



Story 1: Sujauddin Karimuddin

Sujauddin Karimuddin was targeted by the Burmese government because of his Rohingya ethnic and religious identity when he was only 17 years old. A high school student at the time, Sujauddin (who goes by Suja) was prohibited from taking an exam as part of the rising crackdowns in Burma on the Rohingya ethnic minority's access to education, health care, and other basic rights. After challenging the government officer for a chance to take his exam, Suja was arrested, detained, beaten, and held in custody.

“After about 11 days I was released on bail, but with a very large sum of bribe,” he explains. But even then, paying the exorbitant fee was not enough to attain “guaranteed freedom,” in the words of the officer, who told Suja’s mom, “we may pick him up again.”



Afraid he might be arrested again and not make it out alive, Suja fled. “I fled by boat to Yangon and from Yangon to Thailand and Thailand to Malaysia and Malaysia to many other countries, ending up in Australia,” he explains. “I was in pretty bad shape when I was leaving, as you can imagine.”

Although he is now an Australian citizen, Suja first spent several years in Malaysia as a refugee and became closely acquainted with the lack of support and services many refugees there face. These experiences inspired Suja, along with other Rohingya community members, to found a non-profit community center in 2017 called Elom Empowerment, dedicated to supporting Rohingya refugees in and around Kuala Lumpur.

The work of Elom can be explained in part through its name, which has a double significance: “Elom” means knowledge in Rohingya, and the name also serves as an acronym for “Empowerment, Learning, Opportunities, Motivation and Mindfulness,” which are central goals of its work.

“When we talk about ‘what is your vision in life,’” Suja shares, “one thing I say is ‘I want to go home. Back where I’m from.’ The biggest thing is the sense of belonging, the sense of community.”

Elom provides a wide range of programs at its community center, including education, youth empowerment, community engagement, women’s empowerment, and livelihood assistance. Suja explains that they strive to “provide a safe space for refugees to come and breathe,” where they can practice their cultural traditions and have a sense of community and belonging.

As a new organization largely dependent on volunteer hours and donations from community members, Elom Empowerment began to struggle to maintain the center. “We were starting to struggle to sustain it any longer,” Suja explains. “UUSC provided us funds for operations, rent, and one staff member as well,” which helped “take off the burden from us just to sustain the venue.”

With UUSC’s help, the community center has regained a more secure footing and increased its reach, including expanding engagement with women and youth. Suja explains, “It gave us a lot of room to expand our work in engaging with the community.”

On a personal level, although Suja was able to build new community ties in Malaysia and Australia, he continues to live with the difficulty of having had to leave home. “When we talk about ‘what is your vision in life,’” Suja shares, “one thing I say is ‘I want to go home. Back where I’m from.’ The biggest thing is the sense of belonging, the sense of community.”

Through the community center, Suja and Elom Empowerment help to create a sense of community for refugees who have had to flee violence or oppression in their homes. “We

Links to Learn More

- [Video interview with Suja](#)
- [UUSC Discussion and Action Guide for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s online exhibit “Burma’s Path to Genocide”](#)

