

In a country like Myanmar, marked by conflict, repression, instability, and more recently a tragic earthquake, what does it mean for you to “resist” and “live” as a person with a disability? Have there been moments or choices that marked a turning point on your path toward Independent Living?

I am Soe Moe Oo from Myanmar. Recently, I am working in ABILIS Myanmar Country Office as a country coordinator. ABILIS foundation is Finland based organization and supporting grants to organizations of persons with disabilities. And I am also working for Myanmar Independent Living Initiative as a Board Member. Myanmar Independent Living Initiative is Local organization of persons with disabilities and I worked many years before I work at ABILIS.

According to 2019 inter Censal survey, 12.8% of country populations are persons with disabilities in Myanmar.

- I have lived with a disability since childhood, even before the conflict, repression, instability, and disasters in Myanmar. I have faced more struggles than people without disabilities.
- Resisting discrimination and living independently without barriers has always been challenge for me. It is the same for many of my friends with disabilities. Some face even harder lives.
- In a country that does not fully protect or support the rights of people with disabilities, living independently feels like only a dream.
- In 2012, I got a scholarship to study in Japan, and I learned there about the disability rights movement and the idea of independent living. That’s a turning point and changed my life.
- After I returned to my home country, I started living independently and built a family. I have also helped and supported many others with disabilities for their independent living.

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In many difficult situations, Independent Living is often seen as something secondary, almost a “luxury.” In a country like Myanmar, how do you help people understand that it is, instead, a fundamental right – especially for persons with disabilities?

- In a developing country like Myanmar, many people believe that only wealthy men or women can live independently, and people with disabilities are burdens so they cannot live independently.
- Even people without disabilities are sometimes seen as unable to live independently on their own.
- We raise awareness, speak up for the rights of people with disabilities, and advocate together with OPDs that independent living means having the freedom to live, work, and take part in society like everyone else. It means making our own choices and decisions about our lives.

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As a young woman with a disability in leadership roles, what kind of barriers have you faced? And what alliances have been essential in supporting your activism?

Due to the Myanmar culture, women with disabilities are still left behind especially who are living in rural area, in the villages. Parents are always control them in everything. They don't send their children to the school, so there are difficult to get the jobs. For me, I was born at the village which is middle part of Myanmar. I was graduated in 2007. In Myanmar, every jobs define by the university graduation certificate. I tried many jobs but no one accept me because of my disability. So, finally I tried to join tailoring training for persons with disabilities in Yangon. At that time, Yangon is the capital of Myanmar. At that tailoring training, I learned a lot about disability movements in Myanmar. So, I started my journey on disability movements on 2009. At that time, very few organizations of persons with disabilities are working in Myanmar. Most of OPDs leaders are men with disabilities. So, women with disability movements also still left behind. There is only one network of women with disabilities. We are facing many challenges in all sectors because of lack of policies and lack of law enforcement for women with disabilities.

For our future, we need supportive alliances for women with disability society for Myanmar not only for me but also for other women with disabilities. Such as, educational support, health care support, business support, capacity building training, women leaderships training, women empowerment programs, and some other life skills training and etc..

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Looking beyond the borders of Myanmar, what message would you like to share with young disability activists who, like you, are fighting for a more just and inclusive society – even in countries where peace exists only on paper?

I would like to share a few messages with my fellow young disability activists.

- Keep learning and continue to empower yourself.
- Take the lead in creating an inclusive, rights-based, and barrier-free society where everyone can live independently and reach their full potential as others.
- Disability issues cannot be solved alone, so find allies and work together.
- Build networks not only locally but also regionally, globally, and always keep the bigger picture in mind.
- Support and foster the next generation of young people in the future of the disability rights movement.