



ASIA-PACIFIC

SHE INSPIRES

A REGIONAL FEATURE FROM THE ASIA-PACIFIC
ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2020



ICRC

Essayist Anais Nin said, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.” It is this fortitude that women like Ho Chanty and Momtaz, along with others whose stories we narrate in the following pages, embody. When not much was working in their favour, these women – with a nudge and a little help from the International Committee of the Red Cross – turned things around.

This International Women’s Day, we pan the lens across the Asia-Pacific region and bring you inspirational stories from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Thailand. Provided with cash grants for their small business ventures as part of ICRC’s Economic Security (EcoSec) initiatives, these women rewrote their stories into tales of confidence and strong legacy. Making this regional feature extra special is a story of a young ICRC engineer who says being a woman is a strength, and not a weakness! Let’s read on.

COVER PHOTO: MA SU HLAING WITH HER CHILDREN IN THEIR HOUSE IN HSIPAW, MYANMAR

As a mother of two toddlers, Hsipaw resident Ma Su Hlaing has her hands full. But despite her long and tiring days, she occasionally takes out time to talk to community members about the risks related to unexploded ordnance and landmines.

Two years ago, when Ma Su Hlaing was expecting her second baby and went into labour, her husband Kyaw Thet and his brother trekked to get some medicinal herbs from the nearby mountains. But the trip turned tragic when they stepped onto a mine and lost their lives.

Left alone to take care of two young children, Ma Su Hlaing received some financial support from the ICRC to make ends meet.

Today, like a few other members of the community in Shan state who work with the ICRC and Myanmar Red Cross Society to spread awareness about landmine-related risks, she warns about the dangers of making that trek to the mountains and advises people to be safe than sorry.



COX'S BAZAR: PLANTING SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

It is a bright summer morning in the southern part of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Momtaz Begum, a single mother of six children, is out in the field tending her farm along with her eldest son. Back home, her only daughter Julekha prepares breakfast for the family before heading to college.

But things were different five years ago when Momtaz's husband was still alive, she says. Left with no choice but to be strong, she quickly picked up from where her husband had left off. Her day begins with harvesting vegetables sown by her husband in the fields and ends with collecting firewood from the forest to support the family.

"It is not an easy life, especially during the summer and monsoon seasons. I sometimes struggle to sell all the crops due to extreme weather conditions. Irrigating the farm remains a big challenge since the nearby stream is contaminated with wastewater from a camp where displaced people from Rakhine have settled," Momtaz shares.

Having learnt about the microeconomic initiative during a meeting organized by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and the ICRC, Momtaz applied for a grant. After the details were reviewed, she received a conditional grant that is provided to host families affected by the influx of displaced people from Rakhine. Having invested the money to improve things in

the field, she uses the profit from selling harvested corn and radish to meet the needs of the family and support her children's education. With the additional profit, the family has also bought a cow.

"It is not an easy life, especially during the summer and monsoon seasons."

– Momtaz Begum

For Momtaz, just the hope that her six children will have a better future is motivation enough to work hard. Proud of her daughter Julekha, who is expected to graduate this year from Ukhiya College, Momtaz hopes that her five sons would soon return to school and build a better tomorrow.

Momtaz is one of the 890 people who received a cash grant in 2019 through the microeconomic initiatives implemented by the BDRCS and the ICRC in Cox's Bazar. The ICRC continues to provide assistance and protection to both displaced people from Rakhine as well as Bangladeshi households affected by the influx.



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BATTAMBANG'S WONDER WOMAN

The year was 2015. In Battambang, Cambodia, a young woman had just received a grant of 1,000 US dollars from the ICRC's microeconomic initiative programme. Ho Chanty decided to use the grant money to help set up her mushroom business. Taking her husband's help, Chanty used part of the cash grant to repair their shed and roof. She had huge plans and she was not going to let polio get in the way of her dreams.

Fast forward to 2020, 29-year-old Chanty has a flourishing business in the mushroom industry. She makes her own specialized mushroom culture, called spawn, before she is ready to start the process, which she says, can be tricky and time-consuming. "However, this is a more profitable way compared to using ready-to-grow spawn provided by suppliers," Chanty says in her wise business-like manner.

On a good day, Chanty sells up to ten kilograms of mushroom – that is 3,500 Cambodian riel which equals 90 cents per kilogram. On a bad day, she sells a minimum of four kilograms.

But with 38-year-old Hak Samnang by her side, even the bad days turn into good ones. From traipsing over the city to buying ingredients and equipment, Chanty appreciates the infinite sup-

port she has received from her loving husband. Despite his job as a television and radio repairman in the village, they find time for each other.

Of course, time is a commodity that Chanty has learnt to manage quite expertly. Aside from running her mushroom business, Chanty spends her weekends playing basketball. She is a national-level player and a part of the Cambodia female wheelchair basketball team at the ICRC's physical rehabilitation centre.

Having overcome the many challenges of polio with her sheer grit, Chanty is grateful for the independence that the mushroom business has given her. Along with her mother and sister, Chanty maintains the mushroom farm diligently.

Not one to back down because of her disability, Chanty's leadership inspires her family members and her community alike.





STITCHING NEW DREAMS, ONE LOAN AT A TIME

Ranjana lost her husband in October 2004. The grief-stricken widow was left to fend for her son and daughter all alone in the north-eastern state of Manipur in India.

To help support her children, Ranjana started taking up local stitching projects. From darning a torn shirt to sewing a skirt from scratch, soon through word of mouth, friends, neighbours and acquaintances started passing on whatever work they came across. “Those were difficult times, but I knew I had to rise up to the challenge,” Ranjana recalls.

In 2015, Ranjana decided to take a loan of 10,000 Indian rupees from the Manipur state branch of the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) to buy new machines. “The going was slow,” Ranjana says. “I knew I needed help to make ends meet.”

Her dedication to her craft and her zeal to grow her business did not go unnoticed. In 2017, Ranjana received a grant of Rs 44,000 as part of the IRCS “Ashagee Mangal” (Ray of Hope) project, in collaboration with the ICRC. She also received training in business skills to boost her income.

Sixteen years down the line, 40-year-old Ranjana has set up her tailoring business and now provides employment to four other women. “Running my own tailoring shop gives me

confidence,” she says. “I want to impart this confidence to other women who are struggling.”

“Before this, I could only design and work on the items that came to me on order, which made it a bit of a tricky situation financially,” she says. “I could not create garments that weren’t ordered because I wasn’t sure if they would sell. Getting more machines gives me the freedom to create more independently.”

From designing to stitching, tailoring to embroidering, she does it all. Her 22-year-old son and 20-year-old daughter are also proud of their single mother’s achievements.

*Running my own tailoring
shop gives me confidence.*

– Ranjana

“Sometimes, I do get anxious thinking about what the future holds,” she says. “However, I am happy being able to teach my daughter the skills of stitching and tailoring. It’s nice to be able to pass on my knowledge to her so she can do well and not face the same difficulties I did.”

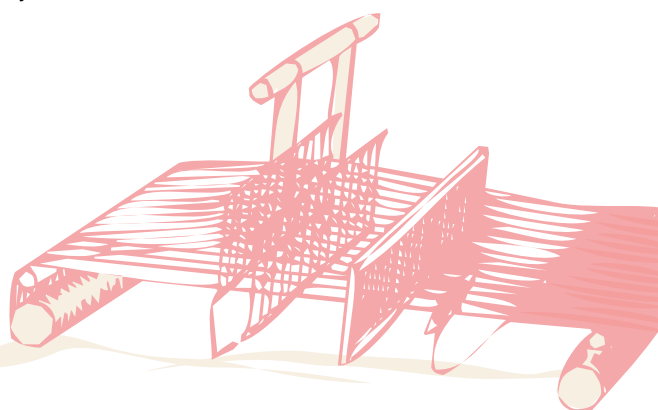


SHE WEAVES YARDS OF COURAGE AND HOPE

An air of tranquillity envelops this part of the camp in Kachin state as N Ka Roi Ja rhythmically weaves and spins piles of yarn to make the traditional Myanmar “longyis” (a type of sarong). Seated behind the loom, this mother of two has been staying in the camp for internally displaced people since 2016, when conflict threatened to destroy the peace in their village of Myit Hkrum in Kan Si, Hpakant township.

The modest dwellings are occupied by N Ka Roi Ja along with her son and daughter-in-law. Almost four years ago when they fled their village due to the clashes, the family did not have much to fall back on. A cash grant from the ICRC helped them start afresh and N Ka Roi Ja bought a loom to set up a small weaving business.

Cheerful and ever-smiling despite the daily hardships, N Ka Roi Ja weaves two “longyis” a month, with each selling for close to 40,000 Myanmar kyats. And though life isn’t the same as it was back home, N Ka Roi Ja’s infectious laughter makes everything in the camp seem a little less grey.



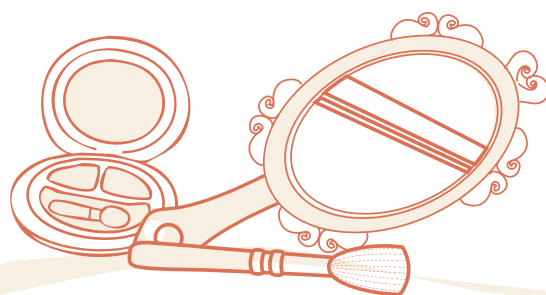


A BEAUTIFUL LIFE: WHEN MARRY'S DREAMS CAME TRUE

As she creates a flawless smokey-eye look for one of her customers, 22-year-old Ma Marry can't help but beam as she gets talking about her salon in Kutkai township. The young makeup artist lives with her family in Kar Lai Zup Awng village, Kutkai township, where they shifted in early 2019.

Having dreamt of eyeshadow palettes and lipstick shades ever since she was a little girl, Marry recently completed a course in beauty and makeup skills. Thereon, the young beauty aficionado became the proud owner of the eponymously named "Marry Beauty Salon" in Kar Lai village after she received 2.1 million Myanmar kyats as part of the ICRC's microeconomic initiative.

Not only does she love giving makeovers and latest haircuts in her salon, but Marry also mentors students by providing them with an opportunity to intern with her once they have completed the training course. Supporting her family and living her dream – these are a few of Marry's favourite things.





R. Ang/ICRC

MAKING A SPLASH WITH HER ENGINEERING SKILLS

Having been with the ICRC for nearly four years now, Bunny Rose Manlod radiates wisdom when she says being a woman in the male-dominated field of engineering is a strength, and not a weakness. “Instead of focusing on the things you can’t do, why not focus on the ones you can?” she says matter-of-factly. Perhaps it’s this nonchalance that helps 27-year-old Bunny turn the shock that people often feel when they see a “woman engineer” into a warmer acceptance and reception.

Words to live by

Always carry passion in your heart, accept your limitations but never let the little things deter you!

It’s all about the perspective

As a Water and Habitat (WatHab) engineer in the field, I’ve accepted and embraced that there will be some things that I can’t do. Instead of feeling frustrated about that and losing momentum, I would rather excel at what I CAN do.

Don’t quit

Once while working in a remote corner of Bukidnon in northern Mindanao, I walked four hours just to reach the community where the water line had to be installed. We found a good source but I was the only one from the ICRC there and faced a lot of challenges in trying to communicate with the community members in their dialect, which I’m not conversant with. We finally established contact with people in the camp and directed

them to get pipes and fittings to the identified water source. After a lot of struggle to fit the pipes and install a connection, we finally managed to get the system in place. But when we tried to draw water, it did not rise through the pipes due to the steep mountains. In the end, all effort was futile. But we did not lose heart and continued our search for the perfect water source!

“Always carry passion in your heart, accept your limitations but never let the little things deter you!”

– Bunny Rose Manlod

Biggest motivator

The smiles on the faces of people who have benefited from our efforts. That’s the biggest and only reward I seek and it keeps me going despite the tough days.

Strength of a woman

As a woman, I feel I can connect better with the community when out there. The women who I meet in the field feel reassured and I feel good that I’m able to contribute towards making their lives a tad easier.



M. Kamili/ICRC

THE PALMYRAH GODDESS

Anulawathie lost her husband to the Trincomalee seas back in 1999. She remembers the last time she saw him take off in his fishing boat, in the black pre-dawn of the early morning, and wishes she had hugged him one last time. “Maybe I should have stopped him from going fishing that day, maybe I should have gone as well, maybe it would have changed the course of our lives.” But no one could have predicted the future – neither the winds which swept her husband away, nor the uncertainty which has plagued her life from that moment on.

The only certainty in 57-year-old Anulawathie’s life now is her passion for weaving.

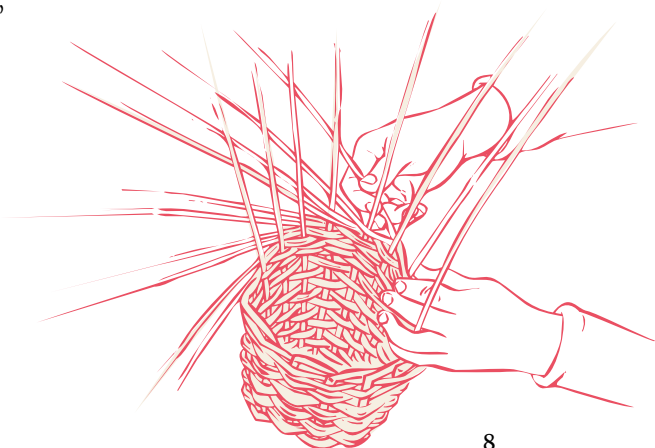
Living in the small coastal village of Kirinda, Tissamaharamaya, in Sri Lanka, Anulawathie started weaving as a mode of self-expression. What started as weaving small products like bags and ornaments turned into bigger projects such as mosquito nets as her confidence grew by leaps and bounds. “I can now weave a basket out of thin air in ten minutes flat,” she quips.

Her neighbours call her the “palmyrah goddess”. “Her fingers move so fast, deftly creating beautiful ornaments out of dry leaves,” a neighbour says. “It is a pleasure to watch her work with such concentration.”

The ICRC’s EcoSec team visited her village and recognized her passion for the crafts – especially weaving products from palmmyrah leaves. Her talent has brought her bulk orders from across the region. “My products travel far and wide,” she beams with pride.

She also supplies palmmyrah bags, decorative ornaments and mosquito nets to retail shops. In addition to these activities that keep her busy, Anulawathie takes part in exhibitions to promote her community’s businesses and activities.

When asked what keeps her going, Anulawathie says, “My vision is to expand my business, learn and grow as a person.” She adds, “I also want to set an example for other women of the craft association to keep chasing their dreams and to never give up on them regardless of the hardships they face in life.”





M. Kamil/ICRC

NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES. SOME SEW THEM

It took Nilanthini 19 long years of moving all over Sri Lanka before she found a place she could call home. By the time she finally settled down in Soruvil, Polonnaruwa district, she had lived at 27 different places, lost a husband, raised an 11-year-old daughter and learnt how to sew.

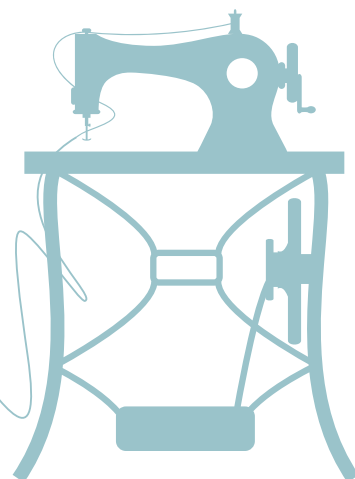
She was six months pregnant with her daughter Sujani when her husband went missing. Forced to eke out a living to sustain her daughter and herself, 37-year-old Nilanthini started sewing with a passion.

“I work hard for my daughter to provide her with the best education and a good lifestyle,” she says. “These are things I had missed out on when I was her age. I was not able to fully experience the love of a mother as she passed away when I was very young. Seeing my daughter grow into a beautiful woman and being able to support her through her journey is my ultimate source of happiness.”

Her sewing talents were noticed by the ICRC’s EcoSec team in the region and they decided to

help promote her small business. With their support, she was able to set up a small enterprise. She now has a loyal customer base and her weekly income is almost 20,000 Sri Lankan rupees. This number goes up during the festive season.

“I want my daughter to have a stable life, a comfortable house and a complete family. If it means staying up the entire night sewing bags and dresses, I am ready to do that and more,” she says. Not all heroes wear capes, some sew them.





A. Ramsey/ICRC

TIED AND DYED WITH LOVE

Around the world, the ICRC helps not just individuals affected by situations of violence, but entire communities too.

This holistic humanitarian approach led to the ICRC's first community support programme. In 2017, we started providing support to a group of women creating locally-sourced handicraft products in the mixed Buddhist-Muslim village of Na Tham in Thailand's southern Yala province.

"The group's name, Si Ma Ya, comes from the Ma Ya clay which is found in abundance in the famous Na Tham cave – once a popular tourist destination," explains Naowarat Noipong, the president of the group. "While in the past, people avoided contact with the clay because of its staining properties, we decided to exploit the clay's strong indelible properties for creating unique tie-dye patterned fabrics."

With a little help from the ICRC, the group was able to showcase their growing product line, as well as the unique Na Tham-specific techniques used to make them, in markets all over the country.

"It means the world to me when people visit us and buy goods to take back home as souvenirs," says 61-year-old Sansungwan. In charge of accounting and purchasing, she has grown a strong bond with all the women over the years.

"We have become so close. Everyone is like a sister or a daughter. I would like to see the group grow, develop and generate more revenue," Noipong says.

From meticulous fabric patterns which are folded, twisted and bound with rubber bands to making bleached patterns now synonymous with Si Ma Ya products, the women spend hours together creating magic. The end results are products that speak volumes about the hard work and creativity of the women behind the handiwork.

The handmade items have attained such popularity that the group now has a dedicated Facebook page, which motivates the women to try out new products.

"As soon as I wake up I start imagining the unique patterns and fabrics I will create," says 62-year-old Chuanchuen Inthornsuth, who is in charge of production. "That's how much my work excites me!"



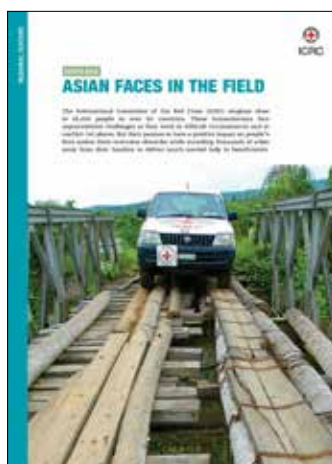
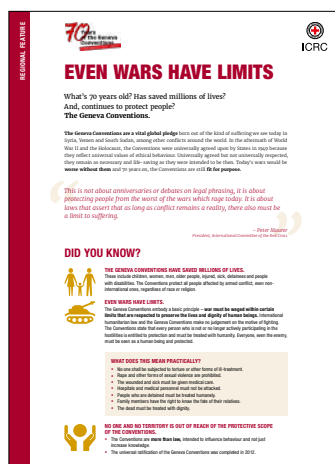
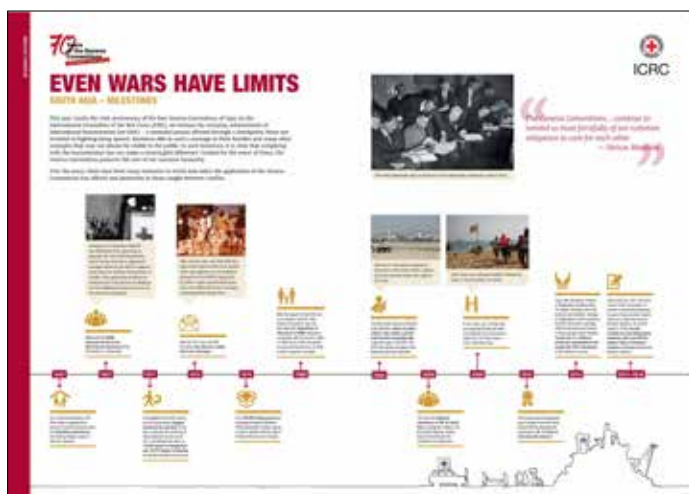
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