convention in much of the world continues to favor the use of "Burma", although usage patterns continue to evolve. For this reason, and at the author's discretion, "Burma/Myanmar" is used frequently throughout this publication and "Burmese" is used as the adjectival and demonymic form. The decision of whether to use pre- or post-1989 "official" names in individual narratives has been left entirely to the contributors, and in many instances the names are used interchangeably with no intended political implications.

Names in Myanmar: Personal and family names, honorifics

There is no official standardized system of romanization for Burmese names or vocabulary, and spellings can vary widely. Additionally, Burmese culture does not use family names or surnames for individuals. First names, which can consist of one or more words, are decided largely based on the day and astrological sign of birth. In informal situations, many people use shortened nicknames. Thus, family kinship is impossible to determine based on names, and unrelated individuals may share the same or very similar names.

Honorifics based on age, gender, and social status or relationship are significant in Burmese culture and are frequently used before an individual's name. For Burman females, "Daw" refers to a respected elder, while "Ma" is used for young women and women of a similar age to the speaker. For Burman males, honorifics include "U" for respected elders, "Ko" for men of similar age and status to the speaker, and "Maung" for younger males. Ethnic groups of Myanmar, such as the Shan, Karen, and Mon, use their own unique honorifics.

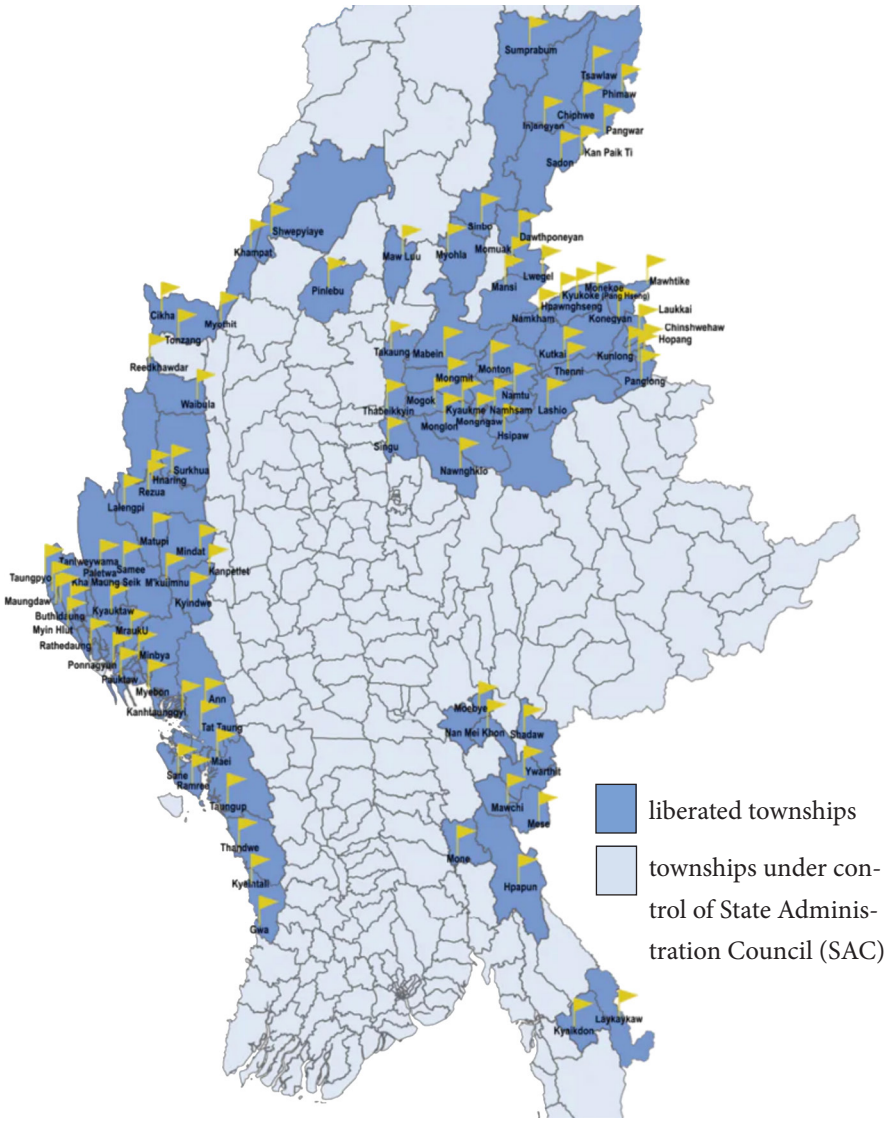
Since the 2021 coup, the military has retaliated against protestors, activists, and revolutionaries with extreme forms of violence and oppression. Many individuals have made the decision to change their names or to use pseudonyms for safety reasons. To protect the identity of informants for this publication, all individuals were given the option to choose pseudonyms and to alter details of their birthplaces and previous occupations.

MAP OF MYANMAR

and neighboring countries

MAP OF MYANMAR

showing liberated areas and those controlled by the military junta as of January 2025



Source: Burma News International/Myanmar Peace Monitor,
95 Towns Captured and Controlled by Revolutionary Forces (January 9, 2025)
https://mmpeacemonitor.org/en/infographic/95-towns-captured-and-controlled-by-revolutionary-forces/

PREFACE

Made in Myanmar with *main-ma-nyan* (feminine wiles and wisdom)

On New Year's Day 2021, Myanmar's State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi confidently delivered an address to the country, backed by the Myanmar flag, with a message of stability and continuity following her party's recent landslide re-election victory in November of the previous year. No one foresaw that only one month later the nation's military would stage a coup against the popular National League for Democracy-led civilian government, leading to the imprisonment and deaths of thousands of civilians and the displacement of millions.

The unexpected events of February 1, 2021 have plunged Myanmar deeper into turmoil, civil war, and dire poverty. The first glimpse the people of Myanmar and the world had of the Myanmar military's third coup d'état (following previous coups in 1962 and 1988) came courtesy of Khaing Hnin Wai, a young female aerobic dance instructor in Naypyitaw whose inadvertent video capture live-streamed the inception of the military coup outside of the country's parliament as the backdrop to her early morning fitness class.

Soon after, amidst a 72-hour military-imposed media and internet blackout, millions of distraught female Burmese homemakers sought solace in tradition, resorting to the age-old practice of banging pots and pans to ward off evil spirits, now represented by the Myanmar military. This symbolic act soon evolved into a widespread woman-led protest, with people using whatever means they had at their disposal—be it pots, pans, car horns, or bells—to express their dissatisfaction and defiance towards the mighty military. Two days later, spurred by the grassroots activism of women like Moe Sandar Myint (Federation of General Workers Myanmar, FGWM), Ei Thinzar Maung and Ester Zenaw, along with female workers from garment factories in Yangon's Hlaing Thaya township, initiated the Spring Revolution uprising in the country's former capital city by taking to the streets.

A pivotal outcome of this protest was the emergence of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), spearheaded by two female professionals in med-

icine and education. This largely peaceful civil rights movement, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 (Su Thet Mon Ø. Bakken, Lilla, 2021), is the world's longest-running movement of its type, now in its fourth year.

In the country's diverse ethnic areas, women not only joined the revolutionary People's Defence Force (PDF), but also formed exclusively female troops of snipers and drone-attackers, particularly in the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF). In Sagaing Region, the area known as the home of the daughters of Buddha, Buddhist nuns, women eagerly joined the revolutionary forces by founding the Myaung Women Warriors Troop (M2M), a special all-female unit, and showcasing their prowess as bomb-making experts, snipers, and drone unit leaders (Irrawaddy, 2022).

Since the 2021 coup, the women of Myanmar have exhibited remarkable courage, commitment, and conviction in their fight for justice and democracy by taking creative action whenever, wherever, and with whatever they can. Take, for instance, the daring act of five young women who poured boiling water from their apartment balcony onto the heads of security forces, halting their pursuit of CDM protesters in Sanchaung Township, Yangon. Despite their bravery, these women, Ei Ei Aung, Yu Yu Win, Khin Hnin Oo, Sandar Soem, and Dahlia Maung, were later imprisoned under Section 505a of the Penal Code (Myanmar Now, 2021).

Myanmar's females who are initiating and engaging in previously unthinkable acts of defiance, many led by women, are fighting against not only the military, notorious for its disregard for human rights, superstitions, and extreme Buddhist-based nationalist sentiment, but also structural gender discrimination and violence under three male-dominated institutions: military, monasteries, and social institutions. For example, Burmese males are raised to believe they possess the innate spiritual superiority of hpon, a concept based on the legitimacy of the inherent inferiority of women. Hpon involves a pervasive belief that women's bodies are so polluted that even articles of their clothing can befoul and destroy men's hpon, their masculine power. Following the coup, women weaponized their inferior social status by hanging their undergarments along defense lines to weaken the *hpon* of the military, a movement which became known as the 'Sarong Revolution' (see Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi, 2013).

As the military crackdown has intensified, women continue to stand firm, employing tactics ranging from catapult slingshots to the use of machetes in Hlaing Thaya. Despite facing adversity—including death, arrest and imprisonment, violence, and displacement—they remain resolute. In fact, women constitute the majority of revolutionary leaders across the country, demonstrating their pivotal role in shaping the course of Myanmar's trajectory. This shift is profound: while coups d'état may be a recurrent feature of modern Myanmar, the current uprising led by females is unprecedented and historical. As of 2023, it was estimated that women constitute 60 percent of individuals active in the anti-military movement (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children, 2024).

The women of Myanmar's creative and daring rebellion against the inhumane military junta with the use of flowers, lipsticks, *htamain* (sarongs), and lethal weapons reveals their strength, determination, and *main-ma-nyan* (feminine wiles and wisdom), and is nothing less than extraordinary. When the military junta's State Administration Council (SAC) escalated its inhumane attacks on defenseless civilians in both urban and rural areas, these women bravely revolted as warriors by producing landmines, attacking SAC personnel with drones and snipers, raising funds and initiating humanitarian projects, administering schools in rebel-held areas, and managing an internally displaced population of nearly three million. Many have presumed that the courageous acts of these women, born and bred under a succession of oppressive regimes and powerful male-dominated institutions, are the result of Western feminist influences. However, *Invisible yet Invincible* testifies to the fact that their bravery, commitment, and conviction originate from their indigenous main-ma-nyan, made in Myanmar. Throughout this volume, they voice their motivations and describe their struggles, sacrifices, strengths, and successes in their own words.

The narratives brought together in this book aim to shed light on women's resilience and main-ma-nyan, feminine-specific qualities that persist despite powerful and unrelenting patriarchal denial in Myanmar. We aim to apply a gender-based 'lens' to explore ways in which these women have what it takes to be future leaders in a peaceful and democratic Myanmar. *Invisible yet Invincible* reveals ten unsung female heroes' courage, commitment, and con-

viction in a deeply patriarchal society where the three most powerful institutions (military, monastic, and social) have long been male-dominated. This book is the first published component of Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's Women's Oral History (WOH) project, and as such is a repository of first-hand oral narratives chronicling the experiences of women who have adeptly made use of the diverse strategies they have managed to transform within oppressive systems into instruments of empowerment. Through these testimonies, these women share their stories of sheer determination, sacrifice, hard work, and resilience. These stories also reveal how the patriarchal domination that has denied the rights of women as equal human beings in Myanmar has, in turn, hindered an excluded majority who hold the promising potential to help rebuild the country.

Furthermore, this book invites these invisible yet indomitable women fighting for freedom, peace, and democracy to the forefront. After inviting these silenced and marginalized women to the podium, their authentic voices have been stylized to a minimum. Transcribed verbatim and edited only for clarity, these interviews are deliberately presented unvarnished. These women, selected from various backgrounds, reveal the collective suffering stemming from the structural nature of gender-based violence. Ten unsung female heroes, espousing diverse and even contradictory viewpoints, engage readers eager for a richer understanding of women's narratives. As professors, medical professionals, Gen Z members, participants in the People's Defence Force (PDF), and a female captain of the State Administration Council (SAC) who joined the movement, they illustrate the shared and collective suffering and resilience of women in Myanmar.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES, POSITIONALITY, and OBJECTIVES

Employing anthropological, feminist, and oral research methodologies, this volume aims to empower Myanmar's marginalized majority—women—to shed light on their sacrifices, struggles, strengths, and successes in their own words. This book uses oral history narratives as a research tool to record, generate, and preserve original, primary, and personal sources for historical processes, specifically documenting the stories of women involved in Myanmar's Spring Revolution to capture their unique histories and experiences as authentically as possible. Invisible yet Invincible seeks to liberate narratives of women and thus elevate women's leadership potential in Myanmar's history and future.

Interviews with participants took place throughout 2021 and 2022. In order to protect and avoid any complications or security breaches, informants were chosen through a circle of close networks. Our senior research team conducted interviews in Burmese and/or ethnic languages, later translating them carefully into English while attempting to preserve and convey the original meanings as accurately as possible. Most interviews were audiotaped and recorded, while a handful were videotaped with the consent of the interviewees. In-depth one-on-one interviews were primarily conducted in-person inside Myanmar and its borderlands. When necessary, follow-up for accuracy, detail, and clarification was conducted in-person or via the internet.

Informants (Selection, consent, context, and concealing identities)

Interview participants were selected from diverse generational, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds to provide a fuller picture of the comprehensive experience of women involved in the resistance in Myanmar. From hundreds of interviews, ten were selected for inclusion in this volume. The age range of interviewees is from 18 to 70, with participants residing both inside Myanmar, at the Thai-Burma border, and in the Burma-India borderlands.

Identifiable information and identities such as names, professional backgrounds, etc. were omitted unless the informants gave explicit permission. Preferences were given to individuals' choices whether to conceal or reveal their identities; some concealed completely, and some revealed some of their personal information. For example, Captain Khin Pa Pa Tun (a SAC deserter), Ma Thazin Aye (founder of Clean Yangon), and two female MPs from Chin State and Sagaing Region allowed us to reveal their identities. However, Teresa (a PDF member) and Myat (member of the UG and fundraiser) asked to conceal their identities with the use of pseudonyms. Scholars chose to reveal their professions but conceal their names.

Nonetheless, our research teams' objective is to record factual evidence and create primary documents for dissemination that can be used not only to educate, engage, and inspire readers, but also to empower women. Aiming to amplify the voices of these unsung heroes, we allow them to narrate their own ideas and experiences and to serve as catalysts for further areas of inquiry. The editors have not added to, deleted from, or significantly edited the original interview transcripts, but rather present them as raw data to avoid influencing the interpretation of the featured women's voices. Each chapter represents the unique journey of the woman involved, as well as a perspective on their common struggle. With this project, we have aimed to foster a dialogue that will contribute to movements for democracy and gender equality in Myanmar.

POSITIONALITY

The burdens of being a native anthropologist

My engagement with the remarkable women who graciously share their narratives in this volume underscores the breadth and depth of our endeavor. The journey of conducting these interviews has been poignant, powerful, and imperative for both researchers and the researched, creating strong bonds yet also becoming emotionally challenging at times for all involved. The work has also fostered a sense of solidarity among all of us. Both the researchers and the researched share common goals and aspirations, which allowed for

the mutual trust necessary for the transparency of in-depth, personal oral interviews to be established under difficult circumstances. Our researchers have strived to remain impartial, to listen carefully, to avoid imposing analysis on interviewee's experiences and stories, and to stay in the background in order to transmit the women's narratives as organically as possible. This volume uniquely privileges the subjectivity of the researchers, delving into the complexities faced by the 'native anthropologist' committed to faithfully transmitting the voices, experiences, and perspectives of our informants—voices that have long been unheard and unrecorded both within Myanmar and in broader academic discourse.

OBJECTIVES

Through this project, we aim to foster a dialogue that promotes democracy and gender equality. Invisible yet Invincible is a critical component of Thanakha Gender Tekkatho's broader Women's Oral History (WHO) project, which endeavors to compile the first comprehensive history of Myanmar women's involvement in the modern Burmese revolution. By creating a platform for dialogue and interaction, we aspire to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

This book specifically aims to (i) shed light on structural inequalities of gender in Myanmar's social, political, and historical process through the lens and experiences of women, (ii) educate, empower, engage, and inspire women who are invisible yet invincible to fight with their might for justice, equality, and democracy, (iii) co-create local authentic knowledge to co-disseminate and replicate and inspire people to adapt these practices and place women's testimonies at the center of feminist oral history as an alternative educational source for social change, (iv) demonstrate that the demand for gender equality in Myanmar does not originate from western feminist influence, but from the excluded majority who are being denied the opportunity to maximize their capacities and realize their potentials, which are key ingredients for democracy and national development, and to supplement women's social and oral historical records, and (v) dismantle patriarchal propagated 'pedagogy' produced by male-dominated institutions of 'knowledge'.

BACKGROUND

Although Myanmar's Spring Revolution uprising in response to the 2021 military coup is intergenerational and intersectional, Generation Z has played a pivotal role. Gen Z's involvement has been influenced by the country's demographics, which include a population of 55.58 million (Department of Population, 2024) and 37.4 million eligible voters. Among them, approximately five million were first-time voters in the November 8, 2020 election. This younger generation has emerged as a vital force in Myanmar's struggle for democracy, and the coup has had a momentous impact on their lives. Having come of age during the country's brief period of freedom and democracy under the elected civilian government from 2015 to 2020, many felt their rights were being stolen and their futures hijacked. They are willing to do whatever is necessary, even risking their own liberty and lives, to fight for rights and freedom in Myanmar.

A pivotal development in the Spring Revolution was the formation of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)—driven primarily by female professionals in the fields of medicine and education, many of whom were later collectively nominated for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize—in the days and weeks following the coup. The CDM quickly became the forefront of the people's resistance to military oppression. Within the first month after the coup, 90% of female professionals in education and healthcare were estimated to have joined the CDM (interviews, 2021). University lecturers, who had long endured severe censorship, intimidation, and oppression under previous periods of military rule, found the country's return to military dictatorship unacceptable. The academic freedom and relative autonomy they experienced under the NLD government not only provided intellectual and professional development, but also boosted their confidence and pride in their work.

Educators vividly recalled the military regime's past blatant disregard for fostering quality education, as universities remained closed for more than a decade following the widespread student-led, pro-democracy protests initiated in 1988, known as the 8.8.88 Movement. Being compelled to teach a

curriculum that perpetuates powerlessness, oppression, uncritical thinking, and unquestioning obedience to military dictatorship rather than the type of 'pedagogy of the oppressed' as suggested by Friere (1970) to foster empowerment through critical thinking and dialogic education had a profound impact on these educators both professionally and personally, as well as on broader Burmese society. They were denied the ability to teach the subjects aligned with their interests and expertise, instead being forced to teach topics dictated by the authorities—lu-ji (big people) in power, often without sufficient preparation, passion, or professionalism. This situation led to reduced self-esteem, anxiety, and loss of interest for many teachers and professors.

Despite overcoming significant barriers in simply accessing and attaining education—a domain traditionally seen as a male preserve in Myanmar—and achieving the prestigious position of university lecturers as women, these female educators sacrificed their anticipated professional security and passion by joining the CDM. They recognized that the brief period of academic freedom and autonomy under the previous government had significantly enhanced their personal and professional lives. Their poignant stories reflect the intersections that underscore the links between education and politics in shaping individual and national development, explaining why they chose to join the CDM despite concerns about the consequences for their students. Academic freedom and educational autonomy are directly linked to democracy, empowering people and enhancing their capacities. Leaving their positions at state schools was not an easy decision for them. For example, a professor who shares her narrative in this volume had taught at a prominent Myanmar university for more than 30 years found herself branded an outlaw at the age of 60 due to her role in the CDM. Still, she asserts, "Between Dharma (justice) and A-Dharma (injustice), the choice is clear. We know right from wrong. Justice must prevail, until then" (Chap 2-Scholars of Spring Revolution). Similar stories and convictions can be found among educators throughout the country, despite knowing that their 'choice' would make them vulnerable to severe forms of adversity—including deaths, arrests, violence, displacement, and deprivation.

As the military's reprisals against those daring to resist the coup became increasingly inhumane and indiscriminate, women rose in revolt. Rather

than yielding, many chose to take active roles with the armed resistance after making their way to liberated areas, including camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Others made their way across the border to a neighboring country despite the vulnerability and stigma of being criminalized as 'undocumented' and 'illegal'. For many of them, return home is uncertain, as the homes which they built with their meager salaries were burnt down or confiscated by the SAC. Choosing to oppose the military dictatorship in Myanmar, where women face significant struggles in achieving education and securing positions in academia, was not a decision taken lightly or made easily.

For many in Myanmar society, structural gender-based discrimination is deeply embedded in the cultural belief in hpon, which holds that males possess innate spiritual superiority, signifying supremacy of intelligence, logic, and wisdom over females. Such discrimination is often justified or rationalized as a 'law of nature'. This belief is further reinforced by Buddhism, which asserts that only men can enter monastic orders and pursue the ultimate goal of Nirvana, while the best women can hope for is to be reborn as a man through the practice of accumulating merit—by being a good woman and supporter of the religion through supporting hpon-ji. These religious beliefs further entrench gender-based disparities in Myanmar. In Burmese culture, monks are referred to as hpon-ji, meaning 'big or large hpon', indicating their elevated spiritual status over laymen and all women. This belief system holds that men are inherently superior, while women are considered not only lacking in hpon, but inhabiting polluted and dangerous bodies due to their reproductive systems. Such beliefs make women potential threats to the 'natural' order of society as women's proximity or contact with men is believed to have the power to undermine and destroy their hpon. This deeply entrenched belief of innate male superiority significantly hinders gender equality and women's ambitions to serve in leadership roles. The effects of Myanmar's pervasive and structural gender bias has prompted the sharing of uncensored and poignant narratives in this volume, showcasing the immense courage, commitment, and resilience of those involved in Myanmar's resistance.

To be sure, female activism and resistance following the 2021 coup has been costly. The first casualty in the 2021 revolution was a 19-year-old female student, Myat Thwet Thwet Khaing (2001–2021) of Naypyitaw. The first hon-

or bestowed on a protester as a martyr of the revolution was also for a woman, 19-year-old Kyal Sin or Angel (2001–2021) who was a talented dancer and Taekwondo champion from Mandalay. On March 4, 2021 in the midst of a confrontation between protestors and SAC authorities, Angel, in her black T-shirt with the slogan 'Everything will be OK' was recorded on video urging others "Sit! Sit! Don't run! You will be hit! Blood must not shed" just before a sniper assassinated her with a direct shot to the head. She had posted poignant message on her Facebook page earlier that morning noting her blood type, phone number, and a message about donating her organs: "If you need any organ of mine, please contact me at this number without hesitation" along with the slogan 'One vote from the heart' and a photo of her kissing her inked finger, representing young people in Myanmar who are willing to exchange their lives for rights and freedom.

Among those to have lost their lives for the resistance include a 59-year-old teacher and mother of two, Daw Tin Nwe Yee (Moe, 2021), and another mother, Wai Wai Myint, who jumped to her death from an apartment building rather than being captured by the authorities (Head, 2021). Innocent children have been among the casualties of SAC's indiscriminate killing of its own people. For example, a seven-year-old girl, Khin Myo Chit, is one of the youngest victims to date. Female political prisoners have also been sentenced to death by the military, including Ma Myint Myint Aye (RFA, 2022). Several women are also among victims to have been directly assassinated by pro-military forces. For example, Nobel Aye, a former student activist and ex-political prisoner was shot to death after being arrested in Pegu in February 2024 (Hein Thai, 2024)..

In the revolution, women have fought like men and at times even outnumbered them on the frontlines. Throughout Myanmar's diverse ethnic regions, brave women have chosen to serve revolutionary armies and take up arms against the military junta. Such women often refuse to serve merely as camp cooks and nurses or other positions considered 'suitable' for females, and instead fight with distinction. All-female special units such as the Myaung Women Warriors (M2M), the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF)-5 Battalion, the 13 Chin Defense Force, and the Tiger Women Drone Force have become renowned not only for their expertise in making landmines,

but also for their successful actions as snipers, drone makers, and drone unit leaders. Kyar Khin Sein, also known as Tiger Lady and leader of the TGR, states that became a combatant "to show that women can fight in combat [too]" (Irrawaddy, 2022).

In this book, the story of a nineteen-year-old-law student who dreamed of becoming a lawyer to help victims of domestic violence in her township of Hlaing Thaya shares her experience of how hard she had to struggle against the expectations and demands of her family, who refused to send her to university. Her parents believed that as a woman, her proper destiny and duty was to stay at home and take care of the family (Chap 1-Women Warriors). This book seeks to rectify the damaging and potential-destroying effects of gender-based discrimination and Myanmar's cultural belief in hpon by bringing to light the significant contributions of Burmese women, thereby enriching the narrative and offering a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of their enduring struggle for equality and justice.

INTRODUCTION

My Life, My Right, My Choice, and My Voice!

Invisible yet Invincible focuses on the stories of women currently fighting against the unelected military junta in Myanmar. It represents a collection of various voices from diverse backgrounds, including young Gen Z members who have become PDF soldiers, federal school teachers, fundraisers for the revolution, university professors, a former captain and deserter of the Myanmar military, humanitarians, health care professionals, and female members of parliament. Allowing these women to express themselves without interference or interpretation, their narratives provide insight into various aspects of Myanmar's social and political landscape. Each story represents the unique journey, choices, and voices of the women involved, as well as their shared common struggle, sacrifices, successes, and experience with structural gender-based discrimination and violence.

Part I features narratives of three 'Woman Warriors' who have all made the difficult decision of taking up arms against Myanmar's military dictatorship. Chapter 1 unfolds the story of Teresa (pseudonym), a twenty-year-old former student at Yangon's Dagon University. Initially drawn to education, Teresa's path took a profound turn when she witnessed firsthand the harrowing realities of rape and domestic violence in her community of Hlaing Thaya, or 'Town of Plentiful Pleasure' in Burmese. Motivated to defend the rights and bodies of women, she embarked on a journey that eventually led her to become a revolutionary soldier in the People's Defence Force (PDF). Teresa's narrative embodies the struggle for justice and pursuit of freedom amidst adversity. She explains that she had previously thought, "If I knew the law, I could protect and defend women." However, following the inhumane killing of pro-democracy protesters following the 2021 military coup, her thinking was altered.

For Teresa, a first-time voter in the 2020 election who grew up under the nascent democratic National League for Democracy (NLD) government,

"engaging with our democratic freedoms and rights [and] maximizing our capabilities, networks, potential, and knowledge" were priorities for herself and her generation. "I couldn't remain silent [after the 2021 coup]," she explains. "I felt compelled to demonstrate my disapproval of both their coup and their rationale." And yet she realized what was at stake for her future. After struggling against cultural norms and expectations to progress with her educational journey at university, she was eager to explore opportunities to study overseas with a scholarship. The most challenging aspect of her decision to join the protest movement was giving up her books and turning her back on her pursuit of further academic knowledge. However, she felt she had no choice but to join the PDF and immerse herself completely in the "armed revolution for sustainable freedom" for future generations. Teresa fully understands, "I've given up everything as the cost of freedom." Furthermore, life as a PDF soldier has not been easy for her. When the military bombs PDF positions, "We have nothing else except stones to throw back at them [junta forces]!" Yet she remains steadfast in her determination to fight, as she feels she is "compelled to fight for our rights...because we must. After the war, we will have to rebuild...with education." Through Teresa's narrative, we shall understand her dreams, courage, commitment, and convictions, as well as her struggles, sacrifices, and hard-won successes.

Another brave young woman, Myat (psuedonym), shares her journey from aspiring educator to law student to anti-military activist in Chapter 2. Motivated by her grandmother's experience of domestic abuse, Myat recognizes the transformative power of education in effecting societal change. Despite familial warnings against political involvement, Myat's commitment to building a better society continues to drive her embrace of activism despite the significant costs to her personally. Her story reflects the complexities of sacrifice and the unwavering pursuit of justice in the face of oppression.

Myat explains, "My interest [in social activism] was initially sparked by my desire to bring my grandfather to justice." Concerningly to her, "No one seems to question why Myanmar faces such a crisis of structural issues, why it has happened, what the root causes are, or how to find solutions... I believe that if we want to build a democratic society, we need many well-educated individuals and critical thinkers." Her calling is to contribute to the develop-

ment of a peaceful, just society through education of younger generations. Since the coup, after seeing many teachers become CDMers, Myat herself has become a federal school teacher and fundraiser for the PDF. When her family warned her against getting involved in the protest movement, "I was already halfway in." She has become involved in the revolution because, "unlike other young people around the world, our lives [here in Myanmar] are far from normal." And that is why she has decided "to sacrifice my youth and my freedom to build a 'better society'." Myat recognizes that involving herself in politics brings her no tangible personal benefit, as reflected in her words, "Loving Myanmar feels like loving someone with no hope of return."

Chapter 3 contains the unusual story of former Captain Daw Khin Pa Pa Tun, who deserted the Myanmar Military (Tatmadaw) Medical Corps after serving for more than two decades. Her story reveals the contrast between education and opportunities allowed for those with strong ties to the military and the general public. Raised by parents who were both preschool teachers in Wakema, Irrawaddy Region, her family could not afford to send both her and her sister to university. She felt her best option was to enroll in a military college as a pathway to securing status, salary, and success in life. At the college, she was exposed firsthand to the Tatmadaw's culture of pervasive violence, brutality, and corruption. She was punished for her 'serious face,' which was interpreted as 'disobedience and a lack of respect' towards her (male) seniors, and forced to wear 'proper Burmese women's attire'. During her time serving in the national military, she regularly witnessed inhumane treatment, deaths of lower-ranking soldiers who died of malnutrition, and victims of drugs, alcohol, and HIV—both soldiers and their civilian partners.

Daw Khin Pa Pa Tun sums up her time in the Tatmadaw by stating: "The abuse of power in the military, it's on another level." She explains that following orders from superiors without question is a must, and "arguing with a senior in the military is like hitting your head against a wall". She says, "If asked, ''Why don't you like the army?,' my list of grievances would be as long as your arm." For her, supporting the "[expansion] of military bully culture to the mass population" became untenable after the 2021 coup, and she states that people should not expect "humanity or empathy from [the military junta]." Frustrated by the international community's relative lack of

interest and support towards Myanmar's resistance, she questions, "Aren't we Burmese humans too? Why are members of the international community so inactive?...Myanmar is one of the most glaring examples of the international community's failure to realize the promise of 'Never again' the military rule in Myanmar and with a collective commitment as ' the last generation'. What matters most is winning the revolution and declaring people's victory!"

Part II contains the narratives of two female 'Frontline Warriors' in Myanmar's resistance. The story of Ma Thin Zar Aye, a trained nurse and the founder of the community-based organization (CBO) Clean Yangon, is the focus of Chapter 4. As a young girl, Ma Thin Zar Aye witnessed the events of 8.8.88 and its aftermath, but at the time it seemed to her as nothing more than a school holiday. More than 30 years later, she actively joined in protests against the military's most recent coup, but after learning her name had been added to the junta's 'wanted list,' she fled to a liberated area for her personal safety. While providing healthcare to other IDPs, she encountered "numerous cases of malnutrition" and began distributing cooked food according to a "nutritional food plan" while also working tirelessly to raise funds for the resistance. After getting to know her fellow IDPs—like the older female who told her, "I'm now in my 60s. Since I was born, I have had to run...and run for my life; I've never been at peace."—she became even more determined to do what she can to help them. Her time in the resistance has also exposed her to females of diverse ethnicities from different parts of Myanmar, such as the young Karenni PDF soldier currently serving with the Karenni National Defense Party (KNDP). Ma Thin Zar Aye was deeply moved when the female sniper told her that she "can't return home. To get my life back, I must fight." All of what she has seen and been exposed to leads her to argue that, "This revolution will not be successful without women. That is the reality, that is the truth." For Ma Thin Zar Aye, "Women's courage, wit, capacities, responsibility-taking, and management skills are on full display [in the revolution]." She is inspired by other brave women who have been denied leadership roles in general society, but are now realizing their full potential in the resistance.

Chapter 5 continues the theme of 'Frontline Warriors' with the impactful story of Ma Khaing, a 50-year-old former Township Health Care Officer with 29 years of experience. Like Ma Thin Zar ,Aye, Ma Khaing also found

herself on SAC's 'wanted list' following her involvement with anti-military protests, and fled by hiding in a safehouse. She unwittingly became the leader of her safehouse due to her skills with organizing, managing, and resolving conflicts. Engaging with the PDF has not only made her unable to return home, but also to be considered dangerous by loved ones, as "Even my own parents are afraid of me." She has gained valuable experience with assisting people from diverse backgrounds, including military deserters, injured PDF soldiers, CDMers, and students—sometimes more than 50 individuals at any one time in the safehouse she manages. Under her leadership, her safehouse community has initiated several income-generation projects such as growing vegetables, sewing, and raising chickens to earn money to support the resistance. Ma Khaing's legacy will be her success in fostering harmony among the various people of different backgrounds, ages, and religions who have all come to respect her judgment and leadership.

Part III focuses on the life stories and experiences of three 'Scholars of the Spring Revolution'. The first chapter in this section contains the narrative of 'Professor Law' (pseudonym), a former lecturer with Yangon University's law department who sheds light on the state of education under Myanmar's military. With her personal experience as both a student and lecturer under markedly different periods of military rule and NLD leadership, Professor Law has learned firsthand that a society is unable to develop sufficient critical thinking skills in the absence of academic freedom. She originally became interested in working in Myanmar's legal system as a young girl. Even after witnessing entrenched corruption in the country's legal system, she decided to teach law at the university level, hoping to contribute to the development of a new generation of ethical law professionals. She soon realized it was nearly impossible for any individual to make a difference in the culture of corruption due to structural and system-level limitations that "prevented [potential reformers] from doing what is necessary" as long as it continued to function under the military's control.

Her experiences as both a student and educator in Myanmar has led Professor Law to conclude that Myanmar needs to end its "narrow, top-down process[es]" and militarized "instruction from lu-gyi (big people)" that denies students the right "to discuss politics". When the NLD came to power in

2015, she began to see how academic freedom could benefit Myanmar society at large. She identifies a widespread unwillingness to return to an academic environment under military dictatorship as the primary motivation for many scholars to become active with the CDM, but with "a different aim than that of politicians". Although "teachers are now treated as criminals, subject to arrest and imprisonment," she remains steadfast in her conviction that "Only better education will help our society to be improved." For Professor Law, "Myanmar's crisis is not just a political one; it is also a humanitarian crisis."

In Chapter 7, another CDMer known as Professor SS (pseudonym), previously affiliated with the Myanmar Department at Yangon University and a former visiting scholar for two years at Thailand's Chiang Mai University, shares her experience of how education is gendered in Myanmar. Although her grandparents supported her in gaining higher education, she found herself the focus of disapproving gossip among villagers who viewed her as a failed woman who was neither dutiful nor obedient. Still, she persevered with sheer determination in order to become a university lecturer. When the military staged its coup in 2021, she stood firm with what she felt was her moral obligation. The result of Professor SS's ethical convictions is that she now finds herself homeless and penniless, and sometimes "even can't afford a meal or a bowl of rice". Despite the personal consequences, she maintains that she has no regrets, as "winning the revolution is the only hope for the future".

Professor SS's vision is a future generation in Myanmar that has high "morals, social values, codes of conduct, and [motivation] to be better humans". In her view, "The revolution has caused a crisis, but rebuilding afterwards will be even more challenging for us. Whether I receive a salary or not, I will teach...to help our people and our country." At times, she asks herself, "Why am I so desperate to rebel against the military or change the system? Why am I sacrificing my life, and what do I want to achieve? Is it worth it?" Her "simplest answer is that change must come. Putting politics above education does not work." She has come to realize that "for the first time in our lives, we understand how democracy and intellectual freedom are linked… far beyond our imagination." She remains convinced that "We must fix our society through education." Even today, as "teaching is considered a crime" and "teachers are treated as criminals" under military dictatorship, she still

aspires "to guide and empower young people until they grow up and become the country's leaders for the next generation."

Another inspiring educator, Professor Ellen, formerly a lecturer in international relations at Yangon University, provides the narrative voice of Chapter 8. Born in Pyinmana, Naypyidaw, she studied and taught at Mandalay University. Her story reveals how militarization in Myanmar has divided not only individuals from each other and Myanmar from the international community, but also short-circuited intellectual thinking and processes of knowledge dissemination among the academic community. Professor Ellen chose to study international relations because she is able to speak multiple languages and her aim was to become a government staffer. However, when she became a professor at the department of international relations in 2005 at Yangon University, she quickly realized that the department was under the military's tight control, believing that allowing the free and open study of international politics was dangerous and held the potential to undermine their firm grip on power. When the NLD was elected to power in 2015, it made Professor Ellen feel "exhilarating. We [academics] were over the moon! We were allowed to read anything we liked, and the joy of learning new things was heaven! It was the happiest time in my life."

She explains that under the NLD government, "We were permitted to write articles. We worked hard to publish, eager to contribute to academic discourse." This first, all too brief taste of academic freedom caused a change in Professor Ellen, who found that she now "aspired to become a better lecturer myself." She also came to recognize a significant difference between herself and her former modest aspirations compared to her students who had higher goals and were "more aware of the world around them…well-informed about the world". She explains, "We [the older generation that came of age under military rule] grew up believing that the Earth was flat without any comparison. All I wanted was to be ordinary. Growing up within closed walls, our goals and dreams were ordinary, aligning with society's expectations of us." Due to her experience with the "stark contrast" of education under military dictatorship and the democratically-elected NLD, she chose to become a CDM educator following the coup. "As an educated member of society, I should not have to tolerate unjust acts by bullies."

Like Professor SS, today Professor Ellen finds herself homeless, jobless, and status-less, yet "one day, when it's all over, I'll be able to put my head high and say, 'Yes, I did it!' Though I might not say prayers, I constantly recite: 'WE MUST WIN. WE WILL WIN.'...People might not believe me if I say that I even recite this in my sleep, but that's all I believe in. When I wake up, I open my eyes with the thought: 'We will win.' With all my might, that's the only thing I believe in. My conviction is so strong that every breath I take resonates with the belief: 'We will win...WE WILL WIN!"

The final section consists of the narratives of two 'Iron Ladies', former female members of parliament (MP) under the previous democratic government. Chapter 9 is the story of Daw Ni Sui Lian, a seventy-year-old ethnic Chin twice-elected MP for the NLD party from Thantlang, Chin State. Her life story reveals how Myanmar's brief period of democracy helped to develop Chin State, and how the development of this region and its people is directly linked to democracy. Daw Ni Sui Lian originally became a high school teacher in Hakha, the capital city of Chin State, because of the dire need for teachers. She later found herself drawn to becoming involved in politics when she realized that her state lacked a female representative, decision-maker, and advocate for the Chin people. Chin State thrived under NLD governance, and approximately 80 percent of these improvements are directly attributed to the NLD's leadership. As Daw Ni Sui Lian was witnessing the transformation of Chin youths, optimistic for the future with large aspirations, the military staged its 2021 coup, which shattered those hopes and sent them into despair.

Since the coup, many of her former students, some of whom had become medical doctors and professionals, have joined the Chin National Front (CNF) and Chinland Army (CAN). Daw Ni Sui Lian explains, "It pains me to see how our children, who worked hard and became doctors, have to hold arms in the jungle. They are like my family—my sons and daughters, my comrades. In solidarity, we are bound together by blood, and nothing can break us. We are left with no other option but to fight for democracy, even if it means risking our lives." Regarding the role of females in Myanmar's armed resistance and the future leadership of the nation, she states, "Wherever I go, I see many women soldiers…Seeing many women participating is encouraging. While I may not have seen many women on the frontlines in the past,

now there are many getting involved…However, according to Chin culture, most women are focused on domestic work. Once the revolution is over, ensuring women have access to decision-making bodies, such as the national government and parliament, is essential. Under democratic rule, women will gain confidence when safety, fairness, and justice are assured."

Lastly, Chapter 10 is the poignant story of Daw Hnin Khaing Soe, a two-time elected MP. As a member of the NLD since its establishment in 1990, she has endured sustained oppression by the military. Still, in 2015 and 2020 she was elected MP of Depeyin, Sagaing Region, infamous for the attempted assassination of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the killing of more than 70 NLD supporters in 2003 known as the Depeyin Massacre.

Growing up under the dark shadow of Military Intelligence, she developed a secret way of communicating with her father, such as making different bird sounds with various meanings and creating a secret code. The military took possession of her family's home for seven years because of her dad's involvement with political activism. According to Daw Hnin Khaing Soe, "When they finally returned our house to us, it was old and crumbling." When the NLD was allowed to legally register in 2012, the party and many of its members had already become economically devastated, with their health and finances in total collapse. Fearing the military's reprisals, "I was afraid to associate with or be [directly] involved in the NLD…so I decided to sell the De-Hlaing journal, a fortnightly publication, by walking one street after another so that I could raise funds to rent an office…all to support a cause I believed in." Talking with customers and community members, "I gained many valuable lessons ... I became closer to the common folk and learned that I could solve their problems as an MP." Since the 2021 coup, she has "once again lost my house, finding myself homeless and on the military's wanted list" like her father before her. Still, Daw Hnin Khaing Soe remains strongly "determined to continue to restore democracy in our country…I will never give up. We will win!"

တခြားလမ်းကိုရွေးလို့ရခဲ့ရင်တောင်
ဒီလမ်းကိုဘဲ တည့်တည့်လျှောက်မယ်
ဒါ သမိုင်းပေးတာဝန်မို့

Part I

FEMALE REVOLUTIONARY FIGHTERS

Even if there is another path to choose, I will choose only this path because I am obliged to do the duty given to me by history.

—Maw Re Re, Karenni Nationalities Defence Force

above and below: Maw Re Re, Karenni Nationalities Defence Force
(photos courtesy of Maw Re Re)

CHAPTER 1: TERESA

People's Defense Force (PDF) revolutionary soldier, 22 years old

We have nothing but stones to throw back at them. We have nowhere to hide!

At the moment, my unit is engaged in active fighting in a war zone at the frontlines. We are being battered and beaten by our own military [the *Tatmadaw*], which has been using thermobaric weapons in airstrikes against us. When their vacuum bombs bombarded us, they torched our tents, cratered the roads, and burned everything. Their fighter planes swept over the treetops. We have nothing but stones to throw back at them. We have nowhere to hide! During the attack, we had to run and hide, but there were only sparse trees. Some of us were hit one by one. We've lost many of our people. Some are injured, others have been killed, and a few have been captured. We have to be more careful. Our camp is located in southern Shan State, a dangerous position, often targeted by airstrikes. Living in an active war zone, we are in a constant state of alert.

The NUG's Ministry of Defense (MOD) provides us some funding, but more is needed for food and weaponry. Consequently, we often have to rely on the goodwill of the locals. Even so, sometimes it is almost impossible to survive. At times, we have resorted to selling our personal belongings. Even with the support from the MOD and the people, we still face issues. For instance, when the MOD allocated 100 million MMK for the purchase of weapons, they demanded invoices as proof of purchase. But even with the funds for guns, we still require ammunition.

We have numerous female soldiers in training at the moment. We do our utmost to ensure their safety. However, in the face of enemy forces, everyone, regardless of gender, must be cautious.

I thought if I knew the law, I could protect and defend women

I'm originally from Hlaing Thayar, Yangon. My family has four members, and I am the eldest, with a younger brother. From a young age, I have overseen our family's finances. I've been shouldering this responsibility since I was in grade 7 or 8, assisting in my father's and mother's businesses. After I completed my basic education high school (BEHS), I took over both of our family's businesses.

When I was young, I was interested in education and aspired to be a teacher. However, after passing my BEHS and witnessing numerous rape cases and instances of domestic violence in Hlaing Thayar, I changed my mind. I thought if I knew the law, I could protect and defend women. I became interested in law, hoping that I would be able to defend women who were victims of such violence. Consequently, I started studying law at Dagon University. While studying, I also managed our family's businesses and simultaneously volunteered with civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). I was a member of the European Law Students Union. My father owns a car workshop, and my mother runs a real estate business. I chose to study law partly to help my mother. Despite being a girl, I learned about construction from my dad and also assisted him with his accounting.

The military coup has left the whole country enraged. Everyone knows how our country significantly progressed under the people's government [the previous NLD-led administration] in such a short time. As young people, we engaged with our democratic freedoms and rights, maximizing our capabilities, networks, potential, and knowledge. All of this, however, was threatened to be obliterated by a single power-hungry individual [General Min Aung Hlaing, instigator of the 2021 coup]. I couldn't remain silent; I couldn't accept it. I felt compelled to demonstrate my disapproval of their coup and rationale. So, when Ei Thinzar Maung initiated the protest, I joined in. Since then, I have protested the military coup every single day. On March 14, 2021, in our region, more than 100 people were killed. By then, I had become a leader of the protests. As time passed, it became increasingly difficult for us to stage walk-out protests. Instead, we participated in the 'Red Flowers Protest'. The military responded brutally, running us down with their vehicles. I also put my support behind the Underground Movement (UG).

My mother, despite being relatively young and not yet 40, suffers from poor health. Additionally, my entire family relies on me, which gives me a lot to consider. If I were to join the PDF, no one would be left to care for my mum. She depends entirely on me. From preparing her breakfast to managing her daily routines, I've been the one taking care of her. I have to juggle domestic duties while also pursuing my interests and passions.

While leading protests, I was also teaching at a federal school [primarily online schools that are self-funded or financially supported by the NUG]. In fact, I even attempted to establish my own federal school, offering online classes. I initially planned for around a hundred students, but nearly a thousand enrolled, which was more than I could manage. Despite being young, I felt the need to offer some form of support to the teachers at the school. I financed the school with my own money and soon realized I did not have sufficient funds to continue. Unwilling to charge the students, I had to abandon the initiative. After this, I redirected my focus toward my family. My mother had to be hospitalized, which was a difficult period for us. Even as I supported the UG, I was always thinking about how I could contribute more to the revolution.

How could I study so peacefully while catastrophic events were tearing my country apart?

My ambition was to become a legal professional. I planned to complete both my bachelor's and master's degrees, followed by a diploma in economics. Subsequently, I hoped to pursue further studies abroad, perhaps in India or the UK. My ultimate aim was to serve the underprivileged regions and ethnic areas in my country. I am deeply moved by the plight of young girls who are forced into early marriages by their parents, often having children when they're only 16 or 17. I'm passionate about assisting victims of rape in their pursuit of justice.

With my parent's encouragement, I applied for a scholarship in India to study law. I was granted this scholarship and was set to leave in December of 2021. However, I started having second thoughts. Yes, I could study there, but how could I study so peacefully while catastrophic events were tearing my country apart? How selfish would it be of me to leave everything behind?

The thought of leaving filled me with guilt. I knew that if I decided to stay, my parents would likely pressure me to leave. But I was resolved. I was not going anywhere. I was determined to fight for my country with all my might. So, I decided to join the ranks of the student Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and become a CDMer.

They wanted us to be silent as they stripped us of our liberty at gunpoint

Never in a million years did I envision someone like me, who was always eager to learn and took every initiative to gain knowledge, giving up everything to take up arms. It's a life far removed from books, pens, and knowledge. Yet, we were coerced into a fight for freedom and fairness. We have tried numerous peaceful and creative methods to express our refusal to accept any more oppression and dictatorship. However, our desperate pleas have fallen on deaf ears. They wanted us to be silent as they stripped us of our liberty at gunpoint. War seems to be the only language they understand, so we were left with no choice but to respond in a way they would comprehend. I joined the PDF force, feeling I had no other options to assert my fundamental rights and freedom.

Since childhood, I have struggled with health issues. I had to visit the hospital for injections every month. The physical demands of frontline combat were too much for me, so I opted to work in a PDF administration center. In our camp, there are no hospitals or clinics. So, I reached out to one of my friends, a medical doctor, and learned from him. I also supplemented my knowledge with information from the internet. Using this newfound knowledge, I was able to help soldiers and villagers who fell ill. In addition, I assisted in teaching the children of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Given my interest in education, I was happy to contribute to their learning in any way I could.

If he can do it, she can do it too

My entire life has been a struggle. My whole family holds a conservative, 'by-the-book' attitude. In their minds, as a girl, I should only receive a basic education and then get married when the time comes. For them, the proper routine is straightforward: go to school, come back, and do household chores

- just the ordinary duties of a girl. But I'm not like that. I participated in all school activities and competed in all the races. I've always had a keen interest in debate, which led me to attend debate classes. I have also won awards for my performances in debates. I even worked as a volunteer trainer for the debate team at university. I believe in doing what I want to do, what I enjoy, and what I feel like doing.

My aunt used to often ask why I studied so much. She argued that as a woman, my future lies in motherhood. I always responded by telling her, 'No, it is not a crime for a woman to strive for self-improvement. Even if married, she should not have to depend on her husband or become a victim of his control. I refuse to fall into that category.' I was born to be a challenge-seeker as I had to struggle and fight to get what I am interested in— even education, particularly when it comes to competing with boys. My passion for defeating them, or at the very least, giving them a run for their money, is undeniable. Whether it's a race or a competition involving boys, you can count on me to be there. Nothing can deter me. I am always willing to go the extra mile to fight and win, all to prove that women are at least equal to men. My numerous awards serve as tangible evidence of my conviction that men and women are equals. I have an intense, burning desire, and I'm always ready to fight tooth and nail to prove my point, regardless of the cost. I refuse to give in. I am determined to debunk the patriarchal myth prevalent in our society that suggests that women are less capable than men. This myth wrongly places men above women in terms of intellect and capacity.

This myth is prevalent in Burma, where men often act as if they are superior to women. However, as the saying goes, 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.' We must challenge the status quo and end the myths that devalue women. We all must strive to prove our culture wrong in its gender biases. Changing a society's perspective isn't easy, as cultural norms are deeply entrenched, but we can start now, and everyone can contribute. So here I am, ready to demonstrate that women are just as capable as men. If he can do it, she can do it too. I am a fierce competitor, and I never do anything half-heartedly.

I have given up everything as the cost of freedom

Becoming and being a revolutionary fighter with the PDF is far from easy. My guilt towards my parents, especially regarding their health, is a constant burden. When my parents learned that I had joined the PDF, they didn't blame me. They understood my convictions. My father always emphasized that whatever choices I make, I must stand by them with full conviction. 'One must always have the courage of their convictions,' he would say. He advised me not to fear the consequences or regret my convictions, but rather to be accountable for them. So, when I decided to join the PDF, he didn't scold me. He believed in me and allowed me to act on my convictions. Even though they only found out about my decision to join the PDF after I had left home, they supported me in whatever way they could. If I needed medication, they sent it. If I needed money, they provided it. However, I was overcome with emotion and sadness whenever they tried to meet my needs. Their benevolence overwhelmed me. But then, I would remind myself that what I'm doing isn't for me alone. Realizing this provided me some solace.

Being a PDF revolutionary soldier means I have given up everything as the cost of freedom. Among the most precious things that I've lost is my family. My parents mean the world to me. They are my top priority, number one in my life. You see, I wasn't born into wealth. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I come from a poor family. My father had to work tirelessly to provide for us, and especially for me, as I've been in poor health since birth. My treatment cost them an arm and a leg. My dad had to work extra hours simply to afford my medicine. My mother labored tirelessly to care for me day in and day out.

Having a chronically ill daughter presented my parents with dual challenges. My parents shouldered not only the financial burden of my healthcare costs, but also the emotional strain and added physical labor of caring for a sick child. Essentially, my mother dedicated her entire life to my care. I was her top priority. No words can adequately describe the extent of her sacrifice for me. The most significant sacrifice my mother made was bringing me into this world and raising me despite my health issues. Therefore, my biggest loss in becoming a PDF soldier is the distance from my parents.

I feel as though I no longer deserve my parent's love

Recently, I learned that the military had raided my family's home in search of me. I was sick with worry for the safety of my parents, particularly my mother, who was already battling heart disease. I felt like I couldn't breathe until I received word that they were okay. But my anxiety for them hasn't ceased. There's a constant ache in my heart when I think about them. As the eldest daughter, I feel like I have failed to fulfill my primary duty towards my parents. I have let them down. I berate myself as being a wicked and sinful daughter, feeling like a failure in their eyes. This sense of failure is compounded by my being their only daughter. I feel as though I no longer deserve my parent's love.

There have been other moments like this. A while ago, my father fell seriously ill and was on death's door. His condition deteriorated to the point where he lost consciousness. The doctors prepared our family for the worst. However, thankfully, he recovered, for which I am very grateful. When I first heard about his illness, my worry for him was so great that it plunged me into depression. I found myself thinking that if I hadn't chosen to become a PDF soldier, I could have been there with him. I could have taken care of him. Even if he were to pass away, I should be there till his last breath, caring for him in the final stage of his life.

As the eldest daughter, I felt horrified, thinking that I had not fulfilled my duties. I was sick to my stomach, overwhelmed with stress, to the point of tearing my hair out. The constant butterflies in my stomach and the stress left me at my wits' end, leading to depression. I kept thinking that if only I were there, I could provide him with the care and comfort he needs. I should have been with him. As his only daughter and the eldest child, it was my responsibility. The thought of this broke my heart.

I became extremely depressed. I kept thinking that if I had stayed with my parents, if I hadn't joined the PDF and come to the jungle, I could have been with my father during his illness. But I knew I had to be strong. I reminded myself why I initially decided to join the revolutionary PDF. My choice to be a soldier in the PDF has never been about personal gain. It is about our collective well-being and the future generations of Myanmar. I understand how our generation has suffered, how our parents' generation suffered. We

aim to end military rule in Myanmar once and for all so that our younger generations will not face the same fate as us, our parents, and even our grandparents. Therefore, I need to be strong. My goals and I have to be bigger than my family.

In our fight against the dictatorship, we cannot emulate their actions

Throughout this journey, my focus has always been on changing our country's and our people's fate. To bring about change in others, we must first change ourselves. In our fight against the dictatorship, we cannot emulate their actions. We need to 'walk the talk.' If we can't do that, what's the point of the revolt? The revolution must be genuine. To build our country and society, we must first build ourselves. Only by changing our own thinking and behavior individually can we transform our society, culture, and systems. Only when we improve ourselves can our society progress. It will undoubtedly be a challenge, but it's necessary. If we don't practice what we preach, desiring change without altering ourselves, no real change will occur.

This may seem obvious, but it's the most challenging aspect of the revolution. Nonetheless, we must 'bite the bullet' and 'get the ball rolling' for change to occur within our country. This way, we can bring about change more effectively. Otherwise, there is no hope. If we continue progressing, even if not in our time, our future generations can reap the benefits. This hope is the reason we strive to make a difference. Change starts from within. Change within, change the world.

We wish to end this war, as all wars destroy humanity

War—what is it good for? No war is a good war. We, all of us young people currently fighting in Myanmar, understand this. It was never our choice. War is always tragic, inherently violent, and destructive. We must kill others to achieve victory. No war brings peace, only catastrophe, destruction, death, disability. We are aware of these consequences.

We never dreamt of being caught in war and forced to bear arms. We never wanted war. We never sought out war. Indeed, we never even imagined witnessing war, let alone becoming soldiers or carrying guns. We were unwillingly dragged into this war. Their goal is to enslave us with their inhu-

mane brutality. Not just us but generations yet to come. They waged war on their own young people because we refused to accept slavery, inhumanity, and oppression. We are left with no other options but to kill or be killed. We have to defend ourselves and also put an end to this oppression.

We began protesting creatively and peacefully to make our voices heard, but all our peaceful and nonviolent protests fell on deaf ears. We were forced to leave schools, put down our books, and take up arms instead. We never dreamed we would be driven out of our classrooms and into the jungle to fight. The only way to save ourselves from death, arrest, and torture was to take up guns. We wish to end this war, as all wars destroy humanity.

We like to believe that we are part of a just war, one that aims to end the rule of a brutal and inhumane dictatorship and is fought for a democratic, just, and peaceful future. This objective can only be achieved through war, and so we accept it, even though we understand the destruction it brings to our impoverished country and people. Despite the horrors of being part of war, we see it as necessary for us to achieve freedom and rebuild the country.

In reality, even though we are compelled to fight for our freedom and rights, we are all desperate for education. With war ravaging Myanmar's social institutions, causing mass destruction and displacement of human resources, and posing life-threatening risks, the people of the country have been impacted in unprecedented and devastating ways. More specifically, schools have been closed or attacked. Teachers have joined the CDM or have been arrested. Many have fled in search of safety in order to deal with this disruption. Education will be critical to unlocking our country's potential when the revolution eventually concludes and when the reconstruction and recovery processes begin. We will rebuild, equipped with knowledge and skills, from the ashes and remains of our country.

Despite the destruction we've caused in this war, a situation in which we had no other choice, individuals like Myat [whose narrative is featured in Chapter 2] will have to rebuild the country and society through education. So those of you who are currently studying should not feel guilty for not being able to join the PDF or engage in armed conflict with the military. I firmly believe that fighting is not the only solution for winning the revolution.

We will need you to help rebuild our country with education

My students reached out to me, expressing their desire to join in the fight against the military. I responded to them, 'We are fighting the military because we must. However, it is incredibly destructive. After the war, we will have to rebuild, and at that point, we will need you to help rebuild our country with education. This will be a significant contribution to the revolution. You are preparing through education to help rebuild once we end the war. This is a real contribution to the revolution. So, please don't feel like you aren't doing enough or that your contribution is minor. Don't be disheartened; I want to encourage you. Please, keep going.' By now, I've realized that the revolution will not end soon. Realistically, it will take time, even though we wish it weren't so. Being on the frontlines in the combat area, I am on the ground practically every single day, so I witness it firsthand.

Even though we are determined to win and willing to sacrifice our lives for victory, eager to bring the fight to a conclusion, the reality is that we face significant challenges. Even if we are prepared to trade our lives for the people's victory, we are fighting a well-equipped military with only minimal weapons and ammunition. The military we face has jets to bomb us. We understand that waging a war or carrying out a military operation will not cost millions, but billions of kyats.

Let's face it, the situation is crystal clear. The war is a people's war. The military declared war on the people, and we must defend ourselves. There is no other choice. From the start of the revolution, many of us have given whatever support they can. But now, we have been fighting for nearly three years. People living inside Myanmar are facing regular blackouts, inflation, and other challenges associated with the coup. They are no longer able to support us like before. Our main source of financial support has now been exhausted. If our people could continue to support us like before, I promise that the war would end soon with a victory. Now, we must rely on Burmese living abroad.

Of course, my mom wants me to come back home. She wants me to return, to study for my future, and to start a business to secure myself financially. I understand her concerns, but I've told her, 'Please give me time until 2023. If the revolution continues, then I shall come back home.' We believe we have a chance to win the revolution by the end of 2023. But if the war ex-

tends beyond 2023, I will still continue to fight until we win. I won't give up the fight against the military so easily. We know we will win. We must win. We always believe that justice will prevail.

Female PDF soldiers on patrol (above) and in training (below)
(photos courtesy of KNDF)

CHAPTER 2: MYAT

Federal school teacher, PDF fundraiser, and member of Myanmar's Underground Movement, 23 years old

If we want to build a democratic society, we need many well-educated individuals and critical thinkers

Myat, that is my name. It's not my real name, but let it be. I'm still living in Myanmar, working as a volunteer teacher at a federal school. I'm also a fundraiser for the PDF and work with a CSO. I've been elected as a youth leader.

We can't easily solve the current crises we face in Myanmar. We are grappling with structural issues. Myanmar has experienced repeated military coups in our lifetime, in our parents' lifetime. Prolonged military rule has created structural inequalities which have led to social conflicts in our country. People don't have the skills to think constructively—unsurprisingly, due to the education we received under the military. The root cause of our social conflicts lies in this militarized education.

I recognize that activists, politicians, and those involved in politics in Myanmar have often overlooked the significant role of education in politics and social conflict. No one seems to question why Myanmar faces such a crisis of structural issues, why it happened, what the root causes are, or why we haven't been able to find sustainable solutions. I'm interested in these root causes. I believe that if we want to build a democratic society, we need many well-educated individuals and critical thinkers.

Knowing how difficult it is for young people in rural areas to access education, I want to make a difference. Yet, it is extremely difficult to achieve this. I planned to conduct a survey to understand the challenges these individuals face, what they want to study, and how they wish to pursue their education.

However, conducting even a basic survey, let alone more in-depth research, is nearly impossible. If one can't survey or research, how can one understand people's needs in order to design effective solutions? Obtaining permission [to conduct research or facilitate education programs] is virtually impossible at this time, so I'm waiting for an opportunity. In today's Myanmar, there are countless security checkpoints wherever you go, so I cannot move about as freely as I wish.

Each of us must make our own sacrifices, however small they might be

I have to wait for the right opportunity. Travel becomes easier during festivals or holidays, as security checkpoints tend to be more lenient. However, I need to plan well and think thoroughly—safety is always the priority. I also need to think of ways to bypass the authorities' investigations. For instance, if we mention objectives as simple as literacy training, it won't be approved. We have to be creative. Instead, we might say we are going to conduct income-generation training.

I also need to find local youth to collaborate with. Fortunately, there are local students who have already studied with me and now have degrees from college. However, I don't have any funding. I have to invite them as lecturers with the understanding that I can't pay them, but I can provide them with free education. If we want to improve our country, each of us must make sacrifices, however small they might be.

Those of us who live in cities can catch up on education, even if we initially miss opportunities. However, it's much more challenging for people in the countryside or in ethnic areas to do the same. According to my surveys, Myanmar people who migrate overseas come primarily from dry zones. The people in these dry zones have less access to education, and now, due to the coup, more people are leaving. These individuals are pushed to work in other countries, leading to a waste of our human resources. I understand that it's impossible for them to send their children to schools opened by the military. It's also hard for them to learn via online education due to technological barriers. I plan to focus on vocational training and income-generation initiatives to raise funds. Then, with those funds, I will focus on providing free education in these areas.

My grandfather assaults my grandmother without any valid justification

If you're involved in the revolution, you must see it through to the end. You can't just give up and get out. If you know it's the right thing to do, you must complete it. I fundraise for the PDF and work as a volunteer teacher at a federal school, so I'm well-informed about the situation we're in and about the different networks. If there are emergencies, like the arrest or raid of colleagues, I think to myself, 'I could be next', or 'When will it be my turn?' I'm constantly thinking, 'Where should I hide?', 'Where will it be safe for me?', and 'How will I be able to get there safely?' I always ask my PDF friends, 'If I'm being pursued and have to run, would it be okay for me to join you on the frontier?' These thoughts are always on my mind.

I also think about my family, as the military has been targeting the families of activists since the coup. My family is small, there are only three of us. I am the only daughter. My father works in construction, so we are in the lower-middle class, maybe even the lower class. Like all other young people in our country, we are the lost generation. Our lives have been spiraling out of control. Our generation came of age during the Covid pandemic and the coup, so it's very difficult to have aspirations because of our country's situation. We are disconnected from our identities and face broken social networks among ourselves and throughout our society. My students have told me the same. I empathize with them because all of us, our generation in Myanmar, are lost in hope, dreams, aspirations, and goals. We feel like we are drifting.

I come from a conservative family. My mother in particular is very conservative. She prides herself on her infallibility and firmly believes that she always makes the right decisions. Once her mind is made up, no one can change it. But my father is different. He is a bit more flexible. Although, when I was traveling for my work with a CSO, he threatened me by saying, 'If you continue your work with politics, you will need to leave this house.' When my family warned me, 'Don't get involved in politics,' I was already halfway in.

The reason I began to take an interest in law is quite amusing. My interest was initially sparked by my desire to bring my grandfather to justice. He was not a good role model, to say the least, having had many mistresses, even to this day. My grandfather and grandmother married for love, not as part of an arranged marriage. Still, he never hesitated to flirt with others whenever

an opportunity arose. Even now, he's like that. My grandmother comes from a wealthy family background, and my grandfather's mother encouraged my grandfather to marry her. Even after marrying my grandmother, my grandfather continued his flirtatious behavior with other women. His actions have been reprehensible. He indulges in his time with his mistresses, yet upon returning home, he always finds faults with my grandmother, often resorting to physical abuse for no apparent reason. His angry temper flares up over trivial matters.

My grandfather assaults my grandmother without any valid justification. For instance, he will come home at his convenience and then attack my grandmother for not having prepared hot green tea for him. Even when she was heavily pregnant, he would grab her by the hair and beat her so severely that she lost her hearing and now has to use a hearing aid. We have to speak to her loudly so she can understand us. Now, my grandmother is in her 70s, yet he continues to treat her in the same abhorrent manner. I wanted to report him to the police. I told my grandmother that I could do so and have him arrested. However, she refused. Perhaps it's out of love or some other reason. She continues to believe that he might change one day. She tolerates his behavior, enduring his abuse while bearing one child after another. Now, she has four children total.

I can't accept how he treats my grandmother and his habit of maintaining several mistresses. I wanted to bring him to justice and protect my grandmother using the law. That's the primary reason I decided to study law. I sought legal knowledge to shield my grandmother, as well as other women who suffer from abuse and violence. I'd like to become a lawyer to defend vulnerable women from gender-based violence and assault. I've attended numerous training sessions and courses related to law, gender-based violence, protecting women, and combating human trafficking. I am deeply interested in addressing gender-based violence and promoting women's security.

While the coup was taking place outside, there was a war raging inside our house

My grandfather and I are at opposite ends of the spectrum, as different as apples and oranges, even when it comes to the coup. While the coup was

taking place outside, there was a war raging between him and me inside our house.

Like many others, I joined the anti-military protests. He asked me, 'How dare you join the protests? Don't you have any fear? If they [SAC authorities] shoot you, you'll be dead!' When I responded, 'I have no fear of them. That's why I will continue to protest,' he was extremely irritated, as was I. Then he provocatively asked, 'How much are you getting paid for joining the protests?' His remark severely tested my patience, and I retorted. He then kicked me out of our family's home, saying, 'If you continue to protest, get out of my house!' And so, I left his house. It's been over two years since our argument, which coincided with the coup. I haven't seen or spoken to my grandfather since. Occasionally, when I run into him on the street and he tries to call out or talk to me, I refuse. I know that if I engage him, our dispute will simply resume. I'm still enraged by how he treats my grandmother, as well as by his political views.

One day, while attending a training on federalism and democracy, my perspective expanded. As I mentioned before, my dad had also warned me that if I got too involved in politics, he would kick me out. At that time, I had no idea where I could go or how I would be able to support myself, so I had to swallow my pride and continue living there, despite my involvement in politics. It was tough for me to consider leaving the house as I had no other place to go.

During the federalism training, the trainer explained that if we want to build a federal state, we must be capable of supporting ourselves. This reminded me of my situation with my grandfather. I realized I needed my own resources and capacities to become self-reliant and independent. I asked myself, 'Can I support myself? Do I have the necessary skills and resources to survive without depending on anyone else? If I can't support or rely on myself, how can I lead others?' I understood that I needed to develop my capacities and challenge myself further.

My father once told me, 'You can make any decision you want, but you must accept the consequences.' He said, 'It doesn't matter whether you're working for yourself or for others. If something happens, you're the one who must face it.' I was born into a family known for their stubbornness and ob-

stinacy, so here I am. I chose this path and am ready to face whatever consequences may come. Thus, I am committed to being a revolutionary. When my parents discovered that I was fundraising for the PDF, they became frightened. They're so scared that they even avoid touching anything that belongs to me.

I've had to sacrifice my youth and my freedom

Since choosing to engage in the revolution, I've had to sacrifice my youth and my freedom. I've fought against oppressive regimes either with my pen, from the podium, or with my very own hands. As a radical revolutionary, I am a changed person now. The revolution has impacted my entire life and altered it forever. Life-threatening dangers are now a part of my everyday life. I do everything possible to survive and provide support for the revolution.

I once thought that household work wasn't for me, but now I've mastered it. I've also learned construction work. Now I know how to prepare construction materials and tools, how to load and unload them, how to remove debris, understand health and safety regulations, mix, pour, and level concrete with the correct ratios of materials, and perform several on-site tasks. These include erecting scaffolding, loading and unloading building materials, and assisting with operating equipment. I've even pushed myself to carry bricks. Considering how small my body is, it was a challenge, but I overcame it. I know how to hammer nails and construct wooden structures. I also constantly calculate how much I will be paid for all the jobs I've listed, and I ask myself, 'Have I earned enough to survive and support myself?' I'm always calculating, down to the last penny—'Is it enough or not?'

Critical education is the key to transforming society

My single goal is to better our society. However, I was initially unsure of how to go about doing this. I pondered, 'If we change our political system, will society and women's positions also change?' But then I realized that in our parliament [prior to the coup], the number of female parliamentarians was incredibly low. You could count them on one hand! They account for less than 10 percent of total representation. This implies that even if I were to become a parliamentarian, I would still be a minority in a male-dominated

context. How could I spearhead change in such circumstances? There would be no change. So, if these female politicians and decision-makers can't instigate change, how can we expect society to shift toward gender equality? I constantly grappled with such thoughts in search of a way to change society. Then, I participated in a CSO exchange program that discussed the impact of education on society. I learned that to change society, we must first reform the education system. Many emphasized that if we want to transition to a democratic society, we must foster critical thinking skills in the majority of the population, enabling them to distinguish right from wrong. Education in Myanmar should not just be about amassing certificates. The concept of education must be reshaped. It isn't about degrees, but about teaching people to think critically, find solutions, and discern right from wrong. Critical education is the key to transforming society.

I now do some work as a volunteer legal paralegal advisor focusing on gender-based violence and human trafficking issues. I have also been elected as a youth leader in a CSO. As a result, I continue learning more about how to improve society. In one training, I learned that in a country like Myanmar, not only women are discriminated against, but other minorities have also long experienced discrimination. Issues related to ethnic minorities and majority groups are a significant problem in Myanmar. I am firm in my conviction that we must change our society.

Interestingly, this started when I was just 19 years old. If you asked most people, 'What do you want to do in life?', they would typically respond with, 'I want to be a teacher, doctor, lawyer,' or something along those lines. But for me, the answer has always been, 'I want to change society. That's my goal. That's the only thing I want.' I can imagine people might think, 'Such big words coming from the mouth of a 19-year-old!' Regardless, if asked, unlike others, I would sincerely answer, 'All I want is to change our society.'

When I was living in the dry zone, in Nyaung-U and Mandalay, I realized how many of the youth there are missing out on educational opportunities, and how much our country is losing out in terms of wasted human resources and potential. Indeed, education is a basic human right that has the potential to significantly enhance people's life chances. Not being able to access education means that their basic human rights are being denied, but they don't

understand this. They have no knowledge of their rights. Their existence is reduced to living from hand to mouth—securing their next meal must take precedence over everything else. They don't think much about the immediate future beyond that, let alone the future of their lives and country.

My focus is on education. I firmly believe there's a need to redefine the understanding of education in Myanmar. The type of education I advocate for extends beyond the mere acquisition of certificates. I have initiated a vocational training program designed to equip individuals with skills to generate income. Moreover, I'm providing training in arts and crafts along with social and ethnic studies. It's my hope that these efforts will gradually bring about social change.

We are not like other young people around the world

The prime years of young adulthood typically span from around age 19 into the 20s. Under normal circumstances, we, the youth of Burma, are like our counterparts in other countries around the world: exuberant, carefree, cheerful, and untarnished. But the current situation is far from normal. We are not like other young people around the world. Our country's situation is far from normal. We can't be, and we shouldn't be, like other youths. Since the military coup, we've deviated from the global youth norm. Our hopes, dreams, life goals, and aspirations have evaporated. We can't even contemplate opportunities. Our future has become completely obscured.

I refuse to let future generations endure what we have. My goal is to create more opportunities for them. I want to reach out to the isolated areas, where education opportunities are extremely limited, and educate there. I've been waiting for an opportunity to work with more CSOs, but the wait has become unbearably long. The more we delay, the more we stand to lose. The dry zones are regions of significant labor out-migration, representing a massive loss of human resources that needs urgent attention. Thus, I've decided to establish my own foundation. I've invited local young people to join as volunteers, and I provide them with training. With the modest funds I have at my disposal, I've kick-started the operations. Our work may be challenging, but it is the first step towards restoring hope and opportunity for our youth.

We are fighting against dictators, and we can't allow ourselves to act like them

While I am working, I am always reminded of a story about a dragon. Once upon a time, there was a vicious dragon known for its reign of terror over a community living near a forest. No one dared to enter the forest to gather wood or work there. Therefore, the village elders announced that there would be a reward for anyone able to kill the dragon. Many would-be heroes ventured into the forest one after another, but none returned. Then one day, a man declared he would venture into the forest to kill the dragon. Off he went, and upon encountering the dragon, he fought and ultimately killed it. Just before he left the forest, he noticed a cave and decided to explore it. Inside the cave, he discovered precious jewels. Overwhelmed by greed and excitement, he reached out to touch them. But as soon as he touched the jewels, he himself turned into a dragon.

There is something we need to learn from the lesson of the dragon: 'Could this be what happened to the would-be heroes before him? Were they killed by the dragon, or did they kill the dragon and then transform into one themselves?' The dragon should serve as an important reminder to all of us fighting against dictators. In our lives, there are behaviors we dislike in others, for example, those of our parents. We may promise that we will never treat our own children the same way, yet sometimes we find ourselves doing exactly that. The revolution is similar. We are fighting against dictators, and we can't allow ourselves to act like them. If we do, we become the dragon, we become dictators ourselves. I always remind myself that I never want to become a dragon.

Loving Myanmar feels like loving someone with intense passion, yet with no hope of reciprocation

I found my calling at the young age of 19. Now, at 20, I can reflect on a year filled with hard work and determination. I constantly remind myself that there are many people working even harder, and I strive to match their zeal. The issues we face in Myanmar, especially due to the current political climate, are overwhelming. Winning the revolution is just one part of the solution. There are countless other problems that need addressing, and the magnitude of these challenges can be exhausting.

However, despite everything, I can't turn my back on Myanmar. The country that I love and care for deeply is also the one that causes me the most pain and burdens. I take immense pride in my homeland, but there are moments when I question whether my efforts are in vain. Loving Myanmar feels like loving someone with intense passion, yet with no hope of reciprocation, no matter how much emotion I invest. It's as though I'm smitten with someone who will never return my affection. How disheartening!

However, I've chosen this path with firm commitment and deep conviction. Therefore, I will never give up. No matter what it takes, I will continue fighting for our rights. Nothing can defeat me. Even though I'm young and should be experiencing the flutter of youthful love, I am far from it. I don't even entertain the thought. The door to love is closed for me. Love isn't within me right now because it involves human emotions, and I feel I can't afford to engage with them. They could affect me and disrupt the work I am doing. I have so much to do for my country and for future generations. Therefore, I must remain strong and focused.

We are fighting for justice, doing the right thing. Why should we be criminalized?

As you may already be aware, women are largely spearheading the Spring Revolution. We stand at the forefront of this movement. Yet, when you choose to be a fundraiser for the revolution, the first resistance often arises from your own family, especially from your mother. As I previously mentioned, my father's only advice was succinct: 'Whatever path you choose, you will have to bear the consequences.' He spoke those words and let them echo through his actions. He doesn't interfere with my decisions.

Fundraising is a challenging and intimidating responsibility for me. I've never done this before, asking for money from others. It's embarrassing for me. Now, as I'm volunteering as a teacher at a federal school, I also find myself having to ask for donations from the students. It's incredibly awkward! But do I have any other choice? No, I don't, so I must request donations. Since I became a fundraiser, I sometimes feel lower than a beggar, constantly begging.

Another major concern is the issue of safety and security. Whenever someone is arrested, it makes me sick to my stomach. Recently, someone I

trained with was arrested. He was also a member of the student union. When someone close to you gets arrested, it leaves you feeling anxious and sick with worry, constantly asking yourself, 'When will it be my turn?' Another time, a lawyer working as a paralegal at the same CSO where I was also working found himself on a wanted list. Thankfully, the information leaked, and he was able to escape overnight, narrowly avoiding capture. He was one of our best fundraisers. Hearing this news filled me with rage. We are fighting for justice, doing the right thing. Why should we be criminalized? Why should we be the ones who have to hide or run away? It's not fair. However, I also recognize that danger is increasingly near. My safety network is getting smaller and smaller. I could be arrested at any time. I have told my parents to disown me for their own safety.

The coup completely turned our lives upside down. Our entire world came crashing down around us. The nature and spirit of our young people's lives have been destroyed and buried. Never to return to our innocence, we lost our youthful selves. Now, I can tell you honestly how I feel, but I can't express it with others. When I am with my students, I have to hide all of my feelings.

Even if I haven't changed society yet, I am on the right path to changing my family

I come from an ordinary family. My family and I are very different. They lead ordinary lives, do ordinary things, and think in ordinary ways, but their daughter is worlds apart from them. We are as different as chalk and cheese. We may come from the same family, but we are poles apart. This is the most poignant challenge for me.

I hail from a conservative family where I've always had to demonstrate my independence, show that I can uphold my promises, and prove that I'm capable of making wise decisions. Initially, I was treated as guilty until proven innocent. However, as I repeatedly demonstrated my resourcefulness and resilience, my family members' attitude towards me shifted. They gradually started respecting my decisions. Unlike in the past, they no longer used my gender as a pretext to impose restrictions on me, no longer cautioning me that, as a girl, every situation could pose a potential danger.

My mom used to call me constantly, even if I was one minute late getting home. Even though, in my eyes, the changes in them are subtle and slow, they are actually undergoing massive changes. For example, whenever I attended Zoom seminars or trainings on gender equality, masculinity, and feminism, I would purposely listen near my mother so she too could hear what was being said. Thus, she began to gradually understand more about gender issues. Still, this doesn't mean that she would ever admit her views on gender were wrong. She remains as proud as a peacock, convincing herself she has never made a mistake. But I can clearly see changes in my dad. So, even if I haven't changed society yet, I am on the right path to changing my family, however small that change may be.

My family wants me to study overseas, but the thought of leaving my country in such a crisis to study for my own benefit fills me with guilt. I can't do it. If I dream of both changing my society and leaving the country, that would be hypocritical, and I refuse to be that person. No! If I want to improve my country, I must stick with it through thick and thin. Whatever challenges may come, I will stay firmly committed.

Truly, I was a good and obedient daughter to my parents from preschool to university. All my life, I have always been obedient to my parents and have done whatever they wanted me to do. But after the coup, I became a completely different daughter. I became a disobedient daughter who could be perceived as ungrateful and not dutiful. But my conviction for justice and future generations is so strong that I don't see any other options. I will be part of the revolution until we win. And we will win!

I love my country, even if my country does not reciprocate my love for it

I don't expect the revolution to end tomorrow. Realistically, it might take five, six years, or perhaps even seven years. Until we win, I will be a revolutionary, no matter what challenges come my way. Sometimes I feel guilty thinking about other young people like those in the PDF. I'm still living in the city, able to continue my studies, and not risking my life like they are. My friends are on the frontlines, risking their lives for freedom. I feel so guilty about it. They've lost everything they had and are risking their lives. The more I think about them, the harder I work for the revolution.

The main reason for my involvement is that I love my country, even if my country does not reciprocate my love for it. Being Burmese has given me nothing good in return. But still, I can't help but love my country. When there's an earthquake, I don't worry about my house. I worry about our heritage pagodas in Bagan, Maul-U, Inwa, and so on. That's how much I love my country. But it hurts that loving my country is as if I'm loving someone who will never return my affection.

Captain Daw Khin Pa Pa Tun (above), at her graduation from military medical school (right), with other military officers (below)
(photos courtesy of Captain Daw Khin Pa Pa Tun)

CHAPTER 3: CAPTAIN DAW KHIN PA PA TUN

CMDer, former Myanmar Military Medical Corps officer, 36 years old

I was born in Wakema, in the Irrawaddy Delta, once renowned as the 'Rice Bowl of Asia.' My grandparents were landowners from Kyaukone in Yangon but relocated to Wakema after their land was confiscated by the first coup leader, General Ne Win, under his so-called economic land reform in 1962.

Both of my parents initially worked as preschool teachers. However, my father later served in the Ministry of Planning, eventually becoming the assistant director of the ministry. I am the youngest daughter and have an older sister and an older brother. When the 8.8.88 people power revolution broke out, I was in 4th grade at a school in Wakema. I don't remember much, but I do recall feeling happy about the school closures. From then on, universities routinely switched between being open and closed for several decades. The only thing I can associate with '88 was the sight of soldiers wearing red commando badges arriving in our city. Prisoners were released into the streets, causing chaos. There were instances of protesters being shot.

When I turned 18, just after finishing 10th grade, I joined the military's Bachelor's of Medical Science (B.MSc) program. My sister was studying at a government medical college. However, unlike military colleges, government colleges were frequently closed and reopened by the authorities. Imagine this: the government schools and universities were closed so frequently while military schools remained open that my older sister and I obtained our degrees the same year. Even then, the privileges and advantages of being in the military were evident. One reason my family chose to send me to the military college was because my parents were government servants. The cost of sending two daughters to medical colleges would be astronomical. They simply

couldn't afford it, so I had to attend the military's medical college [Defence Services Medical Academy (DSMA) in Mingaladon, Yangon], which differed from the government medical college.

The military college provided a salary to students while studying there, which was helpful for my family. For all these reasons, I decided to go there. My mother didn't encourage me, but my father did. It was the best decision for our family at the time. So, even though I wasn't eager, I joined the military. Before this, my life was carefree and enjoyable, like any other young woman, filled with good times and friends.

Being part of the military, I had to no choice

The idea of attending a military college was scary for me. I was worried that the military lifestyle might be too challenging. Would I be comfortable wearing the uniform? I had these kinds of doubts. Additionally, bad memories, like being teased by soldiers passing by our house when I was in 4th grade, and the memory of students being shot during the 8.8.88 revolution, caused me to harbor resentment towards the military. But now, being part of the military, I had no choice. I was young, only 18 or 19 years old.

First, I had to attend basic military training before starting at the academy. Every morning, we had to do physical training, and every Friday, female members, like male soldiers, had to participate in military exercises. These included running five miles while wearing a heavy backpack, learning to shoot, engaging in physical exercises, and jumping with guns and backpacks. I attended the academy for four years, but with the first year of training, my time totalled five years. At that time, the entrance marks required for both the Military College and Nursing College were the same, 365 marks. The difference between military college and public universities is that the military college not only educates you but also pays you, albeit at the cost of enduring exhausting training. I am naturally a slow-paced person and tend to do everything at a leisurely pace, but the military training helped me become quicker and more disciplined. We had to adhere to a proper dress code. There was a lot of control and discipline regarding our appearance, among many other forms of discipline and control.

I found the first year to be the most challenging. It was very stressful, and

we were under pressure all the time. We were also disciplined in a hierarchical order. It wasn't as challenging as the Defence Services Academic training, but it was still demanding. Our seniors watched us around the clock. If they were displeased with us, we could be called upon and scolded at any time. Naturally, I have a serious demeanor. I appear as a reserved, quiet lady who keeps to herself. My expression isn't particularly warm. However, it seemed my seniors interpreted my lack of a smiling face as a lack of respect. They also accused me of not bowing low enough to demonstrate proper respect whenever I passed by them. I certainly did bow whenever I encountered them, but apparently, it wasn't sufficient. Overall, they seemed to think I wasn't humble enough to pay appropriate respect to my seniors. They called me in and scolded me on how I should behave and show respect, saying things like, 'You do not pay us enough respect.' They lectured me until nearly midnight.

They aimed to cause us suffering

If I received a pass to go out, I was required to wear what was considered to be proper Burmese women's attire. Like my seniors, I wore a Burmese top with short sleeves during my third year at the military college. I thought I was allowed to do this since I was in my third year. However, in the training field, in front of everybody, I was called out and told, 'Even if we dress this way, you have no right to do the same. You must not mimic us. You are a junior, and you should behave as such.' They humiliated me in front of everyone, asserting that they could dress in a certain way, but I couldn't.

After graduating, I got married, and my husband worked as a medical professional at the military university. We have two children. When my husband was posted in Toungoo, I was in Meikhtila. Then, Commander Zin Min Oo ordered me to relocate to Toungoo with my husband. However, after only a week in Toungoo, my husband was sent off for further training for his work. I was left in a new place with a one-month-old baby, but I managed to handle the situation.

When my husband returned from his medical science training, he began working at the Military Training School near Toungoo. He noticed many soldiers were malnourished to the point of hospitalization, and shockingly, ten soldiers died due to malnutrition. This incident was both extraordinary

and alarming. The symptoms the soldiers presented also indicated a lack of vitamin B1. Due to these unusual cases and the high death rate, my husband wanted to conduct electrocardiograms (ECGs) on other soldiers. He was now qualified as a professional medic and wanted to start his profession well, which included wanting to use antibiotics for his patients. When he asked for permission, the commander disapproved. They ended up having a dispute over the use of antibiotics.

Due to the unusual death rates among the new soldiers attributed to malnutrition, many senior members of the military came from Yangon to manage the situation discreetly. This case had the potential to make headlines, exposing how poorly the military was treating its own soldiers. These senior officers met with patients and provided them with nourishing food, including oats, eggs, milk, etc. However, they made sure to seal off information about the soldiers' deaths from malnutrition in order to hide it from the public.

My husband, keen on researching the case and providing antibiotics to the remaining patients, was in a dispute with the commander who wanted to control medicine distribution. At first, we couldn't understand why the commander was so adamant about holding on to the medicine instead of supporting research for prevention and treatment with antibiotics. It was only later that we realized he was more interested in pocketing the money saved from not using expensive antibiotics for the soldiers at the hospital. This led to a situation where my husband was summoned to the office and given a warning. Things got a bit loud during a particularly heated argument with my husband in the commander's office. My husband wasn't supposed to talk back to a senior military officer, as the Tatmadaw is extremely hierarchical. As a result, the commander became enraged and sought revenge.

After the argument, in a move to discipline what he considered my husband's disobedience, the commander ordered the disconnection of electricity to our house. Since we relied on electricity to power the transformer to get water, the lack of electricity meant we had no water. With a one-month-old baby, life without electricity and water was tough. We were outraged when we realized that they had purposefully disconnected the electricity to discipline us for my husband's disobedience, which actually stemmed from his concern for his patients. After enduring these conditions for three weeks, our patience

wore thin.

My husband went to confront his seniors and asked them to reconnect our electricity, but they wouldn't, of course. They aimed to cause us suffering. This led to another quarrel. Not only did the commander report the incident to senior officers, but he also put us under house arrest. We knew that you can never talk back to a senior in the military. Arguing with a senior in the military is like hitting your head against a wall. In our military experience, there had never been a house arrest or arrest of anyone in our positions. It only happened to us under this commander's rule. He ordered us to be confined at a house belonging to another member of the military. My child was only one month old, but they locked us up and took away our freedom.

This is the military, and they always maintain a watchful eye

At first, I didn't realize we were being locked up. But in the middle of the night, when I needed to get hot water from outside to make a milk bottle for my son, I realized we were locked in from the outside. I was so exasperated and told them that we had no reason to try to escape or run away. We hadn't committed any crime or gotten involved in politics. Our entire family was kept under house arrest for six months while our case was being investigated. We were locked inside with a guard at the gate as if we were imprisoned criminals.

Typically, house arrest is implemented until senior officers investigate cases at Naypyidaw. Typically, a commander should not be able to put a captain under house arrest without prior permission from his seniors in Naypyidaw. My husband's commander had us transferred to a military guesthouse with guards when he realized his overstep. I was young and deeply frustrated. After six months, our case was investigated by General Maung Aye, who initially ordered our arrest, gave us a prison sentence, and ordered our dismissal from military service. However, General Than Shwe then became interested in our case. He reviewed it and ordered my husband and myself to a year of limited service, leading to the eventual closure of the case.

While we were under house arrest and detained in the guesthouse, all our personal belongings were stolen. This included our ID cards and clothing. When we reported the theft, we were told we would receive reimbursement,

but nothing came of it. We were exhausted from fighting and decided to let it go. Prior to this, I had reported the power outage at our house to an officer, citing it as the result of a personal disagreement over the provision of antibiotics. The officer's reply was, 'If you can't live without electricity, go and stay in a hotel.' When I saw him later in person, I confronted him, 'Was it you who suggested we stay in a hotel if there's no electricity?' I questioned him openly, and my audacity took him aback. I am not afraid. I value truth and justice. I'm not scared. I simply don't care. But I understand that this is the military, and they always maintain a watchful eye.

In response, they started seeking revenge. They wanted to transfer us. When asked where we would like to be transferred, we chose Meikhtila, where we had been stationed previously. In the military, if you're a specialist, you're generally not sent to the frontlines. However, my husband was sent to the frontlines, leaving me alone with our very young son.

Corruption often leads to exploitation

I went to live and work at the Meikhtila base while my husband was stationed at the frontlines. Since he was not with us, the pressure on me increased. As a form of retaliation, I was always assigned to the busiest ward. This became my routine. I was even ordered to take a military ethics exam in Mandalay.

Abuse of power is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar. It is a pervasive practice across various sectors, but is simply on another level in the military. Corruption often leads to exploitation. While I can't speak for other countries, in Myanmar, if you're working within a military institution, not only are you expected to obey, but you're also expected to ingratiate yourself with your immediate superiors. Only then are you able to live your life in relative peace.

Previously, my superiors had asked me which ward I preferred to be assigned to for my duties. I responded by saying, 'I am a medical staff member. Regardless of the ward I am in, my duty remains the same—to nurse the sick.' At the time, I expressed my honest thoughts without ulterior motives. I didn't realize that my words had offended them. They sought vengeance against me as a reprisal, but I didn't understand that at the time. Initially, they always assigned me to the busiest wards. They even scheduled me for night

duties, which was highly unusual as female staff members were generally not assigned to night shifts. They were fully aware that I had a baby I was caring for by myself and wanted me to experience the consequences of our disagreement. This was a despicable act and an insidious form of power abuse.

When the Covid outbreak occurred in Myanmar, I was heavily pregnant, yet they still assigned me to the Covid ward. This was a sinister act. There were many Covid-related patients in that ward. I had to work four straight hours without any break, all while carrying my full-term pregnancy. One day, the Commander came to visit the ward. He saw me, a pregnant staff member, working inappropriately in the Covid center, but he acted as though he hadn't noticed, or as if it meant nothing to him. His lack of empathy was appalling. It was a sickening experience, but I endured it and worked under intense pressure. However, my husband could bear our family's situation no longer. He said enough was enough, and he left his station abruptly. He was classified as AWL [absent without leave]. I did not try to stop or persuade him to be patient, even though we were both concerned for the health of our baby.

Later, he returned, seeking to resolve his issues with the military once and for all and to clear his name. He was determined to make himself free, so he willingly served his sentence in prison for one year and was subsequently expelled from the military. After prison, he moved to Kachin State and started working at Hpakant Public Hospital.

While my husband was serving his sentence, I enrolled in an MSc program at a nursing college. My single income wasn't enough to support both myself and my baby. I needed more money to get by. At that time, even though I was suffering within the ruthless military institution, I was also fearful of my chances for surviving on my own without any steady income. I wasn't brave enough. I had worked within this institution since I was 18, and my only earnings had come from the military. I was unsure what to do outside the military and how to earn an income to support myself. I had no experience with other jobs. I was therefore forced to find ways to earn extra money. I began selling clothes. To my surprise, my profit from just a few days of selling clothes equaled my monthly military salary! This made me realize that I didn't need to live and work under such terrible conditions in the cruel military environment; I could work anywhere and survive. I could earn a

similar income to my military salary relatively easily. This realization boosted my confidence.

I simply could not tolerate any more

However, I was still contracted to work with the military until 2025. At the time, I thought, I just have to hang in there for a few more years. But then the coup occurred. When the coup was staged, I simply could not tolerate any more. I lost my patience with the military. This institution, which practiced horrendous oppression, committed inhumane acts, had repugnant attitudes, was rife with corruption, and fostered a bullying culture within its own ranks, had now extended these practices to the people. It was no longer a professional military. It had come to be ruled by gangsters. The military completely lost all sense of ethics, integrity, and professional dignity. I felt disgusted at myself for working for it. So, I left.

When I started my military career, my initial posting as a military nurse was in Sittwe No. 17, a 100-bed facility in Rakhine State. I am of the Bamar ethnic group. I faced a language barrier and needed help locally. The commander there was quite bullying in his approach. I had previously undergone six months of training in Yangon and another six months of training in Meikhtila, and in both places, I was provided with sufficient medical supplies. However, when I arrived in Sittwe, I found that the medical supplies were highly inadequate. It was a shock to experience having to puncture holes in drip sets and then clean the run tubes in hot water to reuse them. We also didn't have enough catheters.

At first, I didn't understand why we were facing such a scarcity of medical supplies. However, I later saw with my own eyes that the commander himself was selling these medical supplies in the public market. As a professional nurse, I felt terrible, disappointed, and embarrassed by the institution I worked for.

The hospital was filled with lower-ranking soldiers. Sometimes they returned from the frontier looking very rugged. They wore tattered uniforms, had long hair and mustaches, and looked filthy, dirty, and smelly. Despite this, we had to take care of everything for them, including cutting their hair and basic personal hygiene. Sometimes, it was hard for us to get a barber to

come to the hospital to do this. But when the Commander came and saw these sorry-looking soldiers, we nurses were scolded in front of everyone.

The experience was suffocating

The lack of availability of basic medical equipment and supplies became a severe problem, an issue that was highlighted when a ten-year-old patient who was unable to urinate came for treatment at our hospital. We had no child-sized catheter tubes, none at all. When we informed the commander about the need for a catheter appropriate for a child, he showed no concern and simply told us to use whatever was available. He was within earshot of the boy's loud cries of agony, but this didn't seem to affect him at all. The entire medical team was utterly distressed. We then decided to do whatever we could, so we adapted an adult catheter by cutting a tube from a winged infusion set, commonly referred to as a 'butterfly' or 'scalp vein', for his urinary tract. Thankfully, the boy felt relief afterward. It was shocking to witness such callous disregard for a child's suffering. I had never seen or even imagined such a lack of compassion towards a child.

The hospital was filled with patients. Some were wounded from the frontlines, while others were injured in their communities. A significant number had tuberculosis, but malaria was the most common ailment. Worryingly, the majority of soldiers were heavy drinkers. Many of their health problems were related to their use of alcohol, such as alcohol poisoning, addiction, and related disorders. Most of these were infantrymen, and it was common practice for soldiers to drink heavily after their security duties.

In Sittwe, the security force was comprised of the military, police, and immigration forces. Hence, it was not only soldiers that came to the hospital, but also police and immigration officers who faced alcohol-related health problems. Many died due to drunk driving. The issue of alcohol-related disorders among soldiers was a serious one. In my two years of experience working at the Defence Services Nursing and Paramedical Academy, I saw firsthand the devastating impact of alcohol on the health of soldiers. For every ten soldiers who drank, it was a common occurrence that five of them were suffering from alcohol dependence. Tragically, it was a common occurrence for four or five soldiers to die every single day due to alcohol-related issues. This high-

lighted the severity of the alcohol problem within the military ranks.

Another grave issue was the prevalence of HIV. Many soldiers' wives were discovered to be HIV-positive when they sought medical assistance for illness, pregnancy, or childbirth. Upon testing, it was a shocking revelation that many of these women were HIV-positive. We urgently recommended their husbands get tested, and invariably they, too, were HIV-positive. A significant number of deaths among the soldiers and police were also linked to untreated HIV infection. There could be multiple reasons for these high HIV rates among soldiers' wives. One likely cause is that they contracted the virus from their husbands who served in the army. Another potential reason is that some of these women may have engaged in sex work to supplement their family income due to the meager salaries their husbands received as soldiers.

In my 23 years of service, the only times I found happiness was when I was treating patients. However, the military's culture of revenge, torture, bullying, and relentless pressure made it very difficult to find joy or fulfilment in such a stifling environment. The experience was suffocating.

After earning my MSc, I was obligated to sign a ten-year contract with the Army, meaning I had to serve until 2025. Despite my resolute decision to leave the army, the principal of the Hmawbi Officer Training School sent me a form for a promotion. He called to inform me that my promotion had been approved. Upon hearing the news while I was teaching a class, I was so startled that I couldn't wait until the end of the class. I rushed after them to rectify the situation, explaining that there must have been a mistake since I had never applied for a promotion. Accepting a promotion would mean prolonging my service, which I was certainly not planning to do. I had resolutely made up my mind to quit the military.

We were treated like test animals

I was stationed at the Covid center from the time it opened to the time it closed. We followed a two-week-in, two-week-out routine. That was when I further realized that the military didn't treat us as human beings. As Covid was ravaging Myanmar, the Indian government donated Covid vaccines to us. These vaccines had only been tested on animals in India, yet they were shipped to Myanmar. The military, without considering the lives of its own

citizens, instructed us to use these vaccines on ourselves. We, who were working at the Covid center to save the lives of soldiers, were the first group of people to be treated like test animals.

It was a horrifying experience, as we, being medical professionals, were fully aware of the importance of animal testing to prevent negative health consequences in humans. But they didn't care. Our lives were simply of no importance to the military. They merely ordered twenty of us who were working at the hospital to be test subjects and to be injected with these vaccines. Although I knew I had a strong immune system and could likely handle the situation, I made sure to voice my concern to them. 'My immune resistance is strong, so I can take it, but when it comes to your turn, you may die.' It was horrifying and outrageous.

Working there was intensely oppressive and pressurizing. All our efforts to do good seemed futile. Previously, the senior military medical officers were respectable; they held significant roles and influence. But the military seemed determined to gradually diminish their stature. Little by little, my seniors began to lose their influence and roles. The army also started to appoint newly graduated 'young brothers' who were not required to have exceptional academic records. Their aim was to increase numbers by emphasizing quantity over quality.

When no one was willing to take overtime assignments, I stepped in, despite knowing how exhausting it could be. I became the ward-in-charge and was posted in Myitkyina in Kachin State. Myitkyina was one of the busiest hospitals, as there were many military operations, so nobody wanted to be stationed there. As usual, I was positioned in the busiest hospital wards. I carried out my duties to the best of my abilities. I firmly believe that as a professional, I must uphold my ethics regardless of criticism or praise. I wasn't doing my work for promotions, opportunities, or to show off. I did it for myself, for my own dignity, and for no one else. It was my professional ethics that I relied on.

The military's downfall has been long overdue

When the coup was staged on February 1, 2021, we were summoned to the training field to hear the news. We were told, 'The SAC had no other

choice but to act in accordance with the constitution. This is not a coup.' After the announcement, we returned to our positions, whispering among ourselves, 'Well, here we go again! The country is going to fall apart.' When I got home, I relayed to my husband that Min Aung Hlaing had instigated the coup, insisting that the military had not usurped power, but rather fulfilled its responsibility to 'save the country from collapse.'

I expressed to my husband my belief that Min Aung Hlaing had taken on more than he could handle and that this could be the downfall of the military. The military's downfall has been long overdue, but the cost it would bring upon the people was concerning. They would suffer, they would need to make sacrifices, they would pay the price. The Myanmar military's legacy of bullying and injustice is well-established. They have long practiced this in the military, and now they are expanding their unjust empire to the masses. This mirrors the behavior they've demonstrated within the army, even infringing on their own soldiers' human rights. Therefore, I believe those who have chosen to fight against the military are on the right path.

When I told my husband that I planned to join the CDM, he took our two children and moved to his parent's house, a house that has since been confiscated. Working at the Covid center and witnessing the brutal shootings and escalating violence, I grew more and more desperate. Initially, I considered applying for a passport to leave the country. However, I soon realized the risks involved. My identification card listed my occupation as an officer of the Myanmar Army Medical Corps (Mingaladon), which could potentially draw unwanted attention and suspicion. I was concerned that the military might circulate my photo to the passport office and airport, creating additional risk if I tried to leave through official channels. It was a precarious situation to find myself in. Therefore, my husband and I decided to take the overland route across the border. Before that, we had been living in military housing in Hmawbi Township. Through a friend, we contacted Captain Min Maung Maung [a former military medical officer who, after deserting the military, resettled in Mae Sot, Thailand and began providing assistance to other deserters], who is already well-known, who assisted us. There were instances of the army shooting protesters in Hmawbi around the time of the coup. Even though we were part of the Defence Services, we were ordered to be stationed

at the frontlines for military operations.

When I saw news from Mizzima about the army shooting and killing young people and children, I was emotionally devastated. The realization of serving such an evil and inhumane institution filled me with disgust. I felt as though I was serving the Devil himself, contributing to the destruction of my people and my country. It was something I could no longer continue to do.I was heartbroken and overwhelmed but felt trapped, uncertain about what steps to take next. I even called my father to express my despair about being caught in this hellish institution and feeling unable to escape. I was desperate to leave, but unsure about how or where to go. My husband, as always, was more decisive. He said, 'That's it,' gathered our children, and we left our home.

None of us, the members of the military, from the lowest rank of a soldier to sergeant, corporal, and warrant officer, are satisfied with the way the institution is being run. Those in power within the military are treating it like their own private business. For example, Aung Myint Mo, the son of Min Aung Hlaing, owns a private insurance company. Without consent or agreement, he deducted money from the soldiers' salaries under the guise of 'life insurance.' This is but one such action that has caused deep resentment among the soldiers.

The Tatmadaw has become a gang led by inhumane, devilish gangsters

Moreover, soldiers were ordered to guard Mytel [Myanmar Telecommunications] towers, further adding to their discontent with their superiors. Instead of using military revenue or funds from Min Aung Hlaing's substantial wealth, the SAC deducted money from the soldiers' salaries to donate to the Covid Center, ostensibly in their name. There are many aspects of the military's operations that have left soldiers unhappy and feeling exploited. However, many are constrained by considerations for their families who rely on them, housing provided by the military, or concerns about pensions and retirement benefits. Everyone seems to be counting the days until they can leave the Tatmadaw, and the general sentiment is one of dissatisfaction rather than pride or fulfillment in their service.

Since I left the military, the future feels uncertain, like staring at a blank screen. The path ahead is an uphill battle, a tough challenge. But come what

may, we are prepared to face it. No matter the difficulties, they will never compare to the horrors of being part of an institution I now see as devilish.

While in the military, there was a sense of security, knowing that at the end of the month, I would receive a salary for food and a roof over my head. But the price paid for these comforts was far too high. The Tatmadaw has become a gang led by inhumane, devilish gangsters, and I simply cannot be a part of it. I can't even passively take part in their operations. If everyone who operates the military's machinery were to stop, like I have, they would no longer be able to function. It would be the end of it.

My conscience is crystal clear. I refuse to be part of the military's bloody oppression

Of course, I worry about the future of my children. But my conscience is crystal clear. I refuse to be part of the military's bloody oppression. I want to write my own history with a clear conscience, even if it means leaving everything else behind. You see, now we have tens of thousands of 'watermelon' soldiers—wearing the soldiers' green uniform, but with the red symbol of democracy and the passion of comrades inside, collaborating with the revolutionaries.

While I was in the army, we often discussed how poorly the military was run. Many in the army disliked the way the institution carried out injustice internally, but they felt trapped, too old to leave, with their future survival depending on their pension. Some viewed the Tatmadaw as inhumane and inconsiderate. I witnessed this callousness firsthand. For example, many who suffered from deadly diseases such as hypertension were sent to the Covid Center to risk their lives. I saw a nurse who was a severe victim of hypertension, yet she too was sent to the Covid Center. I felt sick to my stomach when I saw her tiny body dressed in a PPE uniform.

As soon as I saw my opportunity, I left the army to join the CDM. One morning, I went to carry out my duties as usual, and the next day, I left. I was very careful, knowing the risks I was taking. If the army suspects anyone of having a likelihood of leaving, they will take severe action and may arrest them. The lieutenant colonel of our head nurses' women's ward often proudly told stories of how she personally spied on a young captain and arrested him

for planning to desert the army. She is partnered with the military chief, Min Aung Hlaing, so her actions were not a surprise.

When I listened to her stories, I asked myself, 'Why is she telling me this? Does she know that I, too, am planning to desert the army? Is this an indirect warning?' I disguised my emotions and pretended to brush it all off. Sadly, I also had one of the new, young doctors who had just joined the military confide in me, 'I don't want to serve here. I am going to desert.' I responded to him, 'Don't say that!' I had to warn him, 'If anyone hears what you said, you will be in trouble.' I then deserted the army earlier than he did.

I was excited to vote

When I joined the military, I was only 18. Now I am 30, and I've never been given the chance to vote. I wasn't allowed to; the military voted for me. They decided what or who I should vote for. Without my permission or consent, senior officers cast advance votes in my name. It was a clear violation of my human rights.

In the 2015 election, I was excited to vote. At that time, I was working in a rural area, and I wanted to vote so badly that I even planned to return to Yangon to do so. When I requested permission, my superiors told me they had already voted for me with an advance vote! I was furious. When I asked to see the voters' list, they showed me a list with names of people who had never been at our base.

The accusations made against the National League for Democracy (NLD) about fraudulent votes, ghost votes, and proxy votes were indeed committed by the military itself, not the NLD. The Tatmadaw just made up a reason to remove the democratically-elected government because the military chief wanted to be the president of Myanmar himself.

When the 2020 election period started, I was working in Hmawbi. I decided to go and vote because I wanted to see the voting booth, experience the ballot box, and cast my vote myself. I wanted to feel it. But before that, the principal informed me that I must vote in advance. I thought to myself, 'Well, at least this time I can vote.' I voted for the NLD. However, I couldn't close the envelope as there was no glue. I took some cooked rice, used it as glue to seal it, and then handed it back to them. I was very meticulous in securing my

vote. But I later learned from someone that they had opened my voting envelope. I asked them, 'Why did you do that?' They stated that it was because they needed to put an election stamp on my vote, but I know the reason was to steal my vote.

None of this is new. The practice of fraudulent voting is commonplace within the military. High-ranking military officers have been involved in this. Sometimes, a lieutenant colonel would personally come to the training center and instruct trainees on whom to vote for. Since the trainees are new, they are obedient. This shows how the army abuses its power to steal votes. It wasn't surprising then that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won in Hmawbi.

On occasion, they used not only their own soldiers' votes, but also those of their extended family members. For example, in Myitkyina, senior officials asked dependent family members of the soldiers to vote in advance. Generally, the segment of dependent families of the soldiers outnumbered the staff. Even if you were there at the time of the election, you were ordered to vote in advance so they were able to manipulate and use your votes for their own interests. Naturally, they won there too.

I have plenty of reasons to strongly dislike the Tatmadaw. I do not like the way the generals run the institution. I hate their bullying, corruption, inhumane attitudes, injustice, lack of empathy, and abuse. The list could go on and on.

Do not expect humanity or empathy from them

When the 2020 election took place, my husband was so determined to vote that he left Hmawbi in advance so that they could not take his vote. I had already planned to leave the military in 2025 when I ended my commitment to them. The coup in 2021 made me desert the army more quickly than I would have. There was no reason for the coup. The generals did it simply because they wanted to, nothing else.

Tyranny and intimidation is part of military culture. The military leaders had already practiced it well within their own ranks. They were very comfortable with it and had normalized it. Now, they are expanding the military bully culture to the mass population, using power for their personal benefit.

Do not expect humanity or empathy from them, as this is an integral part of Myanmar's military culture. Soldiers from reserved or service areas, medical corps, are now being assigned to crackdown on protesters, and even those not from active frontline units have been made to act similarly.

Before I left the military, I heard about an engineer captain assigned to a troop with the specific goal of suppressing protesters. He was bloodthirsty, and they went to the Hlaing suburb for this very purpose. When he returned, he was happy, proudly proclaiming that he had shot and killed as many as 30 protesters. I was disgusted and felt sick. This incident was not isolated but a well-established pattern of the military's pervasive violent, inhumane culture.

Of course, deserting the army—the only place I've worked and the path that transformed me from a teenage girl into a professional—was not easy. I was concerned about my future and my children's future. But when I compared my situation to the despicable challenges I had already faced in the army, I realized I had overcome them. I thought to myself, 'If I could overcome the bullying in the army, I can take on any challenges yet to come.'

After arriving here [Thailand], I heard that one CDM captain had returned to the military. This news made me worry about my own safety. Now that the Thai-Burma border is open, they could come and arrest us. We are skating on thin ice. We have to be cautious with every step, both our own and those of others.

But I don't think things will get worse than they are now. In our country, everyone loathes the soldiers in Myanmar. So, I, as a former member of the army and now a participant in the CDM, feel this loathing. I don't blame people for feeling this way; the army has committed such hideous atrocities that they deserve the hatred and disgust of the people. I can't ask people not to hate the military because even someone like me who worked within the institution harbors disdain for the organization. However, the army was where I worked before, so I also felt disappointed. I can't be proud of where I worked, which saddens me.

Now, here, our family is together

After joining the CDM, I received a CDM identification number from the CRPH (Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) and some assistance

from the NUG National Unity Government). I also received an honorarium when I joined Pyi-Thu-Pan-Tai (People's Goal), an organization established by deserted soldiers. I am here with my two children, a 15-year-old son and a 13-year-old daughter. I send them to a border school. To be honest, while I was working in the army, I rarely saw them. I spent most of my time working at the Covid Center, so I was hardly ever home. I didn't have the time to be close to them. Now, here, our family is together. My children have the opportunity to attend school, make friends, and socialize. They are happier now, and I am happier too. I'm healthy and feel I can take on any challenges that come my way. Now, there's no one forcing me to do unjust, unethical, or unprofessional things. It's a blessing to be away from such vicious people.

Survival has been a challenge. My resources are limited to savings from my previous job and some money provided by my parents. However, to subsist here, I need to work, which I've managed to do so far. Regrettably, I haven't been able to find a job that is a good fit for me. Here, I'm seen as an illegal entity, and our community members tend to make comparative judgments about each other.

My children will no longer be humiliated as the children of military parents

I served in the Tatmadaw for 23 years; that's half my life. When I joined the CDM and deserted the army, I didn't discuss it with my parents. It was entirely my decision, one I had made up my mind about a long time ago. I'm not worried about my elderly father, who is taken care of by my unmarried sister. However, they are being watched. If I want to keep them safe, I must either disconnect from them, or they must disown me. Our house has already been confiscated.

What do military nurses experience in other countries? I do not know for certain, but I am convinced that they are treated as professionals. In other places, they likely follow codes of conduct and have their rights respected.

For my children, I believe I have done my best. They will no longer be humiliated by being the children of military parents. By removing them from the military environment, which the people widely loathe, they will no longer feel the pain associated with being the children of soldiers. Being children of a military CDMer is better than being associated with an institution that

people despise. I think my decisions have made them proud of me. They also don't need to worry about the future of their education. When we were in Myanmar, I didn't send them to school during the Covid era. Now they can attend schools here, identified as the children of an ax-military-CDMer.

Now the military has announced that there will be a new election, but what for? They have committed fraudulent elections in the past and will likely do so again in this election, so nothing will change, and the upcoming election seems to be designed to ensure that they are elected.

Sometimes, I feel frustrated by the NLD. They knew how the military manipulated the election and how they viciously aimed to hold onto power by any means. And yet, why did the NLD allow the military to vote? No votes from the military would have brought about a democratic outcome. The military has consistently cheated in all elections in Myanmar. This is a routine activity for them. Even if they were to lose, they would stage yet another coup. What is new? In the history of elections in Myanmar, there has not been a single election in which the military has not been actively involved. If the elections of the past were not fair and genuine, what would be different now? Will this election be fair and just? The generals simply cannot accept that the people do not want them to rule. Time and again, the people have shown that they reject military rule. But the military does not want to hear from the people. They are shameless and will do whatever it takes to rob the people of their votes and their clear preference for being led by an elected government.

Aren't we, the Burmese, human too?

My dream for the future is to win the revolution soon, whatever it takes. I hope for victory to come quickly and decisively. When I was in the army, I used to tell my friends that if the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) comes into play, it should come swiftly. When my colleagues heard me say that they told me, 'Well, if they come, you will also die.' I responded that if I must die for the cause, so be it. The quicker they come, the better for the people of Myanmar.

It is heartbreaking for me to witness how unarmed people suffer in the revolution and how our youth have to fight, but at the same time, I do not know what else or how else I could do more for the revolution. I do not know about politics. I have never been involved in politics, nor do I want to be. I

just want to live my life peacefully. My children can never join the army—never, over my dead body. I will never accept it. That's how much I hate the army. The military has fallen from any semblance of glory into hell. I will tell my children how the Myanmar army is not a professional institution, but a gang run by devilish gangsters. It's an unjust, inhumane, and wicked entity—a damaged and failed institution. The Myanmar military has proven itself to be unprofessional, unethical, disgraced, and inhumane.

But why are the international communities inactive? There is evidence of the Tatmadaw committing numerous crimes against humanity and atrocities across the country. It feels like they are ignoring us, treating us as if we're disposable. Aren't we, the Burmese, human too? I wish the international community would help us with armed support to fight back against the military and to defend ourselves. This is a failure on behalf of the international community.

Myanmar is one of the most glaring examples of the international community's failure to realize the promise of 'Never Again', a commitment made with the adoption of the R2P doctrine in 2005. It is heartbreaking to witness the international community remaining unmoved and unhelpful to Myanmar's struggle, displaying a lack of empathy and unity for humanity. Aren't we humans as well? Their actions do not match their words. How can the international community continue standing by and watching us suffer like this? How can they sleep at night? We, too, are human. Don't they realize that? The people of Myanmar are enduring suffering to an extent no population should have to endure. But with or without their help, we are determined to win the battle.

Our revolution is gaining momentum now. Of course, how could it be otherwise? We are the people fighting against an unjust institution. Victory is on its way. The military is losing the battle on the ground, that's why they are resorting to using military jets to conduct airstrikes, dropping vacuum bombs and employing enhanced blast munitions known as fuel-air explosives on armed groups and civilian communities. Their indiscriminate attacks are being made against their own citizens, targeting defenseless children, mothers, women, and men.

I see with my own eyes the courage and commitment of so many women

on the frontlines, fighting on the battlefield. I am so proud of them, yet envious, as I cannot participate in the same way due to my family responsibilities. This fills me with both pride and sorrow. I believe that we all must do whatever it takes to rebuild a democratic country after the revolution. Whether it is a federal system or democracy is not what matters most—what matters most is winning the revolution and declaring our victory!

Part II

UNSUNG HEROES

Ma Thinzar Aye carrying a bag of supplies in a flooded area (top left), with a patient at a make-shift IDP clinic (top right), with a group of children (below) *(photos courtesy of Clean Yangon)*

CHAPTER 4: MA THINZAR AYE

Founder of Clean Yangon, humanitarian worker, CDM nurse, 40 years old

My childhood was filled with wonderful memories

My name is Thinzar Aye, and I am the younger of two daughters. I was born and raised in Yangon within a happy family, and my childhood was filled with wonderful memories. Being the niece of a school principal, I was admitted to school a year earlier than the typical admission age. I was just five years old when I witnessed the 8.8.88 Uprising.

As a child, I was very happy that schools were closed because of the events on 8.8.88. I remember waves of people on the streets, but at that time, I did not understand the meaning behind the people's protests. All I remember is a sea of people filling the streets. I was too young to comprehend that it was an uprising against the military.

My parents were simple, and they never dictated what I should become in life. I pursued nursing college and then worked in a clinic as a special nurse. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to accompany senior doctors as they traveled all over Burma to provide healthcare assistance to people. This experience was my first real lesson in the disparities within our healthcare system. Having lived in Yangon all my life, I was accustomed to efficient services in every aspect of life. However, I was struck by the lack of efficiency and the dire state of healthcare in our country's rural areas. I realized that there were many areas without basic healthcare facilities, something I had never thought about before, living in Yangon, where we had a relatively good healthcare system. It suddenly became clear that there were people in our country who did not have any access to proper medical care. I empathized with them, and this understanding motivated me to think about how I could help this situation.

In 2014, at the age of 30, I established Clean Yangon, a CBO [community-based organization]. This was a significant milestone for me. Together with a friend, I also set up the Mingalaba Youth charitable organization. We collected data related to social services, education, libraries, and other areas. Then, in 2017, I further developed Clean Yangon. The reason behind my passion for Clean Yangon was that despite being the capital of Myanmar and a hub attracting people from all over the country for study or work, Yangon was littered with rubbish. The streets were stained with betel nut spittle, and even the city hall was marked with dirty betel nut stains. It was an embarrassment for us, the Burmese, so I decided to launch a campaign. It was a rubbish revolution, as at that time, Burmese people were embarrassed to associate themselves with rubbish—whether it was collecting it or even disposing of it systematically. Even if we were able to clean up certain areas of the city, I wanted to change people's minds and behaviors, so we invited other small charitable organizations to collaborate with us.

In the beginning, there were only seven of us. People were shocked to see us collecting rubbish and working to clean the filthy streets. But some people also realized that what we did was for the good of the city and the neighborhood, so they joined us. In no time, tens of thousands of people were cleaning the streets of Yangon. We wanted people to change their minds and behaviors, and they did. It became a monthly activity. In 2018, we decided to shift our focus from merely changing behaviors and attitudes to cultivating these values in the younger generation from a young age. Under the democratic and people's elected government, and with the collaboration and support of the Yangon City Development Committee, Ministry of Education, and Basic Education departments, we began to teach children at schools.

When Covid-19 broke out, we collaborated with the NLD Ministry of Health and worked at the Covid center to provide healthcare, supply food items, care for aging people, and transport Covid patients to hospitals if and when needed.

When the People Power movement of '88 happened, I was a child and couldn't understand what was happening. Many, including my dad, joined the protests against the military then. My grandma scolded him, saying, 'What would you do if anything happened to you? They [military forces] will

be willing to spill blood.' At the time, I didn't understand why she scolded him, thinking, 'Did he do something dangerous? How could that be? There are waves of people outside; how can he be in any danger?'

We were speechless, as a coup was least expected at that time

I saw with my own eyes the 2007 Saffron Revolution. The military even killed monks who were peacefully chanting on the streets. I was there, donating drinks, not even joining the protest itself. When the latest coup was staged on February 1, 2021, I didn't see any news about it on Facebook, so I was a little surprised. We had previously heard some rumors, but we mocked them, saying, 'If they [the military] must control, don't control the country—control the rubbish.'

The day of the coup was the day we had a meeting scheduled for an e-library project. At 4:30 am, someone called my husband and broke the news of the coup. My husband was in shock. I was anxious. 'What? No way...They couldn't…' I thought. We were speechless, as a coup was least expected at that time. The election had just taken place, and people had once again voted overwhelmingly for the NLD, the people's party. Even though there were rumors, we thought they would never dare to go through with it after all that had been said and done. I was filled with confidence but couldn't think straight. Thoughts like, 'Mother Suu [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi] is in their hands. What will they do to her?' swirled in my head, but I couldn't even think that far.

We tried to find more information to confirm the news, but by 5:30 am, all the phone lines had been severed to prevent the sharing of information. I had booked a blood donation on that day, and I planned to do that before going to the e-library meeting. When I arrived at the blood bank, all the nurses were upset. They asked me, 'Is it true that there's been a military coup?' I said, 'Yes' and told them how I learned of the news. Now that the phones, internet, and TV had been cut off, we all realized it must be true. The younger nurses asked, 'What shall we do?' We discussed what this could mean, while all while they proceeded to collect the blood that I had come to donate. It seemed to us that this might be a political game, a way for the military to play with Mother Suu and the country.

I continued on my way to the library building in Taikkyi Township.

Around 8:30 or 9 am, I received a text message from the military with an announcement about the coup. I was not able to continue driving. I stopped the car as my whole body collapsed. I was alone and didn't know what to do. I just sat there in my car for half an hour or more, trying to see if there were any radio stations still broadcasting freely, but there were none. All the stations were simply repeatedly broadcasting the coup announcement. So now, the news of the coup had been confirmed.

Then there was a rumor that the coup may be reversed if there were no response or acknowledgment from the public for 72 hours, perhaps in an attempt to undermine the coup. I was thinking maybe it was because the military was negotiating with Mother Suu. Was that the reason we were warned not to do anything? Why...There were so many whys. I didn't know what to do. I was hopeful, cautious, and very emotional. I still remember at that time, I had to pick up some people, but on my way, I had to pass the army base in Taikkyi. I was concerned they might be stopping cars and causing trouble for people. I debated whether I should proceed with my planned activities. But then, before the 72 hours had passed, Dr. Tay Zar San initiated a protest in Mandalay. 'Here we go,' I thought. 'He is doing it in Mandalay, so we will protest in Yangon.' At that time, the Yangon Students' Union contacted us and invited us to join their demonstration. They told us their plans and we agreed to participate. We began protesting on the sixth of February on Hledan Road, and we are still fighting them today.

From the beginning, I was worried

First, we protested peacefully to assert our basic rights and to express our disapproval of the military coup. We protested in Myaynigone Township, thinking that the CDM there would be able to prevent the military from operating. We decided to formally support the CDM. Even before the protest, we started an online campaign called 'We Support Heroes'. We also advocated for teachers to join the CDM.

I had been doing some work with NGOs at Yangon General Hospital, and on February 3, 2021, we encouraged the nurses and doctors there to join the CDM. On that same day, we set up the 'We Support Heroes' page and assisted those who asked for help from within the CDM. On February 5, our phone

lines were cut off. We initially thought our phone lines had been jammed by the number of calls from CDMers. People were informing us on our web page that they couldn't contact us. We then realized that the military had severed our phone line. We knew they must have been monitoring our page and the official phone contact that we openly gave to the CDMers. We were forced to stop operating in that manner and were only able to assist through our network.

We staged protests and initiated a poster campaign to reach out to the international community, conveying various messages, including 'We don't accept the military coup,' often featuring an image of Mother Suu. We carried out this campaign for a whole week, demonstrating in every possible way that we did not accept the military, always using peaceful means. We also conducted walkout protests and other peaceful demonstrations to show clearly that we, as ordinary citizens, absolutely rejected the military's actions. We followed the ideas of Gen Z and engaged in nothing but peaceful means of protest to demand the return of our democratically-elected government.

On February 23rd, military police approached me with a picture of myself and questioned where we were marching. They told me I was 'wa-ran-pyay ma' (an outlaw criminal, but they didn't yet place me on the wanted list under section 505(a), which now criminalizes 'incitement' against the military. We protested in Yangon, and I was also traveling to the countryside to provide support to fellow CDMers there.

From the beginning, I was worried about being on a wanted list with my photo, knowing it could be dangerous for me. If I were on the highway and authorities arrested me at a checkpoint, I would be in trouble. One of my colleagues from the countryside warned me that I should not stay in guesthouses or hotels. He arranged for me to stay in the homes of local people. Everyone was risking their lives to fight against the military in any way they could. I thought, 'If I'm arrested, so be it,' and just kept doing what I had to do. But as night fell, I became increasingly worried that the police would arrive at my door. At that time, they were arresting people door-to-door, as they still are now. They also began to shoot rubber bullets at protesters under the Myaynigone bridge. When they started shooting us, I realized, 'Oh God, they're shooting us,' just like that. They also used water cannons on the

crowds to try to disperse the protesters.

Then they began to shoot to kill

Then they began to shoot actual bullets, and I thought to myself, 'Now they are aiming to kill us.' But we had nothing to fight back with, not even a sewing needle as a weapon. Protests are the means by which people were expressing their rejection of the coup, yet they shot us even though we had no weapons. Then they began to shoot to kill.

In Sanchaung Township, I was hit by authorities as I was at the front of the crowd. I yelled to others, 'Move back, move back!' and then something dropped in front of me. I ran for my life, not knowing which direction I was heading. I escaped, but I saw many people, my sisters and brothers, who were beaten and arrested inhumanely, and that broke my heart. I witnessed it with my own eyes.

Soon after I heard that they had killed Mya Thwet Thwet Khaing. As soon as I heard this, I knew the only way would be to fight back, whatever it took. I was not initially thinking of joining an armed struggle, but when the authorities began shooting the protesters with machine guns in South Dagon, many died, and they were hit one by one. I went there because they needed medical assistance, but I couldn't reach the area as so many people were pushed back. All my own experiences showed me that the military and police were brutal and inhumane. We were protesting peacefully, but peaceful protests would not protect us. In order to defend ourselves and end their brutality, we were forced to take up arms. This was, and still is, the only option for us. I decided to help whoever needed me.

Soon after, two friends and I traveled to Chin State. I quickly noticed a difference when I encountered victims of combat there, unlike the disaster victims I had met before in the same area. When people lose everything because of natural disasters, as I had observed during my previous three trips to Chin State, the first in 2015, their psychological responses are very different. When I helped victims of natural disasters, they acted one way. When I saw them after a fire, they were different yet again. But this time, running to escape from the military's attacks, they were psychologically traumatized. I remember crying the first time I listened to their stories. They actually tried

to console me, saying, 'Please do not be sad. We will help you. We will do whatever it takes to help.' I provided healthcare services and also raised funds for them, staying in Chin State for a month.

In May 2021, after the military attacked Kayah State, CDMers needed healthcare workers and asked if I could assist them. So, I collaborated with friends and doctors, and we went to Yangon and then Kayah [Karenni] State. I have been here in Karenni since June 2021. The people here have never known peace their entire lives. An elder told me, 'I'm now in my 60s, and I have never been at peace. Ever since I was born, I've had to run and flee as the military attacks and attacks us. Born to run, and until we die, our lives are spent running for our lives.' Many of them expressed similar sentiments.

Sometimes people think that we volunteers have escaped from the dangers of the authorities in the cities and are now comfortably and at peace in liberated zones, perhaps even living easily in nature. When I hear this, I feel a bit annoyed. We have not chosen to be in the jungle to relax in nature, but to fight back, knowing that only if we are alive can we resist them. Only if we survive can we do what we must. Only if we are alive can we act.

We need our people to fight in the cities, but we must also fight them with an armed struggle from the jungles. We need funding for those who are fighting in the jungle, funding for emergency life-saving measures, and healthcare for those who are fighting against the military dictators. We also need CDM teachers to educate the children of IDPs.

They need special help

The other day, the military dropped bombs on an IDP camp just five minutes away from where I was in Karenni State. So close. There was a terrible, ghastly silence, then BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! My chest rumbled, and time seemed to stop at that moment as I witnessed the catastrophic damage.

The aftermath of the explosion was a scene of utter devastation, with rubble and debris scattered everywhere. Some of us went to help those who were wounded, and this included entire families. Many people, both old and young, were covered in blood. Many had been hit by shrapnel or debris. When I witnessed this, I realized we had to take care of the health of these victims and find food, shelter, and drinking water for them. The children are

so innocent, they are easily traumatized. They need special help. We had to organize activities that focused on their needs.

At the end of 2021, we began to provide education for the children in the community, creating our own makeshift schools. We had no teaching materials, but when I was told this, I said, 'Okay, never mind, we will do what we can to help you.' So, we collected teaching materials and built temporary schools. After a year, I have gained experience and now realize that building temporary schools is not the best solution. They need more robust structures. The new schools [we plan to build] are designed to look and feel exactly like regular schools. They have proper roofs and more extensive space.

During the rainy season, it was cold, and the sun was scarce. When there was no rain, I would walk if I had time. The children saw me walking, and they started following me. Perhaps they had never seen someone walking as a leisure activity. I asked one of them, 'Will you come with me?' and he nodded, not understanding my language. I brought him along with me, and I gave him some snacks on our return. As a child, he was happy, and the next day three of them were waiting for me outside of my house. Then five, then ten. Many of them soon followed me.

I teased them whenever I saw them. Since they were Chin, a distinct ethnic group, language was a barrier, and they didn't understand me. Eventually, a child who understood Burmese language became a translator. I asked the children how they felt about being displaced. They said that having no homes and the constant running and moving made them feel scared. Some of them were so traumatized that they had gone quiet, as if gazing into the distance, appearing very frightened and lost.

I began to spend more time with the children. As soon as I arrived at their [IDP] camp, all I needed to do was call out, 'Snacks for you! Come!' and they would run to me. By talking with them, I learned what was on their minds. This understanding helped my colleagues and I think of new ways to support them. For example, when we went to the camp to provide medical care, we also included a nutrition plan. The people there provided us with meals in whatever way they could. In the beginning, I couldn't bring myself to eat, knowing how impoverished they were, and yet they had prepared food for me. When I didn't eat, they asked, 'Why not? Do you think it's not clean?'

'Can't you eat like us, with us?' 'Do you find it disgusting?' Hearing that, I ate.

They served us whatever they could gather, like forest vegetables and purple-colored rice. I then realized that they had some small breeding animals like chickens and pigs, and some even had cows. One day, when I looked at what they had cooked, I recognized they had killed one of their chickens and cooked it for me with bitter melon and a spice called maka. Someone said they had cooked it because they were so grateful to us, but they would never have cooked it for themselves. They didn't even feed it to their kids, as they feared running out of their scarce resources.

While providing healthcare, I encountered numerous cases of malnutrition. Both old and young were suffering. Even though there were many IDP camps, if I could feed the people even one nourishing meal, it would be beneficial. I wanted to provide them with some vitamins and nutritional sustenance, so I started feeding them cooked meals, preparing them with creativity and care. Not only the children but also their parents were overjoyed to have meat. Otherwise, they would eat whatever leaves and bamboo shoots they could find, particularly during the rainy season. Some families only had plain rice. We provided meals every day, three times a day. If there were over 1,000 people in one camp, we couldn't feed everyone, particularly at dinner. But now, thanks to donors, we are feeding them routinely, camp by camp. We've been doing this since 2021, so it's been over a year now.

However, we've faced deadly issues, especially when the area was bombed or when active fighting broke out. During those times, we couldn't buy meat, and there were days when I couldn't feed the people as planned. Even if I had planned for three meals, I could only provide two. Now, we are focusing on self-reliance for food by emphasizing agriculture and livestock. We're considering what we can grow in the area and what kinds of livestock we can keep. The problem we face is a lack of suppliers. Some people brought their domestic animals with them when they first arrived here in 2021, but now there are fewer and fewer, so supplies are scarce. We can see the city from where we are, but we can't go there due to the numerous military checkpoints on the way. Additionally, the military has confiscated chickens from sellers on the road and has not allowed them to come and sell in our controlled area. As a result, we can't buy them. We can grow some vegetables like mustard leaves

and lettuce, but some places have no access to water. Therefore, they can only grow crops during the rainy season.

We, as women, can do it

This revolution will not be without women. That is the reality, that is the truth. When we protested, we felt no fear. We have many courageous women leaders both on the ground and at the frontier, standing firm and making a significant difference. We have female soldiers in the PDF, and in Karenni State, women soldiers in the Karenni National Defense Party (KNDP) fighting on the frontlines.

I know one young girl in particular. Though she is slight and thin, she is an extraordinarily talented sniper. When she shoots, she can hit her targets one by one with precision and skill. I've witnessed her talent with my own eyes. I have learned from her as well. I once asked her, 'Aren't you afraid to fight?' She started as a peaceful protester, but is now fighting for her life, criminalized and wanted. Forced to flee to the liberated area, she told me about her initial struggles. When she was in training, she wasn't strong enough to even carry guns. She would tell herself, 'I can't return home. To get my life back, I must fight. I know nothing yet. I don't even know how to cook. But now, here I am, and I must learn all the skills to fight against the Tatmadaw." And she did just that. She persevered and eventually became an amazing sniper.

I've witnessed numerous female revolutionary soldiers fighting at the frontlines. In healthcare, too, I've encountered many young female medical students and doctors providing vital assistance in battle zones. Our society often differentiates between 'men's jobs' and 'women's jobs', but these brave women are breaking down those stereotypes and barriers. There is no such thing as a 'man's job' or a 'woman's job'. If men can do it, women can too. People often assume that women are incapable of doing certain things. They look down on us and belittle us, deciding in advance that we are limited compared to men. But in Myanmar's revolution, women are leading, they are on the frontlines. And it's not just in this era of revolution. We've seen this before, and now women's roles are becoming even more visible.

Women's courage, wit, capacities, responsibility-taking, and management skills are on full display—not just in my area, but elsewhere as well. They

inspire me, and I have immense respect for what they are achieving. We, as women, can do it. We can show people that women can excel in any field. Our beloved friends have become ministers or deputy ministers, and there are so many mentors to look up to. Many women are fighting at the frontier. I love them all, am proud of them all, and respect them all.

Women are often left behind in these circumstances. For example, men may declare their intention to go to the frontier, telling women to stay at the base to handle domestic duties. Among the IDPs, I have seen pregnant women who are in dire need of medical assistance. Even when we can help, there are often no suitable shelters for them. They may be forced to live in temporary huts that offer no protection from the rain. Moreover, they face reproductive health challenges. For instance, women require sanitary pads every month. There is often not enough space to dry clothing properly, and as a result, women may experience fungal infections due to improperly dried underwear. These challenges present a complex problem, and as a woman, I have striven to do more to address them.

Some young girls, particularly those who are newly menstruating, are embarrassed and frightened by this new experience. They may feel a sense of shame or fear regarding menstruation. Previously, I have conducted sex education programs, so now I am implementing similar teachings at the camp with these young girls. During these discussions, we address the challenges they face, and some girls have also confided in me about other personal and feminine issues. They have expressed how frightened and confused they were when they menstruated for the first time. One girl began menstruating on the day she had to escape from the military forces entering her village. She had nothing to use for her menstruation and was fleeing in only the clothing she wore. Without friends or even a mother to turn to, she had no idea what was happening or who to ask for help. This experience continues to traumatize her even now. There are other ongoing challenges, such as the need for donations of underwear at least once every three months.

Above all, the critical challenge is survival

Conditions are horrible in the frontier areas, where female soldiers are forced to sleep in makeshift shelters, ensnared by darkness and inhabited by

a variety of animals, both large and small. Recently, we discovered evidence that leopards had preyed on two cows. These circumstances make the situation exceptionally hazardous and challenging for female soldiers. To make matters worse, the military could accurately be branded as an army of rapists. When they assault villages, women who can't escape quickly enough commonly fall victim to sexual violence. We've heard countless firsthand accounts of rape and assault from villagers whose villagers were raided by soldiers. Tragically, both the killing and raping of women have become all too prevalent.

Another challenge we face is that even when women actively lead and contribute, they are often not allowed to participate in decision-making bodies, even on matters that directly affect them. There seems to be a lack of consideration for how women can be included in leadership roles or competent in decision-making positions. Instead, they are typically expected to fulfill only supporting roles, such as fundraising activities or cooking. This exclusion from positions of authority remains a significant challenge, even now.

Women are leading in managing various aspects of the camps, from medical care to food supplies, defense, and education. Medical corps are often led by female doctors, demonstrating the vital roles women play in these communities. Everyone is contributing as much as they can. However, we are now recognizing the need to focus on specific challenges faced by young adolescents, including both those in IDP camps and those engaged in combat. Our goal is to offer vocational training, such as computer skills, but obtaining resources and ensuring security are significant obstacles, forcing us to postpone these plans. Above all, the critical challenge is survival, with immediate priorities being shelter and food. These basic needs must be addressed before anything else.

The revolution has now been ongoing for more than two years. It's been a long time for people who are in the camps, moving from one place to another as the military operates. I met them in one camp at one time, and then in another place the next time because there was no water. Some families have no food. They urgently need shelter, food, and drinking water and are desperate. Even providing drinking water is challenging. We do have some donors. Initially, one donor contributed one million kyats, but the next donation amount

decreased to 80,000, then 70,000, and eventually to 50,000, and so on.

We will rebuild from the ground up

Despite all of this, the people's courage and commitment to ending the military's oppression is extraordinary. I have met those whose houses have been burnt down by Tatmadaw soldiers, and told me, 'We built our homes by sending our children to work as slaves for years in other countries like Thailand,, and now they are ashes.'

In Myanmar, it's difficult for a family to build its own house, even when the whole family is working and trying to save. Some of our neighbors had to work for a generation to build their homes. A house represents our lives. Now they've burnt them to ashes, thinking we will surrender. 'We shall never surrender,' the villagers said. 'When our elected government comes back, we will rebuild our lives. They can burn our houses, but they can't burn our land. As long as there is land, we will rebuild our homes. We will rebuild from the ground up. The quicker the revolution ends, the better our lives will be.'

People want to go home—that is where they feel they belong. The longer the revolution takes, the more complex the struggle will be for the villagers. At the moment, they need shelter that can protect them from rain, and they need sufficient food. It is so hard to provide food for everyone. They all want to go home. Their lives have been destroyed and damaged.

When I was young, I heard the saying 'The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.' Our revolution proves that. Women are leading in theory and practice, not just with words but with actions. Look at what they are doing. We want people to recognize and appreciate the role of women in the revolution and to stop discrimination against women and committing gender-based violence. We hope all of this will end when we return to a democratic era where laws will be strengthened to protect women.

Women must not belittle themselves. Being born as a woman does not mean that you are any lesser than any man. They should not think that they can't do what men can. As women, we possess unique qualities such as motherly love and instinct. Our hearts are filled with love and tenderness, and we have the potential to be mothers. Therefore, we, as women, must appreciate our value and our own potential. We must strive for equality with men. If

men can do something, so can women. If they can climb a mountain, so can we. If he can hammer a nail, why can't I? They have nothing extra.

We all must stand up against discrimination. The revolution has allowed us to prove a lot. That's why I am hopeful that beyond this revolution, in a new future federal country, people will appreciate women's roles and recognize their potential.

Ma Khaing Khaing Zaw providing healthcare for an IDF (left) and a mother with her recently born baby (bottom)

(photos courtesy of Ma Khaing Khaing Zaw)

CHAPTER 5: MA KHAING KHAING ZAW

CDMer, head of safehouse, healthcare provider for IDP communities, former township healthcare officer, 53 years old

My name is Ma Khaing. I am a fifty-year-old healthcare professional and a member of the CDM. I have worked as a healthcare professional since 1994, giving me 29 years of service. My experience includes working with communicable diseases, family healthcare, and providing care from birth to death. I was previously in charge of a rural health center (RHC), which included five subdivisions. I supervised 14 staff members. My position was public health supervisor. In the countryside, my role was akin to that of a doctor, encompassing prevention, protection, and care. After finishing my daily duties at the RHC, I also operated a clinic.

When the coup was staged, I gave up everything to join the CDM to reject military dictatorship and stand against the Tatmadaw's oppressive role in Myanmar. Other healthcare workers proposed joining the Red Ribbon campaign, but I was not keen on the idea. The campaign encouraged healthcare providers to use small red ribbons to symbolize their opposition to the military. However, if the military ordered them to act, they would still have to comply. Therefore, I preferred joining the CDM. I protested and challenged the regime openly but peacefully. I was resolute in my stance: I would not work for the military government. I emphasized the CDM as my preferred protest technique, and all of my network agreed. There were no arrests, but the police must have known who was involved in the protests. They might have seen me and targeted me as one of the key leaders in the protest.

My name was on the SAC's wanted list

People in my suburb respected and listened to whatever I decided. If I went to join protests, many others also joined. They would ask, 'Sister, are you going to take a day off, or shall we organize transport or walk in protest?' I organized transport and arranged for drinks for protesters, so the authorities must have been watching me. Soldiers eventually raided my house. One of the police officers in our province had called to warn me that my name was on the SAC's wanted list, but as soon as I hung up the phone, military trucks were already outside my house. Terrified, I jumped out of my bed and ran. I don't know how I managed to jump over a wall that high. All my clothing was torn. But back then, if your neighbors beat pots, the military would release you. So, my neighbors beat the pots, and since I was already out of my house, I escaped. I felt I should no longer stay at home, so I began sleeping at the clinic or at friends' houses.

The second time they came to search for me, they couldn't find me at my home, so they came to the hospital healthcare workers' accommodation. It was a joint force of the military, police, and other local authorities, but they still didn't find me. They came a second time to the clinic, so I began sleeping in the houses of others. I remember hiding at one of my relative's houses on the 27th of March [2021]. I was picking tamarind leaves outside of the house where I was hiding, wearing old clothes. It was around 2 pm. Generally, I would stay hidden inside, but that day there weren't many people around, and the weather was so hot that I thought no one would come. So, I went outside of the house to gather tamarind leaves.

Three people, plainclothes police officers, approached me as I was the only one out on the street under the scorching sun. They showed me my own photograph and asked me if I knew the person in the photo. My heart was beating so hard it felt like it would explode, especially since I was being asked directly. I told them I didn't know the woman, and as soon as they were out of my sight, I ran as fast as I could, like a marathon runner.

After that, I went to my parents' house in Yangon to hide. I wasn't on their family registration list; my name was still on my grandparents' registration. While I was staying with them to hide, I was told to complete a guest registration form and was reassured that even if I were a CDMer, it would

be no problem. But I already knew my home had been raided twice, so after fifteen days, I fled again. I brought my mom, sister, and granddaughter and I moved to my brother's place. But then I was pressured to register again, so I was afraid to stay there. Then, I stayed with a friend, but again it wasn't safe. I kept on running, and finally, I realized that there was nowhere safe inside Myanmar. The safe spaces for me were getting fewer and fewer.

Finally, I decided to retreat to a liberated area, Lay Kay Kaw [in Karen State, near the Thai-Burma border]. My friend knew a teacher who taught English there, and I stayed with them. At that time, the PDF had not yet been established. I began to help the local community in whatever way I could, providing whatever they needed, including healthcare services. People were coming in and out of the area, escaping from the military and staying here as if it were their home. Once they found rental accommodations or attended trainings, they would leave. I didn't go to the healthcare center every day, as it wasn't necessary for me to be there all the time.

I told them to call me if they needed my assistance, but I began to organize the house, looking for funding and buying food. Sometimes my relatives donated food items, and we also provided rice boxes. We had to provide food for at least 20 people every day. I also managed food for the PDF and those in the mountains, in addition to providing healthcare services.

On the 12th or 13th of December [2021], while I was administering Covid vaccine injections to the villagers, we heard rumors that there were thugs in our village. Our health center is next to the ward administrator's office, so I promptly informed my school. I also warned the young people not to go out or visit the tea shop. In our school, we have children and families, and many of those we hosted were young people whom the military likes to target. Like on other days, I always kept a bag prepared just in case there was a conflict. Inside, I packed a little bit of dried food and two-to-three sets of clothing. Everyone was on high alert.

Then the military dropped bombs on us

Previously, the military authorities had come to Lay Kay Kaw and spoken to the village elders, but they had never raided the area before. On the 14th of December, I spotted nearly 200 soldiers in full uniform marching behind our

school. I had never seen anything like it. I thought there must be something serious happening, so I informed the teacher who managed the school and sent him a picture. Within minutes, about 75 people gathered at his house. Nearby, about 20 people were building huts. One of them, who stayed next door, came to check and managed to escape.

As soon as the soldiers arrived, they asked for the teacher who was in charge of the house. Then the soldiers ordered everyone to kneel down. I was not there at the time. I was at the school but could see everything clearly. The teacher who was with me was the principal, as well as the education officer. He told me that after they raided the house, they might come to the school, and he didn't know what to do. They must have been hunting for a teacher who was on the wanted list under charge 459. We also had one member of parliament (MP) at our school at that time.

I knew that after they raided the house, they would come to our school. The principal sent me away on a motorbike. I had nothing except the clothes I was wearing and the phone I was using as I ran. Later, I heard that 12 of our people had been taken away. I asked a doctor at the school for help in hiding people, saying, 'I don't know where to run. I'm not familiar with the place.' Finally, I had to bring everyone to the school. Because I was also afraid of rejection by the locals, I stated, 'I will do anything for you in return. I will nurse the patients, cook for all, and organize everything.' After that, I brought out the rice pot and sardines that we had to feed everyone.

On December 14, 2021 they arrested more people. On the 15th, we had a meeting. We had only 10 patients at the time, but we were also providing care for about 70 or 80 refugees and IDPs. How could I flee with this large group of people? Who would carry the medical supplies? Who would run behind? We decided to divide into three groups to allocate jobs, but, at 2 a.m., everyone agreed that fighting would be unavoidable. We couldn't stay at Lay Kay Kaw, so we all had to flee and hike up to the top of the hills.

We began our climb at 2 a.m. We had to ascend from the bottom camp to the middle camp, where we stayed for about one week. We also received medical supplies and kept them at the bottom camp. I still carried my medical bag just in case and asked people to help carry the supplies: one box for some, two boxes for others. We carried as much as we could.

By this time the military began to drop bombs on Lay Kay Kaw. We knew that meant they could drop bombs on us too. We could hear the explosive sounds of fighting, and we decided we must run. We ran until we reached the camp for flu vaccinations. We couldn't even turn on our phones. By 6 p.m., we all had to switch off our devices, but in the dark, we could see the military dropping bombs on Lay Kay Kaw, our previous base. Then they started to drop bombs on us. Shouts of 'Run, run!' filled the air. We had to escape to a cave, taking only my medicine bag. I felt lucky to have carried the bag, as when we reached the cave, there were three individuals who had been badly wounded. Thanks to the medical supplies, I was able to save their lives. Otherwise, all I could have done was watch them die. In this way, while I was fighting for my life, I was also saving lives.

There was no escape path where we were, so if war broke out, we would be trapped. We needed to run. Little by little, we climbed from the stone cave to boats, then walked undercover in the dark for 45 minutes to reach the main road. Then we got a car, crossed the river that forms the border between Myanmar and Thailand, crouched in the bushes, and without any kind of papers, we were brought to safety on the Thai side.

We needed to be careful on both sides, as we were crossing illegally. Both Thai and Myanmar border patrols could shoot us. We dared to cross only when we felt safe from soldiers on both borders. We were warned that it was a 'shoot on sight' area, which was terrifying. We couldn't even carry our backpacks. I pretended to be a migrant worker and carried some medicines. When we reached the main road, there was a car to pick us up and finally we arrived here. Now, we are staying here illegally without any legal documents.

We are a family of justice

Out of all of us who lived together in Lay Kay Kaw, 49 were killed. We arrived here with a total of 74 people, and now 52 of us are staying here together. Some have moved away as they have found jobs or rented places with their families. Four CDMers have received some food assistance from the NUG, such as rice and a bottle of cooking oil. We also receive support from a few community groups. But we are also surrounded by factories, and if they need workers to load shoes from the factory to trucks, they pay us 1,000 baht total,

or 2–300 baht each. We also have talented young people, including students from a technology college, who can do anything. Now, we are also growing vegetables and raising chickens, goats, and pigs.

As a public health supervisor, I focused on providing healthcare services in Myanmar. I had someone at home to prepare food for me, but now I find myself as the cook, preparing meals for many. I have never done such a job before, but I can. I can and will do whatever I can and try my best. Though we care for each other, we come from diverse backgrounds, including teachers, young students from a technological college, healthcare staff, and many others. We may have our differences, but we compromise to live together in harmony. We are a family of justice, a second family united in our commitment to a shared cause.

In this family, we don't ask or order one another to work; we simply do what needs to be done. If something needs to be done in the kitchen, I'll do it. If we need to raise funds, I'll find them. Sometimes, I must school or coach others, managing challenges that can be emotionally taxing, stressful, sad, or angering. We have never experienced anything like this and never expected to find ourselves in this situation. We must adjust to new realities, like not being able to choose specialists for medical care as we could in Myanmar, now relying on a student clinic.

Obtaining even the most basic medical supplies can be prohibitively expensive, with a single needle costing 1,000 baht and necessary medicines reaching 3-4,000 baht. Donations cover these costs, but I often rely on family funds. Even that can be fraught with danger, as the military frequently investigates my family, wanting to know my whereabouts. This has instilled such fear in my parents that they don't dare send me money directly. Instead, I must spend whatever money I have on medicine or ask for help from 'brothers' who often visit our safehouse.

We live in close proximity to other migrants, some of whom are also without legal status. This complicates matters, especially in emergencies. For example, a recent incident where someone fell and injured his head could not be properly treated at a Thai hospital without incurring exorbitant costs, so I had to manage with limited medical supplies and experience. Education for our children is also not free. Money is needed for schooling, as well as for ba-

sic survival needs like food. Despite these hardships, we are prepared to work and do whatever jobs we can to get by.

The future appears blurred

Now it seems that everything I worked for and dreamed of has been shattered. The future appears blurred, and I'm uncertain about my goals. Before the coup, I planned to work hard, earn promotions, and take care of my family. But now I've lost everything, and I'm unsure of what to do next. However, one thing remains clear: I want to continue serving the people of my country by providing healthcare.

We must invest in health education, especially in preparation for potential outbreaks of communicable diseases. These ailments recognize no boundaries, and they don't affect just one household when they occur. For example, when Covid-19 emerged, we had to fight to provide healthcare while people were fighting each other due to a lack of knowledge about the disease. Many in Myanmar didn't want to accept those returning from overseas, hiding them away as if the disease could be isolated. We need to educate our people.

If we had the resources, our focus would be on agriculture. By investing in farming, we could secure our food supply without worrying about hunger. Some of us have skills in sewing, including myself, though on a small scale. We once attempted to sew for a factory and sell the products, but the profit margin was so slim that we had to abandon the idea. What truly matters in our situation is a sense of individual responsibility and community. If the mother of a child is working, we take care of the child without needing to be asked. We recognize our responsibilities to one another and care for each other naturally, not because we're obligated to do so.

This revolution has attracted all kinds of educated people, unlike previous uprisings, in which only well-educated political activists participated. I was in year 10 of high school during the 8.8.88 movement, and it was mainly university students who joined then. But now, we live in a democratic era and have already tasted freedom. With access to the internet, we're all well connected.

I'm playing a supporting role in this struggle. Even if I can't assist financially or physically, I'm always there morally, standing with those who fight. I've become close to some of the snipers. Sometimes they ask for help paying

their phone bills or request money for drinking water. I'm able to share with them the money that my family manages to send to me.

If I can rent some land, my goal is to grow crops like roselle leaves and cabbages, not only to support ourselves, but also to help others in similar situations. I want to send aid to IDPs and refugees, who, like us, have had to flee for their lives. I want to educate our children living in the jungle. My desire is to work both for our survival and to support the broader cause. With enough support, we can contribute more to the revolution. If we have sufficient food, we can send any extra money to those who need it. Our children won't have to go out and work illegally, risking arrest. We can make a difference for those facing the same challenges as us.

I have no regrets and no attachments

My mother is 76 years old, and I'm the eldest child in our family, so I've always felt a responsibility to make thoughtful decisions. I'm also single, perhaps giving me a different perspective on what I have to lose. My mother may not fully understand the CDM, but she trusts me and shares my distaste for the military's actions. She encourages me to do whatever I can.

Maybe because I have no family of my own and feel I have nothing to lose, I don't feel as though I've lost anything in my fight for justice. I have no regrets and no attachments. I don't speak in big words. My ambition is to do simple things for people and contribute in the best ways I know how.

I'm in my 50s now. I will never give up. I will fight until we win. Our investment in this struggle is immense. Our children have sacrificed their lives. We've given up our professions and positions, lost our homes, and witnessed our villages being burned down. Our lives have been destroyed and damaged to an unrecognizable extent. Yet, we've sacrificed this much not to lose but to win, to overcome the military. With such investment, victory must be ours. If we give up now, future generations may never rise again. We must fight to win this time, and I know we will.

I witnessed firsthand the way the military treated people when they rounded up and raided Lay Kay Kaw. I had to care for so many individuals who they had shot. These scenes and memories shall never fade; I will always remember them as if they are happening now. Even if I die, these memories

will stay with me forever. Because of these memories, I will never, ever forgive them. We will win because we are fighting with soul, spirit, strength, and solidarity for justice.

Part III

SCHOLARS OF THE SPRING REVOLUTION

Between* Dharma *(justice and virtue) and* Adharma *(injustice and immorality), as educated people we cannot ignore our intellect's ability to know right from wrong.

—Burmese Buddhist saying

anti-coup protests in front of a law faculty (top) and as part of the Red Ribbon campaign (bottom)

CHAPTER 6: PROFESSOR LAW

CDMer, former professor of law at [redacted] University, 40s

I am a rather strange person. Ever since I was young, what interested me most were not people themselves, but the problems they frequently encountered in their daily lives. I observed how many problems could be resolved through various methods, while some problems seemed unable to be solved. My attention was drawn to these issues and the ways in which people choose to respond to them.

After completing my tenth year of school, I found myself drawn to economics—it was my first choice. My second choice was law. I believed that with a law degree, I could work as a lawyer, judge, attorney, solicitor, counselor, barrister, or teacher. This choice also resonated with my fascination for problem-solving; I enjoyed analyzing cases related to my studies. Representing both plaintiffs and defendants, focusing closely on the details of a case, and seeking justice became my passions. My interest in problem-solving made me a natural fit for unraveling legal dilemmas. I took pleasure in assisting clients, carefully examining cases, and diligently working to uncover the truth. Eventually, this experience led me to realize that I desired to pursue a career as a legal officer.

When I reached the master's degree level, I enjoyed going to court and watching trials, learning from them. However, the more I witnessed how the justice system—including the judicial and court proceedings—operated in Myanmar, the more I grew disillusioned with the profession. I came to feel that the job was not for me, so I decided to give it up.

I then thought about becoming a teacher to help nurture future professionals. A teacher can share knowledge about the subject of law, and in a

broader sense help fulfill a country's need for legal and human resources. Considering these factors, I decided to become a university professor. I committed myself to being a good educator who would be of great service to my country. The students I would shape and cultivate could go on to become judges, lawyers, legal officers, and more, contributing to the legal system and society at large.

Throughout my teaching career, I came to understand the diverse ways of thinking and perspectives of my students, who hailed from different backgrounds and life situations. Recognizing that they couldn't become jurists without a personal commitment and passion for law, I worked to instill in them a love for the subject. My aim was to help them grow their interest in law, enabling them to pursue careers in this field, surpass my knowledge, learn how to expand their understanding independently, and develop an ability to continually increase their own wisdom. Teaching was far from an easy task, yet I firmly believed that a well-organized and systematic approach would cultivate more specialists in law for the good of our country.

When there was a mismatch between the student's needs and what we teachers were providing, it was our responsibility to identify the problem and find solutions. I consistently pointed out issues within Myanmar's flawed education system, determining what was unsuitable for students, what was wrong, and what needed to be rectified. I communicated these concerns to my department, the university, and the Ministry of Education. My confidence that I could mentor and produce law professionals who would surpass my own accomplishments if I taught them with all my might was a source of strength for me.

The problem with our education system was that it often prevented me from doing what I believed was necessary. Numerous barriers existed within the system, hindering my ability to teach effectively. Implementing initiatives such as teaching outside the standard curriculum, including my own research materials, organizing practical survey field trips, and cooperating with other organizations all required authorization from higher authorities. Most of the time, these permissions were not granted, limiting our options and mobility. This centralized and domineering approach posed an obstacle not only to my professional development but also to my students' education.

My ambition was to improve our society. In our community, significant disparities exist between rich and poor, and there are also wide divisions among those of different religions and ethnicities. I wanted to nurture resourceful individuals who could help and support not just a select few, but the entirety of our human society. I aspired for my students to be better and more productive than me. Recognizing that there were many things I couldn't accomplish alone, my hopes and expectations for my students were both vast and high reaching.

As someone who frequently visits the court, I've witnessed a recurring need for interpreters and translators, particularly in languages like Pa'O or Danu. Often, students must fill these roles. In situations where the judge is Burmese, for example, and both plaintiffs and defenders are Pa'O who are unable to speak or understand Burmese fluently, the balance of justice is compromised. If the interpreters are untrustworthy or underqualified, how can justice prevail? These issues are widespread across the country. In our ethnically diverse regions, we need legal professionals who understand the local languages. Our country's diversity calls for this. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could produce law professionals who speak and understand the various ethnic languages?

Just as with legal professionals, medical professionals who work in ethnically diverse areas should be able to speak the languages of the locals. Otherwise, not only does communication become difficult, but grievous mistakes can also occur. That's why I firmly believe that education should serve the needs of society. We must recognize that our country is richly diverse with ethnic groups like Shan, Pa'O, Danu, Palaung (Ta'ang), Kokang, and many others, and facilitate learning of these languages. If students can discuss and learn these languages, they will have a better understanding of their fellow people.

If there is no academic freedom, there will be no critical thinking

When I was a student, I was not allowed to study human rights law or intellectual property rights. But why shouldn't we be allowed to teach these subjects even if we haven't learned them in school? Can't we study independently and then teach these subjects? In our country, we face a problem where if you

don't have a person in authority supporting you, you cannot teach certain subjects. I didn't learn human rights law when I was a student, and I wasn't allowed to teach it either. However, I was interested in the subject, so I took it upon myself to learn and research human rights law. Through a commitment to this subject, I became an expert, enabling me to teach students and help them become experts in human rights law as well.

Every teacher should have the autonomy to create courses and curricula tailored to their students' needs. The government, the Ministry of Education, and universities should support this initiative. Unfortunately, in reality, education in Myanmar is typically a narrow, top-down process. Department heads typically dictate, 'You studied this subject, so teach only this, and you must follow the government's curriculum.' That means that if there is no academic freedom, there will be no educational development or critical thinking. We should not be restricted to teaching only what our seniors have determined is allowable for us. There's a serious problem: the head of the department decides by votes who should teach which subjects without any consideration of the subject matter or expertise. So, if the subject is voted for you, whether you are qualified to teach it, interested in it, or knowledgeable about it does not matter.

We are unable to teach the subjects in which we excel. If a lecturer is forced to teach a subject she is assigned, regardless of her interests, skills, or background, it can harm the subject and hinder the students who are eager to study it or engage in class. I expressed such concerns to the department, likening the situation to harming the students and compromising the quality of their education, but nothing has changed.

Another problem arose when I was conducting research on human rights. I was invited to present my work overseas, but the Ministry of Education was unhappy with the subject of my research. They became suspicious and questioned me, asking, 'Why did you do research on human rights?' and even suggested I change the topic. When experts from foreign countries came for workshops, the ministry or department failed to promote inclusiveness among the participants. They merely selected which certain students and teachers were allowed to attend. Additionally, they instructed us not to discuss politics during the workshops. As a law professor, if I cannot include

discussion of politics, how can I or my students adequately reflect on the subject matter? With the prevailing attitude and system that centralizes education and law, along with crony views, how can students learn if they are not properly taught? How can we continue in this way? How can we teach?

Before 2013, the concept of 'research' was almost unheard of in Myanmar

I have been working extremely hard since 2013. By early 2021, at the time the coup was staged, I felt that I had been making progress in my teaching. I was producing professional students. I had worked diligently for this, only for the military coup to suddenly ruin all my hard work. It was like pouring water on the sand! I felt as though all my efforts had been wasted.

Under the elected government between 2013 and 2015, we experienced academic freedom and saw significant development in our country's education. Although it was challenging at first, especially since older people or those in powerful positions were resistant to change, their reluctance was somewhat understandable. If they did embrace change, it was often motivated by self-interest. For example, when international workshops or conferences were announced with sponsorship, senior individuals often claimed these opportunities for themselves. However, when more opportunities arose than they could handle, they did share some opportunities with younger professionals. At that time, as they interacted with people from around the world, they realized that change was essential. They also began to appreciate the benefits of change. Once resistant to the idea of learning about human rights, they became open to trying it. As a result, the subject of human rights could be taught in universities starting in 2018. Proper training, workshops, and exposure are also needed to improve the quality of education. We can learn from foreign experts, but change starts from within. We must adapt to new ways of thinking and learning. I tried for years without success, but I realized that even I had to embrace the change. I had to modify my teaching methods and the materials I used.

As the country opened up and reformed, foreign academics began to visit our universities. Where once one risked imprisonment for certain inquiries, now the internet was available, and information could be accessed freely. It was exciting to read and write research papers. Before 2013, the concept of

'research' was almost unheard of in Myanmar. As someone who had a rural background and studied in less prestigious universities, I must admit that my abilities were extremely limited. But once the country started opening up, I was filled with aspiration, and I resolved to improve my academic skills. I began to read more, research more, and present more, and I could see myself improving. Whenever there were seminars, I always contributed papers. My enthusiasm also inspired my students, and they began to follow suit.

I always make a point to share what I know. I frequently invite international universities and scholars to come to Myanmar for collaborative work. For example, I visited the Baoelinnba Institute in Sweden and invited them to come to Myanmar. We then signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with them to formalize our collaboration. They also provided training, research workshops, and other support.

Only those truly committed to change were willing to endure these challenges

One of the challenges we faced was the bureaucracy involved in organizing a workshop. We needed to apply for permission three months in advance and write a series of letters and proposals, going step-by-step from office to office. This process was a considerable workload and extremely time-consuming, resulting in a lot of wasted time. It became a burden for those who wanted to make changes. Many of us were eager to drive change, study, and conduct research due to the opening of the country. However, even with this desire for change, the education system's top-down structure meant that we still needed permission, and this centralization hindered us.

Due to changes in politics, students who previously could only find work as lawyers and attorneys were now able to pursue careers in NGOs, become freelance interpreters, researchers, and more. This diversification of opportunities calls for a departure from traditional methods, top-down centralization, and limited resources. I have gone on many field trips with my students to broaden their horizons, but we still faced great obstacles. Whatever we planned to do, we had to ask for permission three months in advance. At that time, it was difficult to find a qualified resource person, as we were kept busy writing proposals in hierarchical order from our seniors up to the Ministry of Education. The process was often overwhelming and stretched our resources

thin. The long waiting times and numerous letters often led to the cancellation of invitations to us. It was a hard process. Only those truly committed to change were willing to endure these challenges and persist through the numerous obstacles and delays.

Previously, theories and practices in education were completely unrelated. Now, they become more interconnected. As the changes primarily benefited those in urban areas, the unequal access to education and life opportunities remained clear. Most doctors generally hailed from big cities, while the countryside suffers from a lack of opportunities for young people. The distribution of resources was structurally unequal. In the past, law graduates were considered unqualified and believed to know nothing, often relegated to teaching at the primary school level. Now, there is acceptance and respect for our students as professionals. These were significant changes.

Civil disobedience is a form of protest inspired by Mahatma Gandhi

On the day of the coup, internet access was cut across the country. Later, there were repeated announcements on TV about the coup, with the usual claims that it was necessary 'to protect the country from falling apart.' My anger left me restless, infused with frustration and sadness. I couldn't accept what was happening, so I went downtown with my friends to gauge people's reactions. Everyone I saw was enraged, but none of us knew what to do. A day passed, and when we regained internet access three days after the coup, I began talking to my friends about how we should respond. Also, at that time, I was at Mandalay University, and I talked with my students about how we might best react. In the evening, we discussed the CDM and its potential impact on the civil rights movement.

Civil disobedience is a form of protest inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. The military's forceful removal of our elected government at gunpoint, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the president, was an insult to all of us. Therefore, we decided to employ civil disobedience to disrupt and destroy their system. At the time, there were rumors that we had to be silent for three days. Some of us wanted to follow that, but others rejected it as fake news. On the third day, we heard that Dr. Tayza San had started a protest in front of Mandalay Medical School. We decided that not only university teaching staff and med-

ical professionals, but also all staff, including administrative staff, would be welcome to join the CDM.

On February 5th [2021], the first red ribbon campaign began in front of Mandalay University. Although I was not initially a student union member, I became one of the leaders after the campaign, helping to organize various aspects of the protests. I worked on determining who should participate with us, what routes would be safe, and what kind of slogans we should use, among other things. Representatives from Yadanabon, Mandalay, and the technological Universities contacted us to join the protest. There was also a training corps set-up at the front of Mandalay University.

Many university alumni, including some who had been involved in the '88 revolution, came to support us and shared their experiences of the 8.8.88 protests and the military's subsequent crackdown. They helped us plan emergency routes for potential situations where we might face military action. We felt an urgent need to show our rejection of the military coup. We staged a protest on February 22, 2021, in front of the Mandalay train station. Though we saw water trucks and police standing by, they merely watched us.

The real crackdowns began in March. As a member of the protest organizing committee, I was responsible for planning the route, creating slogans, and organizing speeches. Twenty-one organizations joined the protest, including university teachers, staff members, students, workers, farmers, businessmen, organizations from the Zaycho market, religious groups, women's organizations, and LGBTQ+ communities. However, starting on March 27th, violent crackdowns began, and we were forced to flee. When we had to run for our lives, chased by the army, it was clear that the men could run faster than us women. Still, they waited for us, and some teachers were arrested. As a law professional, I knew they couldn't detain someone for more than 48 hours. We went to the police station to secure the release of those arrested, but our efforts were in vain.

I contacted a law firm to see if there was anything they could do to assist arrested teachers and students, but nothing happened. That was the day Kyal Sin, who later became a fallen martyr, joined us in the protest. She was tall, youthful, and beautiful with fair skin. Tragically, she was shot by a sniper from the 12th floor of a building. We were all devastated, as we were unable

to save her.

After that, we gathered back on the roads to march again. From March 7th, the army entered Mandalay University and military trucks were stationed inside the university compound. As a result, we couldn't leave the university, but I managed to find a way outside. During that period of the strike, I was apprehended by military authorities at least seven or eight times. My legs were too wobbly, my body was too heavy, and I couldn't run fast. All I could do was hide. To save myself, I had to take refuge under a car parked on the street. I've hidden both in cars and in people's houses.

No human being should suffer as we Burmese have

On April 10th, I was honored with an arrest warrant. At the end of July, I received a letter from the government informing me that my employment at the university had been terminated. I saw it coming, and I was not afraid. As the crackdown became more severe, I left Mandalay University Housing, leaving all my belongings behind. Then, I began hiding in nunneries around Mandalay, constantly on the move. If someone I knew was arrested, I would change my hiding place. I had to move so frequently that the number of perceived safe hiding places became smaller and smaller. I even once hid in a graveyard. I had to sleep on the ground, surviving with only the bare minimum.

When I hid in the villages, the lack of internet meant loss of connection with my family and friends. I had a very old mobile phone, and I couldn't use it without a VPN [virtual private network] for safety. Even though I tried to stay low-profile and disguise myself in the village, my behavior betrayed me. My attitudes and behaviors were different from those of the villagers, and in one way or another, people often noticed me. Once, when I went to a mobile repair shop to fix my old phone, the man there called me 'Sayama' [female teacher]. This startled me and I felt I had to move again. People always asked me if I was a teacher or a CDMer, so it became tough for me to go out.

At that time, I had a car. I could drive it, but I was worried that someone might be able to identify my car, so I switched it with a friend's and drove with my adoptive father. He was suffering from liver disease. Since he was with me, he, too, had to move constantly, and living on the edge worsened his

health condition. I reached a point where I no longer cared whether I would be arrested or not. I took my father to a hospital, but it was too late. He passed away in my arms.

My life has been completely turned upside down since the coup. No human being should suffer as we Burmese have. We have protested to express our rejection of the military coup, exercising our right to do so. I have not personally attacked anyone. I have never placed blame without reason or spoken out of context. I am not violent. Everything I have done has been within the confines of the law. So why has all of this happened to me?

Some of my students have been arrested. They assumed I would be arrested as well, so they were constantly inquiring about me. A student who had been with me was arrested, and the military tortured him to find out my whereabouts. Finally, after being beaten, he had to reveal where I was. He was deeply concerned and convinced that I would be arrested because of him. When I heard about his situation, it broke my heart. Despite this, I continued to join the protests until the 8.8.88 [commemoration] events in 2021, even though the military had been cracking down on the protests since March.

I have committed my life

Being on the wanted list makes it difficult to survive, as I have no way to earn an income. Even though there are now some private schools where I could work by teaching online, I haven't been interested in those opportunities. Instead, I decided to start selling my own belongings. Eventually, a law student invited me to help start a new law school, Ayeyarwaddy Law School, and I joined. I have taught as a law professor for nearly two decades, at least 17 or 18 years. Even though I know I could survive by working other jobs, I don't want to. My only desire is to teach law and continue to read and write.

The issue of human rights in my country is very sensitive. For decades, the Ministry of Education would not give permission to teach or discuss human rights. However, we sorely need to address the subject. I cautiously began teaching about human rights in 2012. I am convinced that we must teach about human rights. I chose my career as a legal rights and human rights educator. Before the coup, I completed two research papers. But since the coup, I can't concentrate on reading or writing. In order to conduct research,

I need to read, but now I don't even own a bed, let alone a book. When I became homeless, having books was out of the question. Previously, I couldn't imagine living without a printer, but now I don't even have a book. All I want in life is to teach, be involved in politics, and be part of this revolution to end the military dictatorship and human rights violations.

On a positive note, I'm still alive and surviving. I am still involved in the effort to remove the dictators from power. Every day, I dream about the day when we will end the army's control over our lives. We must put an end to our troubled history. Since gaining independence [from Great Britain in 1948], the Tatmadaw has repeatedly staged coups, even though the people have consistently and strongly rejected the military's role in politics. Our entire society struggles with widespread fear of grave human rights violations. I have committed my life and am willing to invest in the betterment of our country's future and our young people's lives.

Our Spring Revolution's CDM is unique in that it involves former government staff—the 'CDM staff.' Most, if not all of us, are now involved in the CDM movement in one way or another. We are like the wheels of a machine, essential to drive it. Even though we used to support the government's machinery, all we received in return was a modest salary. We have rejected the military's coup with all our might. As government staff, we have made it clear that we will serve only the people. We can't allow ourselves to be ruled by a gang of terrorists. We are not puppets. We know what is right and wrong. That's why those of us working in the education sector lead the CDM movement, even though we have had to risk our lives. Our involvement in the revolution has a different aim than that of the politicians. We have learned to strive to educate segments of society to be ready for a better future, aiming for a more just society. We've worked our hearts out to achieve this goal.

I believe our CDM movement has troubled and weakened the administration of the military, which is why they have been so vicious in hunting us down. CDMers are ordinary citizens demonstrating extraordinary courage, conviction, and commitment. Joining the CDM demands significant sacrifice. In Myanmar, to become a government employee, you have to study until you're 25, earn a few degrees, and plan to work until retirement, living on a pension until you die. You may not be wealthy, and you may even have to live

frugally, but at least your employment is secure until death. Many people of retirement age have also joined the CDM, risking the entirety of their pensions.

After the revolution, I still want to teach if I can. I will educate our people about law, politics, and human rights. I want to help the new generation become better leaders in their own right. I aim to assist people in becoming democratic, peaceful, capable, and loving citizens, full of respect and forgiveness for one another. Now, the military is so vicious that even teaching has become illegal. Teachers are treated as criminals, subject to arrest and imprisonment. We must hide in order to teach. But why are teachers arrested? What crimes have we committed? Is it for telling the truth and fighting for justice? I am a human rights educator. That is who I am, and that is what I will continue to be, as it is my lifetime ambition. I will teach, write, and educate people on human rights issues. I shall never accept those who violate people's basic human rights, and I will stand against such violations as long as I live. It is incomprehensible that the military thinks what I am doing is dangerous for our country. Nonsense!

This is Myanmar, a country where someone can be killed simply for teaching the truth. We must all stand against such unjust and nonsensical laws in any way we can. We must discern right from wrong. We must work together to end this so our children will have a brighter future. I will always push myself to the absolute limit for a better society.

Since education is the key to changing society, we must focus on formal and informal education. Society will be improved if we are able to provide better education for our children. I am determined to help our young people increase their knowledge, empathize more with each other, and care for one another. I want to help our youth build the capacities to be recognized on the global map. All the military dictators of Myanmar have done is stifle the potential of young people.

From my experience, collaboration with one another can increase understanding between countries. The whole country falls when one person or group becomes desperate for power. While I may not understand everything about politics, I know that 'nai-ngan-a-yay', or working for the benefit of the country, is something we all must strive for. Helping our own country is the

duty of its citizens. I will stand by justice, even if I do not understand politics. As a citizen of this country, as a human being, I shall do my duty. We are human beings and will not be ruled by inhumane dictators. They will never be able to rule us.

Myanmar's crisis is not just political, but a humanitarian crisis as well

Myanmar's crisis is not just political, but a humanitarian crisis as well. Thinking of it in simple, limited terms can cause us to develop a dangerous perspective. The misery now upon us, the Burmese people, is caused by the bitterness and power-hungry dictators who fear our desire to be equal in human society. We feel helpless. Why are we disqualified for international humanitarian intervention? Are we not considered human? We shall never surrender. We will fight with all our might to survive. Like all other humans, we want to live in peace. We want to be free. We want to be educated. We want to be happy. Is any of that wrong? We don't ask for much.

A humanitarian crisis, by definition, is a generalized emergency that affects an entire community or a significant group of people within a region. In Myanmar, as many as 55 million human lives are at risk, and this situation definitely qualifies as a humanitarian crisis according to internationally agreed upon definitions. I understand that every country has its sovereignty, but when control is exerted through guns and violence, it cannot be considered legal. Suppose the international community continues to ignore the cries of the people of Myanmar under the guise of sovereignty, allowing the military to continue committing atrocities unchecked. In that case, they become complicit in the Tatmadaw's inhumane human rights violations. Are we, the people of Myanmar, not also human? Shouldn't there be a concern for our humanity too? If millions of human lives are at risk, shouldn't the international community consider humanitarian intervention? When will we receive empathy and action? Aren't we deserving of that?

We have been abandoned to the mercy of inhumane individuals, and we are paying the price of the international community's ignorance and neglect. We are human beings forced to exist in conditions of misery, bloodshed, and inhumanity under the rule of brutal military dictators. To anyone who can hear us, I implore—HELP!

2021 anti-coup protests in front of Yangon University's Convocation Hall (top) and in downtown Yangon (bottom)

CHAPTER 7: PROFESSOR SOE SOE

CDMer, federal school teacher for displaced students and scholars at risk in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, former professor of Myanmar language department at Yangon University, 50s

My name is Soe Soe, and before the coup I taught in the Myanmar language department at Yangon University. I grew up in a village in the Nyaung Lay Pin township of Bago Region, living with my grandparents, aunts, and uncles rather than my immediate family members. Despite being apart from my parents, I was well-loved and cared for. I grew up comfortably surrounded by buffaloes and farms. My grandparents were strict and forthright people, and both of my grandfathers abstained from alcohol. They were well-respected within our village and loved and cared for me deeply. Tragically, my grandmothers passed away when I was in grade 2 and grade 10, respectively, leaving my grandfathers to raise me.

My village did not have any resources for tutoring or academic support, so I had to self-study diligently. I was the only person in my entire village to pass the grade and matriculation examination. When I passed the exam in 1986, I could have become a teacher in the village. However, my grandfathers encouraged me to pursue higher education, so I enrolled at Bago College, majoring in the Burmese language.

During my second year of college in August 1988, strikes and conflicts erupted in Myanmar, leading to the shutdown of all colleges and universities for three or four years. My grandfather was a fervent nationalist who had played a significant role in the revolution during his time, even earning a high rank. When Aung San Suu Kyi, or 'Mother Suu', visited our town, my grandfather, despite being very old and hunchbacked, went to welcome her,

aided by his shaking walking stick. With great reverence, he thought of her as 'our general's daughter' [daughter of General Aung San, father of Burmese independence]. He even honored her by presenting her with garlands.

My grandfather's love and respect for General Aung San was evident during the revolution. Having grown up listening to the broadcasts of the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] and VOA [Voice of America], he was able to discern right from wrong when the '88 democracy conflict occurred. I was raised under the strict guidance of my grandfathers, and their discipline has proven invaluable to me throughout my life. Although they both only had a 4th grade education, their wisdom and insights have become increasingly apparent to me as I've grown older.

After the '88 conflict, schools were eventually allowed to reopen and I resumed my second year at Bago College. During that academic year, a second conflict arose, leading to the colleges being closed once again. When they reopened the second time, I completed my second year and then transferred to Mawlamyine University, where I continued my studies from the third year through to the completion of my master's degree.

I often found myself at the center of village gossip

In my village, there were only a few educated individuals, and most people did not understand the value of education. As a result, I often found myself at the center of village gossip for pursuing my studies at the university. Many in the community said that as a woman, my pursuit of education was hopeless and useless to my family. They told me that I would merely die a fruitless death from over-studying and that, as a woman, my education would amount to nothing, making my efforts pointless. These comments were disheartening and seemed to belittle my desire to become educated. However, I did my best to close my ears to the criticism and instead focused on studying even harder.

Many in my village viewed my difficulty in finding a job after obtaining my degree as proof of how useless my studies had been. During those years, I had to endure their criticism and judgmental comments. They would say things like, 'You got that degree, but what use is it? What can you do with that? Where's your job?' During my three years of job hunting, I returned to my village to care for my grandfathers and our farm. This gave those around

me even more reason to criticize me, saying, 'What's the point? You can't get a job even after spending your grandparents' time and money. Now you are back to this same farm and village. That education and that degree won't feed you.' My social environment was always like this. Villagers were constantly breaking down the spirits and dreams of hard-working teenagers, causing parents to lose interest in educating their children, especially their daughters, and pushing them to stop dreaming and cease studying.

I studied very hard on my own and earned two degrees through great effort, but even so, I was often a sore point in people's eyes. I couldn't feel proud and often felt inferior, enduring reviling and belittlement simply because I was an educated woman. My grandfathers sent me to school with the money they earned from the buffaloes and crops, sometimes even having to sell grain and livestock. Nonetheless, my father and my grandfathers were very proud of me and my degrees.

With a baby in my arms, I was determined to complete my thesis

In 1996, after my final exam for my master's degree, I married and returned to my village to help my grandfathers, who were getting very old. I was inexperienced at managing the farm, so I sold some of our properties and pawned some of my belongings, hoping to lend money to others with interest. I was neither good at demanding the repayment of debts nor daring enough to fight for it, and I had no experience in doing so. Within two years, I had completely lost all the money. I didn't dare tell my grandfathers about this, and all I could do was beg those who had borrowed money from me to please return it little by little. It was a slow and painstaking process, like a hen picking up a single grain of rice one after another. Bit by bit, all the money disappeared.

In 1997, I had a son, and when he was just four months old, I returned to Mawlamyine University to work on my thesis again. With a baby in my arms, I was determined to complete my thesis. I carried my baby from one library to another, reading and studying diligently. I was tireless in my pursuit of the completion of my thesis, all while my husband was working in Yangon to pay my university fees. It was a tough journey, but with commitment and dedication, I finally completed my master's degree.

By the time my son was four years old, I decided to move to Yangon to join my husband and seek better opportunities. In those days, there were no internet job searches, and opportunities were not widely advertised in newspapers. I thought there must be a job for me with so many factories in Hlaing Thar Yar township. With an umbrella in hand, I walked street after street, searching for work, until I felt like my feet had become shredded from walking such great distances. I finally found a job in a clothing factory in North Okkalapa. It was odd, the people there did not welcome me. I felt as if they didn't want me to be there, but I had a master's degree, so they decided to take me on as an intern.

As we had nowhere to live, I stayed at my husband's relatives' house in North Okkalapa, even though they weren't pleased to be hosting us. I ignored their reluctance because I was desperate and needed to save money. However, the arrangement didn't last long. Conflicts were occurring every day, so I had to leave the house. I couldn't afford to work at the clothing factory without free housing, so I quit the job. My husband soon after found a job in Ngwesaung township in Ayerwaddy Region, so he also left.

My father asked a friend if I could stay with him while I looked for a job. With their help, I found work at Victoria Mall, near the Naval Science University. The job required long working hours, from 9 am to 9 pm, so I left my son with others, knowing that having a job was crucial for our survival. I was smart, quick, and hardworking, always completing my assigned tasks. My diligence led to a promotion, first to assistant accountant and then to an accountant position. While many of my colleagues were helpful and kind, others became jealous of my rapid advancement. This jealousy often manifested in attacks against me.

Naturally, I have a reserved and quiet personality, a trait I inherited from my grandparents, who were always calm, collected, and patient. This demeanor has carried over into my work life, where initially, I was taken advantage of. Some of my senior colleagues would use their authority to trick me into completing their work. After tolerating this behavior for some time, I felt resentful and decided to stand up for myself. I stopped doing their work and started to demand my rights. As a result, I became less tolerant and more short-tempered. Even though I didn't work there long, these experiences

taught me valuable life lessons.

I worked at the mall for nearly a month, all the while continuing to search for other opportunities, including university positions. Finally, in 2002, I secured a position as a tutor at Pyay University. My husband and I had to make a difficult decision. I had only passed the written exam for the teaching position and still had to go through the oral interview process. There was no guarantee that I would get the job, but I badly wanted to become a teacher. After discussing it with my husband, who supported me, I decided to quit my job at the mall. Since I left before completing a full month, I forfeited my salary.

I returned home to help my grandfathers during the harvesting season. It was a challenging time, as finding the necessary laborers for the farm was difficult, so I took on a lot of the work myself. I harvested with the workers, threshed the crops, and gathered the rice grains. I was able to do everything except drive the cart. Throughout that entire winter, I carried my baby on my back and went to the rice field to work. At last, I received a job offer letter from Pyay University. By the time it reached me, it was almost too late. The deadline to report to the university was only a few days away and I had no time to waste. I quickly packed some belongings for my son and myself and hurried to the station as fast as possible.

It was quite embarrassing for me. Having been in the fields under the sun for the entire harvest season, my face was sunburned to a very dark hue. I felt so self-conscious that I didn't even want to look at myself in the mirror. Some people from my village saw me off at the station. When I arrived in Yangon, I had nowhere to stay. At that time, I knew someone from a school in Mawlamyine school, and when I confided in him, he suggested that I explain my predicament to the school president. Fortunately, I received permission to stay in the professors' housing, even though I was only a tutor.

My income from being a tutor was insufficient, and my husband had to send money to support me and our son. I also had no help, even though I was caring for a child. Still, I worked incredibly hard, prioritizing my job over my personal life, which finally paid off. Gradually, I became well-established at the university, and I even brought one of my grandfathers to live with me in Yangon. I covered all his medical expenses until he passed away in 2007

during the Saffron Revolution.

While teaching at the university, I also offered private tuition, enabling me to earn some extra income, as my university salary alone was not enough. Though this extra income didn't make me rich, it allowed us to live comfortably. I worked at Pyay University for thirteen years, gaining a wealth of teaching experience. Teaching was exhausting, but while we didn't have much, we were content and happy.

I was then promoted and transferred to Yangon University, but I had yet to realize how difficult it would be to find accommodation in Yangon. I managed to secure a room at Inwa Hostel, but it was a small ten-by-ten foot space, and the three of us had to live there. It was incredibly challenging since my son was growing up, but we had to squeeze into that tight space for one and a half years. I tried to find us a house or a larger room, even requesting assistance from the department, but to no avail. Despite many vacant rooms at the university at the time, they refused to let us stay there, simply saying, 'rules are rules'. My son had to grow up living with his parents in a single bedroom. Whenever I recall those days of living at Inwa Hostel, I still feel sick. The bitterness lingers, and even now, when I pass by the place, I don't even want to glance at it. The stress was so overwhelming that it even affected me mentally. That one and a half years felt like a living hell.

Then, it seemed like God finally heard my prayers. Just before my transfer, I was granted a fairly large and convenient room in Hostel No. 1, within the employees' housing. After a short time, I applied for a Visiting Scholar position at Chiang Mai University and was accepted. I went to Chiang Mai University in 2017 and lived there in northern Thailand for two years before returning to Myanmar in December 2019.

For me, nothing else matters apart from winning the revolution

My husband regularly reads the news. When we learned of the State Counsellor [Aung San Suu Kyi]'s arrest [in February 2021], I felt a pain in my chest. I could not express the feeling. I told my son, 'There's something wrong with this. This is bad. This is impossible. It is not acceptable. This is simply unjust.' Even a person like me, who is naive and knows little about politics, can see clearly that the military's coup was wrong. During our country's brief

period of democracy, under the elected government, we enjoyed so much freedom as humans. It was so peaceful.

The period of democracy opened the curtains to the world, broadening our perspectives and understanding. We experienced life under two contrasting regimes: the rule of the military and democracy. Election fraud [on the part of the NLD]? How ridiculous! The military dared to steal the election. They dared to lie about it, and their excuse, 'election fraud', is insanely nonsensical! Only fools would believe them. It's funny that even though I am naive, I knew immediately that the whole country would soon be involved in a revolution. Everyone who knows the truth won't accept this [military coup]. I wonder how long it will take for us to regain peace now.

We, innocent citizens and ordinary people, have been wrongfully and unfairly bullied by the military. I did what I had to do, so here I am, having joined the CDM. If I had worked for the government, it would have meant that I was helping them run the country illegally. If I worked, it would benefit them. I refuse to work for those unscrupulous, foxy, and bullying people. That's why, since the coup started, I stopped going to school and participated in the Red Ribbon Campaign. During that time, the CDM emerged. On March 15, 2020, letters arrived, ordering us to go back to campus. When the military entered the university compound, I packed all my belongings and left in a car early in the morning. As the situation was unpredictable, I moved to my husband's siblings' house and stayed quiet for a while.

I was mentally shattered, feeling like my whole life had come to an end and been stolen from me. The next thing I knew, we were all torn apart. I had to escape to Myawaddy [in Karen State on the Thai-Burma border], where my relatives live. If I ever feel unsafe there, my plan is to move to Mae Sot [on the Thai side of the border]. I know there might be an opportunity to seek refuge in a third country, but I'm not really thinking about that. I don't fully understand politics, nor do I have any specific expectations. All I desire is to see the revolution succeed. I don't want to live anywhere else; I am determined to remain in the country and do my best to contribute to the revolution with all my strength.

For me, nothing else matters apart from winning the revolution. We must succeed at any cost. If it were just for my own safety, I would have fled to Mae

Sot. However, considering the safety of my entire family, we understand the risks involved in being in a state of war. Like many others yearning for democracy, justice, and freedom, I choose to remain inside the country and give my all to the revolution. Though I may not have much to donate, I volunteer to teach students in the federal schools. It's the best way I can contribute to the revolution. I see my friends and relatives sacrificing their lives for this cause, and it motivates me even more to do my part.

I've cut off those I love because I don't want to put them in danger

The loss that I find unbearable during the revolution is the loss of lifelong, trusted friends because of political allegiances or irresponsible attitudes toward the revolution. I've lost many friends and family members who I loved and trusted before everything changed. Now, I'm not sure if they are afraid of me because of possible military repercussions, or if they are only thinking of themselves. I'm uncertain how many friends will remain. I can't check on them now, let alone contact them. I have lost many close friends who were dear to me, but because of the coup and revolution, we can't even reach out to each other. I've cut off those I love and care for because I don't want to put them in danger. Some also seem to avoid me at all costs, and I do the same. I am devastated.

Joining the CDM meant that I had to give up my job and my housing, as we had been living in university housing. I also lost my position, status, and identity. Before, I was a university lecturer; now, I'm no one, and I am treated differently. Even family members and relatives have stopped communicating with me. I know that associating with me can bring danger to them. My heart is broken, as I valued my friendships. But it has been a lesson. I often wonder what will happen to us when and if the revolution ends. Will we ever be friends again? I think not.

My hometown has been ransacked and might have been destroyed by bombs. If I were there, I would have been arrested by the authorities. I have no home to return to. I have had to leave my childhood home behind. Many people rely on me, but I'm unsure where they are now. Even if I knew, there wouldn't be much I could do for them. Sometimes, I can't even afford a meal or a bowl of rice. I can barely survive myself. I live simply. I can get by with

rice and fish paste or water spinach. I'm not fussy. I know many people have it worse than me.

Only if we win the revolution will there be hope for the future. We may be able to get our jobs back. If that's possible, I would like to teach again. I want to continue educating young people. I want to teach those with less access to educational opportunities. I want to help them learn morals, social values, codes of conduct, and how to be better humans. The revolution has caused a crisis, but rebuilding afterwards will be even more challenging for us. Whether I receive a salary or not, I will teach. My only desire is to help our people and our country. I have nothing else on my mind.

Some may ask me why I am so desperate to rebel against the military or change the system. Why am I sacrificing my life, and what do I want to achieve? Why do I give up my life for this struggle, and is it worth it? Well, yes, I have many answers. The simplest explanation is that change must come. We have to make a fresh start because the old way was not working. Since my grandfathers' time, the military has been a force of oppression. My grandfather, a farmer with only a fourth-grade education, often expressed his concern for my future and frequently criticized General Ne Win's coup [of 1962]. He foresaw it. At that time, we were not allowed to listen to the BBC or VOA, but he did so anyway. I didn't know what he meant back then. I thought what he said was nonsense.

The education system in Myanmar is designed to teach students to be obedient and afraid

When I became a lecturer, I realized that most serious problems in our country stem from the education system. The education system in Myanmar is designed to teach students to be obedient and afraid. This approach was dictated by the government, which did not want students to protest, and thus we were instructed to avoid anything that might incite them to do so. We were told to ignore students' performance and behavior, even if it meant turning a blind eye to cheating during examinations. We were not allowed to say a word or even fail a student who cheated. Other teachers seemed resigned to this state of affairs, adopting an attitude of 'let it be'.

University lecturers, in particular, were forced to merely observe what-

ever students did, not allowed to discipline them or correct any negative behaviors that could compromise their futures. For the authorities, what mattered most was the attendance lists, which were reported to the Ministry of Education as proof that the students and the education system were orderly. I was never sure how effective these textbook-based lessons were, or how they helped students learn for their future rather than just for the sake of passing exams. As a result, I have developed a strong dislike for the education system. It stifles the potential of students and hampers their future.

Students should learn to improve themselves with the guidance of teachers and elders. Having the military in control of education does not work. As an educator, I should assist students, guiding them to the right paths. They should be able to make mistakes and then change, fix, and learn from them. We, as teachers, should have the right to teach and educate them, showing them the right way. Sadly, both the rights and responsibilities of teachers have been taken away.

In the brief window of the [NLD-led] democratic government between 2015 and 2020, a five-year period, we were able to collaborate and exchange ideas with many international universities and students. We shared knowledge and learned from each other, developing our capacities. Democracy, academic freedom, and development of intellectual and critical thinking are all intrinsically connected; without one, the others cannot thrive. Even though we tasted democracy for only a brief period, it opened our world beyond anything we had ever imagined before. We learned what universities around the world are doing to advance education. I had the opportunity to be a visiting scholar for two years at Chiang Mai University, and the experiences I gained there were very inspiring. Being an ambitious person, I took my learning very seriously and later shared what I had learned with my students back home.

[Prior to 20215,] we had never tasted or imagined what it was like to live freely in a democracy. For the first time in our lives, we understood how democracy and intellectual freedom are linked, and we found the taste of democracy to be so sweet, far beyond our imagination. We were elated, feeling like we were on top of the world! Oh, the joys of that season. I was not the only one. All my colleagues at the university were making a fresh start, going the extra mile to remove old, useless obstacles, all at our own expense of time,

labor, and energy. Having a chance to do this as professional academics, we felt as though we were reborn again full of spirit, energy, and dreams.

We had never had such opportunities. Indeed, we didn't even know they existed. Both individually and collectively, we were making up for lost time, seizing the moment and thinking, 'This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Now we can be true professionals. We have a chance to change this education system.' We were working incredibly hard, and by the time the coup happened, we were filled with confidence in our progress and looking forward with optimism. We all began to dream for the future—our future, our student's future, and the future of our country.

Even during the Covid pandemic, a global crisis, and just prior to the military coup, the people expressed their rejection of military rule with nothing less than a landslide victory to re-elect the NLD. Yet the military responded with fraud claims, accusing the people's party of being 'unlawful' and reiterating their pledge to take 'guardianship' of the nation accordingly. Once again, the military broke its own promise to honor the results of the free and fair election and to respect the people's votes.

The military could not even find an acceptable reason for their coup. The people knew how they had voted, and yet the military dared to declare the election fraudulent, disregarding the results. Their excuse was nonsensical. They robbed us. It was unjust, unfair, and an insult to us. They exploited our rights. We all suffered, but especially the technologically-savvy generation that had come of age during our brief democratic era. Their future was blown up in thin air. The aspirations and dreams of the youth, who were the first generation with international ambitions, were shattered by the military's actions. For the military, as it always has been, they care for nothing but their own power and profit. I was shocked and dismayed by their daring act and complete lack of respect for the people they claim to 'protect'.

Compliance with social expectations is paramount

I was one of the many students who followed a conventional path to becoming a lecturer. I was told to attend university after I passed my matriculation exam, and like everyone else after matriculation, that was what I aspired to. I went to university because it was expected of me. I applied for a job

because they wanted me to. I chose subjects that others thought were best for me, even though I wasn't interested in them and cared little about them. I just did what was expected of me—nothing more, nothing less. Like a machine, without any personal motivation or aspiration.

For me, the focus was attending university, but as for what subjects I was going to study, I left that decision to others. I followed the subjects that the government determined should require the highest marks for the entrance requirements. We all went through it that way, doing what we had to do to fit into the social expectations regarding education. When I applied for university entrance and was accepted to study Burmese language, I went along with it simply because that path was the one laid out for me.

At the university, I did what was expected of me, simply fulfilling my duty. That's how it is in Myanmar, where compliance with social expectations is paramount. As a student, I was expected to be dutiful, just as I had been as a young child. We didn't have the wisdom or the perspective to see beyond this. I was transforming from a dutiful child into a dutiful adult student, which was good enough for me. I didn't realize I should consider what I truly wanted or was interested in. We did not know what to study for our future, and we couldn't see what others were doing outside Myanmar. We had no internet access and no international perspective.

Then, when I started at university, I saw a computer for the first time, but I couldn't even touch it because it was locked with a key. I was desperate to understand how it worked and what it could do, but all I could do was look at it through the window, unable to explore or understand it.

It was similar when I applied for a job. I applied for certain jobs because others decided they might be good for me. When my grandfather questioned me, asking, 'Can't you get a job like a tutor or lecturer at the university?', I applied and became one. At that time, I had no real hopes or desires of my own. I felt too weak and uneducated to have any aspirations. Nothing else mattered as long as there was rice in the pot and I could eat. I wrote my thesis out of a sense of duty rather than ambition. Even when I was studying, I had no true goals. Only when I became a teacher and tried to help my students analyze poems, stories, and the lessons behind them to strengthen their critical thinking skills did I realize that books have the power to change and shape

people's minds and thoughts. Then, I began to treasure and appreciate the subject I had learned.

Quality education is paramount to transforming the structure of our society

I began to grasp the full weight of what my grandfather had told me, that the entrenched culture created by the military would forever enslave us, and there would be no way to escape unless the military were removed. The military's influence in Myanmar must end once and for all. That's why I became involved in this movement. I will do whatever it takes to win this revolution. At any cost, we must triumph, ensuring that the army never robs our votes again, and we must remove them from power altogether. Almost all of us, my generation and those before us, those after us, grew up under that dictatorship. We were forced to study their curriculum, which offered us nothing to think about and nothing meaningful to learn.

We must fix our society through education. While an [online or hybrid] distance education system in Myanmar would ideally help those who do not live near, or cannot afford to attend, universities, the current approach is insufficient. Our current distance education program offers a one-month intensive class before awarding a degree, a process that is sorely lacking in rigor and substance. Students learn little from this system, and the authorities seem unconcerned about its inadequacies.

Those who study at university can only develop limited capacities due to the constraints of the curriculum. Imagine, then, how students studying with distance education—only a one-month intensive course—could possibly be able to develop the life skills they need, such as critical thinking, social skills, and the ability to discern right from wrong. Our education system seems to contradict the very meaning of education, which should be to help students maximize their capacities and develop effective life skills. Sure, students will get a piece of paper after completing a course, but what use is that if they haven't genuinely learned or grown?

The prevailing understanding of the role and purpose of university education in Myanmar is completely flawed. Simply put, not having a university degree should not hinder one's chances of securing a respectable job. Yet, in Myanmar, a university degree has emerged as a requirement for nearly every

profession, whether it be maintenance worker, technician, pharmacy assistant, or even a flight attendant. This societal expectation wrongly promotes the idea that a person must have a degree to be competent. Without one, they are perceived as useless or less capable.

The prevailing belief that obtaining a university degree is an essential milestone in life wastes time and resources. Often, the pursuit of a degree is driven more by societal expectations than individual interests or talents. Year after year, young people are coerced into studying subjects they have no passion for, or attending schools that don't align with their goals. Decisions are often made by parents, who insist, 'You must attend this school, you must study during these hours, you must choose this subject, you must obtain this degree.' In doing so, they may fail to consider or even care whether their children have any interest or motivations on the paths they dictate them to follow.

Quality education is paramount to transforming the structure of our society. We must embrace social change by fostering positive self-views and societal perspectives, broadening thinking, and shaping the future of our children's thinking skills, attitudes, and life aspirations. This is why I firmly believe we must fix the education system. Our educational approach should emphasize the development of thinking and practical skills. It's not enough to teach children abstract theories; we must also integrate subjects they can practically apply to daily challenges and real-life scenarios. The curriculum must include vocational training to enhance employability, support personal and emotional development, and enable students to become active citizens for the betterment of society. In short, we need to focus on teaching practical and valuable subjects that children can actively apply in their lives.

The government's primary responsibility is to govern the country effectively, including ensuring intellectual freedom within the education sector. What I mean is that the government should actively support educators in restructuring the old, conservative, pervasive, and hierarchical system. The rebuilding process after the revolution will undoubtedly be challenging. If old habits continue—habits that die hard—it will result in more than just devastation. Thus, we need to uproot these deeply ingrained patterns and cultivate new and more effective ways of thinking and doing.

If we aim to change society, we must begin with ourselves. Often, we think

about changing the world without considering the need to change ourselves first. If we truly wish to transform our society, we must start by altering our own mindsets and behaviors. Grasping reality begins with self-awareness, and to create the changes we seek in our world, we need to foster a strong culture of self-evaluation and personal growth. A new education curriculum must emphasize ethics and moral development. We must train and empower teachers with the skills to meet international standards. The entire education system must be transformed, encompassing everything from primary school to degree programs and extending to lifelong learning. Otherwise, we risk maintaining the status quo under a different guise, leaving everything unchanged. In essence, it would be a repetition of the old stories with new names.

Death does not scare them, but oppression does

Times have indeed changed. Unlike us, the children of the new generation were born into democracy. They can learn online, easily acquire international knowledge, and build global networks. They're aware of the world's goings-on and are constructing their own dreams, a prospect many parents can't guide them through since they belong to a new era with fresh aspirations. These children can independently apply for scholarships and study abroad, an unimaginable feat for those of our generation. Even though our democratic period was very brief, they still reaped many benefits.

For Gen Z, who've grown accustomed to the internet and freedom, living under military rule is completely intolerable. They will undoubtedly fight vehemently for their rights. From tongue-in-cheek protests to full-blown armed revolution, they simply can't bear living under the military's oppressive control. They've made the stark determination that they'd rather risk their lives than live under such conditions. Death does not scare them, but oppression does. At this stage, no one can halt their fight. They are battling with all their might and conviction, refusing to stop until victory is theirs. What began as nonviolent protests soon gave way to a full-blown civil war. Understanding this shift from nonviolent protests to armed resistance is vital in comprehending the depth of their determination and the dire state of the situation in Myanmar.

We are barely surviving because of the revolution, and I know it may get worse. But we have to endure it willingly. I will do it at all costs. I have devoted my life to this cause, and I will withstand even the worst situations. Like Confucius once said, we all must take responsibility. The government must fulfill its duty, and so must the citizens. Only then will our country move forward.

In the future, I plan to teach subjects like educational psychology. I want to guide and empower young people until they grow up and become our country's leaders. If I can't continue as a university teacher, that's not an issue. My goal is to influence the next generation positively in any way I can. If I survive beyond the revolution, I want to teach primary or kindergarten children to cultivate good civic practices and life skills. My only hope is that, after the revolution, I will be able to teach again. Teaching is one of the most precious things in life, and indeed, it is my life.

Still, uncertainty lingers in my mind about whether I will ever be able to teach again. What if the revolution doesn't turn out the way we hope? Will I still have the opportunity to teach children? Will my safety permit me to do so? Will the army continue to criminalize and hunt me down for teaching? In Myanmar nowadays, teaching is considered a crime, and teachers are treated as criminals if they do not comply with the ruling authorities. If I am no longer treated as a criminal for teaching, I will teach children for free if necessary. I need no salary; I can survive on plain rice, fish paste, and vegetables. My sole desire is to help our children grow wiser and better than us, ensuring a more prosperous future for them. That is the true longing of my heart.

I'm filled with an urge to join the battle myself

Even before deciding to join the CDM, I knew our chances of winning were only fifty-fifty. I was aware that the task would be immensely challenging politically, physically, emotionally, and financially. However, we are not afraid to swim against the tide. We possess the courage, conviction, and a mission for justice—not only for ourselves, but for those who have sacrificed their lives for this cause. No matter what it takes, justice must prevail.

But we must prepare for a long, arduous journey on the battlefield for peace, justice, and democracy. Nothing comes for free, and I recognize that our daily lives will be filled with poignant struggles and sacrifices. Like the

determined journey of a salmon returning home, we will fight our victory with wisdom, persistence, and commitment. Our conviction is strong; we have what it takes, including the necessary conviction, commitment, and courage. There will be many difficulties, and the battle will be long.

I feel contentment and hope when I see signs that we are winning. However, when I witness the vicious attacks of the military against our people, such as air strikes, I'm filled with an urge to join the battle myself, even if it means risking my life. But then I pause and reflect, 'This isn't right. Simply killing the [Tatmadaw] soldiers will not solve the problem. The key to building a new society is to dismantle the entire system.' In these moments, I resolve to do my best to contribute to our victory and vow never to give up.

I consider myself quite fortunate, as I have not faced as many struggles as others have. My kind and caring relatives have helped me contribute to the revolution in any way I can, no matter how small. I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate and feel a deep satisfaction in doing so. Even if the journey takes longer than we hope, I firmly believe that joining the CDM was the right decision. I have no regrets, and my conviction is as strong now as it was then.

We may see a decisive victory in 2023 as anticipated, or it may take longer. Either way, when that time comes, my joy will know no bounds. If not, we will continue to fight until victory is ours. My fight is for justice, and that has never wavered. Ours is a struggle between justice and injustice, and there can be only one outcome. Justice will prevail, as nothing but victory will satisfy us!

Teachers in uniform participate in 2021 anti-coup protests
in Karen State (top) and in Mandalay (bottom)
(photos courtesy of The Irrawaddy)

CHAPTER 8: PROFESSOR ELLEN

CDMer, federal school teacher for displaced students and scholars at risk in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, former professor of international relations at [redacted] University, 40s

Pyinmana, the place where the Myanmar military was founded, is my birthplace. However, since my dad was a government employee who had to move frequently for his work, I grew up in various parts of the country. My father had an enormous library with a great collection of books. Obsessed with reading, he had an extensive knowledge base. No matter where he was stationed, he would know the history of the town better than those who lived there, and he always shared his knowledge with us. This exposure to such a broad base of knowledge fostered a love of reading in all his children. We have all been avid readers since we were young.

I experienced the 8.8.88 people's revolution, though, at the time, I didn't fully understand what was happening. I was happy to be at home with the schools closed but soon grew bored. To pass the time, I turned to reading, and out of boredom, I started delving into political books. This sparked my interest in our country's politics, and thanks to these books, I also developed a passion for history. When I took my 10th grade exams, I excelled in history, achieving a distinction with a score of 84. At that time, my life was simple and carefree; everything seemed to fall into place effortlessly.

During the 8.8.88 uprising, the schools operated in a routine cycle: they would open, then protests would occur, and they would close again. I was young, innocent, and ignorant then with no particular interest in politics or the people's protest. When the schools closed, I was content to stay home, but when they opened, I attended without complaint, nothing more and noth-

ing less, even as the clock kept ticking and I grew older. Like many in our country of my naive generation, I was rather nonchalant about the whole situation. But as the clock ticked on, I recognized the need to earn a degree after experiencing the 'start and stop' cycles of the education system shaped by our unstable political times. Like others, I eventually obtained my degree, although it took me a few years longer than it would have under more stable circumstances.

My goal was ambitious: I wanted to be a government officer like my father.

I chose to study international relations (IR) not because I understood anything about the subject, but because I was impressed by the Japanese princess Masako Owada. I saw her on TV speaking six languages—English, Russian, French, Japanese, Spanish, and German—and I was amazed that a woman could be fluent in so many languages. I thought to myself, 'How can I do something like her?' Then it occurred to me that if I studied IR, I would have to communicate with other countries. I believed that by studying IR at university, I would gain all the language skills needed to speak several languages, just like the princess.

At university, I had little understanding of the subject I had chosen. Only when I attended the first lecture did I realize how unrelated my chosen field was to my initial goal of learning multiple languages. As I had to select my major, I lacked the information or knowledge to determine which subject to focus on. I had no grasp of the interest I might have in any subject. Looking back now, it's almost painfully hilarious to realize how little relevant knowledge and information I possessed then.

I was also working at that time to earn extra income. I have many siblings, and my dad is incredibly honest. He never accepted bribes or gifts, so he never earned enough to support us all properly. When schools were closed, I found work making candles and working in a cold drink factory. I did all kinds of jobs to earn money. My goal was ambitious: I wanted to be a government officer like my father. That was my dream. I thought that only this job would bring me the status and respect I desired.

I applied repeatedly for a government position, sitting for entrance exams not just once or twice, but six times in total. My motto was, 'I must be a gov-

ernment officer; I shall be a government officer; I will be a government officer.' That was my driving force. I believed that being a government employee was the only way I could fulfill my responsibility as the eldest daughter and take care of my parents in the future. So, I worked hard during school holidays to save money for the entrance exams, persistent in my determination to achieve my goal.

I consistently passed all the written exams for the jobs I applied for but was never called for interviews. At first, I didn't understand why. If I did well on the exams, why wasn't I being invited for interviews? Later, I realized that I wasn't considered the child of any 'big people', and I also didn't attempt to bribe anyone. When I learned that you needed to pay bribes or have connections in order to succeed in the government, my innocent mindset disappeared, replaced by a new awareness of the tricks and corruption of the world.

I became a university lecturer based on my own abilities, not through bribery or being anyone's child. I didn't approach anyone for favors, I achieved my position on my own merits. I am very proud that I didn't become a lecturer by paying bribes but through my own hard work and talent. As a university student, I felt that many of my lecturers taught us just enough to get by. But when I became a lecturer, I found myself doing the same, teaching just enough and nothing more. Then I realized I had become like them, and an invisible string was attached to my job as a university lecturer.

I was not allowed to teach my students properly. Universities in Myanmar were still routinely closed and reopened, continuing a pattern that has persisted for decades due to political issues and instability. I attended Mandalay University as an ordinary student until 2004, and despite it being the second-best university in Myanmar, I still spoke English very poorly. I finally earned my Ph.D. at Yangon University.

As soon as I started my Ph.D. program, I experienced the constraints imposed by the higher-ups in the department and the Ministry of Education. I wanted to research the trafficking of Burmese individuals, but I was not permitted to explore this topic because it was considered too sensitive and politically charged. I was instructed to change my subject several times, and it was an incredibly stressful experience. I was deeply interested in trafficking

and believed it was necessary to research this issue in order to understand the underlying causes and to then propose solutions or policies. However, I was hugely disappointed that even the best universities in Myanmar, which should focus on open research and inquiry, exercised control and placed such limitations on students.

I questioned why I was given permission to research only the subjects they wanted me to explore. The more I worked on the topics I was forced to, the more disheartened I became. My disappointment soon extended to the entire higher education system.

As a Ph.D. student, I was responsible for teaching everything from first-year classes to Master's level courses. Yet, there was no Wi-Fi or internet, and the university library was dusty and sorely neglected. Even the library, which was initially open during my period of research, was later shuttered due to political reasons. I was completely unable to access the books and information I needed. At that time, IR was a particularly oppressed subject because it was believed to be linked to international matters and outside influences, and thus seen as a 'dangerous' major. We were restrained and allowed to teach only within the permission and focus of the department and the MOE. However, the head of the IR department was very supportive. She allowed us to grow and explore our interests, and we were even permitted to attend trainings and workshops related to our major outside of the university. This encouragement fueled my interest in our field and led me to think about how I could contribute to the growth of this field. I began to grasp the importance of IR for our country. IR helps us understand why specific policies and systems might be better for our nation. It enables us to study how the constitutions of different countries contribute to national development, allowing for comparisons and potential adaptations.

For the first time in 2012, we were able to use the Internet without fear of being arrested

In 2005, I arrived at Yangon University, several years before the start of U Thein Sein's reform era, which finally introduced a touch of 'disciplined democracy' in Myanmar. For the first time in 2012, we were able to use the Internet without fear of being arrested. Gradually, we gained more freedoms,

and the country started to open up. This increased access allowed us to achieve a tremendous amount of knowledge about the world. The excitement and inspiration from this newfound connectivity motivated me more to engage with the global community. Recognizing the importance of English in this international landscape, I started attending English classes to enhance my proficiency.

After Mother Suu [Aung San Suu Kyi], the people's leader, won the election by a landslide in 2015, we experienced the taste of true academic freedom for the first time. The internet became free at the university during her administration, completely transforming our educational experience. We could finally search for anything, study on the internet, and gain vastly different information than before. Prominent universities like Yangon and Mandalay gained autonomy and were allowed to operate under their own charters. We were able to teach our students with our own syllabi, and the sense of liberation was exhilarating. We were over the moon! Before 2015, our resources were limited. Even if we wanted to read, there were no books. Now we could read, were allowed to research, and had opportunities to exchange knowledge freely. The joy of learning new things was boundless.

The study of IR gave us perspective. It equipped us with an understanding of how other countries worldwide have become developed nations due to their policies. We could discern which policies led to success and which caused failure. The insights were eye-opening. The happiest time of my life was between 2015–2020. I had dreams for myself, my students, and my country. As we were permitted to write articles, we worked hard to publish, eager to contribute to academic discourse. I even wrote an article that was published in Thailand.

When I was appointed as a lecturer at Mandalay University, I first wanted to conduct a survey among the students to understand why they had chosen their majors. I focused on teaching second-year and final-year students, using not only lectures with notes but also presentations and discussions to engage them. My approach to teaching varied depending on the students' academic levels.

During my time as a lecturer, I also noticed that the students differed from those of us in my generation in various ways. Unlike our naivety and

limited knowledge, they were more aware of the world around them. They were well-informed about the activities of young people worldwide and had ambitious dreams much more significant than mine. While I had merely aspired to become a government officer, they aimed for much greater heights. Their dreams extend horizontally across the world.

Young people in Myanmar today have experienced the taste of freedom and democracy and are deeply fond of it. Unlike us, who only knew democracy by name, they have personally experienced it, and they liked it. They understand why democracy and freedom are crucial for their lives and how these concepts are related. They possess a keen awareness of their rights, which has propelled them to take the lead in revolutions and social movements. Thanks to democracy, they have gained the freedom to travel to other countries to attend schools, trainings, and conferences. Some have even chosen to stay abroad. They have discovered a plethora of options and opportunities and feel empowered to find their own path to achieve their goals.

We were even taught that the Earth was flat

In our time, we lacked knowledge about the world, and it's amusing to reflect on the fact that we were even taught that the Earth was flat. Living in an isolated country with restricted access to information, our understanding of the world was extremely limited, and we could only think in conventional ways, mirroring the thoughts and aspirations of others. Growing up within closed walls, our goals and dreams were ordinary, aligning with what society expected of us. We aspired only to lead regular lives.

The classroom environment was very different in our time. We were expected to maintain complete silence, following a strict code of uniformity. Any attempt to raise questions or voice concerns could result in being expelled from the class, let alone evaluating the teachers or teaching methods! However, during the current era of democracy, classrooms and the education system underwent significant changes. Students had the freedom to question, challenge, and debate with their teachers. As a teacher in this new era, I had a challenging experience when a fourth-year student criticized my lecture, stating that it was not good and that my teaching methods were not up to par. At first, I was upset, thinking, 'How dare the student criticize me!' But now,

looking back, I am grateful to that student. Their feedback prompted me to realize that we were in a new era of education. This experience taught me that, unlike in our time, we must actively extend our knowledge and enhance our capacities as educators. Today's students are hungry for knowledge, and we need to rise to the challenge.

As a teacher, I sometimes had to teach subjects that didn't interest me. For instance, I had to attend a fourth-year class about the United Nations and study it for my Ph.D. thesis, even though I wasn't interested in glorifying the UN and its perceived influence in world affairs. Later, the head of our department asked me to teach a subject I wasn't keen on. However, this time, I approached it differently. I started thinking about how to make myself interested in the subject, and despite the initial struggle, I eventually succeeded.

During the five years from 2015 to 2020, we were incredibly busy, leaving us with little time to rest. The only times we rested were when we were marking exam papers. The rest of the time was filled with capacity-building activities and preparing for the next semester. When the university gained independence and opened up, we had the opportunity to attend workshops and training sessions conducted by overseas experts. Learning during these experiences enhanced our teaching techniques and improved our capacities as educators.

Now, when I teach, I can effectively handle subjects I'm not interested in. However, this change came after receiving a humiliating evaluation from one of my students. I realized that I needed to prepare myself better and engage with the subject matter. I am thankful to that student for their criticism, as it made me recognize my fault for not knowing how to teach in a way that sparks students' interest.

In the past, I used to copy and learn from others simply. Now, I understand the value of academic exchange and learning from my peers. No matter how much I study a subject, authentic learning comes from exchanging ideas. Academic freedom is crucial for fostering this kind of exchange. During that time, the NLD government played an essential role in increasing the capacities of teachers like me. For this reason, I am immensely grateful to the democratic government for recognizing the significance of education and supporting educators to enhance their teaching abilities.

To be honest, before the democratic government, we were not so keen on conducting research. We have to blame those who controlled education in Myanmar then, as they discouraged our research interests. When we sent our research proposals, they would not grant permission if our topics did not align with their predefined subjects. As a result, we were limited to researching the same topics that everyone else had already worked on. And when they had more projects than they could handle, they asked us to do research and even said, 'Why didn't you do research?' as if it had been our fault.

I felt deeply annoyed by the way I was treated, and I questioned my own capabilities, wondering if I was truly incapable. As a challenge to myself, I wrote an academic article, and to my surprise, it was selected for publication. However, this accomplishment coincided with the coup, and I was faced with a choice of using my real name or a pseudonym. Despite the circumstances, I chose to publish it with my own name.

Our country's poor state of research can be attributed to those who manage education and their centralized power. The lack of academic and research ethics is a key factor contributing to this issue. Despite the presence of many brilliant researchers, some with remarkable skills even without having completed a Ph.D., the authorities often overlook and sideline them.

Dealing with such hierarchical orders, abuse of power, and a lack of research ethics in academia can be challenging, and at times, it leads to a desire to give up on research. However, I eventually decided to test my own capabilities as a researcher and push myself forward. That's why I wrote an article. Unfortunately, this effort coincided with the coup happening in the country. Nonetheless, I persevered, completed the article, and submitted it for publication.

No choice but to resist

In early 2021, the unfortunate event of the bloody military coup unfolded, leaving me with no choice but to resist. I joined the CDM as a means of taking action. I firmly understand the reasons behind my decision to participate in the CDM. I am aware of the political systems that could benefit the country and those that would lead to its failure. A government's policies are shaped by the people who design them, and if those individuals are good and virtuous,

their governance will be fair and just. Only competent leaders can create effective governance and government, and I believe in this principle. As a professional academic, I can attest to the stark contrast between the education systems under the dictatorship and the democratic era. They are as different as chalk and cheese.

I still vividly remember that day [February 21, 2021]. I felt a pain in my stomach, and my anger was boiling inside me, but at the same time, I was overwhelmed with profound sadness. The situation became even more chaotic as the telephone lines were cut, leaving us disconnected and in the dark. I could hear people whispering loudly to each other, asking in disbelief, 'Coup?! Why? Again?' The whole experience left me in agony.

I want to challenge those who were in charge of the peace process during the so-called reformist government of ex-General U Thein Sein. Back then, numerous workshops and discussions were held featuring so-called 'experts' like Dr. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, the Chin advisor, Salai, of Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader. These individuals, with doctorates from overseas, presented themselves as advocates of peace during the peace talk forums. However, upon analysis, it has become clear that their words were merely empty rhetoric, and they were working for the military all along, serving their own self-interests.

The democracy under U Thein Sein's rule was not genuine. They called it a 'disciplined democracy', and it was controlled by the military's own 2008 Constitution. The Myitsone crisis was a pivotal moment during that time. We had a semblance of a democratic process and people could voice their concerns to some extent. Yet, the authorities exploited Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, using her as a front to handle the Myitsone crisis. They could have chosen someone else from their circle to deal with it, but they chose to use her to their advantage.

As an IR professional, I am interested in analyzing political affairs. I always study and analyze the parliamentary channel. If I am busy, my father listens to the news and updates me. Even though I am not a law expert, I have learned about government institutions, the constitutions of governments, and the politics of Southeast Asia's ten ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] countries. I learn and analyze developments in detail. Therefore, I

knew even then that they just were simply deploying the word 'peace' cynically for their own benefit. They are professionals, but they lack professional ethics. Their thoughts revolve solely around their own interests, neglecting the welfare of the people and the country. Take, for instance, the 2008 Constitution—it was crafted by so-called professionals, but for whom was it written? Consider the example of U Kyaw, an expert who served as a guest lecturer at Mandalay University and participated in talk shows. He highly praised the 2008 Constitution. Based on these observations, it becomes as clear as day that the President holds no real power, and the ultimate authority rests with the military. No entity other than the army wields significant power in this context.

The landslide election results [in 2015 and 2020] were a clear and robust indicator of the people's choice against military rule. Nobody expected that they would dare to stage a coup. It was shocking and ferocious—a contentious and unjust act that completely caught us off guard. We never imagined that they would take such a drastic step backward. It felt like a blatant display of malicious intent. Their unjust actions left us feeling more than sad. We were indignant and torn apart inside. The idea of military rule was something we could no longer accept, which is why we started the CDM. The military robbed us of our fundamental human rights, and this was an insult to our values and principles.

As educated members of society, we should not have to tolerate such unjust acts by bullies. We possess the ability to distinguish right from wrong and should be guided by the path of righteousness, feeling outraged by such actions. The memory of the coup still fills me with anger and frustration. As an educated person, I cannot accept military rule, and that is why I am participating in the CDM.

The shameless robbery of our freedoms perpetrated by those in power have only fueled our determination. We, grassroots people and intellectuals, understand the value of the democracy we experienced during the brief period of the people's elected government over the past five years. It was even more absurd when we heard the reason they gave for the coup [unverified election fraud]. I remember that day vividly. The weather seemed somber, and the university's telephone and internet were cut off, leaving us in the

dark about the situation. It was only when some male lecturers went out to tea shops that they learned about the coup. At first, we couldn't believe it. The claim of 'election fraud' was even more ridiculous. We knew that teachers were the ones who guarded the polling stations during the elections, so how could that be possible?

We had diverse characters among our five siblings

In 2019, before the onset of Covid, my father, who lived with me at Mandalay University, suffered a stroke and passed away. I am the eldest in the family, followed by my second sister, who is an engineer; the third sister, who is studying law; and our youngest brother, who is now a military officer, but he initially pursued studies in engineering. We all lived together in Mandalay. Myanmar was under the military rule of General Than Shwe at the time. I was pursuing an honors degree while this was happening. Former General Khin Nyunt was known for his appearances as a TV actor, frequently issuing new laws seemingly at his leisure.

I would say, 'Oh, here we go again with so many laws. They don't even make sense...' My dad was equally frustrated and exclaimed 'Goddamn it!' as he counted his meditation beads. My sister, studying law, took a different perspective and said, 'This is the law. Everyone must abide by the law, and no one can change it.' On the other hand, my youngest brother, now a military officer himself, would often mock the military's actions. We had diverse characters among our five siblings. My engineering sister, whose husband is also from the military, took a pragmatic approach, saying, 'We couldn't care less about whoever rules the country. The only thing that matters to us is to get the contracts and permits for our projects.'

My dad used to threaten us, especially since he became a government officer later in his career and felt embarrassed in comparison to his friends. He believed that the choice of major didn't matter; what was important was passing the exams. He worked in forestry and would say that if we didn't pass our exams, we would have to carry wood, just like him. He was serious about his words, so we feared the consequences and worked extremely hard in our studies. He made sure that all five of us had the opportunity to study and graduate from universities.

We all have an age difference of two years. When we were younger, we shared similar hobbies and ways of thinking. My brother was always an avid reader, delving into politics and philosophy as early as fourth grade. However, after joining the military, his mindset changed drastically. His ways of thinking and ideologies became unrecognizable compared to what they were before. When he completed tenth grade, his marks were so high that he qualified to enroll in computer science. He also took the entrance exam for the Military Engineering College. When the military entrance exam results came in before the others, he chose to attend the military college.

My engineer sister wanted to enhance her appearance, so she worked extra to earn more money. In addition to her regular job at a company, she took on other work. Her salary mattered a great deal to her, and she was quite successful in achieving a good income. As the eldest, my priorities were different. I was primarily concerned with my studies, and clothing and fashion didn't interest me. My ultimate goal was to work in a government office, leading a straightforward life. I even planned for my retirement, intending to work as a government staff member until spending my later years at a Dharma meditation center.

My youngest brother had no desire to work for the government. He initially worked in a company but didn't enjoy it, so he tried his hand at agriculture independently. Unfortunately, that venture wasn't successful, so he returned to company work. As the eldest daughter with family responsibilities, I never shared my struggles with my siblings. When my father suffered a stroke and was ill for seven years, I took care of him all by myself. I never complained or asked my siblings to share the duty. Many people, seeing me care for him alone, assumed I was an only child.

When my younger brother, a military officer, found out I had joined the CDM, he threatened to kill me

I didn't tell my siblings when I joined the CDM. It's not that we aren't close, but we have a way of communicating only when necessary. If there's something to discuss, we call each other. Otherwise, we respect each other's independence. This approach stems from the strength of our upbringing by our father, which made us resilient and mindful not to burden each other

with our personal problems. We've set clear boundaries, and we only speak in emergencies.

From the beginning, I couldn't believe when people said that the coup had destroyed relationships between colleagues, friends, and family members. My sister, who now works with a human rights commission, was the only sibling who knew I joined the CDM. But when my younger brother, a military officer, found out I had joined the CDM, he threatened to kill me. I was overwhelmed with emotions. Despite never crying, even in trouble, I found myself weeping. I was distraught that I was fighting against a military that was so inhumane, and to be threatened with death by one of my own family members was truly heartbreaking. That was the only time I cried.

Now, in the midst of the revolution, I am a homeless participant in the CDM. I've been moving between friends and relatives for a year, staying wherever possible. I am fortunate that one of my single sisters, who did not join the CDM, supports me as much as she can.

When I was in Mandalay, no one threatened me. However, during my eight-month stay in Anisakhan, I was asked to complete a visitor registration document. The house I lived in belonged to my cousin, who was also on the military's wanted list and on the run. Her husband, an activist, died from Covid. Anisakhan was unfamiliar to me, so when the ward authority instructed me to register, I complied. But when he addressed me as 'teacher', I became afraid and fled from that place.

I joined the protests, facing the military's brutal repercussions, and have had to run for my life. I am now experienced in this struggle. At first, the protests were relatively calm, but then the military began to use increasingly brutal methods to crackdown on dissenters. We were forced to change our protest routes constantly. The police warned us not to gather in groups of more than five, and they began to chase us. We had to run to escape when the military began using their weapons. We ran until we reached the Indian ward, where we found a small shop. Hearing 'Come in, come in', we rushed inside, utterly exhausted from our flight. We stayed there until it was safe to leave. Since we were all from the education department, our protests targeted places like the law courts. As we moved, we passed police vans and fire brigades on standby to crackdown on the protests.

There was a military training school at Mandalay University, so we couldn't go through there and had to shift our focus elsewhere. Once, while on our way to a focal point, we encountered motorbikes from the opposite direction. Recognizing our university uniforms, they shouted at us, 'Go back… soldiers are following behind us.' Understanding that our lives were in danger, we turned back and ran.

At that time, I had already been transferred to Dagon University from Mandalay, but I hadn't moved yet. Since it was during the Covid period and I didn't want to take a Covid test, I informed Dagon University that I would join after the pandemic. My belongings were packed, but the military had stationed themselves at our university. They questioned me about the chair of our teachers' union and wanted the list of union members. Since there were only three female union members, including myself, I had to run away overnight, leaving all my belongings behind. I didn't care, I just grabbed a small handbag with some clothes. Thankfully, I managed to escape the campus despite their investigations and arrests.

March [2021] was the month when the military intensified its violent crackdown on us. Mandalay University pressured me to vacate my room and transfer to Dagon University immediately. I thought to myself that I would leave Mandalay and go to Dagon to inform them that I was joining the CDM as a lecturer. However, as I moved between the two universities, I was afraid of being included on the list of CDM participants. Many colleagues from the university assumed I would not join the CDM since members of my family, such as my brother and brother-in-law, were part of the military. Even when I informed Dagon University of my intentions, some doubted my commitment and suspected that I would soon abandon the CDM movement.

One day, when it's all over, I'll be able to hold my head high and say, 'Yes, I did it'

At first, I donated as much as I could to support the revolution. I would collect from others if I didn't have any funds myself. I did everything within my power to aid the cause. I made sure to donate something every month, even if it was a small amount. At the very least, I donated 20,000 kyats monthly. When they asked for my name as a donor, I told them it didn't matter,

nobody needed to know. I know myself, and my conscience is clear. I know the part I've played in the revolution. One day, when it's all over, I'll be able to hold my head high and say, 'Yes, I did it'. That's my own history that I've written. Nothing more, nothing less.

I know that anything can happen to me now. I'm in a central location surrounded by army bases. In one sense, I'm safe, but from another perspective, I'm in constant danger and at risk. Because of this, I must avoid activities that could arouse suspicion. While I can't assign student work, I am still able to teach. Currently, I'm teaching 4th-grade students online, but I long to do more. If I can move to a safer place, I'll be able to teach even more extensively.

I've had to stop my research not because I want to but because of my precarious situation. I'm homeless and face danger every day. Since the coup, I've been on the run, hiding in one friend's home and then moving to another to escape the military's searches. With only a few sets of clothing, I'm both homeless and at risk, without even a single book to read. But if I find a safe place, watch out! I'll continue my research with determination. Now, they're even pursuing CDM teachers online to arrest them. I've gone so far as to ordain myself as a Buddhist nun and hide in a nunnery, all in the hope of staying safe.

I have been fortunate to not have to shoulder my family's responsibilities. My relatives have supported me, allowing me to devote myself to the revolution, however small my contribution may be. I'm thrilled to have the chance to participate in this movement. Our only goal is that we must win! Only then will we be safe to live our lives free from danger. There's no rule of law in Myanmar; the entire country is lawless, so we aren't safe now no matter where we live.

I had been discussing the possibility of fleeing to Thailand with friends, but I've changed my mind. I won't go anywhere. Due to safety concerns, there are numerous checkpoints where they can arrest you, and the situation has worsened. The place I'm staying at now is very safe, though ironically so. In front of my house are two military stations, two troops guarding me…making me feel so secure that I can hardly breathe! That's how safe I am. I hadn't thought it would be this hard, living between life and death, facing challenges to my safety and emotions daily. I can't even focus enough to meditate. For

me, survival isn't a problem. I can live frugally.

One of the reasons I admire Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is when I listen to her speeches, she never criticizes or blames others. Far from it, she avoids speaking negatively about others. This quality is something I find most admirable about her, something that even ordinary people like us find difficult to emulate.

When it comes to women, many of us possess a motherly instinct. We tend to be humble and reserved, often enigmatic. We don't usually boast about our abilities or achievements online, on platforms like Facebook or TikTok. The male revolutionaries are primarily online, flaunting what they do. I have female friends who are also revolutionaries but rarely promote their activities online. Men seem to differ in this respect, publicly sharing their actions whenever they feel like it.

The revolution can be divided into two parts, and even Gen Z is split. Out of 50 million people, many are determined to uproot military rule in the country. These individuals might be in the jungle or prisons. Others are studying overseas or trying to go abroad. Even among Gen Z, divisions are apparent. There are only about one million young people in the jungle currently fighting the fight. I often ask myself if I've done enough for the revolution, questioning whether I could go and fight on the frontlines. The answer is no.

As the revolution drags on, it seems that more individuals are benefiting without contributing in what can be referred to as a 'fish-frog' stage of democracy hybridity. Some are even fortunate enough to travel overseas. What I want to express is that while we all know about Gen Z, and eighty percent of them are fighting for their rights, those causing troubles are often those referred to as 'Gen Lee' [similar to the sound of the word 'penis' in Burmese language, used derogatively to refer to activists of older generations]. We need to change our mentalities, and if we cannot, we must ask ourselves why we are fighting in the first place.

To succeed, you must act at the right time

Our immediate priority is to secure victory as swiftly as possible. Our young generation is shouldering a dual burden. Looking beyond the present,

I'm already considering what I can contribute to society after the revolution. With the need to bring about social change and overhaul a seventy-year-old, entrenched social structure, I'm focusing on teaching children. As the saying goes, 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks.' We must cultivate a new culture from a young age to truly transform society. This will be my personal contribution to the community. If necessary, I'm prepared to close the chapter on my life as a university lecturer.

I come from an ordinary family, and my thinking is simple and straightforward. I crave a life filled with simplicity and guided by intelligence. I'm not overly ambitious; I don't harbor grand desires to be something specific. These thoughts never cross my mind. Since my father's passing, I have planned to teach until I retire and then spend my old age in meditation. Now, my primary concern is to remain safe and alive, especially as I approach the age of 50.

Sometimes, I think there might be something wrong with me. I'm a dutiful person who will do whatever I can and must for the revolution. I also have a desire to help people beyond this movement. Life as a teacher in Myanmar is a hand-to-mouth existence, and since the coup, all my savings are gone. I've lost what I had, so I'm not attached to anything anymore.

While hiding in Anisakhan, I even decided to try to grow avocados. Unfortunately, as I was unable to care for them properly, they all died. Life is like that. Everything has a certain time, just like planting seeds, germinating, and transferring seedlings to pots. To succeed, you must act at the right time. Life follows the same rule. I could list at least fifty reasons why I joined the CDM. However, I don't feel like I've made a sacrifice by choosing this path. I cannot accept injustice, so I believe in and stand by what I have done. That's all there is to it.

As for my relationship with my siblings today, it's quite simple and straightforward. They have blocked me, and I blocked them in return. Easy! I don't feel as if I've lost anything. In fact, I'm glad to be distanced from those who harbor what I consider bad practices. For me, it's not a loss. Our differences go beyond mere opinions. I find it unbelievable that they cannot distinguish right from wrong.

I don't see my actions as sacrifices or merely following my beliefs. Many others have sacrificed far more, even their lives, for this cause. But I don't

view my contributions in that light. I'm not giving up anything. If I must put it grandly, my desire is for future generations in Myanmar to face less difficulties than we have.

Though I might not say formal prayers, I constantly recite to myself: 'We must win. We will win.' It might seem laughable, given that I'm just an ordinary person with nothing extraordinary about me. Yet, I am indignant at the way we the people of Myanmar have been treated. The truth must prevail. I want the revolution to be victorious, and I'm even willing to give up my life for it.

My only fear is that I might die before I can do the things I want to do, teach the lessons I want to share with my students, or share the knowledge I possess. I long to see victory. Don't ask me, 'Shall we win?' Yes, surely, we will. Damn it, we will win!

All revolutions need people with strong convictions, and we have more than enough. With this, we will fight, and we will win. We've always believed that we will win, and we still believe it. If I'm arrested, then that is my fate for my old age. People might not believe me if I say that I even recite in my sleep that we must win, but that's all I believe in. When I wake up, I open my eyes with that thought: 'We will win.' With all my might, that's the only thing I believe in. My conviction is so strong that every breath I take resonates with the belief, 'We will win'!

Part IV

IRON LADIES
FEMALE MPs

MP Daw Ni Shwe Lyan (top); her constituency Htantlang, Chin State during *Tatmadaw* airstrikes on March 30, 2023 (bottom)
(photos courtesy Burma News International, Chin Human Rights Organization)

CHAPTER 9: DAW NI SHWE LYAN

First-ever female candidate to win a seat in the Chin State parliament, NLD Member of Parliament, Htantlang, Chin State, 67 years old

I was born in Htantlang, the administrative center of Chin State, in a pristine environment with spectacular views of the hills. This beautiful place is where I lived for most of my life, but it has become a ghost town following the military's airstrikes in 2022 and 2023. After graduating with a degree in history, I became a high school teacher in Hakha, Chin State. I became a teacher because I was interested in teaching and motivated to assist students in an area with a shortage of qualified educators. Education in Chin State has suffered from numerous issues, making the system here incredibly weak. The problems include a lack of teachers, inadequate school buildings, insufficient teaching materials, unqualified teachers being asked to cover many subjects, very low wages, and job instability that all make it very difficult for teachers to support their families. While issues like lack of proper school buildings or a sufficient number of teachers can be overcome by determined students who crave education, the main problem is the presence of unqualified educators. This creates a stark difference between the education available in the cities and in places like Chin State, where the challenges are more acute.

Firstly, teachers are often assigned to teach without receiving proper training, leading to a situation where many are unqualified for their roles. Secondly, the high school curriculum for grades 10 and 11 frequently changes. I've experienced this: just as I became familiar with the teaching material and felt ready to teach it effectively, the curriculum would change again. These constant changes mean that teachers may not invest the effort to become familiar with the new material if they know they will only be teaching

it for a year or less.

Another major problem is the low salaries for teachers. High school teachers only started to get paid 230,000 kyat (109.46 USD) per month after I retired in 2020. Before that, their wages were as low as 1,200 kyat per day with a maximum of 4,000 kyat—still not enough to buy a bag of rice. Teachers struggled to make ends meet, and this financial strain inevitably affected their ability to focus on teaching. Many had to teach during the day and farm in the evening just to fill their stomachs, leaving no time to improve their teaching skills. They were forced to teach merely to get by on their meager salary of 1 or 2 lakhs, greatly diminishing the quality of education. The situation deteriorated so badly that teachers even had to buy their own chalk to use in schools. The government's failure to supply even basic supplies like chalk symbolizes a wider neglect of necessary teaching resources.

Witnessing the glaring failure of the education system in 1994, I grew concerned about the future of Chin State without well-educated youth. Eager to provide Chin children with an opportunity to perform well in grade 9 and on their matriculation exams, like their peers from cities, I opened a boarding school while still working as a teacher. During that era, private schools were not granted independence and had to operate in conjunction with government schools. Therefore, I allowed my boarding school to function under the umbrella of a government school.

I began accepting students for grades 9, 10, and 11. There were 50 students in grade 9, 100 in grade 10, and 200 in grade 11, amounting to a total of 350 students. The boarding school remained operational for nearly 20 years until 2014. Students attended government school classes during the day and continued their studies at night in the boarding school. During weekends and holidays, the students studied full-time at the boarding school. In terms of teaching, we sought assistance from experienced teachers in government schools. Although it was challenging to find teachers in Chin State due to transportation difficulties, my work as a teacher in government schools has helped me make many friends and connections. From the four schools in Hakha, I hired teachers who specialized in each subject for our school.

The educational background of some youths who had passed Grade 9 or 10 in rural areas and came to Hakha for Grade 11 was so poor that some

children from the mountain areas weren't able to even spell their own names, despite being Grade 11 students. Therefore, it was extremely difficult for them to pass Grade 11. We divided Grade 11 into four classes and conducted entrance exams to select students, placing them into classes A, B, C, and D, respectively. We also created a special class for students with the potential to score high distinctions, supporting them to reach their full potential.

In 2004, our efforts paid off, and we even had a student who passed the government exams with distinctions in all six subjects. Others achieved four or five distinctions. This success earned our school the reputation as 'san pya boarding school', which translates to 'an ideal boarding school' in English, and we continued until 2014. I felt very pleased as the school and students thrived academically, and the passing rates of our local students increased by 30–40 percent.

I retired in 2014 after teaching for 33 years. I was 64 at the time, and my focus shifted toward teaching women in their 40s. In our Chin State, there's a pervasive belief that women should only be responsible for housework. Even from a young age, many women are raised to think that their role in life will solely be housework after marriage, without pursuing anything else. This mindset is reflected in the statistic that seventy-five percent of Chin women believe their only responsibilities should be domestic chores, meal preparation, and child-rearing. They often don't feel the need or have the opportunity to participate in other matters, such as politics. The consequences of this belief system can be seen in schools, where as many as seventy percent of students are males, and females only make up thirty percent.

I understood that resisting the military was a cause that transcended ethnic lines

With a goal of developing and enhancing the education situation in Chin State, I engaged in political action and was elected as an MP in the NLD party in 2015, and again in 2020. Although many Chin political parties invited me to join them, recognizing me as a fellow Chin, I opted to join the NLD. I understood that resisting the military was a cause that transcended ethnic lines, and I spent many years working against the military regime. I realized that the struggle against the Tatmadaw couldn't be won by the Chin State

Army alone. The battle requires a united front involving the mainland and the various ethnic groups. Only through this collective effort can we hope to overthrow the military junta.

Thus, I joined the NLD under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and campaigned on its behalf. This decision was met with criticism from some ethnic activists who were displeased with my participation in a Burmese-majority party despite being of Chin descent. However, I maintained my stance, recognizing that the armed ethnic forces' inability to unite in the current climate made a collective effort even more essential. To truly challenge and revolt against the military regime, unity across all ethnic seven states was needed, and my actions aimed to contribute to that critical collaboration.

We can triumph over the military junta under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. While some label this as a manifestation of Burman ideology, I believe this perception arises mainly because the majority of soldiers in the Tatmadaw are Burmese. Though many have suffered at the hands of the military, we have also endured numerous conflicts among ourselves. Despite our previous divisions, I believe we can unite and win against the military in this revolution. We have struggled and striven together, and I hope we can build a future where unity prevails.

During the administration of the NLD government, we achieved significant improvements in our state. Many new schools were opened, buildings were constructed, and roads and bridges were built or repaired. Hospital bed capacity was increased from 15 to 50. Chin State thrived under NLD governance, so much so that the Chin people even composed songs in celebration. Approximately eighty percent of these improvements in our state were directly attributed to the NLD's policies and programs.

Fast forward to 2020, the NLD government, having gathered five years of experience, was prepared to continue moving forward with determination. I began searching for young women in Chin State in order to find and nurture the first female parliamentarian from our region. Having a parliamentarian from Chin State would serve dual purposes, helping the representation of women and further improving our state. Initially, I wasn't confident enough to consider running myself and was focused on finding a young woman for

the role. However, my search was fruitless, and I decided to join the election as a female candidate from Chin State for the NLD. After discussions with my local party, I was elected state representative in 2020, a symbol of progress for all women and especially for Chin State.

The city is now uninhabitable, razed, and turned into a graveyard

Htantlang was a peaceful place before the military coup. However, after the military seized power, I had to flee to liberated areas for my safety in early February 2021. The military bombarded Htantlang with aircraft such as the UC-35, targeting places where they suspected the Chin National Defense Forces (CNDF) were located, even when no battles were taking place. Chin State has been very active in the revolution, so we are often targeted by the military. Our CNDF youths are strong-spirited. In September 2021, we were able to take over the Lon Lei military camp, a significant military stronghold since the time of British colonial rule, with the support of the people. It was a very intense battle. We took over stations in Htantlang, such as Lone Lei and Wanthuu, with our CNDF forces.

Recently, due to Myanmar's army airstrikes and frequent bombardments, the entire population of the town has been forced to flee. Once nestled peacefully in the hills, Htantlang is now virtually deserted, a ghost town left in ruins with houses burnt down, rising smoke, and destruction after airstrikes, artillery, and arson attacks by junta forces. The city is now uninhabitable, razed, and turned into a graveyard. Some people have taken refuge in Hakha, Kalay, and Yangon, while most sought shelter in nearby villages not far from Htantlang. Our town was hit by airstrikes as many as forty times in just three or four days. The military scorched the city, burning down over 2,017 houses and eight churches. Two people were shot dead by the soldiers, and fourteen others sustained serious injuries. Htantlang is in a critical condition right now.

Their futures, their very lives, were stolen

We have eighteen CDF [Chin Defence Force] groups in Chin State, each representing a specific area. The most formidable ones are the Chin National Front (CNF) and Chinland Army (CAN). Under their control, all eighteen

groups are fighting against the military in their respective regions. Sometimes, this fills me with sorrow.

We started to experience the taste of a true people's government in 2015. For five years, we began to dream and set goals, believing that we would soon rise to stand on equal footing with other countries. Just when we began to see the transformation of Chin youths, filled with inspiring dreams, the 2021 coup shattered those hopes and sent them into despair. Their futures, their very lives, were stolen. That's why young people are risking everything to reclaim their rights, fighting with all their might, and winning battles. The skills they have gathered might not seem immediately applicable to their future, but they are essential for survival and navigating the revolution. When I meet with foreign diplomats, I always explain why the young people in our country will not give up the fight. They are fighting for their lives, struggling to reclaim what is rightfully theirs.

I feel a profound connection with the members of the CNF. They are like my family, my sons and daughters, my comrades. We are bound together by blood in solidarity that nothing can break. I'm 67 now and have met with the CDFs at least thrice. I've eaten and slept beside them, fully understanding the intensity of their struggle and their unbreakable determination to win. They feel they have no choice but to defeat the military once and for all, so they are doing everything possible to triumph in combat. We are obliged to take up arms to defend and protect ourselves. This has become a necessity, for only then can peace and education follow.

Education is essential for our future prosperity, but it's costly in Chin State. Supporting a teacher with one lakh each in 50 schools, with a total of 1,300 teachers, costs at least 1,300 lakhs for the 2022–2023 period. These teachers, who are part of the CDM, have to rely on minimal support. The revolution has been sustained by the Burmese population from its inception, and now resources are scarce. This scarcity poses a real problem.

In villages with larger populations, teachers may receive support in the form of gifts, such as meat or vegetables, for Christmas or New Year's. However, the real issue lies with teachers in smaller villages. Out of ninety-one villages, some only have approximately fifty sparsely situated houses. The villagers themselves are poor and unable to support the teachers, and we are

currently struggling to pay the teachers in twenty schools.

They worked so hard to hold books and pens but were forced to drop them

In terms of the healthcare situation here, I'm heartened that many of my students who studied with me in the past have since become medical doctors and are now helping people. However, it pains me as a devoted teacher to see how our children, who labored so diligently year after year to succeed in their professions, are now forced to take up arms and risk their lives in the jungle. I feel just as sad and desperate as they do. Many of my students who became medical doctors are now part of the CDM, and they have been forced to carry firearms and become members of the CDF. They are still in the prime of their lives, with ages ranging from nineteen to thirty.

I feel a sense of suffocation when I see them in the jungle, holding arms. They should be holding pens and books or working in their professions. I know they did not want to take up weapons; they worked so hard to hold books and pens but were forced to drop them. After working so diligently, we have all been forced to give up on our dreams in certain ways. Some of my students created the Chin Health Organization (CHO) after being supported by NGOs to provide better public healthcare. When I see how they care for people, I think that not all my dreams have been shattered and that parts of my dream are still surviving.

Chin State has always struggled with food shortages and scarcity. The reality is that the situation will only worsen as long as the war continues. Imagine how bad the present situation is, and how the ongoing conflict will only exacerbate these disasters. Many people are starving, especially members of the CDF stationed on the frontiers. Sometimes, members of the CDF don't have enough rice and must make do with an insufficient amount of porridge. Some days they must starve, having nothing to eat. And it's not just food that's lacking—often they don't even have access to clean drinking water. Forced to drink from unclean water sources, they risk contracting diseases such as diarrhea and parasites. With a lack of medicine, they can only lie down and suffer in agony when ill. Even those assigned to cooking duties are often left in despair, in agony because they have nothing to make food with.

Seeing many women participating is encouraging

In our culture, there's no strict rule that states women cannot participate in politics. In fact, many women have become actively involved, from protesting against the military authorities to joining the CDF groups following the military coup. Wherever I go, I see many women soldiers. I have met with five or six organizations, and seeing many women participating is encouraging. While I may not have seen many women on the frontlines in the past, now many more are actively getting involved. Though the intensification of the battle has led many women to leave the frontlines, a significant number remains in the backlines. I foresee even more women participating shortly, particularly if we create roles that align with their skill sets.

I wish to assign tasks to young women to empower and uplift them. However, according to Chin culture, most women are focused on domestic work. Throughout my life, the country has been under military rule, and we've been conditioned to believe that political involvement leads only to loss and danger. Women, especially, have been told that politics is risky and that involvement could lead to jail, death, or ruin. Such fear-mongering has led many to shy away from political involvement, feeling that their only responsibility is to their family's wellbeing.

However, in this revolution, we've seen support from people from all walks of life. Once the revolution is over, ensuring women have access to decision-making bodies, such as the national government and parliament, is essential. Under democratic rule, women will gain confidence when safety, fairness, and justice are assured. Currently, under military rule, many young people hesitate to engage in politics, stalling proper development. If we were politically stable and enforced federal democracy, equality, and inclusion, I believe many more young women would come forward. The intersection of politics and economic burdens uniquely impacts women, and addressing these challenges is crucial for empowering them. None of us are giving up. We are united by a loud and clear conviction: We will not give up. Even if our houses are burnt or confiscated, leaving us homeless, we remain strong. The military may attempt to rob us, but they will never steal our convictions or our commitment to victory.

Look at the Tatmadaw forces in Chin State; they are falling apart. The ed-

ucation system, driven by CDM teachers, is now functioning. These teachers are educating students across ninety-one villages, and we have our own medical professionals taking care of the people. We are working together with the CDF at the administrative level. We've created a community bound by shared caring and have established our own regional defense forces. We are united by a single dream: victory.

As long as we are alive, we will fight. As long as we fight, we will win. That is our conviction. Even under constant bombardment and airstrikes, even when faced with homelessness and scarce food, we do not feel defeated. We will win; it is inevitable. They can't eliminate all of us. When one falls, another rises to fight. Our conviction is unbreakable. The military will never set foot in our Chin State again. Even at 67, I stand ready to face them on the battlefield, always prepared to fight when and if needed. We are already winning. Homecoming is in sight!

MP Daw Hnin Khaing Soe at an NLD meeting prior to the 2021 coup (right)

MP Daw Hnin Khaing Soe leading her constituents in a demonstration against the 2021 military coup (left)

(photos courtesy of Daw Hnin Khaing Soe)

CHAPTER 10: DAW HNIN KHAING SOE

Twice-elected NLD regional member of parliament, Depayin, Sagaing Region; IDP camp leader, 50s

I was born and bred in political revolt, a path shaped by my father's devotion to democracy in Myanmar. Though our family struggled, his commitment never wavered. A retired government employee from the Department of Agriculture, my father was also a dedicated member of the NLD since its establishment in 1990. He even served as the president of the municipal party. You could say that in our family, the political crisis in our country is personal.

Like father, like daughter, his passion for democracy has flowed into me as though it were in my blood. Since I was young, I've been drawn to politics, following in his footsteps. Our commitment to democracy is a shared legacy, a personal cause, and a lifelong mission. My father's unwavering, long-term involvement in the NLD has marked not only him, but us as an entire family in the eyes of Military Intelligence (MI).

Under the constant scrutiny of MI, all political activity conducted by my father had to be done in secret. The shadowy presence of MI officers and informants came to feel like an uninvited, intrusive guest in our lives, leading me to become involved in my father's covert political activism, even as a child. As his assistant and messenger, I delivered communications with his colleagues, cleverly and courageously answering his call to duty. Together, my father and I learned to mimic the sounds of birds, using them to send warnings and signals to each other. We developed and rehearsed bird sounds for various meanings, creating a secret code known only to us. This experience was both heartbreaking and thrilling, full of risk and excitement.

MI officers came to our house regularly, searching for my father, who had

to constantly hide to avoid capture. At that time, as it is now, every discussion about politics was considered dangerous and could lead to arrest. My father and his friends developed a shorthand writing system, decipherable only to them, in order to communicate secretly. When my father had to conceal all evidence of this secret communication, I became his confidante and accomplice. Together, we hid the secret letters and codes, crafting a secure hiding place in the cow barn behind our house, concealing the documents between the roof shingles. It was a dangerous game we played, knowing that discovery could land us both in prison.

I became the liaison between my father and his colleagues, receiving secret letters, hiding them if necessary, and delivering them to my father in his hiding place when it was safe. This became my full-time job, setting me apart from other children. I didn't play games or engage in children's talk; instead, I became an essential part of a clandestine world, fighting for democracy alongside my father.

Listening to my father and his colleagues discuss politics was far more intriguing to me than anything else. Their conversations' blend of heartbreak and thrill captivated me. I was desperate to understand more, to grasp every bit of information I could.

Many of my father's colleagues were marginalized because of their political activism, viewed by potential employers as 'troublemakers', leading to their unemployment and poverty. One person I particularly remember was an elderly man, brimming with sheer determination, who regularly visited our house. Despite his ragged clothes and nearly useless bicycle, his keen intelligence, passionate views, and in-depth understanding of our country's affairs left me mesmerized. To my young mind, there was a sharp contradiction between this grandfather's appearance and his profound thoughts. I couldn't help but feel empathy for him, thinking that his intellectual contributions should make him rich. But life doesn't work that way, and I grew up witnessing these disparities, ingraining in me a deep understanding of Myanmar's political system and its impact on people.

In 1996, I completed high school, and four years later, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in geography. As soon as the NLD was legally allowed to form an active political party again, I became a member and eventually com-

pleted my master's in public administration. My political journey continued as I served as a district president from 2012 to 2015. In 2014, I became the general secretary of the Township Conference Committee and represented my district at the central conference in 2018.

Because our house served as the NLD office, it became a target, and the military sealed it off for seven years

I hail from Depayin, a place notorious for Burma's Depayin Massacre [of May 2003] and known for the assassination attempt on democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Not only is it the city where I was born and raised, but it's also where I served as an MP.

When Daw Suu came to Depayin, she was supposed to stay at our house. As she was attempting to find our home, her motorcade was violently attacked by more than 2,000 military thugs and some extremist monks. These attackers were armed with wooden clubs, metal spikes, and bamboo poles. The situation was terrifying, and I've heard reports that as many as 100 people were killed that night. The assault occurred near the Ywarthit Bridge in Depayin Township under the illumination of floodlights. Many women were arrested in the aftermath. Just before Daw Suu's arrival, the military's deputy home minister, the divisional commander, and the commander of the Northwest Military Division Command had traveled to Depayin, which was highly unusual. This, along with the brutal and coordinated nature of the attack, made it clear that the massacre was premeditated.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's second trip to Depayin brought her near my family's house, where the local NLD office had relocated due to external threats, once again. The prospect of the leader staying in our house excited us. However, our home, which also served as the party office, was in an alley and proved hard to find. Moments after her convoy passed our alley, they were ambushed by the military, leading to a traffic jam on Than Street, Yay U Township. Because our house served as the NLD office, it became a target, and the military sealed it off for seven years. My parents were forced out of their own home.

After the incident in Depayin, the military seized our house and locked us out. Despite our pleas, they ignored us, showing no mercy or understand-

ing. Later, they grudgingly allowed us to live in a small hut in the backyard of our own home, but it wasn't big enough for our entire family. As a result, we were separated.

The military's propaganda compounded the terrifying brutality we endured. Many in our community began to see us as criminals and troublemakers rather than victims of an oppressive regime. Our family, like many others who supported Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, saw our lives shattered by the violence, arrests, torture, beatings, and death threats we faced. Depression loomed large over all of us. To find a source of income and to help overcome my anxiety and depression, I took up work in a post office in Yangon.

When we finally regained possession of the house, it was in complete shambles

After seven long and agonizing years, the military finally returned our house to us, but what we found was an old and crumbling structure. It was a painful sight, watching our own home deteriorate before our very eyes, helpless to intervene, as we were not allowed to go near it.

When we finally regained possession of the house, it was in complete shambles, having lain uninhabited for the past seven years. Nevertheless, it marked a turning point for our family, allowing us to live together again under one roof, no matter how decrepit it may have become.

In 2012 after political parties were again allowed to function, we returned to Depayin and attempted to reopen the party office. We focused on securing a good location along the main road and restoring what we had lost. My father's commitment to politics had never waned, and I felt I had inherited his passion and blood. When the NLD was allowed to register again, the party and its members were already economically devastated, with their health and finances in total collapse. We had no money, and people were afraid to associate with or be involved in the NLD. They feared the military's reprisals, having witnessed many years of brutal attacks on the NLD as a political party and its members. We had to raise funds ourselves, even to pay rent for a small room to use as an office. Opening an NLD office became a more urgent priority for us than buying rice to eat.

After so many years of the military's crackdowns and attacks, we were all broke. It was hard to earn anything, and we had no more belongings to sell.

Therefore, I decided to sell the De-Hlaing journal, which was allowed to be published after the NLD was permitted to register as a legal political party in 2012. It was a fortnightly publication, printed in Yangon and sent to Depayin every Tuesday. The magazine's price was very cheap, as it was not aimed at making a profit, but was an educational tool about current affairs. After collecting the De-Hlaing journals from the bus station, I had to sell them all. I walked from one street to another, persuading one shop owner to buy a few copies, then moving on to the next. I went from market to market, selling to as many people as possible. I targeted crowded places and was so desperate to sell them that I even went to street bars and alcohol shops. I roamed under the scorching sun and the pouring rain to support a cause I believed in.

On hot sunny days, I would be drenched in sweat, feeling like I was being grilled alive and walking like a dried fish. On rainy days, I was soaked to the bone. While I aimed to sell as many journals as possible, it became an educational journey. I gained many valuable lessons from doing this. In the beginning, I had to work to persuade almost every customer. I listened to them with my heart and learned about people's ordinary lives. I became closer to the common folk and learned about the many problems they unnecessarily faced, even finding ways to solve some. I also had the chance to learn more about my own town and region.

Slowly but surely, we managed to collect and save enough money to rent an office for 30,000 kyat and had an extra 20,000 kyat to use for office stationery and running the office. I did this for six years. The NLD office was rented by selling the De-Hlaing magazine. I didn't take any formal position, but worked to help the NLD have a functioning office, as we were displaced and constantly moving from one place to another since we moved out of my mother-in-law's house.

I never expected to face such discrimination among our own women and politicians

I wanted to establish a stable office for the Depayin NLD, even though I was neither an elected official nor a leader. I continued my fundraising work until I felt the urge to participate in the 2015 election, so I submitted the form to run for a seat in parliament. It was then that I realized the extent of gender

discrimination in Myanmar. I had heard about it many times, particularly from women's organizations, but I never expected to face such discrimination among our own women and politicians.

When the internal selection process for MPs began, I was encouraged to apply, as I was recognized as a hard worker within the party and the community. However, only then did I realize the impact of gender-based discrimination. Worse still, it was present among our peers. I experienced this type of discrimination against women firsthand. When an older woman I was very familiar with told me that an MP should be a man—and even though she had seen my work and supported me, she voted for a male candidate instead of me—I realized that before convincing men, we need to work to help our fellow women understand and accept principles of gender equality.

Despite countless struggles and competitions, I continued my efforts, doing things others didn't want to do, such as working to revise laws like Law 436 from the military's 2008 Constitution. Because of my political knowledge and tireless work, I became known and loved within the township. FInally, I was elected within the party as its first local public representative.

The NLD won the election in 2015 with over eighty percent of the votes, and I carried out my role as an elected MP. Throughout my life, I struggled because of my father's involvement in politics. But now, as an elected female MP, I began to experience personal problems as a woman, a wife, and a mother. With so much commitment on my part and high expectations from the people, I worked very hard, as did all the NLD party members. However, my husband became dissatisfied with me for not being what he considered a dutiful wife.

My husband believed I prioritized my work as an MP over being a wife, and he resented this deeply. While I understood his frustrations, I knew it was my responsibility as an elected MP to serve the needs of the people who had trusted and elected me to the job. I couldn't fail them. I held my tongue and continued to carry out my duties for the people and the party. After such a long and painful battle, I had no alternative but to serve the people to the best of my ability.

My husband eventually left me and our children, and he remarried another woman. Before I reached the age of 40, I became a single mom, struggling

to continue working as an MP. After my marriage ended, my mother-in-law refused to allow me to use her space for an office, so I had to find a new place. Fortunately, I was able to open the office in a good location along the road after a donor generously donated a plot of land. Together with some savings, we reopened the party office. I must stress that these accomplishments were not mine alone. My father, who served as a township party president for the NLD, has strengthened my political journey. I consider myself lucky to have him as a father; he is a torch guiding my life.

People recognized my relentless efforts and dedication, and in the 2020 election, I was elected for the second time with nearly eighty-eight percent of the votes. Additionally, I received the most votes among the four elected MPs. We were elated, believing we could do better for the country than the military ever could.

…then, out of nowhere, there was another military coup!

During my tenure in the parliament from 2015 to 2020, I served on the Government Guarantees, Admission, and Commitment Appraisal Committee and the Commerce and City Development Committee. During parliamentary hearings, I would regularly ask as many as a hundred questions, relentlessly advocating for the concerns and needs of my constituents. I also championed regional development projects, ensuring regular electricity and pushing for much-needed land reforms. One of my significant achievements was negotiating with the military to return confiscated land to the people, including three plots totaling 551.56 acres and seven plots amounting to 76.06 acres.

We had rebuilt the NLD out of the ashes, rising strong even after enduring malicious attacks repeatedly for decades. From 2015 to 2020, we worked tirelessly on behalf of the people, and we thought our efforts were beginning to pay off. But then, out of nowhere, there was another military coup! The office we had so painstakingly built was crafted from our sweat, blood, and personal emotions. We had saved penny by penny to build the office, even scrimping to buy basic stationery. Now, our hard-earned accomplishments had been crushed. Our office was destroyed from the inside.

I once again lost my house, finding myself on the military's wanted list

under Section 505(1), a provision often used to silence dissenters. My house was raided several times, but fortunately, I was elsewhere, in hiding. My parents' home was also confiscated. It had already been taken from us in 2003 and was held for seven years. Now, we may never get it back. Who knows?

After the military seized control on the first of February 2021, a wave of arrests began, and the situation became extremely dangerous. Yet, we continued our work, commencing a meeting of MPs 45 miles from Depayin in Sitgaing, even under constant threats from the military. The people of Sitgaing, too, stood against the military coup and actively participated in protests. This perilous activity went on for over two months, nearly stretching to three.

I never planned to leave Depayin, where I had grown up, struggled, and worked tirelessly with my colleagues and the people. But when a raid involving over 200 men descended upon my seventy-year-old parents' house, I had no choice but to flee. I only escaped because my father called and alerted me after receiving advance information. After that terrifying incident, I knew I couldn't participate in protests safely anymore. I continued my work related to the revolution from a secure location with an internet connection, avoiding going home due to the military's attention. Amid the third wave of Covid-19, my concerns for my father and my city grew. I began raising funds through connections for medications, oxygen concentrators, and other necessities, all while ensuring I myself had a safe place to hide.

I spent my days delivering medications to those in need and my nights at relatives' houses. After the second raid on my house, I was able to avoid capture thanks to a nearby informant. The military had seen me going in and out of the house during the day and raided it at night, hoping to find me there. But all they found was my father, connected to an oxygen pipe, so they confiscated my laptop computer and left. My mother recovered from Covid-19, but my father was in critical condition when they surrounded our house. The military had sealed off our home for seven years following the 2003 Depayin Massacre. Now in 2021, during the military coup, it was sealed off for the second time.

They raided the house a third time, taking my notes, records, and all my belongings related to the party, and the house was sealed off again. Under this military regime, my house has been sealed three times. During the first seal-

ing, after the 2003 Depayin conflict, we were allowed to live in a small house, but this time, we didn't even have that.

I do not want to saddle the next generation with a continuity of the military's cruelty, slaughter, and oppression

By this time, I felt like I was on the brink of insanity. While worrying about my own security, I couldn't be with my seventy-year-old parents at a time when they needed me most. I felt like an irresponsible daughter, and it broke my heart. I had to look after them from afar, but luckily, even though we're already divorced, my ex-husband's relatives still love me. With their help, my parents moved to a building close to our home. It didn't provide full shelter, so they couldn't abandon home entirely, clinging to the hope they might see their daughter again if I ever managed to sneak back. They chose to stay in the building.

Depayin is one of the places suffering severely from the military's cruelty and oppression. They even shoot at homes of civilians with heavy weaponry. Tragically, one of my neighbors, Ko Nay Lin, passed away after a shell hit his house. After that incident, I tried to convince my parents not to wait for me anymore, but they reassured me, urging me to keep doing my job. They refused to move to a safer location, proud of their daughter's efforts for the country. Whenever I thought about that, I couldn't contain my emotions. Thinking about my nearly eighty-year-old parents worrying about me because of the path I chose made me want to break down.

My security became increasingly at risk, and as hiding places became scarcer, I finally had to entrust my elderly, sick father and my children to my relatives. This time, I was utterly devastated and worried sick for my dad, in particular. He had always been a rock to me and has suffered so much because of his desire to serve our country. Now his daughter faces a similar fate, perhaps even worse than his own.

I am determined to persevere to restore democracy in our country. I do not want to saddle the next generation with a continuity of the military's cruelty, slaughter, and oppression. If I have to fight for my life to see democracy return, even if it's beyond my time, I will do so. Every struggle I endure and every breath I take today is fuelled by hope for a better future for the next

generation.

I'm painfully aware that many have lost their lives and can never return home. Some have been killed by heavy weapons landing right in the middle of their dining tables. Others have been slaughtered for supporting this revolution. The sight of bodies discarded and children killed because schools have been bombarded—these horrors occur daily. My own personal safety is far from assured. I'm alive at this moment only because the revolutionary forces have protected me. Despite the military coup, I will continue my work as an elected MP until we achieve the federal democratic rule that the people desire.

I find myself now as a homeless, single mother of two with a dying father

During the two years [as of 2023] since the military seized control, over 1,700 houses have been completely burnt down and destroyed in my city. Only the love and care of the people who support me have enabled me to continue my leadership role. My father told me that because I stood with the people with integrity, without exploiting funds, they loved and cared for me. He urged me to continue moving forward without ever looking back. But his health has declined with each passing day. Even when he has been so ill that he can barely hear my voice on the phone, he has remained the kind of father who will put a helmet on the motorbike and a water bottle in the basket when I am preparing to go out to campaign politically. He is a father who encourages and supports his daughter even from his sickbed.

I know that the reason I can face difficulties bravely is because I have my father's blood flowing in me. It's because of him that I can keep fighting. I will battle for the future of our country, sacrificing my life just as he has, and I will wage this final struggle every day until I can celebrate victory with him.

I find myself now as a homeless, single mother of two with a dying father, living under the constant threat of being arrested by the authorities. But above all, I am a leader elected by the people, and I shall fulfill my duty to serve those who have placed their trust in me. This is my conviction, my unbreakable resolve. The possibility that I may never see my father or my children again tears at me. My father has been my rock, my support, doing everything in his power to protect and uplift me. Now, in his old age and

sickness, I want to be there for him, but I can't even get close to his bedside.

Still, all these struggles and sacrifices have a clear purpose. My life has been marked by hardship, all in pursuit of a dream to serve people who deserve better than the tyranny of a dictator's rule. As long as they have elected us to lead, we will battle in this revolution and beyond. Though I am bloodied, inside and out, I will never submit to the military's rule. They can take my home, my possessions, everything I have, but they will never quench my determination to fight as long as I live—because we must win, and military rule in Myanmar must end once and for all.

CONCLUSION

As of this writing [February 2024], the military coup in Myanmar has been in place for nearly four years. Thousands of female and male PDF fighters and CDM activists now living in the borderlands of India and Thailand have been criminalized as illegal, undocumented migrants and fugitives, and many more are surviving in IDP camps in liberated areas where they endure discomfort, disease, and severe deprivations. For many, their land and homes have been confiscated by the authorities. They have had to leave behind their lifelong aspirations of becoming university lecturers, medical professionals, and scholars. They have been unable to earn regular incomes for the past several years, restricting their abilities to support their families.

Since the 2021 coup, many female warriors have had to conceal their identities and take extreme precautions for their personal safety. They remain invisible yet invincible as they support the revolution in various ways, such as voluntarily teaching displaced students online. Their drive seems to only increase in the face of their multiple adversities. Their motivation to seek creative ways of overcoming challenges with their main-ma-nyan, their female wisdom, appears to strengthen over time through their utilization of multiple, flexible, and alternative methods to realize their goals with self-reliance and perseverance, despite the often overwhelming force of structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of oppression that have hamstrung them from demonstrating their capacities and developing their potentials.

A a number of international researchers and observers have questioned how the women of Myanmar have managed to remain so strong and firm in their convictions. The answer is that they are painfully all too well aware of the sacrifices that are required in order to achieve their goals, and to them, failure is simply not an option. The preceding narratives of ten women, purposefully

selected from multiple generational, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds, reveal the broad range of female strength operating against oppression in Myanmar, but also merely scratch the surface of the true depth of female determination and resilience throughout the nation's troubled history. Collected together, they tell a story about the women of Myanmar's powerful and poignant mirroring of collective female suffering and strength.

The narratives in this volume also serve as a direct challenge to the discourse of hpon in Myanmar society by highlighting main-ma-nyan, feminine-specific wisdom and strategies for transforming hardships into resolve and advantage. These are exactly the types of thinking and tactics that the people of Myanmar require to win the revolution and rebuild a more equitable nation in the future. If, and only if, women are empowered as equals and treated justly, and are not held back but rather allowed and encouraged to maximize their capacities, can they contribute to the country's development and democratic future with their unwavering resilience and determination, and their unique ability to find creative and alternative solutions. These narratives illuminatingly demonstrate that without gender equality, the powerful capacities and potentialities of the excluded majority are stifled, and a peaceful and democratic future in Myanmar may never be achieved.

While men are leading in active fighting, women have sustained the revolution by fundraising and providing humanitarian aid, healthcare, food, and education in conflict areas. Clearly, today's women-led revolution in Myanmar is not merely a product of 'foreign influence', a frequent accusation made by the military authorities aiming to delegitimize the movement. The narratives of brave women herein poignantly underscore the inexorable necessity of revolution and elucidate why failure is not an option. With the resolute goal of putting a conclusive end to military dictatorship in Myanmar, their invincible determination can serve as a powerful force only if fully appreciated and utilized.

Unfortunately, gender equality is still far from being achieved, even in the current female-led revolution. All the major revolutionary groups today—including NUG, PDFs, and EAOs—are male dominated and led. In the same way, the military, privileged under its own 2008 Constitution with a guaranteed twenty-five percent of all parliamentary seats and full control over the

Chief of Home Affairs, Border Affairs, and Defence, refused to accept the legitimacy of the country's democratically-elected first female leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, for the mere reason that she is a female who had married a Western, non-Buddhist man, the late Dr. Michael Aris.

While various revolutionary leaders in Myanmar have long been fighting for justice, equality, and democracy, their deeply entrenched and often unconscious biases of male superiority—a direct consequence and legacy of hpon—and distrust of females have significantly impeded their progress. Even the interim NUG, Myanmar's democratic government-in-exile, has refused to accept the United Nations' recommended quota of a minimum of thirty percent female participation and representation. Nearly eighty percent of NUG ministers, deputy ministers, and directors are men, illuminating the extent to which international efforts to promote equal leadership opportunities for women in Myanmar often fall short. Such deeply rooted anti-woman prejudice remains a formidable barrier for gender equality and women's leadership. Without dismantling Myanmar's deeply embedded patriarchal cultural oppression, the courageous and highly capable women of Myanmar will continue to be relegated to the lowest positions in society and restricted from becoming decision-makers in their communities even more so than their counterparts in other Southeast Asian nations. Too many activists and progressives shy away from confronting gender issues seen as complicated and sensitive, and have little understanding of the types of change and forward momentum that are required. The quest for equal leadership in Myanmar will remain elusive unless women are able to fully and equally participate in decision-making processes related to issues affecting their lives and those of their family members.

Myanmar's humanitarian crisis has now become one of the most serious refugee crises in the world, already stretched to the breaking point amidst spiraling humanitarian crises. Since the 2021 coup, an estimated 3.5 million people from areas throughout Myanmar have become IDPs (UNHCR, 2025) while nearly 20 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance (World Food Program, 2025). Before the coup in 2021, the exchange rate was 1 US dollar = 1300 MMK in 2021, but the value of the kyat has fallen precipitously, with the rate dropping to 5060 MMK per 1 US dollar in May 2024, and

then 7000 MMK to the dollar by August 2024. People have been struggling with far-reaching surges in the price of strategic commodities and essentials. The costs of fuel, cooking oil, rice, and medicines have escalated due to the significant devaluation of Myanmar's currency against stronger international currencies. According to the World Food Program (2025), nearly 20 million people in Myanmar require humanitarian assistance as of early 2025. According to a statement from the Central Statistical Organization, Myanmar's average monthly inflation rate was 2.61 percent in February 2021, but rose to 34.97 percent in 2023 (Eleven News, 2023).

Unfortunately, the disastrous situation in Myanmar is expected to continue to worsen. The military's enactment of its compulsory conscription law in mid-2024 has forced men aged 18–35 and women aged 18–27 women into service, with the military seeking to meet a quota of 13 million forcibly-recruited soldiers. The conscription law has amplified and added urgency to push factors for Burmese out-migration. Most of those leaving the country to avoid compulsory military service have come to Thailand, either legally or illegally working in a variety of 'dirty, dangerous and demeaning' jobs for their survival even if they are highly-educated professionals. Furthermore, many women are finding themselves vulnerable to human smuggling and trafficking gangs as they are increasingly desperate (World Bank, 2023).

The devastating September 2024 flood, caused by heavy rains triggered by Typhoon Yagi, has compounded existing human rights violations, inflation, and the oppression of millions of people who have already been displaced and devastated by dire poverty due to ongoing conflicts over the past four years. Research has indicated that both natural and man-made disasters are gendered as they impact women and men differently due to existing rigid codes of gender norms and unequal power relations (UN Women, 2024). Members of the international community, cross-border institutions, donors, and governments with an interest in fostering democracy, peace, and gender equality must recognize that focusing solely on women's rights and political leadership is insufficient in a country like Myanmar, where structural gender violence has been cultivated, normalized, and justified. For Myanmar to build an equal, just, and peaceful society, it is essential to address and expose these underlying issues. Without a thorough understanding of the founda-

tional structural inequalities in social capital, it is impossible to cultivate the democratic and equal society that has so long been desperately desired and deserved by the people of Myanmar.

Advancing change is never rapid nor simple, and there are certainly no one-size-fits-all solutions applicable to all contexts. Still, the problematic issue of gender in Myanmar is similar to cancer—performing a proper and thorough diagnosis is necessary in order to identify potentially effective treatments and cures. Effective change must originate from the grassroots level, considering the experiences and realities of the millions who have been marginalized. The strengths, skills, and successes of the informants in this volume underscore the critical importance of valuing women as equal partners in leadership roles. Invisible yet Invincible vividly illuminates female resilience, showcasing feminine-specific qualities and leadership skills weaponized in response to patriarchal denials. Cumulatively, the heroines chronicled here share roles in a long-overdue narrative. As a repository of the experiences of daring women who have adeptly transformed strategies learned within oppressive systems into instruments of empowerment, this book shares ideas that have the potential to be extremely helpful for rebuilding the country with progressive social change beyond the military era. Excluding the unique strategies and capacities of women, the building of a lasting democratic society in Myanmar will remain but a dream.

As an anthropologist, I believe the power and value of personal oral narratives as a component of feminist action research lies in their potential to be used as tools with which to chip away at, and eventually dismantle, biases, discrimination, and oppression. The preceding narratives of invincible women aim to raise awareness of the situation of women in Myanmar today and to illuminate not only the complex, sensitive, and little-understood issues of gender, but also women's capacities, strengths, skills, resiliency, and main-ma-nyan as multiple strategies with which to seek alternative solutions to the problems affecting millions of people throughout our country. Each personal story testifies to the individual woman's strength and sacrifices, as well as her courage, conviction, and commitment in the fight for democracy, equality, and humanity. Their individual experiences reveal the scope of the impacts of the collective and structural violence that they suffer as women. While

the experiences of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has struggled mightily against the male-dominated institutions of the Myanmar military and monastic orders for many decades, is documented and well-known, the stories of the millions more women in Burma who have suffered and continue to suffer deserve to be highlighted.

The most significant aspect of the Spring Revolution protests is not only the leadership of women, but also their unique strategies for combating racism and ethnonationalism while addressing the structural nature of gender violence in Myanmar. On March 8, 2021, International Women's Day, they strategically employed cultural knowledge and perceived feminine inferiority as weapons against the conservative patriarchal regime by hanging their htamains (sarong-like skirts) to weaken male spiritual superiority. This creative strategy garnered unprecedented media attention and support from their male counterparts, marking a critical juncture for social cohesion, sustainable peace, and gender equality in Myanmar.

These narratives underscore the profound significance of women in society. Despite facing structural, cultural, and symbolic oppression from and within male-dominated institutions, women in Myanmar continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination. Their success stems from their adversity, overcoming challenges with main-ma-nyan, utilizing multiple, flexible, and alternative solutions to reach their goals. Through their experiences, they have developed self-reliance, perseverance, and achievement. Over the past several years, these women have endured deaths, arrests, homelessness, and life as fugitives, undocumented refugees, asylum seekers, and forced migrants. Yet they remain steadfast in their resolve, fighting for social change and a sustainable democratic society. They are women writing their own histories and chroniclers of women's histories in modern Myanmar.

These powerful testimonies show that being born a woman in Myanmar often means being considered a second-class citizen, an outsider on 'the path to Nirvana', perceived as innately inferior, and condemned to being victims of patriarchal, cultural, and structural violence. This hinders their potential to contribute to society, peace, social harmony, and democracy. This is why Myanmar's female political participation was the lowest in Southeast Asia in 2015 and the second lowest in 2020, even under a female-led democratic

government. Even now, with sixty percent of women leading the revolution, the NUG and its 17 ministries, including the prime minister's office, remain male-dominated with seventy-eight percent of ministers, eighty-two percent of deputy ministers, and sixty-one percent of permanent secretaries being male. Despite the establishment of the Myanmar Women Parliamentarians' Network (MWPN) in 2022, which works closely with 100 female MPs, without empowering women in equal leadership across all spheres, the path to democracy will be hindered, as the majority is denied the opportunity to maximize their potential and capacities.

Despite these challenges, the women in this book exhibit strength, struggle, sacrifice, and success through unwavering resilience, determination, and the ability to find alternative solutions. They turn feminine oppression into strategies for success, adamant that failure is not an option. Between flight and fight, they fight for their rights, supported by narratives that corroborate military atrocities and highlight the realities of women in everyday life and leadership roles. These stories demonstrate that gender equality and equal opportunities for women are crucial for the development, peace, and democracy of the country. Without gender equality, the capacities of the excluded majority cannot be maximized, and the chance for the country to build democracy, equality, and positive peace will be lost.

"Invincible Women Who Dare" combines scholarly analysis and personal voices, offering a refreshing and original contribution to women's history. It chronicles the biographies of the unsung heroines of the Spring Revolution. In Myanmar/Burma, intrepid supporters of opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi have repeatedly contested military coups that imprisoned their leader after winning the 2020 election. This unjust challenge to her victory led to women-headed protests throughout the nation, known as the female-led Spring Revolution through her supporters' energized movement by banging pots and pans. Female activists, understanding their own cultural norms of gender as the foundation of structural inequalities, weaponized their perceived inferiority to dismantle cultural prescriptions of male spiritual superiority with the Sarong or Htamain protest, known as the Sarong Revolution. This peaceful activism mirrors Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's, which led to her No-

bel Peace Prize. Similarly, in the spring revolution, peaceful Civil Disobedient Movement led by female professionals had been nominated for the world's first Nobel Peace Prize.

The book captures how women naturally lead during crises and conflicts with their might and main-ma-nyan (female wisdom). When marginalized women are given the power to voice and make choices, they show what it takes to be a leader with little or no capital, resources, or support. It invites those invisible yet invincible women fighting for freedom, peace, and democracy to the podium. Their activism stems from their own experiences of generational oppression as women and humans. These interviews, largely unpolished to maintain authenticity, empower the voices of ten female revolutionaries from various backgrounds, revealing their collective suffering of structural gender violence in Myanmar.

Our invitation of silenced women to the podium, their authentic voices stylized to a minimum. Transcribed verbatim, their interviews, intended to empower, have been presented largely unpolished with purpose. Women from different walks of life, ten female revolutionaries espousing varied and even contradictory viewpoints address readers avid for a fuller experience of women's narratives- as professors, a medical professional, a nurse, a member of the PDF (People's Defense Force), a military captain from Medical Corp, who deserted (SAC), as well as a young student activist, a fundraiser, a federal school teacher, female MPs from Chin State and Depeyin, and a political prisoner, showed common and collective suffering of structural violence of gender in Myanmar under three most powerful male-dominated institutions of military, monastic and social institutions. These institutions and their members deny and justify what are normal rights for a man, such as education or freedom for women. To obtain an education, they have to work harder than men, carry double burdens, and do better with their own initiative, sheer determination, and hard work whatever it comes. That helps them develop main-ma-nyan (feminine intrusions) of multiple strategies. Because for them failure is impossible.

One notable historical example is Carrie Chapman Catt, a pioneering advocate for American women's suffrage and founder of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Catt campaigned vigorously for the Nineteenth

Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted American women the right to vote in 1920. Her work with Burmese women was significant; she visited Burma in 1912 and engaged with women leaders in Rangoon. This historical context provided by detailed research underscores an essential point: the contemporary women-led revolution in Myanmar is not a product of 'foreign' influence, a frequent accusation by the military aimed at delegitimizing the movement. Instead, it underscores the continuous and critical roles that Burmese women have played throughout the nation's history, roles that previous historians have often overlooked or erased.

Indeed, past historical accounts have failed to adequately honor Burmese female soldiers who fought against the British army or the women activists who endured violent beatings, imprisonment, and hard labor sentences for their involvement in the independence movement. This book seeks to rectify such oversights by bringing to light the significant contributions of Burmese women, thereby enriching the historical narrative and offering a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of their enduring struggle for equality and justice.

Drawing from various specialist backgrounds, these informants articulate their struggles, revealing a tapestry of strength, success, and resilience. The legendary women of Myanmar engage in the fight for gender equality, freedom, and democracy with unwavering courage, commitment, conviction, and sheer determination, both for their country and its people. Their narratives poignantly underscore the inexorable necessity of revolution and elucidate why failure is not an option. With resolute goals to end dictatorship, they fight selflessly.

However, these stories also illuminate why international efforts to promote equal leadership for women in Myanmar often fall short. Deeply entrenched gender biases and cultural beliefs in male superiority, known as "hpon," significantly impede progress toward leadership equality. This pervasive structural gender bias has catalyzed uncensored and poignant narratives that reveal the speakers' immense courage, commitment, and struggles. Despite initiatives by organizations like the United Nations and various NGOs aiming for 30% female leadership, deeply rooted prejudice remains a formidable barrier. For instance, in 2015, Myanmar ranked at the bottom among Southeast Asian nations in terms of female political representation. This re-

sistance is further evidenced by the reluctance of military and monastic institutions to accept female leaders. Even with women spearheading 60% of the revolution and the National Unity Government (NUG) striving for equality, male dominance prevails, with 78% of Deputy Ministers and 61% of Permanent Secretaries in the Ministries being men (MWYCA, 2023).

In summary, the quest for equal leadership in Myanmar will remain elusive unless women participate equally in decision-making processes. The strengths, skills, and successes of these informants underscore the critical importance of valuing women as equal partners in leadership roles. "Invincible Women Who Dare" vividly illuminates female resilience, showcasing main-ma-nyan, feminine-specific qualities weaponized in response to patriarchal denials. The invisible yet invincible heroines chronicled in this book reveal a long-overdue narrative. These ten unsung women confront a patriarchal society where military, monastic, and social institutions wield power. This work forms a crucial component of Women's Oral History (WOH) and is part of the first collection of Women's History in Myanmar, alongside Women's Ancestry History (WAH). Its repository of oral narratives chronicles the experiences of women who have adeptly transformed strategies learned within oppressive systems into instruments of empowerment. Despite their determination, resilience, hard work, and perseverance, patriarchal domination that denies women's rights as equal human beings continues to hinder a majority whose potential could significantly contribute to nation-building. In short, "Invincible Women Who Dare" seeks to address the gap in acknowledging the invisible voices of women who, despite severe oppression by the powerful patriarchal domains of military, monastic, and social institutions, remain invincible in their fight for equality, justice, and democracy. The narratives in this book vividly reveal why gender matters, capturing the breadth of women's experiences and what it is like to be a woman across diverse domains.

However, international communities, institutions, donors, and governments with an interest in fostering democracy, peace, and gender equality must recognize that focusing solely on women's rights and political leadership is insufficient in a country like Myanmar, where structural gender violence is normalized and justified. It is imperative to investigate and dismantle the knowledge and norms associated with the patriarchal political power

embedded within Myanmar's three dominant male-dominated institutions. These institutions perpetuate 'unconscious bias,' a byproduct of the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' and a reflection of inherent misogyny.

For Myanmar to build an equal, just, and peaceful society, it is essential to address these underlying issues. Without a thorough understanding of the foundational inequalities in social capital, it is impossible to cultivate the democratic and equal society that is so desperately desired and deserved. Achieving such profound change is neither quick nor easy, and certainly, no one-size-fits-all solution or quick-fix project will suffice. Effective change must originate from the grassroots level, considering the experiences and realities of the millions who have been marginalized. Addressing the structural nature of gender inequality is not just necessary but fundamental to creating lasting and meaningful progress towards equality and justice in Myanmar.

REFERENCES

Amnesty International. (2007, November 13). Harsh sentences for Myanmar dissidents. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2008/11/harsh-sentences-myanmar-dissidents-20081113/

As crisis in Myanmar worsens, security council must take resolution to end violence by country's military: Address humanitarian situation speakers urge. (2024, April 4). United Nations. https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15652.doc.html

Burma: Reject discriminatory marriage bill: Imperils right to marry freely, fuels anti-Muslim groups. (2015, July 9). Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/09/burma-reject-discriminatory-marriage-bill

Burma education and training sector snapshot. (2023, March 21). International Trade Administration. https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/burma-education-and-training-sector-snapshot

Crosthwaite, S.C. (1968). *The pacification of Burma*. Frank Cass & Co. Ltd.

Datareportal. (2022). Digital 2022: Myanmar. Datareportal. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-myanmar#:~:text=Mobile%20connections%20in%20Myanmar%20in,at%20the%20start%20of%202022

Department of Population, Myanmar. (2024, July 24). Department of Population, Myanmar: Last updated 1st April 2020. www.dop.gov.mm. https://www.dop.gov.mm/en
ESCAP. (2024, July 24). Population trends in Asia and the Pacific. https://www.population-trends-asiapacific.org/data/MMR

Estimated average inflation rate of Myanmar in 2023-2024 FY rose to 21.2 percent. (2023, October 12). Eleven News. https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/estimated-average-inflation-rate-of-myanmar-in-2023-2024-fy-rose-to-212-percent

Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Classics.

Head, J. (2021, August 14). Myanmar: The woman who jumped to her death while fleeing police. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58196465

Human Rights Watch. (2007). Petrol price hike. Yangon: Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/08/24/burma-petrol-price-hike-inflames-protests

International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2020, November 14). Myanmar youth innovate to engage first-time voters. International Foundation for Electoral Systems. https://www.ifes.org/news/myanmar-youth-innovate-engage-first-time-voters

International Trade Administration. (2023, March 21). Burma education and training sector snapshot. International Trade Administration. https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/burma-education-and-training-sector-snapshot

Kyaw Zwa Moe. (2021, March 2). For Myanmar military, rule no. 1 in riot control is shoot to kill. Yangon, Yangon, Myanmar. Irrawaddy. https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/myanmar-military-rule-no-1-riot-control-shoot-kill.html

Kyaw Zwa Moe. (2023, December 28). The Myanmar people's determination to win has begun to bear fruit. The Irrawaddy. https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/the-myanmar-peoples-determination-to-win-has-begun-to-bear-fruit.html#google_vignette

Medicine shortages take toll on rural Arakan State. (2024, July 17). Development Media Group. https://www.dmediag.com/news/medshon.html

Myanmar Now. (2021, July 2). Women accused of attacking police with hot water remain in prison. Myanmar Now. https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/women-accused-of-attacking-police-with-hot-water-remain-in-prison/

Myanmar's detained ex-leader Suu Kyi moved to house arrest. (2021, April 17). Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-ex-leader-suu-kyi-moved-house-arrest-says-junta-spokesperson-2024-04-17/

Myanmar's junta continues to target anti-junta doctors for arrest. (2023, January 12). Radio Free Asia. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/anti-junta-doctors-01122023142124.html

MWYCA. (2023). The MWYCA report 2023. Yangon: MWYCA.

NRK. (2021, February 1). The civil disobedience movement of Myanmar is nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2022. NRK. https://www.nrk.no/urix/the-civil-disobedience-movement-of-myanmar-is-nominated-for-the-nobel-peace-

prize-2022-1.15434479

Oo, K. T. (2020, August 22). Old TCR vote ele. Development Media Group. https://www.dmediag.com/news/old-tcr-vote-ele.html

Radio Free Asia. (2022, July 23). Death row in Myanmar. Radio Free Asia. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/death-row/index.html

Radio Free Asia Burmese. (2023, January 12). Myanmar's junta continues to target anti-junta doctors for arrest. Radio Free Asia. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/anti-junta-doctors-01122023142124.html

Sagaing Han Tin. (1967). (The Myanmar Chronicle 1). Pyi Thu Arr Nar Press, Yangon, p. 434.

Shwe Shwe Sein Latt, Kim N.B. Ninh, Mi Mi Kyaw Myint, & Susan Lee. (2017, April). Women's political participation in Myanmar: Experience of women parliamentarians 2011-2016. The Asia Foundation & Phan Tee Eain. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Womens-Political-Participation-in-Myanmar-MP-Experiences_report-1.pdf

Snodgrass, J. J. (1827). Narrative of the Burmese war. John Murray.

Su Thet Mon, & Bakken, L. Ø. (2021, March 26). The civil disobedience movement of Myanmar is nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2022. NRK. https://www.nrk.no/urix/the-civil-disobedience-movement-of-myanmar-is-nominated-for-the-nobel-peace-prize-2022-1.15434479

Sullivan, H. (2021, February 1). Exercise instructor appears to unwittingly capture Myanmar coup in dance video. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/02/exercise-instructor-appears-to-unwittingly-capture-myanmar-coup-in-dance-video

Teachers in Myanmar caught in crossfire as conflict rages. (2022, June 25). Radio Free Asia Burmese. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/teachers-crossfire-06242022173224.html

The Irrawaddy. (2022, November 24). Myanmar's women warriors fight for democracy. The Irrawaddy. https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-women-warriors-fight-for-democracy.html

The Irrawaddy. (2023, December 28). The Myanmar people's determination to win has begun to bear fruit. The Irrawaddy. https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/the-myanmar-peoples-determination-to-win-has-begun-to-bear-fruit.

html?fbclid=IwAR1P-

United Nations. (2024 April4). As crisis in Myanmar worsens, security council must take resolute action to end violence by country's military, address humanitarian situation, speakers urge. https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15652.doc.htm#:~:text=Stressing%20that%2018.6%20million%20people,assistance%20to%203.2%20million%20people

Villadiego, L. (2021, May 7). The women's revolution: What the coup means for gender equality in Myanmar. Equal Times. https://www.equaltimes.org/the-women-s-revolution-what-the?lang=en

Yuzana. (2022, November 14). Myanmar's women warriors fight for democracy. The Irrawaddy. https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-women-warriors-fight-for-democracy.html

Burmese Sources

Daw Mya Sein. (n.d.). (Myanmar Women). Shwe Bamar Sarsaung, Sar Pay Beik Hman, Yangon, pp. 22-23.

Sagaing Han Tin. (1967). (The Myanmar Chronicle 1). Pyi Thu Arr Nar Press, Yangon, p. 434.

(The Pyinnya Alin Newspaper). (1922, November 24). p. 8.

(Myanmar Encyclopedia). (1966). Vol. 10, Part 58.

posefully

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PUBLISHED WORKS BY DR. MA KHIN MAR MAR KYI

Publications

Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M. & Walton, M. (Eds.). (2015–present). *Oxford Myanmar Policy Brief Series*. University of Oxford.

Journal Articles, Book Chapters, Thesis

Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M., & Walton, M. J. (2023). "Gender, Religion, Nationalism and Violence in Myanmar's Transition". In J. Taylor and R. de Silva-Wijeyeratne (Eds.), *Rethinking Sovereignty, Religious Boundaries and Transgressions in South and Southeast Asia*. RCSD, Chiang Mai University Press (p 71-101).

Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M. (2018). "Gender". In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, edited by Asam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday. Routledge.

Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M. (2016). "Women, State, Policies and Migration in Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Human Rights in Asia*, edited by Christie Gardiner & Fernand de Varennes. Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Books, Ltd.

Walton, M. J., McKay, M., & Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M. (2015). "Women and Myanmar's 'Religious Protection Laws.'" *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 13(4): 36–49.

Khin Mar Mar Kyi., M. (2014). "Engendering Development in Myanmar: Women's Struggle for San, Si, Sa". In *Debating Democratization in Myanmar*, edited by Nick Cheeseman, Nicholas Farrelly and Trevor Wilson, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS Press), pp. 305–30.

Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M. (2014). "Living Silence and Shattering Hope: Burmese Women and Children in Trafficking", in *People Trafficking, Human Security and Development*, edited by Pamela Thomas, Development Bulletin: Development Studies Network, No.66. pp. 99-114.

Khin Mar Mar Kyi, M. (2013) *In pursuit of power: Politics, patriarchy, poverty, and gender relations in new order Myanmar/Burma* [unpulished Ph.D. thesis]. Australian National University.

A groundbreaking and essential contribution to both Myanmar's history and the broader discourse on gender and Myanmar's resistance movement. —Dr. Miemie Wynn Bird

One of the most—if not the most—remarkable trademarks of Burma/Myanmar's Spring Revolution against the 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar has been the manifestation of extraordinary courage, commitment, and conviction of Burmese women bravely fighting against the military dictatorship.

In their own voices, these unsung heroes reveal how they have transformed their struggles and sacrifices into strengths and successes, empowering them to fight and prevail, as failure is not an option for them as women resisting an oppressive patriarchal culture. *Invisible yet Invincible: Narratives of Women Fighting Dictatorship in Burma/Myanmar* chronicles the lives of the unsung women warriors of the Spring Revolution. Their remarkable forms of resilience stem from their own challenges in life amid militarized political and cultural oppression.

A magnificent testimony to the heroines of its title.
—Sean Turnell, Ph.D.