

Opposing fear or Interview with Naw Ohn Hla

Kachin Girl



“I want people to know that they need to get rid of the shadow of fear. If they show that they are afraid, they will be more intimidated. I want them to know that if they want to go to against this, they can. That is the message we are giving to them and now it is becoming more widespread”.

I was waiting at one of the restaurants to meet with the leader and women’s activist Naw Ohn Hla. It was raining heavily. I have tried to interview her before but she was arrested again. This time, I am determined to interview her so I was waiting at the corner of the restaurant.

Now she has arrived. She is holding a black umbrella. Under the umbrella she was wearing a dress of white material, and she has tied her hair on both sides. She has no make up on her face, but her pure and humble face appears vividly. She is still very active despite being 52 years old. “Because of the heavy rain, it was very crowded on the bus so I am a bit late” she said, explaining her delay. She grabs a chair and sits.

Naw Ohn Hla is from Kone Ka Muu village, Maw Bi Township, Yangon. She got involved in activism during the 8888 uprising and later she became a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD). In 2005, she resigned from the party. Since 2007, she has been actively involved and led prayer campaigns for the release of political prisoners. In 2012, she co-founded the Women’s Democracy and Peace Network.

She has been arrested on and off 17 times and has been imprisoned 7 times. Currently she is on bail after she was released for praying at Shwe Da Gone pagoda, in Yangon, for the release of political prisoners in 2007.

Naw Ohn Hla started telling her story about how she became a political activist for social welfare workers. Naw Ohn Hla told me “In the past, I worked as social welfare worker. I am a Karen ethnic woman and worked for Karen welfare and ethnic identity. I felt that the dictator of the (BSPP) Burma Socialist People Party had strongly oppressed and treated the people unjustly so I took part in the 8888 uprising. I wanted the people to stop being fearful. If they are afraid, they will be intimidated more. So I want people to take part in the struggle – like we do. That is why we are raising awareness as widely as we can.

Question: How did you found the Women Democracy and Peace Network?

Naw Ohn Hla: “When we founded the network, most of the members were ex-political prisoners, especially those who were together with me in prison. We started with 7 organizing committee members. We did not start as an organization because we wanted to recruit women from different states and divisions. We planned to organize a conference where we would elect the leadership after we had recruited women from different parts of Burma. At the moment, we had around 500 members. We had our first gathering meeting with all members in August 2014 and with everyone consenting, we founded the organization and elected the leadership.

Question: What have you done since the founding of the DPW?

Naw Ohn Hla: “Since DPW was founded, we have helped fight against all injustices. Even though we are a women’s group, we mostly work on land grab cases. Of course we have also helped many women’s cases. At the same time, when we are working on the land grab cases, women are in the forefront – as we have witnessed. As we are women, we have always intended to help wome. Among the peasants, there were so many female widows facing severe difficulties after their farmlands were taken away. As a consequence, land grabbing has created a huge impact on the life of peasants. The problems are huge – such

as social problems, health problems, economic problems, including not being able to support their children's education from primary to university level.

I want to share one case about Daw Than Yin from Shin Paung Wae township whose farmlands were grabbed. When her land was taken away, all her plants – like peanut and sesame – were completely destroyed. Because of this she went to work as a tenant farmer – where she was mistreated. As a result, her daughter was not able to enter her 10th grade exam. Since there was no income, they were enduring huge difficulties and pain. We want to help her as much as we can and that is why we are paying for her daughter's school fees. We could not support her much so we helped them connect with monastery education and we pay for her bedding, food, clothing and books.

We also helped in cases to do with domestic workers and underage girls who were forcefully taken as a wives. Ill-treated people do not dare report their cases to the police. Even if they want to report it to the police, they do not have money for all the proceedings, and they also have to hire a lawyer. In this situation, I went to report to the police on their behalf and connected them to lawyers. In Yangon, when land is grabbed, even when men are the breadwinner, it is women who have to take care of the children's food, bedding and education.

Now we have 10 committee members at DPW. We send off younger members for different educational opportunities such as training and internship on Human Rights, Environment, Women's Rights and Adolescent Reproductive Health organized by other organizations. We have organized discussions on current land grab issues and land laws. I am not an expert but I used to be a farmer myself. In the past, we've invited an expert on the issue of land rights and land laws, lawyers and legal experts as a guest speaker. If they could not make it, then I led the discussion.

Question: What did you do regarding land grabbing issues?

Naw Ohn Hla: Farmers whose land has been grabbed did not know whether it is against the law or not. They also did not know how they can legally respond. In this situation, we provided discussions on "Land Laws". We provide information on how they can respond in a legal way. After they know and understand about the laws, they respond back to the land grabbers. For example – farmers from Shin Paung Wae were very afraid to talk about it in the beginning. Their lands were seized by the arms ammunition factory and they were afraid to report this. Later, when they learned about their rights, they started reporting.

Question: Is there any success cases of farmers for their demand of the return of their lands?

Naw Ohn Hla: Yes, but although there were winning stories it does not mean that they get back their land. There was one winning case. In 1996, the Defence Ministry owned an arms ammunition factory which grabbed more than 120,000 acres from 13 villages in Shin Paung Wae Township, Magway division. The farmers fought their case. The army had confiscated the lands and ordered the farmers to work in the farms. One time, one of the military soldiers opened fire against the tenant farmers and asked for money so the farmers got angry. About 500 farmers came out with a petition and sent it to the President and the International Labour Organisation. The post office has sued U Paw Oo who sent the petition for making false accusations. However, we supported the farmers in this case and at last we won.

Since they have been working to support the issues of women and land grabbing, DPW has been followed and watched by the authorities. Sueing and imprisoning is just a day to day matter for Naw Ohn Hla. Whatever happens to her, she will continue to work for the benefit of the people as much as she can. She is determined to work for the people.