

CHAPTER ONE

The Activist: Cheery Zahau

WHEN I first meet Cheery Zahau, she's pregnant with her first child, and so am I. She's about one month further along than me, and we share a little whine about morning sickness before she reassures me that it will get better soon, which is a lifeline I cling to for some time. I feel sheepish because while she had morning sickness, she travelled Myanmar interviewing youth groups and rape survivors, while I mainly stayed in my flat in the air conditioning, eating my way out of the nausea.

There's another coincidence too: both of our sisters are also pregnant. But that's where the similarities end, because a few months after we meet, her sister gives birth.

Her baby is healthy, but her experience is horrible, and it stems from the racism in Myanmar that Cheery has been fighting against her whole life. Cheery and her family are Chin, an ethnic group from the north of the country. Her people are no longer at war with the Burmese government, but they have been widely discriminated against for decades, and their region remains amongst the poorest and most neglected in a country where there is stiff competition for that miserable crown.

Cheery's sister had her baby in Yangon, where Cheery's family now live. First of all, the electricity went out, leaving her sister to deliver by torchlight for two hours. She was bleeding too much, cold and frightened, but there were no doctors to help. When Cheery went to find some doctors, she was told: "You Chin people, you all come in the labour room, are you bringing your whole nation here? You can't be here, get out."

The next intervention from a medical professional came from a nurse, shouting: "Where is that Chin?" and handing Cheery a file. Hours later,

when she was trying to stay because her sister (who speaks Chin but not Burmese) needed an interpreter, Cheery was told: “This hospital is not for those who can’t speak.”

Cheery, shocked by the whole experience, wrote online: “Because of this type of people, I am disgusted [by] this country.”

It’s a reminder of the everyday barriers to life faced by Cheery and her people. After decades of isolation and chronic lack of funds, the health service across Myanmar doesn’t have the best of reputations for anyone, but at least most patients would not have to face out-and-out discrimination as well, while at their most vulnerable.

Throughout our conversations, Cheery tells me stories like this — not just about her family, and not just about Chin people, either. Her work is in human rights, and she has fought for all of the ethnicities of Myanmar, and particularly for women, to be treated better for her whole life.

It’s a fight that has often put her in danger. She has been chased around the countryside by Myanmar’s fearsome military (known as the Tatmadaw) at a time when, as the rulers of the country in previous decades, they had absolute impunity.

Cheery says she doesn’t know when she realized that she was going to have a life like this. But as we meet up and talk over several months, I realize that she was fighting for others even as a little girl growing up in a remote village in Sagaing region.

“We lived in the north part of the village, and the pharmacy is in the south part. Whenever the children are sick, the mothers came to me and asked me to buy the medicine for their children,” she says. “At the time, I thought, this is so unfair! They have their own kids! But,” she pauses. “I have to do it.”

Cheery’s family were a poor family living in a poor region. Her father fled to Mizoram, a border state in India, in 1989, the year after Myanmar’s military junta crushed the famous 1988 democratic uprising that had Aung San Suu Kyi as its figurehead. Her mother left a few years later, so Cheery was brought up by her grandmother.

Aged eleven, she was sent to boarding school 14 miles away from her home village of Kalaymyo. Her school was Christian because most

Chin people are also Christian — they converted after missionaries from Britain and other countries came to their region, mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century.

When Cheery went to school in the 1990s, there were no motorbikes, cars or buses in her area. The only vehicle was a pushbike. So, once a month, Cheery cycled back to see her grandmother. It took her a whole day.

At home, she was responsible for helping her grandmother on the family farm, gathering crabs and fish from the rice fields, cleaning up and, (according to Cheery), slightly resentfully doing more than her sister or uncle, who were a similar age and lived with the family.

In between, in an enterprising fashion for an eleven-year-old, she used to cycle over to a nearby market and buy snacks to sell to her fellow kids.

“I don’t normally tell this story — it’s embarrassing — but when my flip flop was torn apart, I’d go door to door selling my snacks, and I’d always make double. I have to make money myself. Now I realize I was an entrepreneur! I can buy my flip flops, and I don’t need to rely on money from my parents,” she says.

Her responsibilities didn’t lessen at school, where — thanks to an astute teacher who could clearly recognize leadership potential when she saw it — she was put in charge of the girl’s dorm, responsible for making her fellow pupils get up at 5.30 a.m. for breakfast and devotion.

Experiences like this in Cheery’s schooldays shaped her, and so did the textbooks she was supposed to read.

“In the textbooks, it suggests we are backward people, and we are not. We are just poor. It also suggests the Shan people [another ethnicity] are bad because they do drugs, the Kachin people are bad because they want their own state.

“So all these norms about people, we learn in the text books — and of course, the Bamar [the dominant ethnicity, which Aung San Suu Kyi belongs to] are superior,” says Cheery.

But she was never the kind of child who would take this lying down. In fact, her innocent questions at a time of great oppression in Myanmar

— Cheery grew up while the country was ruled by the military junta, which was in power from 1962 to 2011 — led her teachers to describe her as having “one foot in prison”.

When she finished high school, aged seventeen, her teachers warned her not to go to university in Myanmar because of the risk that her outspokenness and leadership potential would be punished.

“They all said, you will be in trouble. They knew I was going to organize something, and I would have ended up in jail,” says Cheery.

Mindful of their advice, she instead joined her parents in Mizoram, India, hoping for further study as well as some political experience and volunteering. But she was immediately faced with discrimination.

“They always call me smelly, fish paste [fermented fish paste is a popular — and odorous — ingredient in Burmese cooking]. There was lots of discrimination,” says Cheery.

It was a taster of the events of 2003, which would change Cheery’s life forever and shape her determination to make a difference in an unfeeling, unfair world.

In July 2003, there was a rape case where a Burmese man was accused of raping a Mizo girl of around fourteen years old. There was a lot of misinformation about the case, and some say the perpetrator was actually her Indian neighbour, but it was too late: the damage to the image of the Burmese refugees was done.

Soon, the biggest organizations in Mizoram state began broadcasting how all Burmese people were bad, drug dealers and rapists, and should leave. Then, every village and town in the state began running loudspeaker announcements saying all Burmese must get out.

“It was terrifying. So that was July, in heavy monsoon rain. I was working with a women’s organization, and suddenly we have lots and lots of women and children coming to our office and asking to stay, to take shelter,” says Cheery.

Landlords had started evicting Burmese people, and in some areas even throwing their belongings out on the street.

“There was terrible, terrible violence. One Mizo politician kindly allowed us to use his empty house so we spread the word that people

can take shelter there. Women came to us telling us people had chased them away with iron sticks," she says.

Cheery headed out to document the violence being done to her people.

"It was so crazy. We were exhausted, and we could not even go home. My parents were hiding. I was hiding. We were hiding for four months ... it's something that is difficult for me to talk about. Sometimes I just skip this part when I talk to journalists, because it's too crazy. The fear in those four months, I cannot even express it," she remembers.

By November, things calmed down after a lot of pressure on the Indian government and the regional Mizoram government.

"But before that, about 20,000 people were deported, some died on the way to Chin state, some delivered babies on the way, some caught malaria. And the people who stayed in Mizoram were the ones who cannot go back to Burma because they have problems with the military there, or no one to turn to on the Burma side. It was a nightmare," says Cheery [she uses the old name for Myanmar, Burma, when talking about her country].

"But in the middle of the crisis, there are always good people. Our landlord was kind, he locked us in from the outside, so when people came it looked like the house was empty but we were inside, working with the women. It sounds like the Jewish and the Nazis right? It was crazy."

It also sounds to me like the definitive end of innocence for Cheery, who was twenty-two years old at the time. But she says it was also a beginning.

"So one day I was praying — I mean, complaining really — because we tried to contact human rights groups and the only two who gave us a response were Amnesty and Refugee International.

So I was upset and tired and very frightened, and I complained to God: 'We cannot live in Burma because of the military oppression and we come here, my Chin people come here, and they still face this. And the international community does not know us, the Burmese community does not know us, so — why did you create people like us who will be mistreated like this?'"

Then, she heard a voice.

“This voice came in. ‘It is your job to speak,’ it said. And that’s that,” says Cheery. Whether the voice was God or her own inner leader piping up, the decision was made: her life would be dedicated to activism, and to others.

That voice has motivated her ever since to try and make a difference, often at great personal risk.

Cheery is probably most famous in Myanmar for her work on the military using rape as a weapon of war against the Chin people.

In 2007, with her team from the Women’s League of Chinland, she documented thirty-eight cases of the military raping Chin women. It was a number that Cheery described at the time as the tip of the iceberg.

The Chins are not the only ethnicity to have suffered in this way in the past few decades in Myanmar: numerous credible reports have found that the Burmese military has used rape as a weapon of war and oppression for years against many different ethnic minorities, from Kachin women to Mon women. In fact, as I write, there are reports that the same thing is going on now — under Aung San Suu Kyi’s government — with thirty Muslim women seemingly raped by soldiers in a flare-up of violence in Rakhine State in a single afternoon in October 2016. The reports are difficult to verify because no foreign reporters are allowed into the region.

Nearly 2,000 women have come forward about military rape in Myanmar, but the risks associated with doing so mean that the likely total affected is much, much higher. In Cheery’s report, the youngest girl targeted was twelve, and almost half were gang-raped.

At the time, Cheery wrote: “In one case, a woman was stripped naked and hung on a cross, in a deliberate act of mockery against her Christian religion. This indicates that sexual violence is being deliberately used as a weapon to torture and terrorize local ethnic populations into submission. There is a collective understanding among the troops that they can rape with impunity.”

No one was ever prosecuted for the rapes, and women who complained were threatened. So were Cheery and her team.

“When you investigate rape by the security forces or the government army, you are under threat. Those guys are untouchable,” she says.

She points out that the entire process, which took place over several months in 2006, was incredibly risky — mainly for the victims and for her team in the field.

“The army were looking for us all over the place. We had to do it quietly and quickly. Sometimes we travelled at 4 o’clock in the morning because we know that the army is in another village just four miles away, so we have to run away,” she says quietly.

Cheery says her team took the most risks, as she spent time in the office coordinating efforts while they were almost entirely on the ground in Myanmar, where at that time there were thirteen army battalions stationed across thirty-three military outposts in the area.

“Sometimes we are missing some info because the researchers could not have paper, for security reasons, so they had to remember,” she says.

I ask her if she was ever frightened, and she laughs a bit at her own youthful bravery.

“Actually, no,” she responds. “I would be now, but I was so young. When I started the Women’s League of Chinland, I was twenty-three. I don’t know how I pulled this off. But I was so young, so naive, so full of commitment to document what was happening to Chin people that I didn’t look at what might happen to me.”

The release of the report in New Delhi on 27 March 2007 — Tatmadaw Day — was like a bomb going off for the international community. Although in Myanmar, organizations were queuing up to denounce Cheery and her report, the world was beginning to pay attention.

In the weeks before the release, Cheery was asked to testify about military rape in Myanmar at the UN, as well as to meet officials in London and Brussels.

“This was the first time they ever heard about the Chin situation,” she says. “I talked about not only Chin but the mass rape across Burma. The room was packed. I was shaking. But when I spoke, you could hear a pin drop. It was silent.”

International pressure is, in part, what eventually brought Myanmar to the semi-democratic place it is in now (although as mentioned, military rape is far from a historic horror).

Documenting it back in 2007, though, meant that Cheery had to flee to Thailand, as she was no longer safe even in Mizoram.

“There were a lot of threats. Someone sent me a radio transmission of the Burma army asking the Indian army to arrest me,” she says. “Then in 2007, the Burmese military government sent a letter to the defence department in Chin state. They made everyone, especially the women, line up and asked [them] how they are linked to me. ‘Where is Cheery Zahau? Are you related to Cheery Zahau? Have you received money from Cheery Zahau? Have you had training from her?’”

Her family were forced to disown her, and people crossing the border were shown her photograph and asked if they’d seen “this girl” — at which point in her story Cheery laughs, and points out that she crossed the border plenty of times herself, but just wasn’t seen.

“I was not attacked physically because I was very lucky to escape. Of course, if I had ever been in their [the army’s] hands, it would have been finished,” she says.

At some point among all of this harassment, Cheery thinks now that she became depressed, particularly after immersing herself so deeply in the testimony of the rape survivors she met.

“What I noticed at the time was that I was drinking too much. I didn’t drink until the age of twenty-five, and by the time I did, I was drinking far too much. I was not drinking every day or drinking alone, but [before] I don’t drink alcohol, that’s just not me. It’s not how I grew up. And I didn’t trust men, because of what I had heard,” she says.

For this reason, alongside the continued persecution, she decided to move to Chiang Mai in Thailand in 2008, long a haven for Burmese dissidents, and “stay quiet” for a few years.

“In Chiang Mai I was out of that hectic situation so I had some private time and I realized I was very angry. I did not realize I was depressed at the time, only after. But once you are upset like that, angry and distrustful, you cannot have a relationship with anybody,” she says.

In the end Cheery spent three years there before coming back to Myanmar in 2011, when the military junta handed over power to a military-backed civilian government and the country began to open up to the outside world.

As you would expect, she hasn't kept quiet since. Cheery still fights for human rights, for women and for the Chin people. She represents and amplifies their voices on a national level but also quite literally puts her back into it: physically building roads and bridges in the remote region in the absence of any government support.

She has some good stories about these trips. On one journey, on a pretty hairy-sounding motorbike ride through a landslide (sheeting rain, clinging on, dodging falling rocks) that Cheery realized she needed to pee. I first hear her tell this story at an International Women's Day event in 2016, and she brings the house down by asking "Can I be a bit dirty?" before she continues her story.

The men stopped to let her pee, amid much embarrassment and squirming on their part. It's a jokey tale, but with a serious point. In a conservative society like Myanmar, that's an awkward question to ask, and it's hard to be the woman asking it when some on the trip may well have thought you had no business being there in the first place.

Pee stops aside, Cheery also still opposes the government where necessary, including even standing against Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party for the local Falam seat in 2015's historic elections.

The campaign against her was a rare dispiriting and dark moment among the general jubilation that greeted Aung San Suu Kyi's historic path to victory. It focused on her support for Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority, one of the most persecuted groups in the world (see Chapter 8).

Cheery supports their plight, seeing in it a more extreme version of what the Chin people have experienced. But many Burmese people are anti-Muslim, and Aung San Suu Kyi has not only done nothing since her election to help these people; she has stood by as the situation for them has dramatically worsened.

"I was very disappointed with that campaign. We did not argue on

the issues. We argued on false information, and one of the very successful tactics used against me was the Rohingya issue,” says Cheery.

“At a youth dinner before the election, some people were talking in a very demeaning way about the Muslims, and of course I had to intervene, right? I can’t let people assume all Muslims are terrorists or they don’t belong here or they will destroy Chin society.”

She said it was one of the moments when her religion helped her to think clearly, regardless of the fact that it might cost her the election.

“At the end of the day, you cannot send people off to sea and let them die in the boat [many Rohingya have attempted the perilous sea crossing to escape Myanmar and find better lives in neighbouring countries like Thailand or Malaysia, and many have died as a result],” she says. “If Jesus was alive, he is not going to do that. Or any God. So we need to find solutions.”

Perhaps as a result of her interventions on issues like this, Cheery didn’t win, but says she learned lessons and might run again. If she does, it is unlikely to be as a candidate for Aung San Suu Kyi’s party. While Cheery admires “The Lady”, as she’s known in Myanmar, she is concerned that her party is not held up to a high enough standard, because anything is better than the past.

Moreover, she is worried about the ongoing power of the military and their actions in the continuing ethnic conflicts that have flared up in various regions of Myanmar since the election. While the NLD won the election, the military is still incredibly powerful: a quarter of seats in parliament are reserved for military personnel, and as well as its own ongoing autonomy, it also effectively controls the defence, home and border affairs ministries, and also has veto powers.

“And this is the same institution that has done all these human rights violations, restricted activists, and they continue to do so,” says Cheery. “It’s more and more complicated with the new government. The Tatmadaw has not changed. Even the biggest governments who come to talk, they say bad guys can be good guys. But they don’t change so easily.”

“I always gave the warning before the election that the NLD combined with the Tatmadaw is a disaster for ethnic people. And that is happening.”

One thing she is hopeful about, though, is the changing situation for women in the new Myanmar. “The fact that we can even discuss women’s issues is a change from the past, but we still have a long way to go,” she says.

She tells me a story about her ID card. As a Burmese woman, the status written on your ID card — if you are either a single woman living with your parents, as most Burmese do before marriage, or if you are married — is “dependant”.

“Mei ko ku it is called in Burmese. Ask ten women in this country what is written on their identity card, and it is dependant. So those woman who often have lots of responsibilities are still legally dependants, they have no rights to ownership when they want to get loans, there are a lot of legal barriers,” says Cheery.

“Even for someone like me, I have to fight with the authorities — we had a big argument, twice — to change it to private business owner because I have my own thing, my research, my skills. But he kept writing dependant. And I went back to him. Write I am a business owner. Write it. But it’s a long battle and a lot of girls won’t do that.”

For middle and upper class women, there are ways round this, and they are often quite educated and independent, says Cheery. But for poorer women in rural areas, there’s a double burden — taking care of the families at the same time as having to make money to survive, and this is not recognized. For Chin women it’s even worse, as they take on even more responsibility. If someone gets sick, it is their responsibility to look after that person on top of their work in the family and the field, but they have no access to any inheritance, which goes to the male members of the family by custom.

“The fact that Chin women are very much disempowered in the family makes me want to speak up. And how people treat me, how men treat me. ‘Oh this is a young girl, her voice doesn’t matter’ — I have been told that a lot,” she says.

So this inequality on the familial level is next on her agenda. First though, she has to finish her report for the Women's League of Burma. This time, it's about violence and rape in a domestic context, and the women who — in the face of very little state support — help those who try to escape. (See Chapter 3 for more on the lack of provisions for survivors of domestic violence.)

"The last interview was about an infant girl being raped by her neighbour. Two years and eight months old. A baby ... it's sick," she says. "And the only services available are from these women's organizations, but they are limited financially — there's nothing from the government. In some areas the courts are reasonably active. In others, it is disappointing."

She says the experience has made her feel that society is "broken", with unspeakable brutality like this still barely discussed as a result of societal taboos about sex. In many cases, the women who help the survivors become the target of the perpetrators, who tell them things like "I will come out of jail, and I will get you". Or they are told that rape is a private matter that they shouldn't be involved in. Cheery says the experience has made her both sorrowful and proud of the victims and the women helping them.

"These women who help rape survivors, they are the real heroes," she says.

She remembers another woman she met, a Chin woman in Mizoram, in 2008. She had four children, and sold ice cream on the street to provide for them. If she didn't make 20 rupees a day (5,000 Burmese kyat, or less than US\$4), she sent her children to neighbours for dinner, and skipped eating herself. At the same time, she was fighting for her children to be included in scholarship programmes to ensure their lives were not as hard as hers has been.

"When I met this woman, I cried a lot, and I still get emotional when I talk about her, because I realize how government inaction can cause extreme poverty, and let this type of situation for women happen," says Cheery.

"So this woman for me is also the real hero, she is my hero, the hero

for her children. And I think we don't draw enough strength from other women, ordinary women who do amazing work, who risk their lives for others, who make their society better, their communities better."

I tell Cheery I think she is a hero, and she laughs it off. But she does hope her voice will help amplify others.

"I love the sky," she says, a little dreamily. "But to me, if there's only one star in the sky, it's not pretty, it's not complete. So we need to have lots of stars. In women and politics, we need to have lots of stars, lots of women, championing education, reproductive health, business. That is what I hope for women, and that is our purpose for doing what we do."