

THE MIDDLE PATH: HOW HNUNI TRANSFORMED TRADITION INTO TRIBAL LEADERSHIP

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The Journey of Hnuni: From Silence to Leadership

The story of Hnuni is a powerful testament to the transition from a constrained life of tradition to the forefront of humanitarian leadership in Myanmar. As a Chin ethnic woman, her path was initially shaped by her father's religious commitment to dedicate his firstborn to God, leading her to achieve an impressive academic foundation in India and Amsterdam. It was during these studies that she encountered the concepts of gender equality and tribal rights, sparking the feminist convictions that would define her career. However, her return to Myanmar presented a stark contrast to her education.

HNUNI'S STORY



Upon marrying into a conservative denomination, she was barred from leadership roles and preaching, relegated instead to secondary tasks despite her qualifications. For nearly a decade, she navigated this "patriarchal religious system" by suppressing her true self to maintain family harmony while raising two sons.



I WAS SO FED UP WITH THE MALE DOMINANT PATRIARCHAL RELIGIOUS SYSTEM WHERE MY PROFESSION IS FIXED... I WAS STRUGGLING WITH MY CAREER, FAMILY, YOU KNOW, THEN I THINK THIS IS THE BEST OPTION.

The Catalyst for Change and the Birth of HLD0

The catalyst for change arrived in 2013 when a group of elderly men gathered in her home to discuss a way to serve their native Hualngo land. While Hnuni was initially there only to serve tea as a daughter-in-law, the founders realized they lacked the technical skills and English fluency necessary to connect with their global diaspora. Seizing this opportunity, she became a founding member and the secretary of the Hualngo Land Development Organization (HLD0). Although the organization began with a narrow focus on agriculture and food security, it provided the professional escape Hnuni desperately needed.

This evolution was fueled by Hnuni's relentless commitment to utilizing her knowledge and skills, which had been suppressed for so long. She describes this period as a time of "self-giving," where she worked without a salary, driven by the joy of finally being allowed to contribute to her community. Her dedication did not go unnoticed, as she took on the monumental task of managing all communications, digital files, and planning for a committee of over 100 executive members spread across the world.



Initially, the mission was simple: improve agricultural yields and preserve the environment by sending a candidate to a rural leadership institute in Japan. Hnuni played a pivotal role in this first success, managing the selection process and fundraising through local contributions. When the institute specifically requested a female candidate, it further validated Hnuni's belief in the necessity of women's involvement in rural leadership. This small victory set the stage for a much larger evolution that would redefine the organization's scope.



I was not allowed to do for eight to nine years. And now I can do... I'm doing whatever I know, like I'm contributing, you know, I'm using my skills and knowledge, freely using it.

Strategic Growth through External Investment



A major partnership in 2014 shifted HLDO's mission toward community-led development and human capacity building. International partners recognized Hnuni's enthusiasm and invested \$50,000 USD to help HLDO build the capacity of 30 villages. This investment was a turning point, transforming a small group of volunteers into a professional organization capable of managing complex humanitarian projects. For Hnuni, this was the first time her leadership was truly appreciated by an external institution, providing a shield against the patriarchal norms of her local context.

Despite this support, the transition was not without technical hurdles. Hnuni had to teach herself the intricacies of financial reporting, Excel formulas, and the rigorous policy requirements of international NGOs. She spent seven days a week fully committed to these new tasks, often acting as the sole person responsible for both high-level strategy and ground-level implementation. This period of rapid learning ensured that HLDO met the professional standards required to sustain long-term growth.

The organization's mettle was truly tested when a severe cyclone submerged the city of Hakha in Chin State. Under Hnuni's guidance, HLDO pivoted to emergency response, distributing seedlings and farming grants to devastated communities. This successful response solidified the community's trust in Hnuni, proving that a woman-led organization could deliver results in times of crisis. The "trust building" that typically takes years was achieved in just one through her visible competence and resilience.

They was hearing to our stories and all. Then they said, okay, you are found quite committed, you are quite enthusiastic... they risked on us.



Navigating the Middle Path of Leadership

Hnuni's leadership is defined by what she calls the "middle path", a strategic approach to achieving goals within a patriarchal society by being "smartly convincing" rather than purely confrontational. To balance her demanding career with her domestic life, she initially chose to give her husband management over the household budget and domestic decisions, such as which schools the children should attend. By navigating the system from within, she was able to pursue her goals without the "pain" of total cultural alienation.

By framing her work not as a personal ambition but as a collective family commitment to their people and land, she successfully integrated her professional goals with her family's values. She emphasized that her efforts were for the blessing of the entire family and the Hualngo community. This framing was crucial in winning over her father-in-law, who deeply loved his motherland and saw Hnuni's work as a continuation of that legacy.

This sacrificial approach eventually won the full support of her husband and sons, creating a "win-win" environment where her family now assists with household chores so she can focus on her mission. Her sons, now teenagers, support her by handling laundry and other tasks because they believe in the importance of her work. Hnuni maintains that a leader must be the most hardworking and sacrificial person in any group to truly inspire change.

” I am going the middle path... reaching to my goal without you know without so much pain... we should be wise in convincing people and then to convince people we should be quite smart.

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Empowering the Next Generation of Women

Hnuni has even brought her children to the field to see the impact of her work, ensuring they understand the value of mobilizing people to gain their own dignity. She views this as a form of parenting that instills respect for humanity and social justice in the next generation. Her home has transformed from a place of suppression to a hub of shared vision and mutual support.

Her message to the next generation of women is that capacity is the ultimate agency; she believes that while men may have more systemic advantages, a woman who works harder to fill her "capacity cup" becomes an indispensable leader who cannot be neglected. She encourages young women to never be lazy and to focus on building skills that make them resilient in any environment. For Hnuni, professional skill is the only tool strong enough to negotiate with patriarchy.

Keep fill up your capacity women...
so that you can be sustainable...
I am here because of my capacity.





Ultimately, Hnuni's story is one of sustainable resilience through wisdom and hard work. She remains dedicated to HLD0 and the Hualngo people, proving that leadership does not always require loud rebellion, but can be built through consistent, high-capacity service. By filling her own capacity, she has not only changed her own life but has opened the door for countless other women in Myanmar to do the same.

About SHIFT Asia

SHIFT Asia (Supporting Humanitarian Initiatives for Transformation in Asia) is an initiative that advances women's local humanitarian leadership and drives gender-transformative change across Asia, working specifically in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

