

IS SOCIAL MEDIA CONTRIBUTING TO VIOLENCE?

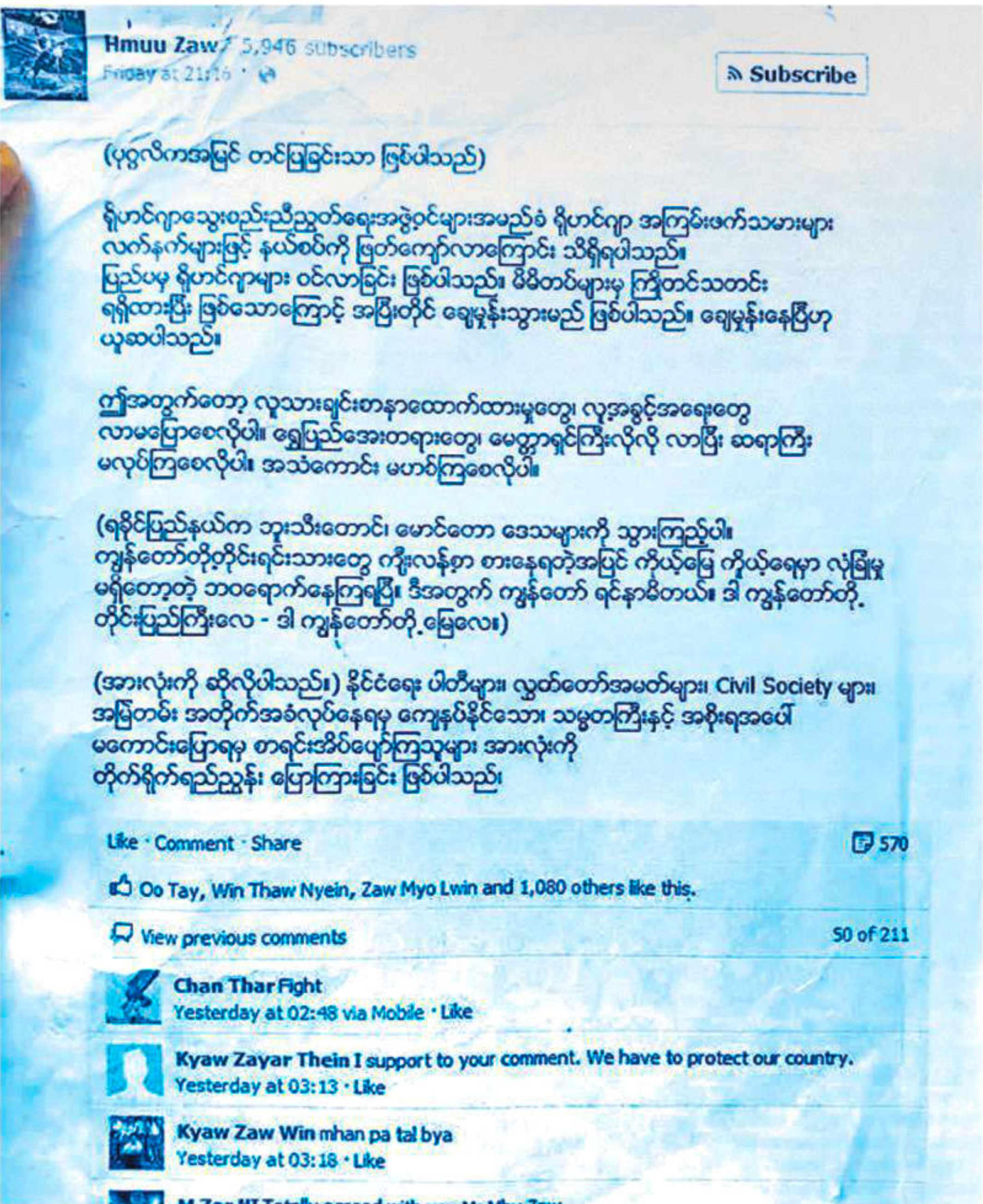
After page 5 says in a post on the topic, “We are opposed to hate speech in all its forms, and don’t allow it on our platform.” Facebook posts are monitored manually in its Silicon Valley headquarters with the help of a team of content reviewers on the ground in Myanmar. Challenges in understanding the context of local languages far away in Asia mean many hate-filled posts remain up on the site and may have helped incite violence against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine. Facebook’s head of news feed, Adam Mosseri, said in a recent podcast interview on *Slate*: “Connecting the world isn’t always going to be a good thing... We’re trying to take the issue seriously, but we lose some sleep over this.” One point of contention has been the

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slur *kalar* which, though historically benign, is nowadays primarily used to denigrate Muslims in Myanmar. In the case of *kalar*, Facebook has stated that the word is subject to selective policing as it can also be used innocuously in addition to being an anti-Muslim slur. “We looked at the way the word’s use was evolving, and decided our policy should be to remove it as hate speech when used to attack a person or group, but not in the other harmless use cases,” the post explains. In addition to hate speech, propaganda by government officials such as Htay also proliferates on Facebook. In another post on July 30 last year, Suu Kyi’s office posted that high energy biscuits distributed by the World Food Programme (WFP) of the UN had been found at an alleged Rohingya “terrorist” camp in the Mayu mountains (the post is no longer up on the site but a statement

by Htay on Twitter still is). Human rights groups and the UN denounced the post as irresponsible and fueling anti-aid worker sentiments. “Government officials have used Facebook to spread false information, seed hatred, and reinforce negative and discriminatory stereotypes,” argues Matthew Smith, head of Fortify Rights, a human rights organisation working in Southeast Asia. Suu Kyi also earlier rejected well-documented allegations and evidence of rape during the violence—her official Facebook page calling one woman’s story “fake rape”. “In Myanmar, officials regard inconvenient facts as fake news and absurd views as the truth. It’s one of the last governments on earth that should be legislating around what’s real and what’s fake in the news,” says Smith to *Star Weekend*. The government continues to focus on the few cases where the media published news on the Rohingya that turned out to be fake.

All that is battling hate speech, rumours and misinformation is policing by Facebook, which is falling short. According to Lwin, who frequently posts on Facebook about what he hears is happening on the ground from a network of activists based in Rakhine, “Many posts of Rohingya activists are taken down and accounts disabled while hate speech posts against the Rohingya remain active.” He cites Facebook’s unfamiliarity with the Zawgyi font and, though it now works with a Burmese team to moderate posts, questions the team’s neutrality. Human rights groups have also alleged that the government is behind pro-Rohingya Facebook and Twitter accounts and posts on the situation in Rakhine being deleted. “This marks the first time that social media has played such a significant role in contributing to a genocide,” says Dr Hussain. The situation in Rakhine, in his



The June 2012 Facebook post by then deputy director general of the presidential office, Zaw Htay, alleging that “Rohingya terrorists” with weapons were infiltrating Myanmar.

opinion, draws parallels to the genocide in Rwanda in the early 90s, where the radio was used to inflame the Hutus against the minority Tutsis by dehumanising the latter. “Hate speech should be shut down immediately and Facebook should have been tackling this long before now, when it’s been called out for it,” he says. More recently, Facebook has also been called out for its role in Sri Lanka where anti-Muslim violence in Kandy, boosted by viral posts and videos encouraging the violence, led to a nationwide state of emergency last month. “I wouldn’t go so far as to blame Facebook directly for the violence in

Rakhine, but it hasn’t been a neutral force in the country. As a platform, Facebook has done more than any other to spread hate-filled anti-Rohingya sentiment throughout the country,” says Smith. The other side of the coin, of course, is that Facebook and other social media sites and messaging apps have enabled Rohingya citizen journalists and activists from within Rakhine to tell their stories to the outside world. While accounts of violence at the hands of Myanmar security forces are now being shared, so too has anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim sentiment spread across the rest of the country. ■

PERSPECTIVE

The bedtime of weekends turns out to be the most intimate moment of exchange between us, mother and daughter. That is the time when my mother opens her heart to me and reveals her darkest fears, her deepest pains and disappointments from the past.

Sometimes, I feel surprised at her sharp memory: the accuracy with which she remembers the details, the incidents, the characters that tormented her or verbally abused her. The only child of her parents, and motherless since three months of infancy, she grew up in the reluctant shelter of relatives, playing in the fields of northern India. Her father, then a young widower, devastated at the loss of his wife and grief-stricken not knowing how to raise a baby, left the house and estates and took to mad wanderings for a few years and never married again. She grew up with her maternal grandma, who too died when mother was four, leaving her to the care of maternal aunts.

She remembers the incidents of fun and mischief with her cousins, and she tells me all, as I sleep by her side. She tells me the terrible pain of unfulfilled dreams of being a doctor. Alas, she never learnt to read or write. Her father had to travel all over the country for business. Sensing that an itinerant life would not benefit his daughter, he trusted her in the hands of an acquaintance and made no reservation in paying the foster family all expenses of his daughter. He paid for his daughter’s education too, but the foster mother used up the money without allowing my mother to go to school. Her father also assigned a private tutor to her, but she never got the free time to study or do his homework. Her father thought that the foster parents were taking good care of her with the handsome amount he was sending every month. My mother—a little girl of nine or ten years of age—never complained to her father of the slaps, the dragging-by-the-hair, the pitiless beatings with a metal ladle from her foster mother. She never complained of the household work that kept her awake till midnight, and the additional one hour that she had to remain awake to sit by and guard her foster mother while the latter offered *Tahajjud* prayers. And mother had to wake up in the wee hours to fill buckets and pitchers with drinking water, and prepare breakfast and lunch for her foster father before he left for work. She looked on as her foster parents fed their son—the same age as my mother—with eggs, milk, butter and jam, all that was paid for her too, but which she was denied.

And through all this, my mother saw her most cherished dream of being educated melt into nothingness. A descendant of wealthy feudal landlords, “*Twinkle, twinkle little star*” was the only rhyme she got to learn as a child. What I find so remarkable about her life is that she never uttered a word of complaint; she always bore



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

THE MOTHER
A TRIBUTE TO
A HOMEMAKER

NAZNEEN AHMED

her agonies, those tortures, in silence, which today appears saintly to me. Hearing the sound of beatings, her neighbours would come to rescue her and want to inform her father, but she would request them not to do so. On the contrary, when her father made his monthly visit to her, she would lie to him: she was having a beautiful time with the family and so on. The unsuspecting father would leave knowing only the lies, unaware of the stories of deprivation, amid the

abundance he provided, in his daughter’s life. Perhaps those lies were meant to protect her grieving father from the knowledge that his daughter was in pain; or perhaps, while lying to save her tormentors, the 10-year-old was bestowing the forgiveness that should have come from her seniors. Today, I understand what Kahlil Gibran meant, “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”

She was relieved of this distress when her father finally reduced his business travels and took up a house, asking her to move in. In time she got married. Once I asked her, “What was the first thing that father told you when you met each other on the wedding night?” “I don’t remember anymore,” she had said. But after a few moments, I saw tears trickling down her cheeks, tears that testified the mountains of differences with her husband—an educated man from Jharkand—differences of personality and perspective, but literacy being the most poisonous difference that brought her only underestimation and disregard from her husband. She endured all to keep the marriage alive.

On the night of Feb 10, the intimate exchange between the insomniac mother and daughter began. My mother poured out her sorrows to me: “When I die, I will ask Almighty why he brought me to earth at all when he was to inflict only pain and suffering upon me? When I was to accomplish nothing and remain illiterate all my life?” My 58-year-old mother wept by my side like a child. I did not have words. I fought hard to hide my own tears. Then I said, “You have not accomplished anything in your own eyes, but in others’ eyes, you are an accomplished woman. You are a failure in your own eyes, but in others’ eyes—in *my* eyes—you are a success. Your life carries the message of magnanimity, sacrifice and great tolerance. You did not let the wickedness of people destroy the beauty of your soul, and with this invincible spirit you raised a beautiful family.”

My words were not to console her. We have learnt to measure a nation’s success through its GDP; likewise, we laud the achievements of women in the public sphere on International Women’s Day but overlook the unsung work of the homemakers, who, without holding any office or fancy academic degrees, have provided the most valuable input that a nation needs to nurture sensible citizens—a home.

They are the noble homemakers that stayed behind walls, but nevertheless, created blossoming gardens in the midst of concrete. And this huge responsibility requires not just sacrifice, but also competence. Just as project management requires organisational and financial skills, so does a household. Just as a corporate manager requires emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication skills to manage a team of diverse members and differing opinions, so does a homemaker to build consensus and bring all members on the same dinner table. The difference lies only in recognition.

And so I assure my mother that she is not a failure but the most magnanimous and enlightened person, someone who has taken life’s challenges head on.

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ABOUT TOWN



DRAWING AND THINKING, THINKING AND DRAWING-1
DHALI AL MAMOON’S ART EXHIBITION
Organiser: Artitude
March 10- April 17, 5-8 pm, Kala Kendra, Mohammadpur



SMART CITY HACKATHON 2018

Organiser: Preneur Lab - Social Good Company and United Nations Development Programme in Bangladesh
Apr 13-14, 9-6 pm, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Novo Theatre



APPROPRIATION IN WRITING
PANEL DISCUSSION
Organiser: Gourmet Bazar Banani and Shazia Omar
April 13, 5-7 pm, Gourmet Bazar Banani



MACHINE NA MANUSH?
Organiser: Jatra Biroti Banani
April 14, 8-11 pm, Jatra Biroti, Banani