

Feminism in Myanmar

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Executive Summary

The Burmese Women's Association, established in 1919, was the first women's organization in Myanmar (then called British Burma) and led by the wives of officials and rich women entrepreneurs. Following in its example, many other groups, while based on religion, emerged to promote national handwoven cloth and to preserve the culture and Buddhism against colonialism. Grass-roots women found representation eventually after female farmers, workers, journalists and students joined in the independence movements, and from them emerged many female leaders. Generally during the colonial period, women who were not of the elite communities participated in few roles of prominence. Women's rights activists (both from the grass roots and elites¹) raised their voices successfully for special laws granting women equal rights with men in marriage, divorce and inheritance², and they protested for the removal of the "sex disqualification clause" in the law barring women from contesting elections. Women's organizations, like the National Council of Women in Burma (1926), extended their coalition with international women's organizations, such the National Council of Women in India, although alignment with the Indian groups became a divisive issue during the colonial period.

In the parliamentary era (1948–1958), women's participation in politics at last was somewhat accepted and their numbers increased. But women in leadership positions were there to maintain their husband's or father's status and power (sometimes taking the government position of their husband upon his death). After the military coup in 1962, the social and political movements of women across the country once again became limited. The military oppression of the many ethnic populations stimulated their political activism; however, the violence committed against the women became a point of rebellion, reducing women's issues to their victimhood. Unlike the traditional women's groups that formed on the basis of religion and nationalism, exiled women's groups, largely of ethnic origin, were more progressive, even introducing the concept of "feminism" to their sisters who remained inside the country.

It is the women's organizations formed by activists, working women and students (not those organized by elite women) who have maintained their sense of sisterhood, coordinating in advocacy and to push for the empowerment for all women. Myanmar acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997. The Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, the leading government agency for women's issues, drafted the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022), based on the 2008 Constitution as well as the CEDAW recommendations and the 12 priority areas of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Under the Strategic Plan, the National Committee for Women's Affairs organized four working groups: i) women and participation; ii) women and peace; iii) violence against women; and iv) mainstreaming (coordinating on all issues into government policies and programming). The civil society groups working on women's rights issues have collaborated with the National Committee for Women's Affairs in the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

The more recent priorities of the women's organizations in Myanmar have been to empower women's participation in the economy and in politics. Forming women's income-generating groups has been key to promoting women's economic activities. Women's rights activists have thus far advocated unsuccessfully for a quota system that proscribes that 30 per cent of candidates or representatives in the ongoing peace process must be women. The increase of elected women to 10.5 per cent in the 2015 general election was the highest level in history, though it was far below the number of female Parliament members or their equivalent in other South-East Asian countries.

Women's organizations have begun engaging with men's groups as well as with LGBT rights organizations as partners on many common issues. Activists have heavily embraced digital media, particularly social media, to raise awareness on gender equality and to stimulate activism. Nonetheless, women's groups remain challenged by male-dominated groups seeking to protect the deeply rooted patriarchy ruling most of daily life in Myanmar.

Introduction

Myanmar is a least developed country in South-East Asia, located between the world's most populous countries, China and India. According to the 2014 census, 51.5 million people live in Myanmar (MPHC, 2015: 1), with a sex ratio of 51.8 per cent female to 48.2 per cent male. Its 2017 Human Development Index rank is 148 of 189 countries, while its Gender Inequality Index puts it at 106 of 160 countries. Women occupy 10.2 per cent of parliamentary seats. Only 28.7 per cent of women have completed secondary education, although the proportion is far greater than the 22.3 per cent for men. An estimated 178 women die for every 100,000 live births. And the female labour force accounts for 51.3 per cent of the female population, while the male labour force is 79.9 per cent of the male population (UNDP, 2017).

Although the country made a modicum of progress in its Human Development Index value between 1990 (at 0.358) and 2017 (at 0.578), traditional stereotypes and myths are deeply rooted in the society.

Myanmar ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, and as part of those obligations, the government committed to make and enforce laws that uphold women's rights and to promote women's security as well as equality in political and economic participation (GEN, 2013). According to the 1947, 1974 and 2008 Constitutions, women are to enjoy equal rights with men in the economic, social and political spheres. But as a country enriched with more than a hundred ethnicities and almost 60 years of armed conflicts, women's issues and their rights have long been the least priority.

When political liberation took hold in 2010, the movement for women's rights became louder. Yet, the sought-after

equal presence of women in political participation, in peace building and economic empowerment remains a struggle.

No matter how much the political system has evolved, traditional belief and practices cannot be changed overnight. The cultural norms present the biggest barrier to women's equal participation in the public sphere. In particular, strong religious myths, the customary laws of each ethnicity and patriarchal institutions keep women from their entitled freedoms and potential.

For starters, nearly 88 per cent of the population in Myanmar is Buddhist and believing in the concept of the male power known as *hpon* that comes to men at birth. Myanmar Buddhist women are considered "inferior" to men because they lack that power, while that power gives men the nobility of manhood. Second, because of traditional practices, ethnic women are losing their rights in inheritance as well as in marriage and divorce. Third, the State reinforces patriarchal institutionalization in defining women's role as in the family. In the household registration list or on the National Registration Card, women are always given the position of "dependant". The name of a girl's father is more important than hers for school enrolment and for the National Registration Card.

Despite the challenges and limitations, women's movements have been raising their voices since 1919. Although the first movements were based on patriotism, they emerged over time to fight for women's empowerment. This study examines the trends in women's movements since 1919 and the many women's organizations and coalitions, their agendas and barriers as well as how the movements are moving forward.

Historical Period 1900–1990

The historical accounts based on the literature of British officials and newspaper articles highlight that women in British Burma³ (as Myanmar was called then), unlike women in India or the West, enjoyed equal rights as men, particularly on the division of marriage property and inheritance.⁴ This belief was adopted from the practice of the majority Bamar⁵ group, which ignored other ethnic groups' customs. According to Ikeya (2006), British colonizers used the high status of women's rights in Burma as an indicator of just how civilized the country was (unlike elsewhere, where women had few rights, if any, thus living in an uncivilized society, which, in the colonizing British perspective, needed saving and thus became the "white man's burden"). The Burmese patriots, in resisting that colonization, used that "measure of civilization" to argue for liberation from the British (that they did not need "saving" by the allegedly superior British).

The British officials' praise of women's high status meant little in the colonizers' daily administration. The role of women was devalued in the census created by the British. Previously, as explained by Kumar (2006), the contribution of women to family income was recognized in the Burmese census exercises between 1872 and 1881, when they, due to their work and income, were documented as "producers". The census under the British rule, from 1901 onwards, defined women as "unproductive dependants", reflecting a failure to understand labour contribution within Burma's society and misinterpreting enumerators in the classification of types of jobs because the model was adapted from an industrialized country. Thus began the British colonials' attempt to construct their civilization agenda by devaluing Burmese women's status. The status of women became an important indicator of achieving imperialism.

It cannot be denied that the literacy rate of women improved under the British rule. The number of female students in private and public schools increased by 61 per cent from 1911 to 1921 and by 82 per cent from 1921 to 1931 (Ikeya, 2011b: 55). This progress, ironically, instilled the value of education for the advancement and independence of the country from colonialism, with national schools cropping up. The female university student population increased by tenfold in the early

twentieth century. The growing number of educated women along with the female employment rate in legal, medical, educational and media professions also improved.

The British administration used the increased number of graduated women as opportunity to import elite feminism favourable to the Western ideology. Yet, the increase in women's knowledge of international affairs and the imperialist doctrine led women into nationalism and to using the women's movements in the struggle for independence from the British.

The roots of the feminist movements and women's organizations before independence

Women's organizations under colonialism were established to promote women's role within the agenda of preserving nationalism, as determined by male-dominated organizations. The Young Men's Buddhist Association, founded in 1906, was the first largest prominent organization in the country; it aimed to protect the Buddhist-based culture against British rule. The first women's organization, the Burmese Women's Association, was formed in 1919, soon after the Young Men's Buddhist Association splintered into two fractions: the elder group remained apolitical while the younger group, which emerged as the General Council of Burmese Associations, embraced a political movement. The Burmese Women's Association, started by the wives of officials and rich women entrepreneurs and some 300 members, worked to strengthen the activities of the General Council of Burmese Associations for the advancement of Burmese women.

They focused on marriage between Burmese Buddhist men and women, Buddhist literature preservation, supporting national schools and promoting local textile production. They successfully lobbied for legislative reform of the marriage laws to allow Buddhist women to marry non-Buddhist men (and thus not lose their rights to inheritance or divorce) and for adoption of the Sex Workers Act.

The Burmese Women's Association was a pioneer in demanding the rights of women's participation in the election of municipal councils and legislative councils,

women's ability to obtain a barrister license and even for the reduction of tram fares for women.

A women's demonstration in 1927 galvanized more than a hundred female protesters demanding removal of the "sex disqualification clause" in the law that barred women from running for a political position. Ikeya (2006: 34) noted that the protesters gained the support of international feminist associations, such as the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship and the British Commonwealth League, who encouraged the British administration in Burma to grant women the rights to contest elections.

The Young Women's Buddhist Association also emerged in 1919. It was a religious-based organization enshrined in patriotism, akin to the then defunct Young Men's Buddhist Association. The Darna Thukha Women Association, followed shortly after, established by female community members, who barred the wives of high-ranking officials from filling the leadership positions. Their name later changed to Wunthanu Konmayi Athin (Patriotic Women's Association) as their activities evolved to focus more on nationalism than Buddhism, particularly over the protest against interfaith marriage with Indians. The organization became well-known in the pinni (national handwoven cloth) costume promotion movement, which the Burmese Women's Association also supported.

The nationalism of women rose through the pinni movement, which was mainly led by nationalist male leaders and Buddhist monks. The movement initiated the notion that women's costume represented a safeguard of the nation's culture and needed protection. Penny (2008) remarked that the pinni movement was likely influenced by Gandhi's Swadeshi movement (a nationalism movement in India), which was a boycott of foreign imported cloth. During his visit to Burma in 1929, he asked Indians living there to boycott imported fabrics.

The nationalism movement at that time, however, had been accelerating with the growth of national schools boycotting British missionary schools.

Along with the rise of nationalism, certain men and women began in the 1930s to regard themselves as "master"⁶ to increase moral resistance to colonization.

These women's organizations operating at that time joined the struggle for independence by seeking donations to support students' protests, oil field workers' protests and a trip to a military camp in Japan for 30 comrades, who had formed the Burma Independence Army secretly to fight against the British. Both the Burmese Women's Association and the Wunthanu Konmayi Athin ultimately broke up over disagreement among their members on whether to merge with India (becoming an entity within India) or fight to return to their sovereign status.⁷ Upon colonizing both countries, the British had made Burma a province of India (Nhyin, 2008). It was a divisive issue for several groups. Burma was eventually administered separately, in 1937.

In 1926, the National Council of Women in Burma emerged as a more progressive organization than one supporting Buddhism and patriotism. As Muheerjee (2017) described it, the Council was an affiliate of the National Council of Women in India and a local branch of the International Council of Women. Daw Mya Sein, also known as Miss May Oung (the daughter of U May Oung, the Minister of Home Affairs in the British administration), led the Burmese Women's Association at that time but became also a member of the Council. When no female representative was included in the Burmese delegation team to travel to London for the Roundtable Conference on Burma in 1931,⁸ Daw Mya Sein proposed herself, with a recommendation from the Women's Freedom League in London that prompted her inclusion. During the conference, she commented on how Burmese women had enjoyed equal franchise with men, with Burmese laws giving men and women equal rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance before the colonial rule and she had demanded respect of those laws by the British.

Daw San, also a member of the National Council of Women in Burma, attended the All Asian Women's Conference in 1931 with prominent feminists in India, like Sarojini Nahdu, Rameshwari Nehru and Margaret Cousins. The universal sisterhood agenda of the British colonizers to save Indian women (as part of the "white man's burden") was rooted in imperialism. Thus, the collaboration between Burmese women's representatives and other Asian women was based on the belief that "South–South connections" went beyond the more familiar Western–non-Western axis (Ikeya, 2011a: 91).

Although the sisterhood agenda aimed for unity of Asian women under British colonialization, British women occupied most of the executive committee positions in the National Council of Women in Burma. The organization was criticized for ignorance of internal affairs while an international outlook was overwhelmingly adapted. As a result, Daw Mya Sein and Daw San broke away that same year, in 1931, and established the Burmese National Council of Women to focus on documenting the lives of Burmese women and child labour—issues, they argued, that were ignored by the government.

As noted, the goal of women's organizations in those early decades was to support national movements calling for liberation from colonialism rather than individual's rights or the rights of a specific group of people. For instance, Daw Ank, a prominent female leader, highlighted the importance of women's unity against colonialism in the first Women Assembly (in Rangoon) in 1939. Newly emerging women's organizations began looking beyond the religious-based and patriotism missions to more advanced political ideology, particularly anti-imperialism, identifying their organizations with names that emphasized "independence", "liberation" or "solidarity", such as the Burma Independence Women Organization, the Women Solidarity Organization and the Union Women Organization.

These organizations also ended up collapsing, only because they were impacted by the split of other leading male-dominated organizations and parties along ideological differences in the independence struggle.

The role of women in student protests, labour strikes and media movements for independence

Participation in students' movements

Female students and members of women's organizations took on a fundraising role for student uprisings, dating back to the first student strike in December 1920. The protest was to boycott the University Act, which the students viewed as elitist and exclusionary of the Burmese population. Many female students joined the strike as well. A few of them took a leading role even, giving speeches to motivate other students' activism.

Beyond these activities, however, there is little documentation of female leaders involved in movements of change (Sengupta, 2015). The student strikes of 1920, 1936 and 1938 became an arena in which young educated women could exercise political activism. According to Sengupta (2017), the 700 student protesters in the 1936 student strike included more than 30 young women. And it was a female student leader, Ma Khin Mya, who proposed the All Burma Students' Union, which emerged from that strike.

The student strike of 1938 became a mass collaboration between young people from the educated and working-class strata of society. Student unions, including the All Burma Students' Union and the Rangoon University Students' Union, agreed to march with workers from the oil fields in the dry zone to Rangoon (now called Yangon). Feminist leaders, like Khin Myo Chit, emerged into prominence in this period. The students' movements at that time were conjoined with Dobama Asiayone, or the We Burman Association, which involved many women leaders (Sengupta, 2015).

Participation in farmers' and workers' uprisings

The revolution of women from the working class needs to be acknowledged as "the movement beyond ethnocentrism". Unlike the elite women who previously led campaigns to protect against interfaith marriages, the female participants in the labour strikes reached beyond feminine discourse. The role of women strikers, like Daw Sel, Ma Aye, Ma Than and Daw Myint, was used to motivate other women to join the oil field workers' revolution (Nhyin, 2008: 18).

In 1930, the Saya San Rebellion became the largest uprising in Burma under British rule. Women were clearly a part of that farmers' uprising, but because the role of women in farming was regarded as supplementary to men's work, the participation of women was not well acknowledged, beyond the women leaders it attracted, like Daw Kyin Myaing. As it happened, she was charged with defamation by the British government during that uprising in which farmers were demanding the return of their lands from Indian money lenders. "Taken land, taken money, then taken our women" became the anthem of

their uprising. In addition to land, the protest leaders condemned the practice of taking Burmese women by the Indian money lenders as payment for a debt.

The oil field strike of 1938 became one of the great historic movements of protest against British administration. The workers for the Burma Oil Company wanted better pay and working conditions. Thousands of oil workers, including women workers, participated in the strike. But this strike differed from the previous strikes in that it drew support not only from students but from workers in other sectors. According to Ikeya (2011a: 87), around 200 women workers from a cheroot factory and 1,000 more from match and rope factories⁹ in Rangoon also joined the strike.

Participation in media

In the late 1910s, female writers were given media space to promote femininity rooted in culture and religion, on the basis that the women's role was important for national goals, culture and identity. But many people did not appreciate the women-led journals and women journalists. Their work was viewed as inferior. Consequently, women authors and journalists began using their husband's name or some other male name when publishing, such as Daw Phwa Shin, the editor and publisher of the *Tharawaddy* newspaper (Than, 2013).

After the 1920s, female authors extended their talent of writing to commenting on contemporary issues impacting society. Daw San, for instance began publishing the *Independence* newspaper—the name inspired by the Irish nationalist paper, *Irish Independence*. She represented the hope for Burma's freedom from the British as well as her independence from marriage and a salaried worker's life. She wrote many articles under different names: Mr. Kwa Si for her editorial column and "Ma Shwe Kyay's Diary" for women's patriotism. She criticized the political elites, the oppressive British administrative system and municipal functions while promoting progressive political ideology for women through the "letters" sent between two female characters, Khin Hla and Khin Nyunt, in her "Yuwaddi Kye Hmoun" ("Young Ladies' Mirror") column. As a member of the Burmese Women National Council, Daw San led objections to foreign newspapers when

their writings hurt the reputation and image of Burma's women (Ikeya, 2013: 28; Sone, 2012: 111–112).

Likewise, Khin Myo Chit, who became a well-known feminist writer, began her writing career with such educating posts for women as "The Role of Mother in Children's Education to Cultivate the Future Generation for Burma" and "Consultation for Young Married Women on How to Deal with a Cruel Mother-in-law" (Sengupta, 2015). The women's columns in women's magazines became a platform to share women's voices and experiences. The presence of prominent female intellectuals in the papers inspired and encouraged less-educated female readers.

Thus, the writings in women's columns before independence were rooted in nationalism mixed with femininity (to preserve the culture) and progressive feminism (to leave the domestic sphere and get involved in revolution).

Women's participation in public administration and politics pre- and post-independence

Ikeya reported that in 1931, 388 of the 44,867 public administration workers were women. But the colonial administration was reluctant to employ more women in the public sphere and thus drew on a 1919 legislative proposal to disqualify women from civil service and from university admission on the basis of sex or marital status. The proposed bill stressed: "Women Civil Servants if married either must deliberately endeavour to remain childless or will be forced to neglect either their children or their duties to the Service or both. Either neglect, it is submitted, is contrary to public policy. The social effects will obviously be undesirable" (Ikeya, 2011b: 57). Fortunately, the civil service commissioners did not accept the proposal.

Women's participation in Parliament around that same time was reportedly minimal, but nonetheless, it was a space to show solidarity of women by supporting the lone female member among the 79 members (in 1929). As highlighted by Nhyin (2008: 34), Daw Hla May, the well-known Wunthanu leader, was noted to have said: "We all voted and strongly supported Daw Mya Sein, aka

Miss May Oung, to be a MP because we dislike being undermined by the British officials regarding Burmese¹⁰ women as vegetable sellers.”

The number remained unchanged (one woman) among the 132 MPs in the 1936 Parliament. The number of elected women members of Parliament eventually increased, to seven in 1947.

In the parliamentary era of 1948 to 1958, women’s participation in politics was more accepted, and their numbers increased. Women’s political activism in that period, however, was believed to be strongly connected with a sense of family solidarity, responsibility and loyalty; the women who took on parliamentary positions were following on in kinship politics to maintain their husband’s or father’s status and power (sometimes taking the government position of their husband upon his death). Since the military coup of 1962, the role of women in public administration and politics has been fading.

After the 1962 coup, the Burma Socialist Programme Party, backed by the military, was discouraging of female leadership and did not provide institutional incentive or opportunity for women to hold positions of political power (Harriden, 2012: 177). Thus, one ruling party (the military) controlled all activities, including political activism, channelling it into what they called the Burmese Way to Socialism movement. In fact, no activism was tolerated, and their idea of socialism only led to the increase of military power. The annual farmers’ and workers’ conferences sponsored by the Burma Socialist Programme Party neither represented women’s views nor offered initiatives for women. As Harriden pointed out, women occupied 15 per cent of the party membership, of 225,000 women among 1.5 million members in 1981. As well, noted Harriden (2012), the majority of executive members were male, while some women were allowed an executive position in lower-level township councils.

Because Burma was attached within the administration of India as a provincial entity in the early 1900s, its people were treated as the British treated the Indians (in need of civilizing), although the British administrators recognized that Burmese women were of higher status than women in India. Nonetheless, the colonizers worked

to devalue the status of Burmese women and to promote elite feminism (excluding the needs of working-class women). In response, the colonizing Burmese protected women’s identity as a national value, which resulted in women being treated as an object requiring protection.. But generally and due to the struggle for liberation from the British, the early feminists were united more in that rebellion than the fight for the respect of women’s rights. Ultimately, the conceptualization of femininity exercised by the colonizer and by the groups being colonized strengthened the value of masculinity.

Elite feminism engaging with patriotism was not completely disadvantageous because it awakened women’s political activism, although the early movements were attached with male leaders’ agendas. Women’s rights struggles were part of the independence movement. The elite feminists’ activism, such as the anti-foreign culture campaign, did not reflect the grass-roots women, and the struggles of female workers, farmers and students indeed initially were also not well recognized. The nationalism movements also ignored the rights of women from different religions or ethnic groups. Lack of consideration about the intersectionality increased the inequalities. And that ignorance became one of the sources to divide and rule the women’s communities and to reinforce militarization after the independence.

Militarization and the feminist subjectivities in State building post-independence

The military has been the largest and strongest institution in Myanmar. The military force increased from 15,000 to 85,000 service personnel between 1948 and 1960, then its size doubled to 170,000 personnel by the time of the 1988 uprising, which began with student protests that rapidly spread into rebellion for the removal of the Burma Socialist Programme Party regime (Harriden, 2012: 175). Although political liberation and democratic transition began in 2010, military expansion was not likely to be affected. The Global Fire Power (2018) estimated that the number of military personnel increased to about 516,000 within two decades after 1988. Along with the growth of the military power since the 1962 military coup, the influence of associated patriarchy became larger and deeper in State building. The military was accused of

 Timeline of Myanmar women's social and political activism prior to the 1988 rebellion.

 Source: *Global Justice Center, 2013.*

1927	Women activists stage the first strike against sex discrimination, protesting British regulations that prevent women from holding legislative positions. The first woman is elected to the Rangoon City Council.
1929	Burmese women are granted the right to vote. Daw Hnin Mya from Mawlamying is the first elected woman in the Legislative Council.
1931	Burma Roundtable Conference in London discusses the Government of Burma Act of 1935. Miss May Oung (Daw Mya Sein), secretary of the Burmese Women's Association, represents the women of Burma and demands that the British enforce the equal rights women were entitled to by Burmese laws.
1936	Under the 1935 Government of Burma Act, Burma is allotted local rule over certain areas of government, in a system called "diarchy". Daw Hnin Mya is the only woman elected to the first legislative assembly.
1937	The 1935 Government of Burma Act comes into force in 1937; Daw Saw Sa is elected a member of the Senate.
1943	A 16-member Independence Preparatory Commission is formed to produce a constitution for the new State of Burma; the Commission has no women members.
1947–1951	The Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting the constitution has 111 male (no female) members. In April's election, four women are elected. After the assassination of independence leader Aung San and other leaders, their wives, Daw Khin Kyi (for Aung San), Daw Khin Nyunt (for Thakhin Mya) and Daw Khin (for U Razak), replace them in Parliament, for seven female MPs.
1952–1956	Three women are elected to Parliament. Among them, Mrs. Ba Maung Chein is appointed Minister for Karen ¹¹ Affairs in the first union cabinet—becoming the first female minister.
1956–1959	Three women are elected to the Second National Assembly; two women are elected to the Chamber of Deputies; and three women are elected as members to the Chamber of Nationalities.
1959–1961	In the elections for the Third National Assembly, three women are elected to the Chamber of Deputies and Chamber of Nationalities.
1962–1974	The military, led by General Ne Win, seizes power. Women are excluded from the government and the ruling (military) party.
1974	The 1974 Constitution calls for power of the State to be in the popularly elected people's assembly (Pyithu Hluttaw). Nine women, of 449 members (2 per cent), are elected to the 1974 People's Assembly of Burma Socialist Programme Party legislature.
1978	The number of women increases from 9 (2 per cent) to 13 (2.8 per cent) in the Burma Socialist Programme Party legislature.
1982	The Central Committee of the Burma Socialist Programme Party has one woman among 100 members.
1985	The Central Committee of the Burma Socialist Programme Party has eight women of 280 members, none of whom has a major role.

committing sexualized violence against ethnic women to quell opposition movements and to maintain their power over ethnic troops. But that oppression catalysed the ethnic women's political activism as well as the animosity of the ethnic people towards the military. Even though women engaged with their respective armed group in different ways against the Burmese military (often as fighters), their involvement amounted to supporting the agenda of the male leaders.

Patriotism and hatred towards the invading military converted many women from obedient daughter or mother into combat fighters. Such transformation from social agent to political and military agent was initiated under the Japanese occupation in the 1940s. According to Than (2014), the Burmese Army decided to establish a women's wing to fight against the Japanese army in 1945, because women were seen as good mobilizers with villagers. The involvement of women in the army was considered as a

temporary tool that would dismantle after the war. Instead, it nurtured the political activism of women and shook women's traditional roles in the domestic sphere.

The women's army was not trained as professional soldiers, but they received many political ideology trainings, particularly on Marxism. These ideologically trained women became the activists in the underground movements of the Communist Party of Burma against the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League and the Burma Socialist Programme Party regime in the post-independence period. Harriden (2012: 159) found that women were drawn to either party by a strong sense of familial loyalty. The wives and daughters of high-ranking Communist Party leaders were actively involved in the armed insurgency, which, again, amounted to strengthening the patriarchy institutions rather than struggling for women's rights.

Under the Burma Socialist Programme Party regime after the 1962 military coup, evidence indicates the recruitment of women into the military expansion. For instance, Major Yin May and Captain Yin Mhon of the air force and Captain Mya Aye from the navy were sent to the United States and Israel to attend military training. They were then assigned to mobilize and train female cadres (Nhyin, 2008: 62–73). Harriden (2014: 175) argued that women's involvement in the armed forces was barely visible because their representation was estimated at less than 1 per cent from the 1970s to the 1980s. The female cadres were trained to supplement the male forces in protection against the invasion of the Kuomintang troops from China and in the battles with ethnic armed forces.

Ethnic women leaders were given high ranking in their armed forces, although they were just a few in number. These ethnic women gained leading positions, however, because of their kinship with the male elites. For instance, Olive Yang took on the leadership of the Kokang militia after the death of her father, who had been the leader.¹² Similarly, Sao Hearn Hkam, the wife of the first president of Burma, Sao Shwe Thaik, fled to Thailand when her husband was arrested by the military in 1962 and then took a position in the Shan State Army.¹³ Naw Louisa Benson, a beauty queen as well as an insurgent leader, was the wife of the commander of the Karen National Defence Organization's Fifth Brigade.¹⁴ When

her husband was killed in 1965, she led troops back to cooperate with the Karen National Union forces to fight against the government army.

The challenges of feminists in State building after independence

The women's movements in the post-independence period became more complex due to the oppression they experienced by patriarchal ideology and institutions. Nationalism had a triggering role in persuading women to fight against imperialism before independence. The prolonged civil war after independence raised the concept of "Bamarnization" influence among the Bamar (still the largest ethnic group) over the many different ethnic groups. Ethnocentrism was thus cultivated among those groups to repel the Bamar influence. Women were either victimized or viewed as protectors on both sides of the conflict.

Then, along with the increase of militarization during the civil war, elite feminism experienced a revival. This time, it was directed to not only fighting against the influence of foreign cultures but to also encourage the embrace of the closed economy under the Burmese Way to Socialism. As in its early days, this elite feminism did not represent the issues and needs of women from the working class.

The first "new" Parliament after 1948 independence was based on the 1947 Constitution and granted equal opportunities for all citizens in employment, but the traditional practice of gender-appropriate economic roles remained unchanged. The government continued to view women as the primary contributors towards better health care and education services for the entire population under the Pyidawtha¹⁵ programme: women were encouraged into the nursing and teaching professions. The wives of government ministers led the planning meetings for the maternity and child welfare and health care provisions, which largely amounted to an immunization programme for children. According to Harriden (2012), opportunity for women's access to education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels did increase. Yet, the social gap between well-educated upper- and middle-class women in urban areas and the women in rural areas or other economic classes remained huge.

Women did not fully enjoy their right to employment and equal pay due to tensions between embracing modernity and preserving tradition. Harriden (2012: 150–152) highlighted that some newspapers advocated equal pay, while others argued that women earning more than their husband would threaten the “manly ego” and “traditional male domains”. Women working in foreign industries were verbally attacked, mostly if they imitated foreign fashions. The wives of the political elites became examples of how “good women” should behave and dress, particularly when they were dealing with men or foreigners.

Women’s bodies and clothing again became an issue linked to nationalism. The banning of prostitution was used as a propaganda tool to raise nationalism and protectionism. Than (2011: 2014) pointed out that most institutions, including the government, some media and women’s groups, argued that prostitution was the result of foreign interaction and moral corruption. But leftists and some other women’s groups viewed it as a class struggle resulting from the dysfunctional economic system of the government, poverty and civil war. They asked the government to provide sufficient employment for women to reduce poverty and prostitution and to work harder towards creating an egalitarian society.

Except for some preventive measures for health care, there was no adequate control or welfare plan to tackle prostitution. It was one of many attempts by the military regime to control women’s bodies and sexuality. As well, the government promoted nationalism by amending the interfaith marriage laws of 1954 that previously had protected Burmese Buddhist women from losing their property rights when they married a non-Buddhist or non-Burmese man. Additionally, beauty contests were banned after the 1962 coup, with the reason that women are paragons of socialist virtue—that concept also was applied in building the nation as a socialist State.

The class problem became more obvious in the era of State building, reflecting how all women do not experience discrimination equally. Under military rule, the suffering of ethnic women doubled because they faced both class and race issues. Although the wives of the political elites were given active roles in the conflicts, the minority ethnic women at the grass-roots level endured sexual violence by

the military during the prolonged civil war. “Rape” was used as a weapon by the army to disgrace and devalue the ethnic communities. Women became victims of the battles created by male chauvinists. Even the women leaders in the male-dominated arena had a hand in the growth of patriarchal power. Either in the class struggle led by the Communist troops or in the ethnic conflicts, women’s issues and their experiences became battle cries for promoting the revolution against the military (using the women’s victimhood). Egalitarian practices between men and women were never promoted, even in the Communist or ethnic societies. Despite women being victimized by the military (through the violence) and the ethnic armed groups (through the use of the violence they experienced as a tool), their activism was praised as leverage towards achieving the political goals.

To sum up, the status of recognizing women’s involvement in State building varied throughout the country’s many struggles. Under the colonial rule, women from the colonized countries aligned together in pointing their feminism towards anti-colonialism. It was different in the early years of independence of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League’s administration (1948–1961), in the rule of the Revolutionary Council (1962–1974) and in the rule of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (1974–1988). Yet, the common theme strongly supported by the ruling governments, either the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League or the Burma Socialist Programme Party, was femininity reinforcing nationalism.

After gaining independence in 1948, the State acknowledged women as the part of welfare concerns, which resulted in development interventions for their benefit. During the third Asian-African Conference of Women, in Colombo in 1958, members of the Women’s Welfare League from Burma raised the challenges of women’s welfare and reiterated their refusal to become actively involved in political movements. According to Armstrong (2016), the Burmese participants in that conference represented “nationalist” and “state feminist” as well as “social reformist” interests. That conference established a sisterhood network with commitments to bettering women’s education and their access to health care infrastructure and social development. However, the military coup d’état in 1962 weakened women’s networking alliances with the international communities.

Contemporary Period 1990 to present

The rise of women's organizations from the grass roots under militarization

Political awareness became the basis for initiating women-focused issues under military rule in what became Myanmar in 1989. This means ethnic women transformed their subjectivity and complementing role in building up the military's power to more active leading positions in the name of social change. Under the military regime, women from the different ethnic groups organized themselves as representation of their ethnicity to raise their voices against the human rights abuses of women by the military and to protect refugee women. The Karenni National Women's Organization, established in 1993, and the Burmese Women's Union, established in 1995, and both operating near the border with Thailand, were the first organizations under the military regime promoting the human rights of women as well as women's rights. The Burmese Women's Union, according to O'Shannassy (2000), was formed by exiled female student leaders from the All Burma Students' Democratic Front.

Other ethnic women's organizations followed in the footsteps of the Burmese Women's Union, such as (but not limited to): the Tavoy Women's Union in 1995, the Lahu Women's Organization in 1997; the Rakhine Women's Union in 1998; the Shan Women's Action Network, the Pa-O Women's Union, the Kachin Women's Association in 1999 and the Palaung Women's Organization in 2000. Rather than coming together to support male leaders and their agendas, these groups took on women's issues for political capacity building, women's education for economic and social advancement, women's participation in economic development and the end to violence against women. Even the Karen Women's Organization, formed in 1949, expanded its focus from social welfare to women's rights and promoting women's participation in community decision-making processes and in the national political sphere. They later also moved beyond the rights of ethnicity. The feminist ideals leading the social and political changes became more emphasized when the women's groups began to challenge the traditional notions of femininity and the roles of women in politics.

The Women's League of Burma was founded in 1999, in exile, with 12 organizations of exiled ethnic women.

It reflected a sense of sisterhood derived from the many differences in race, ethnicity, culture and religion, with the common goal to increase the participation of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights as well as in the national peace process and improving the role of women of Myanmar at the national and international levels (WLB, 2011).

Such collaboration became an effective arena to escape the influence of the men's agendas and to challenge the misogynists on their ignorance of women's issues. Although the Women's League of Burma was not allowed to enter the country, they introduced the concept of gender equality into the country by cultivating strong feminists through gender and human rights programmes. These trained feminists became a new type of pioneer in the establishment of women's organizations inside the country that centred on the rights of all women, but particularly working-class women, and on gender equality. Unlike the previous women's movements in the colonial and post-colonial periods, this activism was more strategic and united. Led by middle-class and ethnic minority women, the intersectionality among women was also considered in their political and social change movement.

In contrast, the military government formed the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association in 1991, the Myanmar National Committee for Women Affairs in 1996 and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation in 2003. These organizations were pitched as aiming to promote women's roles at all levels, but their goal of "preserving Myanmar culture" only aimed to strengthen traditional and patriarchal notions of femininity. Houtman (1999) criticized the State-founded organizations as led by the wives of generals and other authorities to counteract Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership capacity and popularity at the international level.

Myanmar acceded the CEDAW in 1997, and the National Committee for Women Affairs became the main body to develop the CEDAW action plan.

So began a rivalry of ideology between the traditional femininity inside the country and the progressive feminism outside the country and competition for influential power

over female communities by women from the ruling class and the middle-class women seeking to achieve social and political change. The government-established women's organizations never achieved social or political change. They managed to implement small activities, such as an immunization programme, an HIV and AIDS awareness programme and provision small loans for women's income generation. They ignored the sexual violence cases against ethnic women by the military (WCRP, 2004).

Contemporary's feminist movements and achievements

Political reforms after 2010 opened space for the coordination of efforts by women's organizations inside and outside the country as well as between the State's institutions and non-state actors. This contemporary activism has engaged not only with fulfilling the basic needs of communities but also with the policy reform process.

Women's organizations in this period have strengthened community resilience by means of women's empowerment in economic and public decision-making. "Economic empowerment" and "political empowerment" of women are the core activities of most of today's organizations to improve gender equality. The leading government agency for women's issues, the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, drafted the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022), based on the 2008 Constitution as well as on CEDAW and the 12 priority areas from the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action: livelihoods, education, health, violence against women, economics, decision-making, implementation mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, girls and armed conflict.

To support the implementation of the Strategic Plan, four technical working groups were established in 2017, in partnerships between the National Committee for Women's Affairs, civil society organizations and other local and international organizations to target: i) women and participation; ii) women and peace; iii) violence against women; and iv) mainstreaming of these issues into policies and programming.

With the aim to advocate with policy-makers through the National Committee for Women's Affairs, the women's organizations shaped their current activities around the working groups, particularly women's participation in the economy, politics and peace building.

Women's solidarity through economic empowerment activities

NGOs implement women's economic empowerment programmes, but they continue to face a range of challenges, such as few skills and limited job opportunities. According to the 2015 Labour Force Survey findings (latest data), women's labour force participation is lower than men's. The active labour force of the male population aged 15 and older accounted for 80.2 per cent of the male population, while the female population was only 51.6 per cent of the female population (MOLES, CSO and ILO, 2017). The political and economic reforms that began in 2010 and the lifting of the international community's economic sanctions in 2016, foreign investment, particularly in the garment sector, created many job opportunities for women. Despite the income-generation activities of NGOs or the growth of the female labour force, there has been little impact on the livelihoods of women due to their limited skill levels.

What has improved are women's skills in social mobilization and networking.

Microfinancing is widely recognized as a poverty alleviation mechanism because it increases the income of women. Based on the need for credit for poor people for rural development, various novel microfinance schemes have emerged in Myanmar in recent years through the interventions of development agencies and private social enterprises. The government endorsed the Microfinance Law in November 2011, recognizing loan provision to poor households as a development tool. Microfinance opportunities reached 2.8 million people as of 2012—most of them marginalized women and impoverished persons (ADB et al., 2016). The Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (2017) argued that, due to the smallness of the loans, their impact is only short-term welfare through increased consumption of the family or the establishment of a small business, like a small

grocery, that only generates daily income. Nonetheless, the income-generating activities through microfinance schemes have promoted women's solidarity. Most of the loans are provided through women's solidarity groups, such as the Self-Reliance Group, which are organized and facilitated by development staff and based on a revolving fund for sustainability.

Female labour force participation has been a tool to empower women's economic capacities. The large number of women employees in the garment factories (at 80 per cent) represent a significant example of female labour empowerment. However, the garment sector is also rife with labour disputes and workers' strikes. But through these protests, the workers realized they needed to form labour organizations that would truly represent their issues, needs and concerns.

Labour organizations were abolished after the military coup of 1962 but returned after the Labour Organization Law was enacted in 2011. The first labour union to emerge in contemporary Myanmar grew out of a Tai Yi¹⁶ footwear factory labour strike in 2012. The strike, initiated as a protest of the low daily wages, spread to garment factories, whose workers joined, pushing the numbers to 2,000 protesters. Interestingly, women workers led this labour strike (most employees in shoe or garment factories are women). The women leaders then organized a labour union during the strike and demanded an increase in wages, the re-employment of the workers who were dismissed during the strike and to implement rules, regulations and by-laws in line with the Labour Organization Law (The Progressive Voice, 2016).

The labour union has grown since then, now representing 69 labour groups and more than 9,000 members across the country. This was yet another great achievement of the women's movements since 1919, and one that was led by grass-roots women.¹⁷

Although women's economic empowerment activities have brought little change to the life of marginalized women, they have promoted the growth of solidarity among them. Through the understanding of the inequities in economic participation, this trend has further ignited the political and social activism within grass-roots women.

Women's participations in politics and peace building

The 2015 election led to the largest number of women elected to public office in the country's history. Yet, their representation in the Parliament remains abysmal: women made up 13.6 per cent of the MPs elected to the lower house and 13.7 per cent of MPs elected to the upper house, while only 2 of the 166 military appointees for 25 per cent of the reserved seats were women. The rate of women's representation in the state and region parliaments was equally low, averaging 12.7 per cent of elected MPs and 9.7 per cent of the total MPs, including military appointees. Even though the number of women in the Parliament is smaller than in other Asian countries, the increased rate of elected female candidates from 4 per cent in 2010 to 10.5 per cent in 2015 is considered remarkable (Minoletti, 2017).

The lack of a gender perspective in the peace-making process has resulted in an acceleration of efforts to include women's perspectives in peace building. As put forward by the Transnational Institute (2016), the prolonged communal violence should be tackled with women's inputs because women were the victims of the violence. Gender equality is now recognized as a critical issue in analysing the conflicts. More broadly, women became the victims of the war, but in some cases, they were survivors and agents of conflict. This makes a strong case for how essential women's representation is in the peace-building process.

Under Thein Sein's government (2010–2015), no women were involved in the 11-member Union Peace Working Committee. Women ultimately were included as signatories to the National Ceasefire Agreement, but only minimally—from the government side, only two female MPs were included among the 52 representatives of the Union Peace Working Committee (Muehlenbeck and Federer, 2016). The Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process and its sisterhood organizations pushed the male militants leading the peace building to consider gender perspectives in the political dialogue themes.

Application of a gender quota is recognized as an important and effective to foster a gender-inclusive peace process (AGIPP, 2017b). The first Union Peace Conference

in 2016, also known as the Twenty-first Century Panglong Conference, discussed and ended with an agreement to include a 30 per cent gender quota in every level of political dialogue. But there has been no policy to implement the gender quota (also at 30 per cent) in the peace process (JPF, 2018). Daw Mikon Chan Non, one of the ethnic women leaders in the peace conference, noted that the rate of women's participation in the Panglong Conference has increased, but many of them have been as observers or facilitators (13 per cent of the participants were women in the first Panglong, with 22 per cent in the third conference¹⁸). Women's advocacy groups urged the delegates attending the third conference to implement a gender equality policy for women's representation in all sectors.

There has been little impact on women's representation at the ward and village tract levels. Women won 41 of 16,785 seats (0.2 per cent) in the 2012 ward and village tract administrator elections but then doubled to 88 seats (0.5 per cent) in 2015. Women's advocacy groups emphasized that such increases are not meaningful in some areas, such as conflict zones, because women are likely to be tools of the male leadership (AGIPP, 2015). Meaningful participation of women at all decision-making levels has come a long way, but it remains far from equal representation. Fortunately, it is gaining momentum in challenging the male-dominated leadership.

The united forces of women in legal reform

Women's organizations recognize that violence against women remains the most challenging issue hindering women's participation in economic, social and political life. The descriptions in the Penal Code (1861) do not reflect women's experiences of violence. The Gender Equality Network (2013) suggested reforming the laws to reflect what CEDAW recommends. For example, the laws for violence against women should be in line with the CEDAW provisions and are not.

But there is progress in motion: the Prevention and Protection of Violence Against Women bill was drafted in 2013 by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement and women's rights groups. The final bill, with 20 chapters, is awaiting parliamentary approval. It

calls for covering women's and girls' rights in a separate form of legal protection. The bill will protect women from all forms of violence, including domestic violence, marital rape, sexual violence, harassment and assault in the workplace and in public places. It includes the penalty of life imprisonment for raping girls younger than 18 years, while people found guilty of marital rape will face two to five years in jail. The draft bill also includes serious punishment for physical violence to girls and women and speaks to rights of inheritance (Lwin, 2015).

Adoption of the Prevention and Protection of Violence Against Women bill is considered a massive step in the protection of women's rights, but its enforcement will be critical (GEN, 2018). Women's rights groups united in the drafting stage of the law and remain so; they recently coordinated with the Department of Social Welfare in a working group on violence against women to provide training on the draft bill to police and other law enforcement actors, local authorities, line ministry staff, local department officers and health care providers.

Changes in women's status in other cross-cutting issues

There have been many positive changes in women's conditions in education, health care, economic participation and public administration between the military rule (1990–2010) and the civilian rule (2010–present). The 2014 census found the national adult literacy rate to be almost 90 per cent, although the male rate was higher (at 93 per cent) than the female rate (at 87 per cent). But those figures represented great improvement from the female rate in the 1983 census findings. The school-age population in 2014 was approximately 11 million persons, up from 8 million in 1973. Still, 19 per cent of the women's population aged 25 years and older in 2014 had no schooling, while only 13 per cent of their male counterparts had no schooling. Women's performance in higher education levels, however, was greater than it was for men. The 2014 census data also showed that the rate of women completing secondary education was 28.7 per cent, while it was only 22.3 per cent for men. A 2016 report by the Asian Development Bank noted that the rate of women passing the matriculation exam improved, from 29.6 per cent in 2008 to 34.3 per cent in 2012.

Women's health has made some improvements. In particular, the maternal mortality ratio has declined, from 520 deaths per 100,000 births in 1990 to 178 deaths in 2014.

The rate of women's involvement in government and public administration, as already noted, has increased, if only slightly, from 2007 to 2014. Of the total staff of 31 government ministries, an average of 52.3 per cent were women in 2014, an increase from 51.4 per cent in 2007–2008. At the mid-management level (deputy director and equivalent) in 31 ministries, 39.1 per cent were women in 2014, up from 32.5 per cent in 2007–2008.¹⁹

Influencing factors on women's political decision-making

Women have limited space on the political field, thanks to the Constitution, State institutions and cultural norms. The 2008 Constitution supports male-dominated leadership. The military occupies 25 per cent of the reserved seats in the Parliament; the qualification criteria for president (Chapter 3, no. 59(d)) require someone well acquainted with the affairs of the country, including the military. These articles limit the number of female representatives in the Parliament and deter a woman from running for the presidency. Moreover, section 352 of the Constitution states: "The Union shall, upon specified qualifications being fulfilled, in appointing or assigning duties to civil service personnel, not discriminate for or against any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, and sex. However, nothing in this section shall prevent appointment of men to positions that are suitable for men only" (Myanmar Constitution, 2008).

Women also face traditional barriers to public participation, such as the approval of their husband, control of financial resources by the husband, verbal insults and defamatory comments to their character during the campaign period and threats to their safety while travelling at night for campaigning (WON, 2016). Latt et al. (2017) noted that the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and other prominent female political leaders had inspired other women to enter politics. According to their survey findings, experiences in social volunteering,

political activism and community-based organizations created pathways for women to initiate a political life. Thus, women's rights organizations are now working to increase women's involvement in all decision-making processes, from the community to the national levels. CEDAW General Recommendation 5 on temporary special measures (1998) recommends a quota system to increase the participation of women in education, politics, the economy and labour markets. Policy-makers have, to date, ignored the recommendation.

Because Myanmar has a first-past-the-post electoral system, women's organizations are advocating with political parties and village development groups to include at least 30 per cent of women in the candidate selection or in the steering committee of groups. A gender quota system has also been introduced in other national committees.

The coalition among feminists and expanding the network

Some recently established women's organizations emerged from the mobilization of women at the grass-roots level as a response to emergency issues following a natural disaster or armed conflict. But they have expanded their horizons to gender development and embracing feminism as the core ideology to understand all gender inequality issues. In contrast, traditional elite women's groups continue to reinforce femininity by praising the male-dominated hierarchical system.

The Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs was formed after a male-led delegation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council attended the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Although the international community expected the State-founded women's organizations to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and accede to CEDAW, the implementing organizations, either the National Committee for Women's Affairs or the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation, led by the wives of senior government leaders, were simply a proxy to strengthen the masculine endeavours of the military. As criticized by Harriden (2012), the National Committee for Women's Affairs promotes Myanmar women's identity through cultural shows and fashion

shows of traditional costume every year on the Myanmar Women's Day (July 3). Such a celebration continued, even in the democratic transition period, because nothing changed under the Thein Sein government (2010–2015).

On the international front, however, the government committed to addressing gender inequalities (MNCWA, 2013). With the push of the international community to accelerate implementation of the CEDAW action plan, the National Committee for Women's Affairs eventually engaged with civil society groups in the later years of reforming, such as with the four working groups previously discussed, in which United Nations agencies, NGOs and civil society groups were involved as members and have jointly implemented several action plans.

Many local women's organizations emerged in 2008 in response to the Cyclone Nargis disaster. The Women's Protection Technical Working Group, for instance, was formed then to champion multisector and cross-cutting issues experienced by cyclone-affected women. The group evolved into the Gender Equality Network in 2012 to expand their focus to advocacy for policy change regarding violence against women, women and labour rights, women's participation in politics and peace building, as well as a women's rights awareness programme (ADB, 2015). The Gender Equality Network is the largest coordination group, with 130 civil society and international organizations and individual resource persons working on gender and women's rights issues.

The Women's Organizations Network also was founded in 2008 after Nargis, with 30 local organizations as members. The Network has engaged with community-based women's groups around the country to improve the socioeconomic conditions of women. Since they were allowed to enter the country (in 2012) once the political liberation began, the Women's League of Burma, formed by a group of women in exile, has worked to empower ethnic women's groups on economic, social and political issues.

In 2014, another network organization, called the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process, came together to coordinate many women's and gender-oriented organizations, such as the [Gender and Development Institute](#), the [Gender Equality Network](#), the [Kachin State](#)

[Women's Network](#), the Mon Women's Network, the [Nyein \(Shalom\) Foundation](#), the [Women's Organisation Network](#) and the [Women and Peace Action Network \(Shan State\)](#). This organization focuses on women's security, peace and justice issues, particularly United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325²⁰ (AGIPP, 2015).

These network organizations have coordinated with each other in advocating with the government for an increase in women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels as well as implementing the agenda of the National Committee for Women's Affairs.

The government has acknowledged the contributions of civil society organizations to women's rights development and has accelerated collaboration with them, including to implement the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women. But its agenda was criticized for ignoring local needs. For instance, the Strategic Plan overlooks critical elements of Resolution 1325, such as displacement (refugees and internally displaced persons), land confiscation, communal violence and the proliferation of small arms (AGIPP, 2018).

As of 2015, women's rights defenders began including men in their activities. In particular, men have been invited, as partners, to education sessions within the violence against women's programme. Gender equality activists created the Engaging Men Myanmar group to raise awareness about sexual harassment and the recent laws relating to gender-based violence. Engaging Men Myanmar has organized since 2016 a public event on Valentine's Day with quizzes and activities to promote gender equality. For the international 16 Days of Activism,²¹ Good Men campaign is included to promote the respect of women's rights.

Gender organizations have also extended their reach to the LGBT community to talk about gender issues. The leading gender organization, Equality Myanmar, has been the prominent actor in promoting LGBT rights, particularly on discrimination in education and employment. Equality Myanmar, with the coordination of the Myanmar LGBT Rights Network, has called for equality and justice for the LGBT community. In particular, they have demanded removal of Section 377 of the Penal Code, which prohibits sex among homosexual people.

Most NGOs have approached the LGBT community from a health aspect, such as raising HIV awareness, rather than working with them on gender equality. As members of the [Gender Equality Network](#), LGBT rights activists have been invited to join campaigns and advocacy workshops, albeit as participants or observers—not as facilitators.

Challenges and limitations

Denial of feminism

There is no actual Burmese translation of “feminism”. Mostly, it is referred to as *ei-hti-ya-wada* (something that focuses only on women’s issues). Consequently, most people have misunderstood that feminism as something biased towards women, and feminists are viewed as men haters. This reaction has cultivated divergence and competition between men and women rather than social cohesion and gender complementarity. In addition, feminism is regarded as a Western ideology trying to influence local culture and traditions. Traditional groups view feminism as a tool of neo-imperialism of the West over developing countries, which only intensifies the challenge to uprooting the deep-rooted patriarchy system. The traditional groups include religious institutions, such as monk and nun associations, and State-sponsored women’s groups. They believe that feminism is demanding radical changes to improve women’s well-being while ignoring the values of local people. Feminists have also found that the word “feminism” seems to be negative even for some women’s rights defenders.

According to gender activists interviewed for this study, “gender equality” seems to be more acceptable for most local groups, who find language and interpretation the main obstacles to understanding the theory. While the feminists consider equality of the sexes as well as the intersection, as gender activists do, the theory is based on the concept of fighting against the patriarchy rooted in men’s and women’s society. However, as the gender activists explained that the promotion of gender equality in Myanmar has only affected ad hoc issues and has yet to touch the influential power of patriarchy on gender relations.

For instance, the extreme Buddhist nationalist groups proposed revoking the 1954 Special Women’s Marriage

and Inheritance Act, to be replaced with the Myanmar Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law. Under the proposed law, Buddhist women would need to obtain approval from a guardian and government officials before marrying non-Buddhist men. And non-Buddhist men would be punished with a ten-year prison sentence for not converting to Buddhism after marrying a Buddhist woman. This law would prohibit women’s rights and discriminate between Buddhist and non-Buddhist women in Myanmar. More than 160 women’s and civil society organizations opposed the law by collecting one million signatures (in 2014) to counter the coalition of nationalist groups that supported the law²².

In 2015, the parliament adopted two laws that support monogamy practices and population control, with both seen as aiming to stifle the increase of the Muslim population in Myanmar. Although women’s groups had been united in opposing these laws, their activism began fading after the laws were approved. The women interviewed for this study claimed that the gender activists should have been aware of the influence of patriarchy, which has been victimizing women for political gain.²³

The patriarchal religious institutions

According to the 2014 population census, around 88 per cent of the population in Myanmar is Buddhist (MPHC, 2016). Despite a non-discriminatory clause between men and women in Buddhist literature, the practice of Myanmar Buddhists is typically characterized as favouring patriarchal values. Not only has male power maintained influence over communities from a religious perspective, but the religious institutions have dominated community affairs.

In the parliamentary era (1948–1958) under the administration of Prime Minister U Nu, Buddhism was declared the national religion. Houtman (1999) asserted that the concept of national unity of Myanmar is based on non-secular ideology because the junta (1990–2010) always referred to Myanmar as “the country of Buddhist Burmese.” The general public cherished the role of Buddhist monks in the independence struggles under the British rule and the protests against the dictatorship, particularly in the Saffron Revolution in 2007. As

Gil (2008) acknowledged, the monasteries were instrumental in cultural and social life at the community level.

Sangha, the community of monks, was highly involved in the protest of Myanmar women wearing foreign cloth and imitating foreign culture under the British colonial administration and even under the authoritarian regime. Thus, the ruling government did not ignore the moral impact of the Buddhist monks over the people and took advantage of the power of Sangha in mobilizing the community. The role of monks was strong in advocating with the government to enact the interfaith marriage law in the parliamentary era and in the era of democratic government after 2010.

There is evidence that Buddhist nuns have been discriminated against within their institution. For example, Saccavadi, a Myanmar nun, was ordained in the *bhikkuni* (female monastic order) in Sri Lanka because the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*²⁴ had disappeared several years in Myanmar. When Saccavadi returned to Myanmar from Sri Lanka in 2005, the State Sangha Nayaka Council,²⁵ a State-sponsored religious institution set up in 1980, investigated her case and accused her of committing a crime (disobeying the rules). She was punished—made to bow three times to the monks in the State Sangha Nayaka Council—for her crime and was ordered to replace her *bhikkhuni* robe with a nun's robe, to sign and admit that she was foolish and to read these admissions aloud in front of the monks. Because she did not follow what the monk council members ordered, she was arrested and sent to prison.

The dependence between State and religious power has distorted the rise of feminist ideology. Kawanami (2013) noted that the role of nuns' associations in Myanmar is to express their loyalty to the institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the authority of monks. Similar to defining women's role as caregivers at the domestic level, the religion is also viewed as a family sphere that maintains that nuns are the member of that family who need to give care to others by supporting the male heads. As the religion has been an untouchable issue in the country, equality has been lost even in the religious institutions, which impacts on communities, most of which are influenced by religious power.

Male-dominated decision-making and power in politics

The strong patriarchy system rooted in the growth of military power has been a major challenge to improving women's rights. Conflicts between the military and ethnic armed groups, most of which had been quelled by peace agreements, returned in 2011. The armed forces continue to commit sexual violence against ethnic women and women of different religions, especially the Rohingya women, to enforce their masculine power.

The 2008 Constitution does not include a legal definition of discrimination against women based on the tenets of CEDAW. The clauses that exclude women from occupying ministerial positions (Articles 232 and 352), that grant military personnel immunity from prosecution of war crimes, gender-based violence and gross human rights violations (Articles 343 and 445) and that suspend human rights during times of emergency (Article 381) thus support discriminatory practices against women. The government has failed to develop a justice mechanism for women, including the investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators committing gender-based violence during the conflict. Peace dialogues have barely addressed the gender, peace and security issues. Limited funding to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1352 is also one of the restrictions to the advancement of women's rights in conflict settings and the achievement of inclusive peace (AGIPP, 2017a).

Women activists have highlighted that men's approval (to open up the space) is crucial for women to take part in community affairs or public decision-making processes and to enter politics. Even though women are allowed to run for election, a report on female Parliament members' experiences (Latt et al., 2017) indicated that voters' preference for male politicians was higher than for women. The discussions and decisions on political agendas or party policy have been dominated by male leaders, while women have been mostly excluded from party meetings or informal gatherings. And there has been little collaboration among women politicians across party lines. Generally, women party members agree with the 30 per cent quota for women's participation in candidate selection, but they have less power to influence the decision of male leaders within their own party in favour of the quota.²⁶

In addition, the representation of marginalized groups, including ethnic women's groups, women's labour groups, female student groups, women with disability groups and nuns' groups, have been less considered in the current gender mainstreaming processes. They have collaborated with and supported other women organizations who are leading in advocacy for policy change at the national level. However, those marginalized groups still need knowledge and capacity building to challenge the male power within their communities.

Innovative approaches to promote women's rights

Women's rights activists have applied two approaches in eliminating discrimination practices between men and women. The first approach is advocating with the government for law reform and for necessary interventions for women's peace and security. The second approach is to raise awareness among communities through such innovative campaigns as "One Billion Rising Myanmar", "#Metoo", "White Ribbon" and "Whistle

for Help" on sexual harassment and other gender-based violence issues. Other activities include education sessions, gender-awareness film festivals, singing contests and theatre. Social media has been vital for outreach communication. Facebook, for instance, had 9.7 million users in the country in 2018.

The women's rights activists acknowledge the influential power of Facebook because it was mainly used in collecting the one million signatures for the campaign to against reform of the interfaith marriage law. The #MeToo campaign to share individual experiences in sexual harassment has been popular among women, who have publicized incidents on buses, in taxis or other public spaces on Facebook, where the offenders were cited, followed by thousands of users mass sharing the post. Social media has also been a useful space to disseminate information with the public. Women's organizations have posted updated activities and information on laws, complaint mechanisms for gender-based violence and hotline numbers. Although some victim-blaming comments appear, many counter-arguments take on the blamers.

Conclusion

Colonized by the British and occupied by the Japanese for more than 100 years and then afflicted with more than 60 years of prolonged civil war with several ethnic groups, Myanmar has endured many challenges. Poverty, poor education, weak institutions and gender-based violence remain as challenges to be addressed in State building. Women's issues also remain low priority because women's rights are assumed to be unworthy of discussion or not as urgent as peace and economic development. There is little awareness that gender mainstreaming is needed as a strategy or approach in development programmes to achieve gender equality.

Historically, Myanmar women were given a supporting role in the political and social fields to assist with the implementation of male leaders' agendas. Women's clothing and an interfaith marriage law were prioritized in nationalists' movements because women were regarded as preservers of the culture.

There is widespread belief that Myanmar women enjoy equality and high status and are able to participate in public life as men do. Men's and women's official and legal equal status provided in the Constitution has been highlighted as proof. No one points out the traditional customs and practices that contradict such a belief, however. During the previous military regime, the government perpetuated the illusion of women's high status in statements and reports.

Femininity has been appreciated in State-sponsored organizations to maintain patriarchal power. Recent women's organizations have engaged a more progressive view and a more organized and strategic plan to promote gender equality than the women's groups established a

century ago. Today's women's organizations come from the grass-roots and have collaborated with marginalized groups, such as ethnic women groups, although the collaboration with female student groups, women with disability groups and female labourers' group remains weak. Feminism is still viewed as a radical perspective; many women's rights activists are even reluctant to accept feminism. Although marginalized groups, such as women with disability or female students, have collaborated with women's networks, their capacity to counteract male dominance within their respective community needs strengthening. The influence of male leadership in the political parties restricts the coalition of female members across party lines, which also needs stronger attention.

To address these issues, this study suggests that feminism is the solution to bring about a structured change for gender equality. Women's inclusion and gender quotas should be adopted in making peace agreements, legislation and constitutional reform processes as well as the candidate-selection method of political parties. The government should lead in eliminating all forms of violence. A strong legal framework should be developed to facilitate access to justice for the survivors of gender-based violence. It is also essential to ensure that survivors of violence can access critical support services and that the judiciary, police, health professionals and social workers are provided with necessary training to respond to violence.

And lastly, the international agendas for development issues must be localized to provide income-generating activities to women and to create safe and sound environments for working women rather than focusing on the empowerment of elite women.

Endnotes

1. These elite women activists represented not the whole women's community.
2. It was started since before the colonial period. So here it means (elite) women activists from upper class always more emphasize about marriage, divorce and inheritance laws in any period.
3. British rule of Burma lasted from 1824 to 1948.
4. For example, Harold Fielding Hall's writing in 1898; R. Grant Brown's writing in the early twentieth century; Sir Harcourt Butler's article "In Times of India" and the articles in the Hindi monthly paper *Stri Darpan (Women's Mirror)* published from 1909 to 1928 (Ikeya, 2011c: 46–50).
5. The largest ethnic group in Myanmar, at 68 per cent of the country's population, according to the 2014 census.
6. Master: *thakhin* for men and *thakhin ma* for women in Burmese.
7. Wunthanu represents "patriotism"; "Konmayi" means "women" Athin stands for "Group"; so "Wunthanu Konmayi Ahtin" means patriot women's group.
8. To decide whether to continue administering Burma as a province of India or to govern it as an independent entity directly from London.
9. Women in the British colonial period were mostly employed in match factories, rope factories and cheroot factories.
10. The name "Myanmar" was changed only after 1962.
11. One of the major ethnic groups in the lower part of Myanmar.
12. Kokang is an ethnic groups in the north-eastern Myanmar.
13. Shan is a major ethnic group and the state is the largest area in Myanmar.
14. The Karen people live in the south-east of the country.
15. Pyidawtha, or Happy Land, was a development programme in the post-independence period, launched by the Prime Minister U Nu administration in 1952. But it failed to sustain after the military coup in 1962.
16. "Tai Yi" – it is the name of footwear factory. That's why, that strike was well known as "Tai Yi" strike.
17. In-depth interview with Ma Nwet Yee Win, the secretary of the labour union, September 2018.
18. Note from the Together for Peace, Equality for All Forum, organized by the Women's League of Burma in September 2018.
19. See <http://mmsis.gov.mm/statHtml/statHtml.do> [accessed 14 Dec. 2018].
20. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security calls for the adoption of a gender perspective to consider the special needs of women and girls during a conflict, repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.
21. The 16 Days of Activism is an international campaign organized annually, from November 25 to December 10 to fight gender-based violence.
22. 4 laws under "interfaith marriage law" were approved by the government in 2015, despite disagreement by women's groups. The following paragraph explained about 2 laws out of approved 4 – these are about population control and against polygamy practice.
23. In-depth interviews with May Sabal Phyu, Director, Gender Equality Network; Nan Phyu Phyu Lin, Director, Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process; Pyo Let Han and Shun Lei, Founders of Rainfall Feminist Organization; Sanda Thant, Socio-Economic and Gender Resource Institute.
24. Bhikkhun is a fully ordained female monastic; they used to be female religious leaders who earned the same respect and religious authority as monks did at the time of Buddha.
25. State Patron Committee of Sangha.
26. Finding from in-depth interviews with female candidates from political parties.

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