

THAWDA AYE LEI

Writing and...

I will present this topic in three parts: number one, writing and living; number two, writing and being a woman; finally, my writing and other careers.

Before I proceed, I'd like to provide a bit of background information. I come from Myanmar, which is a country in Southeast Asia. According to the 2014 Census, the literacy rate of the country is 89.5% of the total population of 51 million – this statistic accounts for 92.6% of men and 86.9% of women.

Firstly, can Burmese writers make living as a writer? Before the 1988 military coup and dictatorship, authors were not wealthy from their writing, but they could survive by writing alone because there were almost a hundred-thousand publications produced a year. However, after 1990, the political instability, economic sanction, and systematic destruction of education by the military government sunk people into poverty, and the publishing industry was censored. According to data gathered by the Myanmar Publishers Association in 2015, the estimated number of titles published annually is almost 14,000, and the average number of copies being printed is 1000. The average price of a book varies from about 2 to 8 USD, and the writer earns 15% of the total selling price of a book. Therefore, a writer can only survive if a film production company buys their novel, or if they receive honoraria from literary talks.

Secondly, what is it like for female writers in Burma, a country where patriarchal values are deeply rooted? For a male writer to freely think or write, their wives have to support them. In my family, my father is an author; he loves dreaming, reading, writing, and talking with those who love literature; but he's not interested in making money. My mother is the breadwinner. Thus, for a woman to survive as an author, it is more challenging because she not only has to work outside like her husband, she is also expected to do housework and childcare when she gets home. There are many female writers in our country, but only a few of them continue writing long-term because they aren't afforded time and space to write.

Finally, how do I balance writing and my other profession conducting gender-related research for an NGO? My NGO research provides me with income, but it also feeds my writing: I created my first novel based on my experiences of working on the cyclone recovery project, specifically my first-hand knowledge of how severely the community was affected by the cyclone and the challenges encountered during the recovery phase. My writing career also benefits my researcher's life. Because we are doing socio-economic and political research, our research findings go only to policy makers for advocacy purposes. However, sometimes we need public awareness to push the policy makers toward change. This February, with the support of UK government, our organization conducted research on people's lives on Sino-Burma border. The objective was to inform mainland residents about the social, cultural, and political lives of residents of the border who experience frequent conflict (particularly with Rohingya, near the Bangladesh border). Our people argue each other about

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these issues with minimal knowledge about the lives of people living on the border, and in order to resolve these arguments, the general public needs to know how the state defines the border versus how border citizens define it by the reality of their lives. In addition to our research, we decided to educate the general public about border lives in an artistic way. As a part of the project, I wrote three short stories which are based on the real live stories of three people living on Sino-Burmese border. I was not giving the messages very directly to the readers, because I also keep the value of art because those stories were written for an educational purpose. I just let them read and think and see the situation for themselves. We published that short stories collection book, entitled *Borderless Cloud*, and distributed to the public for free. Thanks to the success of that project, we have continued to integrate the arts into research.

As a researcher, I have received many resources to create stories, and I am still catching up with the contemporary world as I travel for my work. This is how my two careers relate and complement each other, in term of income and resources. Sometimes, I have some occupational stress because of my work and all my inspiration lost for writing, but as a writer in a developing country, another job is necessary for survival. Not all female writers are in the position to carry all this weight—depending on class, age, race and cultural background, some women have more challenges that are limiting their creation. We must work to remove these roadblocks, promote the creativity of all women, and make space for them.

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