

CAPTURE CHANGE STORY

Aye Mi San



I think we should participate in the activities or trainings to educate ourselves about our rights and gender equality. I wish everyone would keep updated on this issue.

– AYE MI SAN

Eighteen years ago, Aye Mi San decided to walk away from her farmer's life in Mandalay, Myanmar to begin a laborer's life in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

“Due to the economic decline in my hometown, my friend persuaded me to find a job in Thailand since there was a greater opportunity. So, I finally crossed Mae Sai border gate and became a migrant worker.”

She started her job in Mae Sai until she obtained a pink card, a non-Thai ID card for a migrant. Then, she headed to Bangkok to work as a housemaid for a while. After she met and married her husband, she decided to work as a construction worker like her husband. They have since settled in Chiang Rai.

Now, at the age of 39, Aye Mi San is wearing another hat as a volunteer for The Freedom Story. She connected with the staff from this organization when they conducted a community visit at her village.

“When there were religious ceremonies or other events in my village, the staff would prepare some quiz questions and rewards for anyone who could give an answer. That was when I remembered their name. Later on, I have learned more about the Freedom Story's mission.”

Aye Mi San's language skills are not strong enough to communicate fluently in Thai. In spite of that, she has trained to understand how to access to government services. Her duty is to assist Burmese laborers when they are working with Thai officers on submitting their documents and following up on the progress of their requests. Sometimes, she accompanies them to the hospital, court, or social security office.

"My advice could change their lives. Many of the workers are able to complete applications for Child support grants or social security benefits by themselves. They even know how to ask Thai officers for help with filling out the form in the Thai language. They have learned all of this from me."

After attending several training sessions from The Freedom Story, Aye Mi San realized that women and men should be equal. Nevertheless, it has been very tough to put the idea of gender equality into action. She has experienced discrimination from her company, where women have regularly been paid less than men.

"Female workers' wage is set to be lower. Regardless of how hard we have worked, we would earn the same. I had tried to argue but there was only me who spoke out. Nobody stood beside me. That was the reason I gave up my fight."

However, she has had some success passing down a concept of women's rights to the others, allowing her to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"Some do not agree with me as they think it is useless; otherwise, I am so glad that some are eager to ask me about their rights and the meaning of gender equality."

Like other migrant workers, Aye Mi San's life has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her company has not provided any cash assistance, even when she was requested to self-quarantine with no income.

During that time, she stayed outside the village since she needed to go to hospital with her husband. She also took that chance to assist her neighbors who could not go out by going to the grocery store and dropping their groceries at the gate. This is how she supported her village and they survived together.

"Actually, I was quite stressed during the outbreak, but going back to Myanmar is not a good choice. I need to send money to my mother and my son who are living there."

Considering the burden on her shoulder, Aye Mi San decide not to go back. She could not earn as much money in Myanmar as in Thailand. Her son, 8, has just started 1st grade.

"Previously, my son visited me and his father every vacation. Because of the virus, we cannot stay together. All we can do is video call."

The battle with COVID-19 is not over yet.

Political unrest in Myanmar is continuing.

While the sun is going down, Aye Mi San starts a video call as she does every day, sending mother's love and care across the Thai-Myanmar border to her little son.