

CAPTURE CHANGE STORY**Dao Eng**

People might think that women should always submit to men. Women should stay home, cooking and cleaning, while men are the breadwinners. This is gender inequality. For me, I believe that men and women are equal. Even if we are women, we can work and rely on ourselves.

– PHUU PWINT KHAING

Phuu Pwint Khaing or Dao, 23, is a young migrant worker living in Chiang Rai, Thailand. She is originally from Mandalay, Myanmar. In 2006, her family trip to Thailand turned out to be a major turning point, since her parents found better career opportunities here. Today, her main job is to pack fresh fruit in the market.

Dao started working and joined a Thai language class when she was 15. Her Thai language skills have allowed her to work as a volunteer for The Freedom Story.

“The Freedom Story team once came to educate us about human trafficking, labor rights, and social security benefits. After, I decided to volunteer. And they delivered more training sessions for us.”

Since then, Dao has worked as a Burmese interpreter. She accompanies migrant workers, including pregnant women, mothers, babies, and patients to hospitals or the social security office.

Her ability to cross the language barrier is a beneficial skill for other laborers. The Freedom Story once connected her with a male worker who wished to move to work in a new area, but he had lost his ID card. Dao assisted him in working with his employer and Thai officers until he obtained an ID card and started a new job. This meant a better chance for his life.

"I think I was able to help when the workers could not communicate with Thai people. I have also been trained how to effectively coordinate with the officers. Being an interpreter has given me a good opportunity to support other workers. I am so proud of myself."

Dao knows that women's rights are an important issue that need to be raised. Improving women's well-being is also one of her goals. Her belief in gender equality was reflected when she helped one female worker who was a victim of domestic violence.

"I asked her 'why not divorce your husband since he had hurt you?' She explained that she moved to Thailand with no friend or family. Without him, she has no one left to rely on. She also hadn't got an ID card yet. That's why she was scared."

At that time, Dao tried to empower the woman to stand on her own feet.

"I guided her to apply for an ID card and look for a better job. Instead of depending on men, women like us can earn our living. She might have thought couldn't do it at the beginning. But after I encouraged her, she was full of hope."

Meanwhile, Dao has tried to convey the lessons she has learned from The Freedom Story to other women. Her aim is to educate others to protect them from human traffickers.

"Some might be persuaded via Facebook that they could earn more money with an easier job. That is how women have been deluded due to lack of awareness. To prevent it, I hope everyone will let their families know where they are. And bear in mind that human trafficking could happen anywhere, not only at the border. It is so close to us."

The outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted Dao's life like other workers. Her workday was reduced and income consequently decreased. Most people in her community were infected and some lost their lives. Not everyone in Dao's family could avoid infection. Dao contracted COVID-19 and was in severe condition.

"At first I just felt a bit sick. The next day, my symptoms were getting worse. My oxygen saturation level was 92 percent. I was diagnosed with an infection that affected my lungs. So, I needed to take Favipiravir. I really had a hard time then."

Despite Dao's hardships under the pandemic, she has never stopped her roles, both as a worker and a volunteer. With her language skill, she has dedicated herself to guiding Myanmar workers to improve their quality of life in Thailand as they deserve.

Dao ultimately recovered and was fully vaccinated. She received Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine as her second shot in January 2022. She plans to continue her duty helping Burmese workers to improve their quality of life in Thailand.

When asked about the value of her volunteering role, Dao answered the question with pride.

"We have made them realize that they are not alone. When in need, we will always be there."