

It's a Curse to be a Woman

By Daw Pee

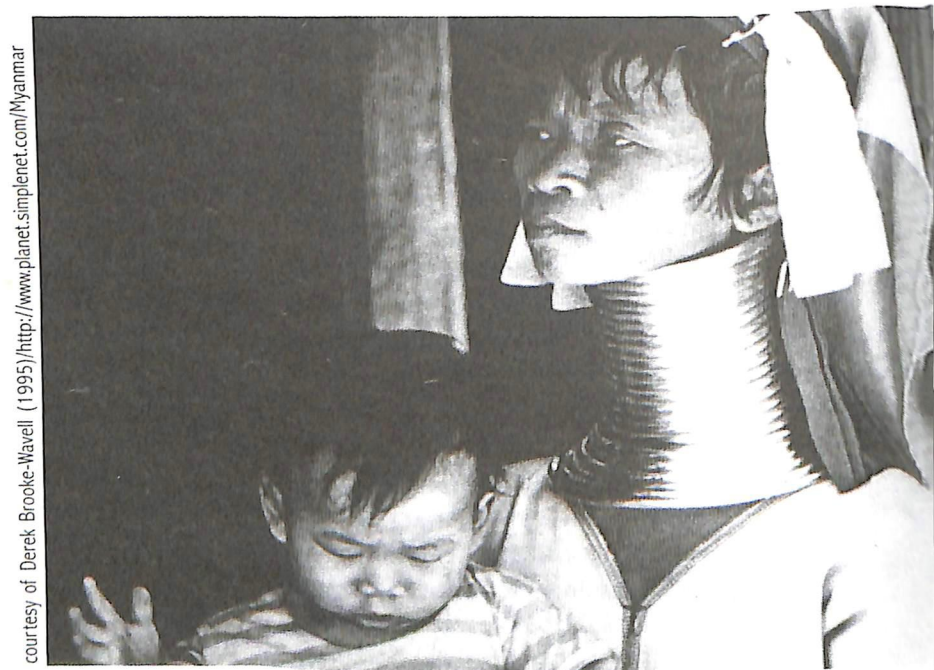
Myanmar is a very beautiful and rich country in Asia and yet it is poor. Why has the country not developed? Is it because of poor management by the political leaders? Or the persistence of our traditional, backward culture? Whatever the answer is, it is the women who are suffering more from the consequences of poverty. Age-old prejudices still cause women to suffer, particularly in some parts of the country. When will this end? These traditional practices must be challenged by new ideas, but educated people are so few.

Let me tell you about my life as a Myanmar woman today. These are my true stories and I want the world to know that there are still some traditions in my country that abuse women.

My name is Daw Pee. I was born in 1940, the fourth of five children. My parents were poor and uneducated. It was so difficult to go to school during that time. We lived in the remote village of Sai Kone in Phekon Township, southern Shan State which was known as a "black area" (so-called because of prevalent political unrest). There were 20 houses in our village.

I belong to one of the ethnic minority people, the *Padaung* (who are popularly known as wearing heavy stacks of brass neck rings). The *Padaung* are very superstitious and their religion centres around the *Nat* or spirits. My parents were traditional believers but I converted to Catholicism. When I was four years old, my mother died soon after giving birth to my younger brother. Many women died this way, because medical services were just not available. After her death, everything changed for the worse. My father was a drunkard and a gambler.

He was not really a good father. After he died the following year, many people came to collect the debts they said he owed them. Since we couldn't pay, they stripped our house of whatever they thought had some use. Only the old and ruined house was left to us.



courtesy of Derek Brooke-Wavell (1995)/<http://www.planet.simplenet.com/Myanmar>

It was my oldest brother who was 14, who took over as head of the family. He supported us by looking after cows owned by others. My second oldest brother had to go into the forest to look for food to eat. My work was to look after my younger brother at home. For many years I spent the day waiting for my elder brothers to return with food and drink.

When the villagers learned that I had given birth to twins, they came to see me and said it was not good. They took away my babies and threw them into a pit, believing that they were not human beings but animals. They even tried to kill me but luckily I escaped.

We had neither electricity nor candles, and we made do with only sunlight during the day and burning pieces of pinewood at night. One day, due to the carelessness of one of my brothers, our little house burned down to the ground. We had to sleep under a big tree near our old house. According to tradition, we were forbidden from sleeping in another house because then it would also catch fire. After a few days, the villagers helped us to set up a little tent where we could begin our life again.

At the start, we were often hungry, eating only bamboo shoots and other food gathered from the wild. We had no rice.

When I was seven, I began to work for a family as a baby sitter. They were Catholic, and I converted to that religion. I was with them for many years. But due to the continuing military operations in our area, our whole village was

totally destroyed and we had to keep moving around from place to place because there was nowhere to stay.

My eldest brother came to know my situation and fetched me to stay with him and his family. Then a friend helped me to find work in a religious convent, where I was in charge of the kitchen at the boarding school run by the nuns. Not very long after that, the convent was nationalised by the military government. I had no work and returned to my brother again.

At 14, against my will I had to marry a stranger, a 20-year-old man. I was told that if I didn't marry this man, I had to leave the house. He bought me from my brother with 20 silver coins to become his wife and servant. This was a traditional practice among the *Padaung* people. Women were treated as slaves who had no right to decide. They were forced to obey the parents or elders in the family.

There were other cruel practices. For example, parents could agree to marry their children to each other even before being born. If, later, the young woman and the young man refuse to honour the arrangement, both of them are brought out of the village and killed. A child born to a single mother would be thrown into a pit or buried alive. These customs are still practised today, though to a lesser degree than before.

My husband was the eldest son and he stayed almost all the time at the farm, coming home only once in 20 days. I had to be at the farm too even when I was pregnant. Since my husband's family had bought me, I had no right to ask for anything from them. I received no medical attention during my pregnancy, no special diet.

courtesy of Robert A. Betto



During my eighth month of pregnancy, my husband was struck by malaria and he died. I gave birth one month after, to twin babies. This was at the farm. Nobody was with me, not even a relative, because it was forbidden to help a woman giving birth when her husband had just died. Even if someone happened to help, the mother had to pay a “ransom” to this person by giving a pig or a silver coin. Since I could not afford it, I tried to prepare everything by myself. I felt lucky to give birth to my first baby, followed after three minutes by another. After cleaning up, I fell asleep. I had already set aside some dried food a month ahead.

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After a few months, I tried to return to my brother’s house but the family forced me to marry again, this time to my husband’s younger brother. I had six children with my second husband who was an irresponsible man. Voiceless and unhappy, I tried to divorce him but had no money to pay for it. I wanted to raise my children well, send them to school, but this did not happen. Instead, my eldest son became a drunkard and got married early. The second son went to join the rebels, and the youngest son became drug-addicted.

Because my husband neglected his responsibilities, it was I who had to look after the needs of the family. When the military government decided to build a camp and then a railroad, I was required to render labour as a “volunteer” because I didn’t have the money to hire someone else to do it for me. I really could

not guide my children any more. Once I went out to look for firewood in the rain, and I fell into a deep hole. I could not afford to go to a hospital. That was when I became paralysed.

Conclusion

Traditional practices cause many women to suffer. At the age of 13 or 14, a girl is sold into another family, in exchange for silver coins, cash or valuables. Once they get married, they are treated like animals. They are not free to speak up.

In the family, male children have a better chance of getting an education. For example, if there is only one girl among five children, she would be the last one to be sent to school. This is because she would not be useful to the family anyway, since she would belong to her husband’s family after marriage. Daughters are not considered an asset. Only sons are valuable, and parents are glad to spend a lot for a son’s wedding.

Daughters are not entitled to inherit from their parents. Once a woman gets married, she has to serve not only her husband but also his parents. Her slavery would be ended only upon her death or the death of her parents-in-law.

These backward traditions do not recognise that women are human beings with the same basic rights as anyone else. It is a curse to be a woman under these conditions.

Education is needed in order to bring about change. I hope and pray for change to come. But when will that be? 🙏

Daw Pee is a 60-year-old woman who is now in bed recuperating from sickness. Her story was originally written in Burmese and translated into English by Dereh.