

The women's struggle in Burma

Monday 24 March 2008, by [CHENG Eva](#), [Thet Thet Lwin](#) (Date first published: 5 March 1997).

Women played an active role in Burma's struggle for independence — from British colonial rule and Japanese occupation — and remained an organised force under the post-independence government, 1948-58. Ne Win's seizure of power in 1958 and his military dictatorship strangled the women's and other social movements. But with the explosion of people's movements in 1988, Burmese women rose again.

THET THET LWIN, an executive of the central strike committee in Shan state during the 1988 uprising and — after a brief period in jail — an executive of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (the post-1988 student army) until 1995, spoke to Green Left Weekly's EVA CHENG about the women's struggle in Burma. Lwin joined the Burmese Women's Union in 1995 and is now its foreign relations officer.

Question: What role did women play in the 1988 uprising?

In 1988, all the women were at the front of the demonstration. When the men saw that women were walking at the front, the question was why didn't they also join in. Many young school girls and female university students walked together with their male counterparts. We didn't form any particular women's organisation, but the housewives did.

After the military took power at the end of '88, a women's group was formed among intellectual women. They helped in the campaign for the National League of Democracy (NLD) during the [1990] election. They have tried to hold other activities, but they can't operate very freely because of the military government's restrictions.

Question: Tell us about the housewives' association.

That association was founded on the idea that housewives are an important force to bring about change. They are really active in staging protests, organising women to come together and call for political changes.

The housewives' association is very much part of the democracy movement. The association called for a democratically elected government. But it doesn't exist any more since the military took power.

Question: Can you describe the state of the women's movement since 1988?

In NLD, you can see many active women playing a leadership role. But inside Burma, they can't work very well: many are put in prison. Because of the military, women in Burma cannot promote the role of women.

But on the [Thai-Burma] border, we [the Burmese Women's Union (BWU)] are trying to play that

role. We are the first women's union, and we try to work together with all different ethnic groups.

Question: What are the BWU's objectives, and what sorts of activities does it engage in?

A group of women students who escaped from Burma started the union on the border. Later we extended membership to women who migrated to the US, Europe and Thailand. The base camp is still on the Thai-Burma border, with one other on the China-Burma border and another on the India-Burma border. Some members are inside Burma but for security reasons don't reveal their identities.

In the border camps we concentrate on education and development. For example, we recently gave training for primary school teachers. We also did adult literacy training — because there's a very high illiteracy rate — and skills training in sewing and traditional weaving. We get an income from selling our products.

The objectives are to promote the role of women in Burmese politics, to give women a platform and to encourage women to become a fundamental force in a new democratic government.

We try to prepare women with the knowledge and skills by providing education and training.

Question: How big is the union?

At the moment we have 220 members, of which about 30 are overseas. The overseas members mainly lobby the governments of their respective countries. They also participate in activities like the boycott against the [military government's] Visit Myanmar campaign and against products from businesses which are doing business with Burma.

Question: What is the union's understanding of the causes of women's oppression?

Our message is different from others. Women suffer in our country because we have a military dictatorship oppressing both men and women. So we give out the message that women have rights — human rights — which will only be realised when we have a people's government.

Question: What is the union's relationship with the democracy movement?

We and the NLD are separate organisations, but we support each other directly and indirectly. We don't have open contact with the NLD inside Burma, but on the border we helped some of the NLD to escape after mass arrests. Some continue organising there.

We can't work together openly, but we learn from and support each other. For example, when Aung San Suu Kyi and her party were calling for the boycott of foreign investment, we lobbied the international community not to do business with Burma.

P.S.

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