CHAPTER 6

'I will Fight such Dictatorship until the End'

From Student Rebel to Feminist Activist, Mother and Peace Negotiator

Zin Mar Phyo and Mi Sue Pwint

Introduction

Mi Sue Pwint is a leading member of the All-Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), one of the founders of both the Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Burmese Women's Union (BWU), and one of very few women included in the post-2011 nationwide ceasefire process. Mi Sue Pwint was born in Kayah State, and comes from a multiethnic background: her mother was Innthar and her father was Shan. She is the main caretaker of her daughter, who was born in a rebel student camp and has cerebral palsy. Zin Mar Phyo writes about women's rights and experiences in Myanmar for the Honest Information (HI) project, an online platform featuring women's stories, and for the Irrawaddy. She has been involved in BWU since she was a teenager.

In this conversation, Zin Mar Phyo and Mi Sue Pwint trace Mi Sue Pwint's political awakening and her journey from being a young carefree student in the city to becoming a revolutionary leader living in the jungle. Drawing on Mi Sue Pwint's experience of the struggle for democracy and rights over more than three decades, they focus on the many ways in which women's political participation is informed by their overwhelming reproductive responsibilities and care work for families and communities, as well as by dominant gender norms that frame young women as in need of protection. As discussed in other chapters in this volume, a prevailing belief that men, not women, should lead armed struggles and revolutions also limited Mi Sue Pwint's political participation, at least initially. Zin Mar Phyo and Mi Sue Pwint discuss the strategies used by Mi Sue Pwint to overcome the gendered

challenges she faced as a female political leader and explore the ways in which Mi Sue Pwint has sustained her focus and determination over time. Mi Sue Pwint also reflects on how being a mother has impacted her political career, and why she decided to return to Myanmar after the transition in 2011 to partake in political dialogues with the government. In closing, Mie Sue Pwint shares her thoughts about how the 2021 military coup will affect women's rights, and her own beliefs about the future.

Becoming a Political Activist: 'I Tried to Forget about the Fact that I was Female!'

ZMP: What was your childhood like before 1988? Could you briefly share some of your experiences?

MSP: Our family life before 1988 was just like other ordinary civilians. Since we were from a middle-class family, we did not have many difficulties or concerns. My parents encouraged us to read books, and they often had political discussions that we could listen in to. After high school, I moved to Yangon, to enrol at Yangon University. There I met writers, poets and artists, most of them men, and I began to be more aware of the political situation in the country. I tried to forget about the fact that I was female! I mostly liked to sit in the tea shop with my friends and talk about literature and art and politics, rather than going to school. I learned a lot, not only about the feelings and the fights of students in politics, but also about the struggles and lives of ordinary people.

ZMP: So growing up, most of your friends and colleagues were male and that was unusual for women. For example, you sat at the tea shop together with men, which women usually didn't do. How did the society respond to you because of this?

MSP: When I went to university, I actually stayed at one of strictest boarding houses for female students. My mum found that boarding house for me. We had to be home at a certain time, and so on. But me and a close girlfriend of mine stayed out late anyway, to attend literature talks and political discussions. So we were viewed as bad girls by other people because we didn't follow the boarding house rules, we were out late, we had many male friends, and, of course, we sat in the tea shops. You know, during that time, women

never went to tea shops because that was men's place. Even if they had to sit there for some reasons, they sat there really quickly and left as soon as they could. Even me, even though I sat there with my male friends and chatted with them all day, I did not like my younger sister sitting in a tea shop! I usually told her 'you eat quickly and go back', 'You do not stay here for long' and so on, since I did not like other men staring at her. I worried a lot for my sister. She wore make-up, which made me worry that people would think that she only went to the tea shop to try to get attention from men. You see, even I had those conservative ideas! I did not know about gender equality, didn't think that women, regardless of having make-up or not, have choices and rights. I did not understand about the gender stereotypes and norms which we have to fight against. To be honest, that didn't change until I came to the border, really. Even then, though, I thought that young women leaders like you shouldn't drink alcohol or behave improperly. I didn't think like that about men. I have been dealing with these types of thoughts for a long time. It is very difficult to get rid of such deep-rooted practices or thoughts. I am explaining this since I would like to highlight that even we, who are empowering women and work for women's rights, grow up with gender stereotypes. It takes time to change this, even for us.

ZMP: So what motivated you to take part in the 1988 uprising?

MSP: Before the uprising, I saw how people lived their everyday in poverty. I remember when the military demonetized the bank notes, and the economy collapsed. When this happened, an old woman who sold rice and food near our boarding house started screaming in grief and desperation. But even besides this, the students had a conflict with the military. A student called Phone Maw was shot dead by the military, but they lied about it. I demonstrated with my friends and colleagues against the military regime. We marched from Yangon's Arts and Physics University to the University of Technology. And then the military cracked down on the protests. I ran into a small street to avoid arrest. I felt so disappointed with the military's behaviours – their bullying and the crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. I could not even sleep or eat. As a young student, I could not accept such injustice. I knew that I could be beaten, arrested, and even shot or killed, if I joined the demonstrations. But I felt I did not have any other options: I had to respond to and resist this crisis. Soon, the students living in the boarding houses were broken up by the military and forced back to their

home regions. When I arrived home again to Loikaw, I helped to organize the student movement in my home town. But I had to do this very secretly as the town was very small, and everyone knew each other. We started the movement in Loikaw with four to five young student leaders. And then we grew. When 8888 happened, I was one of the key leaders in Loikaw, I gave public speeches and organized the protests.

At the night of military coup, on September 18, we had to flee. We took some clothes, and hid in houses around Loikaw. But after a couple of weeks, I decided to go to the border and join the armed revolution to fight for democracy, as we didn't know how long the coup would last for. When we arrived at the border, we met with Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). They took us in. We didn't know how to live in the jungle. We had to build our own accommodation; carry the bamboo; lift and hold the building equipment, and so on. We also struggled with our food. We had to live on fish paste and banana plants, or fish paste and pumpkin, but we tried to get energy and strength from each other.

ZMP: At that time, how did the political participation of women look like in Myanmar, and in the movement?

MSP: Many women actively participated in the uprising. But parents worried for their daughters, more than for their sons, and wanted them to come home. For their sons, they gave them advice on how to avoid being shot and arrested, instead of calling them back to home. Even among the parents who were politically active, they encouraged their sons while they tried to stop their daughters from their political participation.

There were many active women who were always ready to take any roles and any duties for the sake of the movement, and many supported the movement in different ways from men. During 8888, whether students or housewives, they all came out to the street. Some walked in the protests, some supported protesters with food such as banana and water. But many women were pressured to stay back.

When I left for the border, we were the fifth group leaving. The students would leave in groups, you see. There were only three women in our group. Among those women, there was one I was really proud of. Her mother was seriously sick in hospital and was in a critical condition. She got the news about her mother's death while we were attending the military training together in the jungle. So, you see, there were many strong women; some,

like my friend, were even stronger than men. In my experience, women are calmer than men and can solve the problems easier. Men get very emotional and aggressive. Yet most of our male colleagues looked at us women as being burdens. Some men screamed at women: 'You shits! We are tired of helping you and doing things for you!' For women, when we arrived at the border, there were two types of jobs: medical training or communication training, not front line. Fortunately, I did not have to choose between those two things since I had the same education levels with other male colleagues, and I also reminded the men that we women had helped lead the movement inside Burma. I told them: 'You cannot pressure us to choose the medical training while you are choosing to be in authority roles of the camps.' After that I became part of the camp committee; I became a leader.

ZMP: So many women left the revolution for different reasons. But you stayed there. Why? What made you strong, what made you stay with revolution?

MSP: What I always think about is shame. I feel shame if I do not accomplish what I decided I should do. I could not go back until we had achieved our goals. I tried to remain strong, although I have had many anxieties and disappointments. I have spent 20 years of my life in exile, fighting for democracy, and I have often felt like I wanted to give up. I have felt depressed. Whenever I feel lost I try to think about the good things I have done, or the success that I have had. I try to remind myself that 'at least I am still useful being here'. Maybe the reason as to why I could keep going forward with the revolution was the fact that I always tried to recognize and value every single thing that I have done. I reminded myself that younger students or soldiers were dependent on me. I always kept that in my mind, in order to go forward and to keep going. Since I have joined the armed revolution after 1988 uprising, I have decided that I will fight such dictatorship until the end and I will go back home only when such military dictatorship fall down. That's it.

Becoming a Revolutionary Woman Leader:

ZMP: When we look at old photos of ABSDF, it is rare to see women. But you are in these photos. At that time, very few women were involved in decision-making in the border areas. Why do you think you were one of those few ones? What were the challenges?

MSP: For me, I was used to having male friends since I attended the university. I was confident that I could protect myself well from any harassment. Also, most of the men in our camp were from the provinces, and they preferred to do practical tasks rather than political ones. For example, they were not good at public speaking, and so whenever visitors or guests came to us, me and my female comrades would greet them and talk to them. There were also many relationship problems between leaders that I had solved out. Therefore, people recognized my skills and I think this recognition gave the space for me to be included in the leadership roles. However, even though I was in the leadership role, it was obvious that women could not get the highest position such as Battalion Commander or Chairperson, even in the camp. And to get to the headquarter level, regardless of women's political knowledge or great capacity for alliance relationship, no women could reach that level.

Even though we fought for democracy, what we practiced in reality in our groups was not democratic decision-making; instead we sought people's agreement. And most people believed that even though women were active in politics and they had as much revolutionary experiences as men, women should not be leaders. They even said this in front of me. They said: 'Yeah, we know women can do it but they should not be in this position just because they are women.'

ZMP: So how did the women's movement in exile start? What was your role in that movement and what pushed you into women's activism?

MSP: In the beginning, I did not have a strong commitment for women's rights. But I noticed that women did not have space, like men, and that women had to try much more than men, and women were criticized even when they tried hard. For instance, many female soldiers came to ABSDF's Headquarter and worked in the financial department, the organizing department and research and documentation department. There were all women who were very busy with computer for all day and night. They had very strong political commitment. They had the same resistance as men; they could live in a hard situation and in hunger if needed. But they did not receive any recognition for their work or their commitment. We could count with our own fingers the number of women in political leadership roles. Some women came to our headquarter because they got married with some soldiers and they followed their husbands. Once they had arrived, they took different responsibilities, such as cooking, gardening, growing animals to sell, etc.

After Manerplaw fell, our headquarter was also affected. We had to hide, stay in small groups across the river in Thailand. Then the ABSDF top leaders began to discuss about women's political participation, since they thought that the armed revolution might take a lot longer. I think they started to get the idea of promoting women's political participation to foster the political battle. They called me in to discuss this, since they thought I could organize the younger generation. They wanted to form a women's group to promote women's political participation. At first, ABSDF wanted this group to function as a wing. But we women, we sat together after we had formed the group, and thought that we would rather be an independent group, not a women's wing. ABSDF leaders opposed this, they said we would break up the revolution, but finally they relented, although it took at least six meetings!

ZMP: You were fighting for democracy, overthrowing the dictatorship and struggling for women's rights at the same time. As a political leader and as a women's leader, what were the challenges for you? How did you overcome them?

MSP: I will give you an example. I became a member of secretariat team of NCUB. As a member of secretariat team, we regularly had to do political position papers. In the beginning, it was so difficult for me. The political analysis that most men discussed were like guessing what would happen based on the news information they had got. For instance, they would compare the latest news and the old news, they would guess what possible could happen. Clearly, there were many things which did not happen as they guessed in reality. They were just guessing the things. But people were impressed when they would talk a lot and broadly.

I tried to be confident to do the same as the men. If they spoke for five minutes for discussing their political analysis, I did the same time. If they took 10 minutes, I did the same. I tried guessing what would happen.

Another difficulty I had was about decision-making. I thought that if we discussed one thing in this meeting and we did not come to an agreement, we would have to discuss it again the next day. But for men it was not like that. They gathered at night time and decided among themselves, when they were drinking and eating. For me, I came to the next meeting, well-prepared for the things I would discuss, but the decision would already be made without my knowledge.

Another difficulty I had was that they ignored my contributions. No one responded to my political points, and they just went through the meeting

the way they wanted to. It was very hard. But I kept reminding myself that if I gave up, it would be even harder for other girls and women to participate in politics in the future.

Returning Home: 'We have a Duty to do Right'

ZMP: What do you think about the peace process led by U Thein Sein after the transition in 2011? I am asking because there was a controversy between armed groups who participated in the peace process, like ABSDF, and those who did not. As one of the leaders of ABSDF, why did you decide to participate?

MSP: In the beginning, I was not sure if we should meet him or not. I had a lot of concerns. Finally, I decided to take any political opportunity that we could get from this process. You know, when we came back to Burma, we faced many challenging questions about our decision. But while we faced criticism, there were also opportunities to meet with and talk with other political groups inside Burma. I tried to hold the ABSDF's flag high among these challenges. There was a reason why I wanted to hold it. Once the national ceasefire period started, and we returned to Burma, we almost didn't have any leaders or any members left. We were broken. Some of our members had been disabled due to the fighting, some were hurt in other ways, and some lived in the jungle. They had already sacrificed their lives. Some had been arrested, and some were tortured to death. They gave their lives for the revolution, under the flag for ABSDF, maybe more than 700 people in total. We have a duty to do right for them. Seeing the grief of their parents, brothers and sisters, I decided that the sacrifices of these people could not be in vain. So, I decided to participate in the peace process only with one ambition: to hold the ABSDF flag high, to reach our goals, and walk the road we wanted to walk.

Also, no one wins through fighting. Some have had war for 20 or 30 years. Some ethnic armed groups have been at war for 70 years. Until now, we have not won and they have not won too. The civil war does not stop. We cannot defeat them and they cannot get rid of us. It feels like a situation that will last for a lifetime. So I thought it was time to try to find a solution through political dialogues. That's why I took part in the peace process. But I also had concerns. It had been almost 25 years of working for the revolution through

ABSDF when we decided to come back Burma. We have always worked in partnership with our allies. Could we still participate in the dialogues if we didn't do it in partnership with our allies? And should the ABSDF end its revolution without success?

ZMP: What do you think has changed with the peace process, since the National League for Democracy (NLD) took over from U Thein Sein?

MSP: Personally, I don't want to judge NLD's actions, or indeed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's actions since I don't know much about her thoughts. But I can clearly say that NLD is really very weak when it comes to ethnic issues. For instance, Dr Tin Myo Win, who worked with Daw Suu with the peace process, is just her family doctor. He doesn't know about ethnic issues at all. So, when he tried to work with this he got very stressed. He was stressed when he had to meet with KNPP. He was stressed when he met with the Kachin. He eventually developed a heart disease and went to see doctor in Singapore to get treatment. And from the military side, they do not want the peace process to succeed under the NLD. The military still think that fighting against ethnic groups is the right thing to do.

ZMP: How did the peace process (in both U Thein Sein and the NLD periods) impact on women's rights, gender equality and women's participation in politics? What has been changed?

MSP: Under U Thein Sein era, the decision was made to include at least 30 per cent of women's participation in the NCA. But while the ethnic armed groups had so many women, the government side was not ready. So, instead of putting the words 'at least 30 per cent', the government representative requested that we put 'appropriate number' in NCA. Later, the government side did bring some women to the dialogues, such as the wife of U Aung Min and his wife's friends. But these women did not have any position or any decision-making power.

In terms of women's participation in the peace process, the EAO's [ethnic armed organization's] side is even more active than the other sides. Even though they do not have much willingness, they try to listen to the Women's League of Burma (WLB). In terms of women's participation, I can say that it doesn't move forward in peace process. It might look like women are in the peace process. but in essence they are not. They just add women to ceremonial roles, and to facilitator roles, not decision-making roles.

ZMP: Can you say something about your own participation in the peace process and the current political process? How has that been?

MSP: I have taken part in the peace process everywhere I have been assigned to. There are 16 members from EAO's sides (two representatives from each signatory group) in UPDJC. I set my own standard to try my best in the meetings. For instance, I set the rule that I won't talk about women's issues at every opportunity. I will only strongly say it when it is really necessary. If we try to talk about women's issues all the time in the meeting, people there will go to toilets or they do not give concentration just after we raise our hand to discuss. That is what most men are doing in reality. So, as a woman leader in such male dominated community to have recognition on our voice, I set the rule only to discuss about women when it is necessary. I work hard, but try to be strategic about when and how I bring in women's perspectives and rights.

ZMP: How does the current coup impact on women's rights and their opportunities?

MSP: There could be wars. Women will suffer. Anything could happen; women have to give birth in war, will be gang raped, will be gang tortured and there will be sexual violence against women. It will be like the hell will be alive again for women. We will have to do our best to find the pathway where we could collectively make decision and work in a united manner. We must pray that the era of war where women are violated will not return.

ZMP: What are the differences between 8888 and 2021 coups in terms of women's participation and ethnic situation?

MSP: In 2021, the women's participation in the movement has increased significantly. Women are vital in leading negotiations and guiding the crowds. Women's participation in 2021 is a lot stronger than before. Women are everywhere. Their voices are coming out. In the past, it was not that women weren't in the movement. They were involved in the movement but their roles and participation were not very visible. Right now, many women were arrested under the current coup. Many women have spoken out with great courage. Even among the celebrities, there are many female celebrities who are bravely speaking out against the military coup.

Being a Mother and a Revolutionary: 'The Work I have Done is not Easy'

ZMP: As a female revolutionary politician, how have your choices affected your family life? Has being a female political leader made it easier for your family relationships?

MSP: If women want to go through their lives as politicians, they will have to think about their private lives! If you have a strong commitment to be in politics, and stay with your duties no matter what, you need to think carefully about your private life. You should only get married if you have supporting family structure. If not, I will say that your journey will be very tough, for sure. Like me! I even have more difficulties since I have a disabled child.

You know, the work I have done is not easy. It might be even more difficult than fighting in a war. I know there will be more challenges for my political journey. However, my decision is still to continue my political life. Due to my decision to continue my political work, there will always be argument or disagreement in my family life. My partner will keep telling me: 'You are stubborn. You are trying to hit your head to the highest mountain, it is the time for you to be with the child and you should work for our child stuffs.' As I see, of course, I have a responsibility and I try my best to take such responsibility. The pathway I have walked through before is the road I want to keep walking on. Whoever tell me to stop the things that I want to do will be my enemy. Therefore, I know there will be consistent argument and disagreements in my marriage. Things will be like that.

Because of this, I did not want to encourage the young women to get married while I was in women's organization. I was not happy when I heard a woman got pregnant since I want women to be in politics very actively and freely. I want women to do politics.

ZMP: What are some of those difficulties?

MSP: My daughter has a disability. At the time of her birth, it was so difficult to give birth. And I did not have the opportunities to have regular medical check as the pregnant women needed. Some suggested that I should not give birth in the jungle due to my age. However, according to ABSDF's rules, we could only be sent to the hospital in the city when we were seriously sick and when we could not give birth. If not, everyone have to give birth in the

jungle. That was our rules. I was afraid the other people would feel it was unfair that I could go to city to give birth. If they would feel it was unfair, this would affect to our organization. Also, I was healthy and I thought I would be easy to give birth. So, I gave birth in the jungle but it was difficult. And my child now lives with a disability. But I have been lucky because I have had my BWU sisters to help me take care of my child when I work. My husband only needed to sleep beside my child at night. Even at night, they would wake up to look after her when she woke up.

Now I do my work alongside taking care of my child. At first, I had so many difficulties. For instance, I had to go by flight to attend the discussion but I did not have the cost for my child. But I decided to bring my child with me no matter what; regardless of feeling hungry or thirsty, in order to keep my work.

I am the only person who is there for my daughter all the time. She is always with me. But sometimes, when I try to focus on my child my work suffers. When I focus on my work, my child suffers. It is balance.

ZMP: What would be your future dream for your family life?

MSP: I do not expect very much regarding my family. But right now the military has taken power. We have no more income, and we have to worry for money. But everyone will die one day. Rather than thinking about what kind of history I want to write or what kind of children I want to have, I just want to live in peace and accept my life. Of course, sometimes I worry for my child, how can she survive without her parents? Sometimes I think the worst things. Whenever I think about the future of my child, I feel very stressed, my heart burns, and I can't sleep for days. But as a human, we have our own fate and luck, which we cannot change. I will try my best for her. The rest will be her fate and depending on her. I try to think like that. If we can arrange something for her future where she could earn money, she could have a safe place to stay and where she could live in harmony with the community. That's all we have in our mind right now. That's the most important thing.