

## HOW THE PANDEMIC GAVE RISE TO AN UNLIKELY DREAM FOR AN INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMAN IN KACHIN

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Photo: UN Women/Naw Su

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Htoi Gender and Development Foundation is working with women in camps for internally displaced people in Kachin State and supporting the economic empowerment of the most vulnerable women.

This work has been made possible by supplementary funding from the Government of Japan for the regional programme 'Women and Girls at the Centre of COVID-19 Prevention'. The programme contributes to the goal of leaving no one behind, even during COVID-19.

The pandemic is just another unwelcomed burden for Daw Lu San – a widow – and if the situation lasts too long, she fears that the financial burdens will become too much to bear on her own. Single or married, she says women in general have it harder in the camps for displaced people.

Daw Lu San lives in the Zi Lun camp in Kachin, participates in the Htoi Gender cash for work programme where she was trained to make cloth masks. Following the training, she received 500,000 kyat (\$380) to invest in her business, and she began to produce and sell the masks for 400 kyat (\$0.31) each.

As the sole breadwinner, Daw Lu San looks after the needs of her four children, all of whom are still young and in school. She spoke fondly of their ambitions but financially, she is unsure whether she will be able to pay for their dreams, including university, medical school or music lessons. "All my children are clever and they have goals," she says. "But I can't support them financially. I want to support whatever they want to do but I do not have the ability to support them."

Large parts of Kachin State remain in a protracted crisis, characterised by ongoing and sporadic conflict, unresolved political grievances and an array of actors competing for resources ranging from logging and minerals to illicit drugs.

As of May 2020, there were 137 camps for internally displaced people in Kachin State, with a total of 95,736 inhabitants, of whom approximately 52 per cent are women, 37 per cent are children and 5 per cent are people with disabilities.\*

Many people have been displaced since 2011 when a ceasefire between the Government and the Kachin Independence Organisation broke down. In addition to the static encamped population of internally displaced people, additional people are temporarily displaced by sporadic violence and natural disasters.

Before the pandemic, many women earned a living as day labourers outside the camps of internally displaced people; but since COVID-19 pandemic hit, movement has been restricted and people struggle to find any income. Women report they are barely able to meet basic food needs, buy soap or masks, or pay for their children to return to school.\* Protection mechanisms are failing women and girls, with an increase in gender-based violence including intimate partner violence, heightened vulnerability to exploitation (including trafficking), inequitable access to health-care services and disproportionate economic shocks for women as a result of the pandemic. People in the camps of internally displaced people have no freedom of movement, and during COVID-19 lockdown measure they had little access to health services and markets. Humanitarian organizations also have restricted access to camps in Kachin State, which prevents the delivery of critical services to those populations.

\*Source: Humanitarian Needs Overview: Myanmar. Available at [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MMR\\_HNO\\_2020\\_FINAL\\_131219.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MMR_HNO_2020_FINAL_131219.pdf).

As schools are currently closed due to COVID-19, the family is staying in the camp. While social distancing has been advised, there is rarely any space for that within the camp or even in their own home, says Daw Lu San.

### An aspiration to succeed

Before the pandemic, Daw Lu San worked in a pig husbandry and also sewed bags and sold them in the local markets. She had participated in a Htoi Gender training programme where she learned sewing, which made it easier for her to begin producing cloth masks.

*“I am currently making three-layered masks and I sell them to the Kachin State Women’s Network and other organizations that place orders with our sewing group in the camp. All the masks are order-based, so if I make more masks, then I can have more profit”, said Daw Lu San.*

Her post-pandemic plans are ambitious but she is determined to invest in the future, and her small-scale mask production initiative has given birth to something bolder. With her newly acquired skills of making cloth masks, Daw Lu San wants to expand her business into stores and markets in the nearby Hpa-kant, Bhamo and Laiza townships in Kachin State, where she has previously sold her bags. Once she begins to earn enough, she plans to save and invest in the future of her family and her personal desire to establish a small-scale animal husbandry, complete with pigs and chickens.

*“Men and women can do the same things equally. I have my sewing skills, I send all my children to school and I lead my family of four children just as well as any male-headed household. I want to be a successful business woman, and farm on my own land.”*

In the meantime, however, she can see the impact of COVID-19 around her in the camp. People began to borrow money from each other to buy food without any means of income, and they are unable to return the money. This harsh cycle was to be expected and Daw Lu San admits that if this lasts longer, it will make life very difficult for the camp dwellers. She is grateful to participate in the Htoi Gender programme. It has not only provided access to financial support for a sustainable business model but also given her a support system.

The Htoi Gender programme primarily includes the most vulnerable women in the camps: widows, women with disabilities and those without any form



Photo: UN Women/Naw Su

of employment. Ever since her husband passed away, Daw Lu San has been alone in supporting her family and through the women’s sewing group she met other women who are facing their own challenges head on just as she is. This connected the women with one another and enabled them to support those who are in more need than themselves by offering food and even financial support.

### Adapting to new challenges

Over the years, Nang Pu, the Director of Htoi Gender and Development Foundation, built a close relationship with the women in the camps. Those relationships continue despite the pandemic: “Some women contact me through Facebook messenger to ask for help related to gender-based violence and women’s rights violations,” Nang Pu says, “Before the pandemic, women would usually come to my office to discuss such matters.”

With careful planning and mapping of a safe route away from restricted areas, Htoi Gender was able to ensure that medical services continued to reach the camps during the lockdown without any setbacks. The mandatory two-week quarantine measure was a huge hurdle. They had to rethink how to reach women but also not to put them or the staff in harm’s way. “In order to avoid the two-week quarantine measures for



Photo: UN Women/Naw Su

the staff, the cars are driven to a certain point where another car from the camp side would be awaiting to unload the items. The medical items are then distributed by the camp leaders,” explained Nang Pu. This way, they prevented any human contact or possible transmissions.

Nang Pu is well-known as a gender and children’s rights advocate in Kachin State. She began her charity work in her local church. She observed high cases of infant and maternal mortality and gender-based discrimination in Kachin State, and she felt dissatisfied with the inadequate responses to those challenges, so she established Htoi Gender, a local community-based organization in 2014. Six years later, and in a time of global pandemic, the organization continues to help the most vulnerable in the camps of internally displaced people.

### A lifeline for the most vulnerable

For Htoi Gender and Development Foundation, sustaining the livelihoods of the women in camps of internally displaced people during the pandemic has been crucial. Many of the women participating in their programmes have care responsibilities and need income to take care of their children, family

members with disabilities or a child on the way. “The women are affected much more as they are taking the responsibility of their families. This results to heavier work load and more stress,” added Nang Pu.

Under the cash for work programme, supported by supplementary funding from Japan, Htoi Gender has engaged 200 women from 12 camps in income generation activities and the women have received training for activities such as making cloth masks, hand sanitizers and food items like *balarchaung kyaw*. All these initiatives enable women to make an income during the COVID-19 crisis. By providing the right support to women like Daw Lu San, Nang Pu believes that they can take charge of their lives, gain economic empowerment and discover the strength they have within themselves.

Daw Lu San agrees. She finds that the programme has served as a lifeline especially for women with disabilities and widows who have very few options in finding sources of income. “Some of the women cried when they sold their masks as this was the first time they earned money during COVID-19. Last night, I also wondered to myself what situation my family and I would be in if I wasn’t involved in this programme”.

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