Htay Htay Hlaing: The Builder

by Scarlett Hawkins – Advocacy Manager
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Myanmar is a country that has undergone great changes from the last century during its rapid change to democracy. With its borders opening formally to tourism in 2013, the world has been granted an insight into one of the most beautiful and interesting countries in the world. With 7 Regions, 7 States and 1 Naypyidaw Union Territory, 135 ethnic groups and enormous geographic spread, Myanmar is a country where improvement of maternal and newborn health outcomes can be rapid and significant.

Htay Htay Hlaing has been a midwife since 1988 and is as enthusiastic about her career as she was when it began.

“Since I was young, I have aimed to become a nurse–midwife,” Htay Htay says, “I wanted to deliver healthcare from womb to tomb. I love midwifery and ante-, intra- and post-natal and newborn care, and also attending to their families.”

Though based in the country’s capital of Naypyidaw, Htay Htay acknowledges the enormous need for midwives across the country.

“Midwives work mostly in villages or people’ homes,” she explained, “Many are based in rural and also hard-to-reach areas.”

This means that the demands on midwives are considerable, and many are required by necessity to blend their maternity care role with others. When Htay Htay first qualified, Myanmar’s maternity health services included care of women during the pregnancy, labor and postpartum periods, as well as care of newborns and family planning.

“Nowadays, Midwives play a critical role in ensuring that women, adolescents, child and newborns survive and thrive,” she explains. Midwifery services are delivered at the primary levels where standard care, basic emergency care and outreach services are the main priorities, to the secondary and tertiary levels – the latter of which also serve as referral centers for comprehensive care.

“We provide midwifery services according to National Standards, World Health Organisation (WHO) and International
Confederation of Midwives (ICM) guidelines,” Htay Htay says. “There is more emphasis now on preventing health problems in pregnancy and the early detection of abnormal conditions.”

Education is a subject of which Htay Htay is clearly enthusiastic: she is currently responsible for academic affairs, administration and financial management of all 50 nursing and midwifery schools across the country. Building the capacity a country to ensure all women, newborns and families have access to a competent and well-resourced midwife is not an easy task, but Htay Htay is diligent. By ensuring that all maternal and newborn health policy is informed by evidence, the quality of midwifery education (and that of nursing) is improving considerably.

“This year, the two-year Midwifery Diploma curriculum has been upgraded so it is in line with both Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ICM standards,” she says. “Our two-year Bachelor of Midwifery Science (Bridge) Program will be implemented in the 2019–2020 academic year.” Its focus, she explains, is to improve midwifery education and ensure that the careers of midwives can be developed further. At the core of it all, it is clear that Htay Htay’s true passion is to help build a system that can reduce maternal and newborn mortality in her country with the help of midwives.

“We want to improve the health of women and their families and progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,” she says. “This is such a wonderful job: catching gorgeous, healthy babies and helping mothers facilitate a natural part of their lives.”

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