

# TESTIMONY

“Personally, as a Rohingya woman, I feel that I have been subject to greater discrimination than if I were a Rohingya man or if I were a non-Rohingya woman. It is hard to describe this discrimination because it’s not visible or easily measurable. I can just *feel* it.”

Wai Wai Nu





# Layers of Marginalisation: Life for Rohingya Women

Testimony from Myanmar

*Rohingya are an ethno-religious minority from Rakhine state in Myanmar. Having been effectively stripped of their citizenship and made stateless through a Citizenship Law passed in 1982, they have faced decades of severe discrimination and persecution. They face restrictions on their rights to travel, to marry and have a family and in their access to education and healthcare. Many are also living in internment camps, subject to forced labour and/or facing extortion. As the country has been undergoing reform, the situation for Rohingya has worsened, and they face widespread and systematic violence. Many have fled, undertaking a perilous journey to other countries. Those that survive this, often face insurmountable difficulties being recognised and resettled in third countries due to their lack of citizenship status.*

*The Equal Rights Trust spoke with Wai Wai Nu, a former political prisoner who is now working as an activist to advance human rights and combat the discrimination faced by the Rohingya community. She spoke about the severe discrimination faced by Rohingya in Myanmar, the challenges facing women in Myanmar following 60 years of military rule, and how being both Rohingya and a woman means she, and other Rohingya women, face unique and intersecting discrimination.*

My name is Wai Wai Nu and I am a 29-year-old Rohingya woman. I was born in Rakhine state in the western part of Burma and I grew up in Rangoon.

In 2005, when I was 18, my family and I were sentenced to 17 years in prison – five years under the National Emergency Security Act and 10 years under the Citizenship Act. Officially, we were charged as my father had moved us to Rangoon without a family registration form and had obtained a national security card under a fake name. However, my family and I believe that there was a hidden agenda which led to our imprisonment. Before we were imprisoned, my father had joined with the opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and became a member of the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP). The CRPP is an opposition group which emerged after the 1990 election, when the military government refused to transfer power to the winning parties. After the election, the CRPP called on the military government to transfer

power and allow the winning parties to constitute the parliament and my father was involved in this ongoing work. At first, only my father was arrested and then, two months after he had been in prison, they came to our family home and arrested everyone. We think that they only did this because we are Rohingya and that they put the whole family in prison to teach my dad a lesson about speaking up as a Rohingya and as a member of the opposition. My imprisonment was the result of my being both Rohingya and the daughter of a political activist.

I find it very hard to look back to my time in prison, the conditions were difficult and it is hard to relive them. The prison was in Rangoon and it is one of the most notorious prisons in Asia. There were many mental and physical challenges, and difficulties concerning how the prison authorities treated prisoners. All of my experiences in prison – the conditions, being put there without a fair trial or an appeal, meeting other women who had encountered similar problems, the prison system – all of these experiences and the courage it took to meet them led to me becoming a human rights activist and founder of Women Peace Network – Arakan, where I work with other groups to promote human rights and tolerance. As a human rights activist, I believe in the universality of human rights and I want to promote the advancement of human rights around the world. However, I work for my own community, the Rohingya community, as well.



*Wai Wai Nu*

I think that Rohingya women face different layers of discrimination and marginalisation. All women in Burma face various forms of discrimination. As Burma is a developing country that was ruled by the military for 60 years, women here face a much more difficult situation than women in other parts of the world. Women face discrimination in many areas of their life, including in leadership roles. Had I not founded Women Peace Network – Arakan and instead joined a male-led group or any other civil society organisation, where the majority of the leadership are men, it would have been difficult to be recognised as a capable woman or to take a leadership role. That is a challenge that many women face in this country, just because they are women. Many women also face discrimination and violence in their own homes. The discrimination that women face can often be worse depending on the place that they are living, their status, their ethnicity and their religion. If you are from a highly marginalised ethnic group then you will encounter far more discrimination in terms of the lack of recognition that the government gives to you, and in terms of them talking to you or representing you.

Rohingya experience terrible discrimination which has led to the indescribable situation that they are currently facing in Burma. During my lifetime, the view of the government has

changed towards Rohingya and is now much, much worse. When I was young, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the Rohingya community were equal, and they were regarded as citizens of this country and people of this country. In my father's time, he could be a public servant, he got his degree certificate, he could practice his profession and be a teacher at the government school. But after 1992, discriminatory restrictions on the livelihoods of Rohingya began. At this point, although things got worse, the government never claimed that Rohingya were illegal immigrants or labelled them as Bengali or as foreigners. However, after the political change in 2010, our situation deteriorated as the government started to use the rhetoric that Rohingya are illegal Bengali's and not from Burma. Rohingya were then excluded from so many areas of life.

This change can be described in one word for Rohingya – “hell”. Since then there have been no positive changes for the Rohingya community, and in fact, the government has stripped all remaining fundamental rights from Rohingya in this country. The government discriminates against, and persecutes, all Rohingya and does very little to protect them. The government is taking away the right to citizenship from Rohingya, including from women and their children, and taking away their access to education, healthcare and jobs and their freedom of movement. This discrimination has caused thousands of Rohingya to flee from the country, with many others being put in jail arbitrarily and many have been killed. Finally, the government took away the rights of Rohingya to have a registration card. This has caused the current situation we are seeing now, where many Rohingya have been left stateless and living in confinement. There are 150,000 Rohingya living in camps in Burma.

When I came out of prison I faced many barriers because I was Rohingya and because my father had been involved in the opposition. By way of example, I had to struggle to obtain my degree certificate. Although I had finished my university education, the university would not issue me a certificate and I had to fight to be awarded my certificate. I won the fight and have the certificate now. But even today, I still cannot be a lawyer because of my identity as Rohingya. I think this helps to illustrate the level of institutional discrimination Rohingya face.

In addition to the discrimination we face as Rohingya, Rohingya women face some additional forms of discrimination in society and in the community. The impact of the lack of security for Rohingya is particularly acute for Rohingya women. Not only does the government not intervene to protect Rohingya women, much of the sexual violence comes from the security forces themselves. Not just when the women go outside their home, but even when they are at home; security forces can come into your home, rape you, abuse you and torture you. Women in camps also face security risks. This does not happen to other women. There is also the systematic discrimination of imposing restrictive and discriminatory policies on Rohingya women, such as restrictions on the number of children that Rohingya women may have and restrictions on their ability to marry. If a Rohingya woman wants to get married, she has to get permission from the town administrators. If a Rohingya woman has more than two children, she may have to pay a fine or go to prison and the children may not be included in the family registration list. The government also imposes discriminatory birth control policies. So there is certain specific and



systematic discrimination that is directed towards Rohingya women in Myanmar by the government. Many of these laws and policies have been enacted over the past two decades. You cannot imagine this situation occurring in most other parts of the world.

Personally, as a Rohingya woman, I feel that I have been subject to greater discrimination

than if I were a Rohingya man or if I were a non-Rohingya woman. It is hard to describe this discrimination because it's not visible or easily measurable. I can just *feel* it. I feel that my identity as a Rohingya woman has meant I have been restricted in my ability to live the life that I want to. This is true of my professional life, family life, social life and political life.

One of the things I often see is that, rather than acknowledging and addressing the main cause of the problems faced by Rohingya women and women more broadly, the common reaction is to blame women themselves, or to see the disadvantages faced by Rohingya women as being a problem within the Rohingya community for which the community itself is to blame. The government as well as government-led scholars blame the Rohingya community as a whole and particularly the religious leaders, saying we should empower and educate Rohingya women. However, they say this simply to avoid responsibility and to avoid addressing the root causes of the problem. They blame the community for not being educated. They forget, or pretend to forget, that because of government restrictions, Rohingya children are not able to be educated and may be illiterate. All women should be educated and be able to study and go to school, but their lack of opportunities to do so should not be used to excuse discrimination against them or as an excuse to hide a political agenda.

The persecution of Rohingya is a political agenda; the military-led government is denying the fundamental rights of Rohingya in this country and using Rohingya as a scapegoat to benefit politically. I think that what is allowing this discrimination and persecution to occur is a lack of information. Rohingya have been segregated from mainstream Myanmar and marginalised by the media. The corruption of the governmental, judicial and administrative bodies in the country also contributes to this discrimination. There needs to be political dialogue and the restoration of peace and justice through fundamental rights.

The government has the power to change how Rohingya women, and the Rohingya community more broadly, are treated. They have the power to abolish all discriminatory policies and

they should grant Rohingya citizenship rights and dignity. As the National League for Democracy begins the process of taking control of parliament and the government, I hope it will take some initiatives towards restoring justice and peace, and grant our basic rights as our country's people. There is also a lot that the international community could do to make that possible. They could hold the government accountable for their actions against Rohingya by using the media, talking with the government and by showing solidarity with Rohingya. I think that we also need to be careful when we talk about Rohingya as stateless. Originally, the Rohingya were an indigenous group in this country, they enjoyed full citizenship and equal rights with all other Burmese citizens and ethnic groups. So when people describe Rohingya as stateless, I think that can sometimes lead to a misunderstanding, giving the opportunity to those who are trying to deny the rights of Rohingya to say that we are not from Burma. It allows the government to avoid taking responsibility to address the problems and does not hold them accountable. The persecution of Rohingya creates statelessness and when we talk about stateless Rohingya it can create more confusion.

Although I enjoy my role as a human rights activist, I feel somewhat forced into it by my position as a Rohingya woman and because of the injustices I face in my life. I feel I need to stand up for my community because I know my community and I know what the conditions are like in my country. I never thought I would need to become a human rights activist or politician. Sometimes I wish that I could be a free, young woman and pursue a free life with less pressure. If I were not a Rohingya woman and if I could live a different life, I would be a teacher at the university, a lawyer, a judge or a diplomat. These were my dreams when I was young when I, and my community, didn't face this much discrimination.