



Wai Wai Nu:

CEW+ Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist at the University of Michigan; Founder, Executive Director, Women Peace Network and Founder, Yangon Youth Leadership Center

Wai Wai Nu is the executive director and founder of Women Peace Network and the founder of the Yangon Youth leadership center. Nu was a political prisoner for seven years under the Burmese military government and emerged to serve as a national – and international – voice for Burma’s human rights and democracy movement.

In 2012, she was released under a presidential amnesty. Nu was deeply moved by the escalated violence she encountered upon her release from prison. As a result, she formed the Women’s Peace Network, as a platform to build peace and mutual understanding between Myanmar’s different ethnicities and to empower and advocate for the rights of marginalized women in Arakan and Myanmar. Through the Women’s Peace Network she has been campaigning for women’s rights. Nu has been working to reduce discrimination and hatred among Buddhist and Muslim communities and improve human rights situation of her people, Rohingya. Nu has conducted women’s empowerment training, offered legal education seminars, and organized human rights and peacebuilding activities.

In 2014, she founded Justice for Women, which operates as a network of female lawyers providing legal consultation and education for the women of Myanmar. She also organized a campaign called the My Friend Campaign with youth from different communities to promote tolerance and to reduce discrimination among diverse groups. In 2016, to engage youth in the peacebuilding process, Wai Wai founded the Yangon Youth Center - a space where young people from diverse backgrounds can come together to learn, share, and explore their ideas and promote leadership in social, political, and peace-building policy making.

She was awarded the N-Peace award (peace generation) and selected as one of the 100 Top Women by the BBC in 2014. She was named a Democracy Courage Tribute in 2015 by World Movement for Democracy. Nu was also recognized as one of the 100 inspiring women by Salt Magazine and one of the 100 Global Thinkers in 2015 by Foreign Policy Magazine respectively. She was listed as one of the Next Generation Leaders in the world by Time Magazine in March 2017. Nu was also awarded the 2017 Hillary Rodham Clinton Award for Advancing Women in Peace and

"I was arrested when I was 18 years old because my father was a Member of Parliament for the political opposition in Burma. Eventually my entire family was arrested. I spent 7 years in prison until I was released in 2012.

Since I was a kid I have seen and lived a lot of injustice—I understand how it feels, the challenges faced by women and the poor people in my country. I realized the political system in Burma doesn't benefit all of us, and since then I have tried to change the system to better the situation of women. We must see that all human beings are the same. We have to take care of each other to build a beautiful world."

– WAI WAI NU



"It is very selective, targeted discrimination over an entire [Rohingya] population. So for myself – I am not free. My community is not free. My country is not free. Their lives have been deprived of all freedom, all dignity as a human being. It is a big trauma as a society."
– WAI WAI NU

Security by Georgetown University Institute of Women Peace and Security. She is also a Young Global Leader at the World Economic Forum and was named an Impact Hero 2019 by the Earth Company. Most recently Columbia World Projects (CWP) announced that Wai Wai is part of the second cohort of Obama Foundation Scholars at Columbia University.

The Rohingya have long been treated as outsiders in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, even though their families have lived in the country for generations. Nearly all Rohingya have been denied citizenship since 1982, effectively rendering them stateless. They are denied freedom of movement and other basic rights of the Rohingya peoples, and many young Rohingya feel a great sense of hopelessness.

The ethnic division and violence between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar has continued to escalate, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless— mostly Rohingya. According to Amnesty International, the Rohingya have suffered from human rights violations under Myanmar’s military dictatorship since 1978, and are among the most persecuted people on the planet. Beginning in 2017, renewed violence, including reported rape, murder, and arson, triggered an exodus of Rohingya amid charges of ethnic cleansing against Myanmar’s security forces. More than 14,500 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh between January and November 2018 to escape ongoing persecution and violence in Myanmar, joining almost 1 million others from 2017 and previous years in precarious, in the overcrowded camps. And the conditions remain dire for the estimated 500,000-600,000 Rohingya still in Rakhine State.

Wai Wai’s Work:

Wai Wai and activists like her are doing important work in promoting tolerance in Myanmar and the engagement of women and youth to end human rights abuses. Myanmar’s ongoing violence against ethnic minorities is a challenge to Wai Wai’s work, but her hopes for Myanmar remain the same; democracy and the protection of equal rights for all.

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About the CEW+ Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist Program:

The Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist (VSA) Program brings to CEW+ a social justice activist whose work affects women and recognizes gender equity issues from an intersectional lens. One goal of the program is to build the capacity and effectiveness of social activists while amplifying the voices of underserved populations. This is accomplished by giving the VSA time, space and support to work on a project that would not be possible under the activist’s usual working circumstances. The VSA program is made possible through a generous gift from U-M alumna Twink Frey and her husband, the late James McKay.



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