



Hawkers and Hijabi Cyberspace: Muslim Women's Labor Subjectivities in Yangon

Shae Frydenlund and Shunn Lei

Abstract

Muslim women's experiences of exclusion are often at the forefront of academic literature on ethnicity and race in Myanmar. Yet Muslim women's varying experiences of exclusion involve more than discursive Othering and state violence. Drawing on postcolonial, Marxist-feminist, and border studies perspectives on the relationship between exclusion, inclusion, and labor subjectivity, this article takes Yangon Muslim women's diverse and embodied experiences of urban space and work as entry points to understand shifting relations between the state, capital, and labor in Myanmar. We argue that capital articulates with social difference to create conditions of violent *inclusion* in precarious labor markets and the emergence of new labor subjectivities. This ethnographic research also shows that, despite facing exclusions from public space and formal labor markets, hijabi women in Yangon create vibrant communities, new subjectivities, and new livelihoods on the internet, highlighting the ways that Muslim women make lives within and diagonal to spaces of domination.

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှမွတ်ဆလင် အမျိုးသမီးများတွေ့ ကြုံရလေ့ရှိသည့် ဖယ်ကြဉ်ဆက်ဆံခံရခြင်းများကို အများအားဖြင့်မျိုးနွယ်စု၊ လူမျိုး တို့နှင့် သက်ဆိုင်သော ပညာရပ်ဆိုင်ရာ သုတေသန စာပေများတွင် ပုံမှန်အားဖြင့်တွေ့ရလေ့ရှိသည်။ သို့သော် မွတ်ဆလင် အမျိုးသမီး များတွေ့ကြုံရသည့် အမျိုးမျိုးသော ဖယ်ကြဉ်ဆက်ဆံခံရမှုများမှာ အမူအယာအားဖြင့် ဖယ်ထုတ်ဆက်ဆံ ခံရခြင်းနှင့် နိုင်ငံတော်မှ

အကြမ်းဖက်ခြင်းတို့မျှသာမကပါ။ ယခု ဆောင်းပါးတွင် ဖယ်ကြဉ် ဆက်ဆံခြင်း၊ အကျုံးဝင်ပါဝင်ခြင်းနှင့် အလုပ်သမားများ အသုံးချ ခံဖြစ်မှုတို့ အကြားရှိ ဆက်နွယ်မှုများကို ပို၍ကိုလိုနီအခြေပြု မက်စ်ဆစ် ဖီးမနစ် ဝါဒနှင့် နယ်မြေအခြေပြု လေ့လာရေးရှုထောင့် တို့မှနေ၍ ရန်ကုန်မြို့ရှိ မွတ်ဆလင်အမျိုး သမီးများ၏ စုံလင်ကွဲပြား သော မြင်သာထင်သာရှိသည့် မြို့ပြနေရာနှင့် အလုပ်အတွေ့အကြုံများ အား မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအတွင်းရှိ နိုင်ငံတော်၊ အရင်းနှင့် အလုပ်သမားများ အကြားရှိပြောင်းလဲနေသော စပ်ဆက်မှု များကို နားလည်နိုင်ရန် အတွက်လေ့လာမှုကိုစတင်ရာအဖြစ်တာ ထွက်အမှတ်အနေဖြင့်ချဉ်း ကပ် လေ့လာသွားမည်ဖြစ်သည်။ အရင်းနှင့် လူမှုကွဲပြားမှုတို့ ပေါင်းဆုံကာ အလွယ်တကူပြုပျက်နိုင်သည့် အလုပ်သမားဈေးကွက် များအတွင်း အတင်းအကြပ် ပါဝင်စေသည့် အခြေအနေများ နှင့် အလုပ်သမားများ အသုံးချခံဖြစ်မှုတို့ကြောင့် အသစ်ထွက်ပေါ်လာ သည့်အခြေအနေများ ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာရသည်ဟု ကျွန်ုပ်တို့သုံးသပ် ပါသည်။ ရန်ကုန်မြို့အတွင်းရှိ ဟီဂျပ်(မွတ်ဆလင်အမျိုးသမီးများ ဘာသာရေး အရ ဝတ်ဆင်လေ့ရှိသောခေါင်းဆောင်းပုဝါ) ဝတ်ဆင်သော အမျိုးသမီးများမှာ အများပိုင်နေရာများနှင့် သမားရိုးကျ အလုပ်သမား ဈေးကွက်များအတွင်း ဖယ်ကြဉ်ဆက်ဆံခံရခြင်းများကို ကြုံတွေ့နေရ လင့်ကစား၊ အခြားမျက်နှာစာတဖက်ဖြစ်သော အင်တာနက်ပေါ်တွင် သက်ဝင်လှုပ်ရှားသည့် လူမှုအဝန်းအဝိုင်းများ၊ အသုံးဝင်မှုအသစ်များ၊ သက်မွေးဝမ်းကြောင်းမှုအသစ်များကို ဖန်တီး ခြင်းများဖြင့် ယင်းတို့ သည် လွှမ်းမိုးသည့်နေရာများအတွင်းနှင့် အပြိုင်ရှိရာများတွင် မိမိတို့ဘဝကိုရပ်တည် နေကြောင်းကိုလည်း ယင်းတို့၏ လူမှုအတွေ့ အကြုံများအပေါ် အဓိကထား၍ သုံးသပ် ထားသော ဤသုတေသန စာတမ်းမှ မီးမောင်းထိုးပြသနေပါသည်။

Introduction

The Lucky Eleven Facebook page has nearly 12,000 Burmese-speaking followers. Run from the Yangon home of 24-year old Thinn Thinn, Lucky Eleven is the shopfront for her cosmetics business, which features a wide variety of products from brands like Maybelline, Estee Lauder, Bath and Body Works, Labo Labo, and Shiseido. Thinn Thinn posts to her page upwards of 20 times per day, highlighting different brands and products, while also posting “promotions” for special pricing on different products multiple times a week. Her business has a devoted following of Burmese-speaking hijabi (Muslim headscarf-wearing) Muslim women—Thinn Thinn herself is a Rohingya woman born in Rakhine State and raised in Yangon. She also wears niqab, a black two-piece garment that covers the arms and ankles and features a horizontal opening for the eyes. Though her family is from northwestern Rakhine State, her parents and siblings migrated to work in Saudi Arabia. After struggling to obtain a government identity card that would allow her to attend University, Thinn Thinn decided to start her own business selling makeup to the new generation of cyber-connected and cyber-literate Myanmar women who are increasingly interested in global beauty and skincare trends.

Thinn Thinn’s Lucky Eleven Facebook page also features hijab-wrapping instructional videos from other Yangon beauty and hijabi fashion “influencers,” skincare tutorials, and thousands of joyful, emoji-laden comments about the page’s content. Lucky Eleven is one of dozens of similar pages managed by hijabi and niqabi women in Myanmar, selling everything from bejeweled hijabs to snacks and beauty products. Notably, these Facebook pages also serve as a community forum for hijab enthusiasts. Photos praising the religious virtues of hijab-wearing, and the inner and outer beauty of the hijabi or niqabi herself, stand in stark contrast to the anti-Muslim cartoons and social media posts that circulate widely on Burmese Facebook. In fact, Burmese hijabi cyberspace is often the only space where many

young Burmese-speaking hijabis can see and interact with women who look like them, away from discrimination, harassment, or assault.

The decision to wear the hijab, or pa'wa in Burmese, is not taken lightly by Muslim women in Myanmar. Wearing the hijab in Myanmar, especially in Yangon, positions women who may have passed as Buddhist within a thorny web of raced and gendered discourses of belonging and non-belonging across multiple scales. Some women choose not to wear the hijab because they do not feel spiritually ready to make the commitment to wear it consistently. As San San, a 29-year old Myanmar hijabi woman put it:

I thought about the decision for a long time. Many years. Because it's a serious commitment. You can't just take off the hijab if you want to go dancing at the club, because you feel discriminated against, or because it's too hot. You have to wear it all the time, it's our religion. You have to be brave.¹

Other Muslim women choose not to wear the hijab not because they are not ready spiritually, but because they are scared of being targeted by Buddhist violence or excluded from the institutions where they hope to study or work. The materiality of the hijab, and the embodied experience of being Muslim and being a hijabi or not, are imbricated in broader struggles over belonging in the Myanmar nation and, as we try to show in this essay, Myanmar's broader political economy of labor.

Hence, apart from their existence as valuable social space for young Muslim women in Myanmar, hijabi social media shopfronts reflect two important structural features of Myanmar nation-building and political economy. First, Muslim hijabi women face both de jure and de facto exclusion from political, social, and economic spaces on the basis of their non-Burman racialized ethnicity, non-Buddhist religious status as Muslims, and

¹ San San, personal communication, 2018.

their choice to visibly display their Muslim-ness as hijabis. Second, this exclusion is accompanied by *inclusion* in a very specific labor regime: flexibilized, precarious sales and hawking work. Recalling colonial-era stereotypes that continue to represent Muslims as business-savvy immigrants from South Asia, Muslim women in Yangon often turn to online sales and hawking work in the absence of other opportunities to attend university, enter civil service, or the ability to make ends meet with only a husband's wages. However, in the midst of a proliferation and entrenchment of discriminatory discourses and structures that limit the lives of Muslim women in Myanmar, hijabi cyberspaces have emerged as hybrid spaces of identity affirmation and new economic life, in which the celebration of Muslim womanhood is intertwined with sales work and wages. Additionally, the work of gender activists in Yangon is cracking open spaces of exclusion for Muslim women, specifically educational and political spaces.

This paper examines the interrelated processes of Muslim women's exclusion and inclusion in Myanmar through a study of their navigation of everyday spaces of life and work in Yangon, based on research conducted before 2019. We begin with an overview of critical theorizations of social exclusion and inclusion in order to foreground our argument about the simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of Muslim women in Myanmar. We argue that racialized and gendered hierarchies in Myanmar articulate with capital to engender the simultaneous exclusion and discipline of Muslim women, and their inclusion in Myanmar's political economy as "informal," flexibilized and casualized labor subjects. From there, we outline the extant literature on the historical and geographical specificity of gender, race, and Islam in Myanmar, which is followed by a discussion of our research methods. The fourth section examines Muslim women's lived experiences of exclusion in the spaces of the Myanmar school, the street; and the government office. The fifth section is a discussion of Muslim women's varied experiences of hawking and online sales work. We conclude with a discussion of the production of new, positive subjectivities and spaces by

urban Hijabis, highlighting the ways that Muslim women make lives within and diagonal to spaces of domination.

Theorizing Exclusion and Inclusion

In the wake of a bloody twentieth century, explaining how human subjects came to be exclude-able and kill-able was a central task of philosophers and social theorists. For Hannah Arendt, Nazi Germany's horrific crimes against Jews, gays, Roma, and the disabled were predicated on the ability of differentiating between bearers of the rights of citizenship and subjects who were not bearers of these rights— a project that holds lasting significance for understanding how the murder and displacement of Rohingyas has been carried out with impunity.² Arendt's approach traces the history of imperialism and pan-movements, which incubated racism, solidified the expansion of state power, and created the stateless person that would later be the victim of totalitarian brutality. Her argument culminates with an analysis of the social and political conditions following WWI that led to the separation of Jews from non-Jewish community and nationality, namely the historically the tight-knit Jewish culture sphere, that created the context for their abstraction and expulsion from humanity. In the fractured nature of modern life, race-thinking and totalitarianism encouraged the formation of a rootless mob that could be mobilized as an instrument of thoughtless evil.

In contradistinction to Arendt, Giorgio Agamben examines the relationship between exclusion and *inclusion* to argue that subjects are caught within a juridical-legal framework for the explicit purpose of their expulsion from it.³ Agamben cites the biopolitics of grouping human bodies into a political category (meaning they are included in a political system, but have no agency within it), rather than their removal from a state and space of citizenship. For Agamben, *homo sacer* can be acted on by

² Arendt, 1973.

³ Agamben, 1998.

the sovereign when the body becomes the site of politics, arguing that Arendt misses this connection in her own analysis of citizenship and human rights: “yet what escapes Arendt is that the process is in a certain sense the inverse of what she takes it to be, and that precisely the radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life (that is, into a camp) legitimated and necessitated total domination”.⁴ It is not the human that is outside the protection of the state that experiences abstract nakedness, but rather the human that is actively made political and grouped into a state of exception (decided by the sovereign). *Homo sacer* exists within the polity but is rendered rightless in a state of exception.

Although Hannah Arendt notes the relationship between imperialism and hierarchies of race in the production of exclude-able and kill-able subjects vis-à-vis the state, it is postcolonial scholars writing outside of Western Europe who extend Marx to demonstrate how the violence of colonialism engenders the production of specific sets of subjectivities that articulate with states and capital. For Franz Fanon especially, the process of making colonial subjects is inseparable from nation-making and capital accumulation.⁵ Where Marx scarcely mentioned the production of subjects in capital through hierarchies of power, his account of primitive accumulation laid the foundation for critical understandings of colonialism as not only a capitalist venture, but a subject-making one. In a famous passage from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon emphasizes the ongoing process of subject-making that characterizes colonialism:

The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And, consequently, the colonist is right when he says he “knows” them. It is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject. The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system.⁶

⁴ Agamben, 1998, p. 120.

⁵ Fanon, 1963.

⁶ Fanon, 1963, p. 2.

Echoing Fanon, critical historian Michael Charney has convincingly argued that the experiences of Muslims, especially Rohingyas murdered and driven from Rakhine State with impunity, reflect not the postcolonial politics of Burmese nation-making, but the enduring colonial present and its racial logics—shored up and reproduced by generations of military and state actors who reproduce categories of racialized ethnic belonging *at the same time* that they accumulate astronomical wealth—in Myanmar.⁷ Keeping in mind the continued relevance of colonial structures of domination in Myanmar today, we aim to follow Fanon’s practice of “stretching” Marx to examine the relationship between Bamar supremacy, the Myanmar state, and capital as they shape the subjectivities and material lives of Muslim women in Myanmar.

To this end, it is useful for us to consider the work of Marxist-feminists, anti-racist scholars, queer theorists, and critical border studies scholars that problematizes a focus on citizenship, bare life, and the spectacle of nation-state borders. Their work points instead to the articulation of borders with the state and capital to produce diverse subjects—whether through labor migration programs that include Filipina workers in the nation-state by granting citizenship, but result in *de facto* exclusion as a result of labor burdens,⁸ the use of inclusive and “progressive” sexual politics to exclude certain immigrants,⁹ or the inclusive-cum-exclusionary discourses of multiculturalism. For indigenist postcolonial scholars such as Glen Sean Coulthard, inclusion effectively facilitates exclusion through discourses of multicultural inclusion and a “politics of recognition,” which have the insidious effect of excluding indigenous Canadians by erasing experiences of colonial domination in the present.¹⁰ Taken together, theorizations of violent exclusion and its relationship to inclusion sheds light on the predicament of Muslim women in

⁷ Charney, 2018.

⁸ Pratt, 2006.

⁹ Andrijasevic, 2009.

¹⁰ Coulthard, 2014.

Myanmar by allowing us to critically interrogate what, on the surface, appears as the production and discipline of excludable subjects in relation to the political economy of labor.

In concert with other critical scholars' theorizations of the relationship between social exclusion and inclusion, Mezzadra and Neilson's development of "border as method" problematizes simplistic and clean distinctions between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, and citizen and non-citizen.¹¹ The authors argue that the multiplication of both cognitive and physical borders in a globalized world does not simply exclude certain populations: they join with, or articulate with, capital to produce a heterogeneity of *labor* subjects such as the female migrant factory worker and the precarious and flexibilized immigrant worker. When examined from the perspective of the political economy of labor, technologies of segregation and exclusion associated with immigration policies and event detention camps work not as devices of exclusion, but as temporal devices for controlling and pacing supplies of labor. For example, in the case of Indian information technology workers who are casually employed and laid off, or "benched," by employment agencies who supply immigrant workers to Australia's vast information technology industry, immigration status is more about controlling the cost of labor than the exclusion of Indian workers from the rights of citizenship in Australia. Being fired or deported for violating strict visa rules on work hours, which entails being sent back to families in India for "holding" until their next contract, reflects the temporal pacing of the labor supply that enables information technology companies to drive up the cost of labor and ensure maximum accumulation, rather than the policing of national borders.

Moreover, building on the work of Marxist-feminists, Mezzadra and Neilson demonstrate that, amid shifting relations between capital and states, in which the composition of living labor stretches across times and the borders of nation-states,

¹¹ Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013.

workers (especially women) experience the intensification of labor burdens at the same time that their working days are being extended. Hence, capital's articulation with gendered hierarchies and regimes of citizenship enables a "muddying" of Marx's traditionally inverse relationship between the length of the working day and labor's intensity. Put another way, where Marx argued that living labor could not survive both the lengthening of the working day and the intensification of production, a diversification and multiplication of labor systems, such as trans-local family support across national borders, the diversification and expansion of women's unwaged social reproduction work, and women's double shifts, make both labor extension and intensification possible for capital in new ways.

For the purposes of this study, critical interrogations of "inside" and "outside" from the perspective of race and gender provide fertile ground for understanding the experiences of Muslim women at a particular historical conjuncture in Myanmar, where highly visible practices of exclusion vis-à-vis state discipline and the production of racialized ethnic hierarchies is also accompanied by the emergence of new labor subjectivities. Drawing on critical Marxist-feminist and border studies perspectives on the relationship between exclusion, inclusion, and labor subjectivity, this essay takes Yangon Muslim women's diverse and embodied experiences of urban space and work as entry points to understand shifting relations between the state, capital, and labor in Myanmar.

Gender, Race, and Islam in Myanmar

Historically, not all Muslim minority groups in Myanmar have experienced dispossession and precarity in the same way. As Burma studies scholars write of the relationship between Muslims and the Myanmar state, those who affiliate more closely with Burmese culture are positioned more favorably vis-à-vis state structures, while those who emphasize their non-Burmese

cultures and religious values are targeted for punishment.¹² This exclusion is also explicitly racialized and gendered in ways that affect Muslim men and Muslim women differently and unequally. For example, the putatively sexually rapacious Muslim man is understood not only as a threat to women, but also as a threat to the vulnerable body of the nation, while Muslim women are represented as passive victims of a violent and backward Muslim patriarchy, fertile perpetrators of a population war against Myanmar, or not represented at all.¹³

Reproduction and the body are key sites where racialized discourses play out in Myanmar, where a “Muslim invasion” and fertility are intimately linked to Burman Buddhist ideas of national belonging and security.¹⁴ For example, a now-infamous cartoon in which a Rohingya woman is actively using her fecund womb as a weapon to wage the population war against Burman Buddhist Myanmar. It is also believed that Buddhist women are forced to convert to Islam and give birth to Muslim children, that Muslim men are engaging in a ‘Romeo jihad’ against the Burmese nation, and that Muslim women are forced into polygamous marriages.¹⁵

Buddhists from a variety of backgrounds, from the fire-brand monk leaders of Ma Ba Tha to Rakhine women villagers, cite a fear of Muslim men’s violent virility and Muslim women’s fertility in precipitating the destruction of the Burmese Buddhist nation.¹⁶ This fear is encapsulated by Myanmar’s “race and religion” laws, passed in 2015, which restrict interfaith marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim men, limit the number of children born to Muslim women, restrict conversion away from Buddhism, and outlaw polygamy.¹⁷ The 2015 package of laws follows a decade of similar laws and informal government practices enacted locally in Rakhine state, which surveil

¹² Crouch, 2016; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016; Schissler et al., 2017.

¹³ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016; Schissler et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2015.

¹⁴ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2015; 2016; Schissler et al., 2017.

¹⁵ Schissler et al., 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016; Walton et al., 2015.

and discipline Rohingya women by requiring them to register with Na Sa Ka—the Burmese acronym for the notorious former Border Area Immigration Control Headquarters—for approval of marriages (women are reportedly forced to take pregnancy tests before marriage), and birth registration.¹⁸ For Rohingya women, the birth of more than two children results in fines or imprisonment; thus, women seek unsafe abortions, register children with other married couples, or do not register children at all. Children discovered by authorities are put on a government “black list,” barring them from access to any citizenship rights whatsoever.¹⁹ In the aftermath of the violent pogroms of 2012, 2016, and 2017, discourses of Muslim deviance are continuously taken up by state officials who justify the exclusion of Rohingyas and other Muslim groups.

From her vantage point as a middle-class Bamar woman, co-author Shunn Lei has seen anti-Muslim sentiment grow in Myanmar since 2012, especially with the astronomic rise of Facebook. She also points to a longer, but not abstractly prior, history of discursive violence that has accompanied military and structural violence against Muslims in Myanmar. Burmese children are taught anti-Muslim bias from a young age; elders, teachers, and others in positions of power reinforce anti-Muslim bias in the spaces of the school, the home, and the street.

Shunn Lei recalls that if she misbehaved as a child, parents and grandparents would say “kalagyi pann thwar laint mal,” or (kalagyi is going to arrest you) or “Babugyi cor thwar mal” (Babugyi is going to take you away). Though not always used as a slur, the term “kalar,” or foreigner from the West, became racially coded language to identify people with Indian phenotypes, such as darker skin or narrow nose bridges, as culturally and behaviorally defective. The term’s political charge developed during the colonial period, when large numbers of Indians and Bengalis moved to Myanmar, especially Yangon, which precipitated severe anxiety among Bamars and Burmese nationalists, who

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

felt they were becoming strangers in their own country.²⁰ In the postcolonial and postwar periods, the term remained in use as anxieties over foreign invasion converged with fear of Muslims, colored by broader, globalized discourses of Islamic terrorism. In Myanmar, anti-Muslim sentiment has been stoked by the inflammatory rhetoric of U Wirathu and the Ma Ba Tha organization, which encourages Bamar Buddhists to “defend” their country from Muslim “invaders,” but state discourses of Muslim invasion and terrorist threats have justified multiple waves of genocidal military operations in Rakhine State.²¹

Myanmar’s 1982 citizenship law is an oft-cited explanation of Rohingya and non-Bamar Muslim subjugation in Myanmar, though, as Nick Cheesman shows, the law is frequently not read in detail, or is misinterpreted:

In fact, the law contains no reference to the enumerated 135 national race groups nor does it contain any specific sections to deny Rohingya citizenship. Rather, it makes membership in a national race the gold standard for citizenship and the primary basis for determining the rights of someone claiming to be a member of the political community that was then “Burma” and subsequently “Myanmar”.²²

By linking citizenship with racial categories, Rohingyas are produced as subjects who can be simultaneously abandoned by the state and capital²³ and targeted by what Mbembé describes as necropolitical, or make-die interventions by the state.²⁴ Rohingyas are also produced as a discrete population opposite a discrete Bamar national population, subject to targeted management and intervention by the Myanmar state, military, police, and other diverse actors. Hence, Rohingya exclusion from na-

²⁰ Schissler et al., 2017.

²¹ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016.

²² Cheesman, 2017, p. 471.

²³ Li, 2010; Povinelli, 2011.

²⁴ Mbembé, 2003.

tional-racial belonging is interlinked with the *production* of a racialized Burmese national population, and, as we show later, the production of diverse and flexible labor subjectivities.

In the context of Myanmar, existing gendered, ethnic, and racial hierarchies have been multiplied and entrenched with ongoing wars and accelerating ongoing processes of primitive accumulation that have ejected peasants from land but not led to their absorption as wage labor.²⁵ For minority and poor women in Myanmar, the country's "opening-up process" is characterized by new articulations of capital with the Myanmar nation-state and its production and maintenance of gendered and racial hierarchies, resulting in an increase in unwaged labor burdens as the value of the Myanmar Kyat fluctuates, real wages fail to keep up with the cost of living, and wage work becomes increasingly flexibilized, if it exists at all. For example, Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi's studies of gender and development in Myanmar show that working-class Burmese women are compelled to "make up shortfalls" in household income through wage work in addition to performing household and care work duties when income from working relatives, agriculture, or a family business proves insufficient.²⁶ For ethnic and religious minority women, especially Muslims, conditions of economic hardship interlock with the subjugating effects of sexist, racist, and religious discrimination that proliferate in Myanmar state bureaucracy, institutions, and everyday customs. Shae Frydenlund's study of Rohingya women's work lives emphasizes the relationship between military violence, segregation, and increasing labor burdens for Rohingya women in Rakhine State, where those who once worked in the home or on family farms are compelled to sell their labor to local capitalists who profit from Rohingyas' spatial isolation and desperation, while those who remain in the home must work harder to take care of relatives unable to secure regular wage work.²⁷

²⁵ Prasse-Freeman & Phyo Win Latt, 2018.

²⁶ Khin Mar Mar Kyi, 2013, p. 306.

²⁷ Frydenlund, 2020a.

At the scale of the body and the everyday, Muslim and hijabi women in Yangon experience the articulation of racial and gender hierarchies with the state and capital through surveillance and discipline in the school and passport office, as physical and verbal harassment by men in the street, and as the material condition of low or unwaged work and poverty. The next section discusses Muslim women's subjectivities, then their experiences of three everyday spaces they inhabit: the school, the street, and the government office. Each space reveals different moments of articulation of gender and race with the state and foregrounds the articulation of these hierarchies with capital vis-à-vis the production of Muslim women as laboring subjects, specifically, flexible hawkers and sellers.

Methods

This collaborative project is informed by the theorizations of Third World feminists, which understand Third World women to have an “epistemic advantage”²⁸ that uniquely positions them as bearers and producers of knowledge about social, political, and economic life. Coming from different backgrounds as a Burmese artist/activist and an American graduate student, we collaborated in the design and writing of inclusive and critical feminist research about minority women's experiences in urban Myanmar. We used methods of ethnographic participant observation, focus groups, and interviews. We interviewed 15 Muslim minority women, including women from the Myanmar Muslim, Rohingya, and Shi'a communities about their livelihoods, experiences of exclusion, experiences as sellers, and their experiences as hijabis in Yangon. We participated in a two-day hijabi makeup class, conducted twelve interviews as well as two focus groups of eight Muslim women from Burmese and Rohingya backgrounds. Using multiple qualitative methods allowed us to

²⁸ Herr, 2014.

gain understandings of women's experiences as they understood them and compare these findings with observations of everyday lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

Double Exclusions

The School

As Muslims face heavy-handed state violence and surveillance, and women of all faiths face significant burdens of poverty and precarity, Muslim women in Myanmar face double, or more precisely, intersecting, exclusions unique to their position as both Muslims and women. Phyu Phyu Oo's study of education access among Indian Muslim women in Yangon reveals a lack of access to education as a result of both discriminatory government school policies and the patriarchal, sexist views of conservative Muslim community leaders and family members.²⁹ Conservative Indian Muslims, like other conservative Muslims in Myanmar, prefer to send daughters to single-gender schools or religious schools. Crucially, decisions regarding girls' school attendance varies considerably between Muslim groups and between urban and rural contexts.³⁰ Many cite fears of abuse and assault, rather than conservative religious or sexist views, when justifying decisions to keep girls at home.

Urban Muslim hijabis found themselves excluded from government educational spaces, public spaces, and formal wage labor because they are both Muslims/hijabis and women. On one hand, although there is no formal law outlawing hijabs in schools, there are strong *de facto* prohibitions against wearing hijab or niqab in government schools. This leaves religious schools, often single-gendered, as the only option for women who choose (or who are encouraged by their families) to attend school as hijabis. However, government universities and employers do not recognize degrees from religious schools. Thus,

²⁹ Phyu Phyu Oo, 2016.

³⁰ Frydenlund, 2020a.

Muslim women are excluded from both spaces of higher education and most factory wage work that employs poor Burmese women, as factories far from home or with male supervisors are not considered appropriate for Muslim women. As the third section will show, this exclusion from formal wage labor is accompanied by inclusion in informal hawking and online sales work, which often demand more capital investment, risk, and extended working hours from women. Put another way, Muslim women's multiple experiences of exclusion facilitate their production as diverse, flexible, and precarious "bearers" of labor power.

Even those who do choose to forego hijab so they can attend primary school may still end up excluded from higher education and other formal institutions due to the difficulties that Muslims (and especially Muslim women) face when trying to obtain government identity cards. When (urban) individuals are denied identity cards, exclusion from higher education and formal wage labor disproportionately affects women who are tasked with filling gaps in household income by working "double shifts" as informal hawkers or wage workers in addition to fulfilling household labor and care work duties. Faced with staggering bribe costs and long waiting periods for identity cards, many pay to secure a card only to find their race listed as "Bengali," despite their heritage as Burmese Muslims, Indian Muslims, or Rohingyas. Khin San Winn, a 23-year-old Rohingya woman, saved money by selling snacks online for years to buy an identity card for 800,000 kyat so that she could attend university and earn a degree. Notably, one cannot sit for university entrance exams or earn a university degree without an identity card that proves belonging as one a Myanmar *taingyintha*r, or "national race."

Dr. Aye, a prominent physician, activist, and educator in Yangon, explained the bizarre contents of her own identity card: "mine has four races! It reads 'Bamar Pakistan and Bamar Iran,' even though it was my great grandparents who emigrated – we are from Myanmar, not Iran!" However, Dr. Aye is lucky: "if you

apply for a card these days, it just says Bengali. You can do nothing with this card". The reason for her luck can be attributed in part to her brother's quirky passion for their family history, which was originally dismissed as an eccentricity: "When he wrote this ten years ago, we thought it was nonsense! But now we understand the value of this work, thank God we have that history!" Now, more than ever, Dr. Aye is aware of the power that history holds in relation to state categorizations of belonging.

Thazin, a 25-year-old Myanmar Muslim woman, recalled her experience as a student at a government university, where she participated in a freshman welcome event as a singer. Rather than encouraging her and educating students about discrimination based on religion, sex, and race, faculty discouraged her from participating, explaining that her "Indian-looking face" would result in humiliation from the crowd. When Thazin was on the stage, men among the student crowd shouted out to the stage "stop singing!" and "Haray!". In the halls of the university, men her age would say "kalamagyi lar ne be," or "the Indian-looking woman is coming." More than a dozen Yangon Muslim women, including Dr. Aye, shared similar experiences of discrimination and harassment, which were overtly colored with sexism, racism, and Islamophobia, as they braved government schools and universities to pursue dreams of higher education.

Compounding the structural violence of Myanmar state bureaucracy and policy, anti-Muslim, anti-woman discourses are (re)produced with terrifying efficacy in the spaces of schools and universities, as the bodies of Muslim women are actively targeted for policing and harassment, invoking what Alison Mountz and Mezzadra and Neilson have described as the inscription of the nation's borders onto a subject's body.³¹ In public schools, Muslim and hijabis' experiences of exclusion reflect everyday bordering practices of both the state, in which teachers and administrators embody the state itself in their policing

³¹ Mountz, 2010; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013.

of Muslim women's clothing, refusal to punish harassers, and their enforcement of policies excluding those with "Bengali" or other non-Burmese national identity card statuses. Exclusion from public schools and universities in Myanmar is a key process through which Myanmar state practices articulate with capitalism to produce specific labor subjectivities in the form of hijabi hawkers and sellers.

The Street

The street is a fraught space for all women, but is especially challenging for Muslim women in Yangon, where they face harassment from both non-Muslim and Muslim men. Though Muslim women who may be perceived as South Asian often receive racist taunts from Bamar men, Moe Lin, a 25-year old Myanmar Muslim, explains that street harassment is different for Muslim women who wear hijab or niqab:

When I didn't wear hijab, Burmese men would yell after me or catcall me, and Muslim men would not notice me because I wasn't visibly Muslim. Muslim men don't usually harass Burmese women. When I started wearing hijab in 2012, both Burmese and Muslim men would harass me – Burmese men would say 'oh look, there is a Muslim woman, she is so arrogant with her hijab,' and Muslim men would catcall me, tease me, and yell after me. They think 'oh! A Muslim woman, we own her!' So it is like this, we are facing oppression from Burman people, the state, and from our own communities.³²

Moe Lin is acutely aware of the specific visibilities created by the hijab – Burman men point to her hijab as a marker of difference and deviance in relation to a Bamar Buddhist status quo, where Muslim men deploy misogynist claims over the bodies of Muslim women who "belong" to them and their community. Moe Lin's

³² Moe Lin, personal communication, 2018.

experience highlights the doubleness of Muslim women's exclusion – that they are targeted as Muslims in a Bamar Buddhist majority space (the street) and they are targeted by sexist violence in their own communities.

Hamidah, a 19-year-old Myanmar Muslim woman who runs a makeup instruction business and a beauty blog, is passionate about her decision to wear hijab – a choice she made at 14 after a long and tortured period of reflection: “I cried and cried, because I didn’t know if I could be a hijabi and run a beauty blog and business in Myanmar.” This was shortly after 2012, and Hamidah wasn’t sure she could do this, she explained, because Myanmar is a Buddhist country where Muslims aren’t accepted, especially hijabis, since they are very visibly Muslim. She was not only afraid she wouldn’t succeed in her dream of becoming a successful beauty blogger and entrepreneur, but was also afraid of death threats, physical violence, and arrest. After deciding to wear the hijab, Hamidah has plenty of online detractors, but she is not concerned with them. However, she has experienced more street harassment:

*Once I was walking in my neighborhood (downtown Yangon), and an older Muslim man was walking in the other direction. As I passed him, he touched below my chest – I yelled at him – how dare you touch me! This is my neighborhood! Another time, a group of Burmese boys grabbed my hijab and tried to pull it off from the back. I scolded them! How dare they!*³³

Notably, Hamidah’s choice to enter online business was not fundamentally shaped by her lack of access to formal education. She has a diploma from a religious school (not a public school), but as the third section of this article discusses at greater length, her informal work as a seller is precarious (many customers do not pay), relations of power linked to debt (she received a sizeable loan from her father to start the business), and high overhead

³³ Hamidah, personal communication, 2018.

costs (makeup is imported and expensive), which limits her ability to make a living wage. She lives with her father. Rather than being a source of income, she explains, the business is about her passion for beauty and teaching other women how to use makeup and become more confident. Her goal is to draw attention to Myanmar hijabis on the international stage as a professional blogger and YouTube content creator.

Neither Moe Lin nor Hamidah framed their experiences of street harassment as traumatic, nor did they express fear of attacks and discrimination, rather, they emphasized their pride and determination to fight for their rights as hijabis and Muslim women who exist in Myanmar but are forcibly disappeared from public space. Moe Lin countered exclusion from higher education with double shifts as a baker, seller, and homemaker. For Hamidah, her experiences of street harassment and the lack of income draw our attention to the everyday material relations of debt and dependence that characterize many Muslim women's lives in Myanmar, despite their best efforts. While we aim to attend to the women's strength and dignity in the face of subjugation, we also draw the reader's attention to the multiple forms of violence that Muslims – especially hijabis – face in their daily efforts to improve their life chances.

The Government Office

The government office is a key space where bureaucrats embody the Myanmar state and Bamar Buddhist nationalism by disciplining and punishing Muslim women. When we asked each research participant whether there were any places they could not go in Yangon, most answered “the government office.” Even Dr. Aye, who is a Shi'a Muslim from a relatively privileged background, recounted incident after incident of profiling, harassment, and embarrassment at various government offices:

When I went to get my passport photo taken, they asked me to take off my hijab. They said they would not give me my passport if I had the hijab on in the photo. So, I stared at him and I took it off. I kept

my cap on (points to the tight undercovering that keeps hair in place under the hijab), but tucked it behind my ears so they could see them. He said that I needed to take that off, too! I said, 'why!' and he said 'we need to see your hair' - my hair! Why do they need to see my hair! They do not need to see my hair. It's ridiculous. There is no rule about hair for passport photos.³⁴

Dr. Aye's story not only demonstrates that hijabi women are subjected to embodied violence in state space, but her experience also highlights the role of officers who embody the state and perform the state by disciplining state subjects.³⁵ State officers and employees embody the Myanmar state's broader anti-Muslim discourse, enacting violence through everyday interactions that complement and extend broader forms of state violence, such as military operations in Rakhine State. Like the passport office, the identification office works as an important space where state employees embody the Myanmar state to police belonging and enact violence through otherwise mundane interactions. San San, a 35-year old Myanmar Muslim woman, recounted her sister's particularly difficult ordeal at the identity card office:

My younger sister lost her ID, and so she had to go to the ID office. The officer told her she had to take off her hijab to enter the building. He would not let her go inside. She refused to take it off, and didn't get her ID card. After 2 months, he finally broke down and gave it to her. There are no official rules that say women can't wear hijab in the office, it's just discrimination.³⁶

A fellow online food seller and upper-middle class Rohingya woman, Thuzar Khine, 22, recalls her recent visit to the passport office: "they discriminated against me at the office because I wear hijab. They asked me if I could speak Burmese!"³⁷ Thuzar's

³⁴ Dr Aye, personal communication, 2018.

³⁵ Mountz, 2010.

³⁶ San San, personal communication, 2018.

³⁷ Thuzar Khine, personal communication, 2018.

relatively high class status afforded her the ability to access an identity card but did not shield her from harassment and discrimination by office staff.

While San San and her sister were able to secure Bamar Muslim identity cards with cash, most are not so lucky, especially those from rural or poor households. Fatima, 22, is a Myanmar Muslim woman from Mawlamyine who moved to Yangon in 1999. She attempted to get an identity card multiple times at the local Insein identity card office but was told to leave: “they told me that Muslims do not get identity cards – that we are Bengalis. They told me that I had to go to the regional office if I wanted to get a card. This office is far away and it will cost a lot of money.”³⁸ Fatima wanted to become an engineer, but dropped out of school at grade six when her family was unable to survive with money earned from selling vegetables. Though the identity card is a major barrier to education, her family’s poverty was the more salient issue preventing her from entering higher education and locking her into informal work as a hawker. Fatima’s husband drives a motorbike and earns about 3,000 Myanmar Kyat per day after paying the motorbike rental fee (a nearby Buddhist family has four motorbikes and rents them to Muslim boys in the neighborhood) and gas. To make ends meet, Fatima sells vegetables and aims to start a betel nut stand once she can save 30,000 Myanmar Kyat as capital to buy the betel nut and the cart.

Despite very real barriers to Muslim women’s dignified access to public spaces, education, and formal wage work outside the home, Muslim women’s own decisions regarding education, mobility “outside” the house, and work are often overlooked or dismissed by a focus on state- or community-led cultural and religious exclusion in Myanmar.³⁹ For many Muslim women in Myanmar and elsewhere, religious covering is a deeply held belief, as is remaining *within* the space of the home as mothers, caregivers, and homemakers.⁴⁰ For some middle-class Muslim

³⁸ Fatima, personal communication, 2018.

³⁹ Frydenlund, 2020a.

⁴⁰ Abu-Lughod, 2002; Frydenlund, 2019; Herr, 2014; Mahmood, 2011.

women in Yangon, for whom education past grade six was economically feasible for families, the choice was clear to attend religious school and forego higher education in favor of full-time motherhood and care work, or home- or internet-based work that aligned with their religious values. However, economic hardship and fear of state violence remain the most salient barriers to Rohingya and Myanmar Muslim women's education in Myanmar, as most families struggle to make ends meet as farmers or sellers. Reinforcing the centrality of dispossession and reduced or lost access to the means of production in shaping Muslims' precarity in Myanmar, Dr. Aye recanted a story. Once a friend tried to point to Yangon's many successful Muslim businessmen to argue that Muslims are more clever and wealthier than Buddhists in Myanmar. Dr. Aye responded by asking: "What is the main source of income for the vast majority of people in this country? Rice and farming. Who owns almost all the paddy and farmland? Bamars! So no, Muslims are not better off"—in short, arguing that a handful of exceptionally wealthy urban Muslims do not erase Muslims' collective experiences of dispossession and exclusion relative to landholding Bamars. Though control of rice markets is certainly more profitable than control of land and means of production, Dr. Aye's comments reference the broader structural inequalities that position Muslims as both second class and lower class citizens in Myanmar.

Labor Market Inclusions and Double Shifts

Most scholarly and journalistic analyses have located Muslim and especially Rohingya precarity in relation to historically-specific processes of Othering, which justify discursive exclusions from the Myanmar nation-state and "its" structures, such as education and citizenship. Akin to Myanmar's liberal feminist activists, scholars studying Myanmar generally eschew Marxist analysis. In particular, studies of religious and ethnic exclusion in Myanmar have (reasonably) argued that political economy analyses fall short of explaining how exclusionary practices

come to be accepted or embraced by Burmese people. While understandings of Bamar Buddhists' support for military violence against Rohingyas and Buddhist women's support of the "race and religion" laws that would ostensibly harm them⁴¹ are well-served by attention to psychic geographies of fear and anxiety, a close examination of Rohingya experiences of exclusion from the standpoint of labor composition produces an entirely different perspective on the causes and conditions of their suffering, namely, the relationship of labor's exclusion to its inclusion in newly reconfigured capitalist landscapes. Moreover, this careful attention to the relationship between exclusion and inclusion at a specific historical conjunction in Myanmar must move beyond the space of the factory floor to the spaces and scales of the body, the home, and the everyday to illuminate the gendered, racialized violence of Muslim women's inclusion in informal labor markets and the extension of unwaged workdays in the home.

Sharifa Bibi and her husband, Mohammed, live in a small wooden house perched on stilts above a river in Insein Township. It was raining hard when we went to visit them, and we eyed the river as it rose. Yes, the house will sometimes flood, Mohammed said, holding his hand up just below his waist. When this happens, they sleep in hammocks. Sharifa and Mohammed identify as Myanmar Muslims, though of course this lineage is mixed. Mohammed explains that his father was a Hindustani Muslim from what is today Pakistan, and that Sharifa has Rohingya relatives in Kyaukphyu and Mawlymine. They both grew up in a village about three hours north of Yangon and moved to Insein in the early 1990s. Their children are spread throughout Southeast Asia—one works at a chicken factory in Kuala Lumpur, one catches fish in Koh Tao, and another works at a factory in Singapore. Mohammed used to be a teacher at a Madrasa, or Islamic school, and gave teachings at the local mosque. Sharifa was *ein ma shin*, manager of the household or housewife, before increasing hardship led them to relocate to Insein.

⁴¹ Schissler et al., 2017.

Their new home's proximity to Yangon allows them to access more potential buyers for the fried snacks they sell to survive – their town was too small to make a living as hawkers. About 16 years ago, their son noticed a flyer advertising land for sale in a small, mostly Buddhist enclave near a monastery. They bought the land with savings from their sons' fishery work in Thailand, and he built the house by hand. The house was well-built—on our visit, we were dry and comfortable as a late monsoon storm raged outside. Though Mohammed's work as a teacher used to provide a living that enabled Sharifa to care for the children and read the Qu'ran, now she gets up at 2am to prepare the dough and cook the snacks. Then, Mohammed takes half the snacks to Sule Pagoda each day. Sharifa remains in the neighborhood and sells the other half the snacks by the monastery gates where the neighborhood street meets the main road. They do not have the capital to run an independent business. Instead, they take a loan of one lakh (100,000 Myanmar Kyat) from a local Muslim businessman every 10 days to buy oil, lentils, and flour for the snacks, and repay the loan after selling enough snacks. After paying the loan and 20% interest (notably interest is forbidden in Islam), they can take away about 20,000 Myanmar Kyat per month, barely enough to survive.

Muslim women in Myanmar have diverse, and often contradicting, views of what it means to live a good life with respect to home, work, and family. Yet there is also a key theme that unites them: the dignity and agency of Muslim women who strive to reproduce the home as a space for the Muslim family.⁴² Sharifa's views of her and her family's situation are familiar, especially among the Muslim women of the Burmese diaspora: she would prefer to be a housewife, to cook for her family, read the Qu'ran, and remain in the space of the home. At home, it is safe, she says. If her sons were able to send money, maybe their poverty would be less suffocating. Instead, Sharifa's informal labor provides her sons, especially Iliaz, with *support from the South*, which de-

⁴² Frydenlund, 2020a.

scribes Third World women's provision of material and emotional aid, such as cash or care work, to relatives elsewhere in diaspora.⁴³ In Sharifa's case, her son Iliaz is barely able to support his own family in Kuala Lumpur. Thus, instead of sending his aging mother and father cash remittances from work in a chicken factory, Sharifa and Mohammed dedicate substantial amounts of labor and cash to send traditional medicine, spices, amulets, and holy water from Yangon, purchased with a month's worth of earnings from selling *akyaw*.

Readers will note that, in this case, both Sharifa and Mohammed are working together to generate income that eventually becomes *support from the South*. However, by beginning her working day at 2am, then selling *akyaw* nearby while Mohammed sells *akyaw* downtown, it is Sharifa who dedicates significantly more labor power and labor hours to the production of snacks that they sell. She also cooks for Mohammed, maintains the house, and cares for two orphan girls who have no home. These exclusions are Sharifa's activities demonstrate the gendered and racialized character of informal hawking labor regimes among the urban poor, where Muslim women are more likely to be subject to the violent inclusions that follow expulsion from the space of the "good life."

Chit Lay and San Oo are 21 and 30 years old, respectively. Though unrelated, they are both Rohingya women who moved to Yangon from Sittwe with the goal of attending university upon graduation from grade 10. However, neither woman had an identity card, and thus could not sit for exams. For years, Chit Lay and San Oo took free English classes at a nonprofit school in Yangon before being able to attend university. Notably, San Oo and Chit Lay are middle-class Rohingya women, whose families are reasonably comfortable. Chit Lay's father, mother, and brother support her and her sister through remittances sent from years of work in Saudi Arabia. San Oo's father worked as a customs agent in Sittwe and is now retired in Yangon. However, both women's families were unable to fully support them. Chit

⁴³ Frydenlund, 2020b.

Lay began cooking when she realized that her husband's income as a car salesman was insufficient to pay rising rent costs, pay school fees for children, and support her parents and in-laws. She decided to find a way to earn extra income to support the family and employed her skills as a cook to create a cake business. She makes most of her money from birthday cakes and other celebratory confections, which are especially popular during festival season and Eid. With the money earned from her business, she was able to buy an ID card and study economics at university. However, she has not been able to find work as a professional, and thus continues her baking business.

Frustrated with her inability to sit for exams and later attend law school, San Oo knew she had to raise enough money to purchase an ID card. However, her lack of diploma precluded opportunities for higher-wage employment. Hence, she came up with the idea to cook and sell traditional Rohingya snacks at her aunt's home and sell them online. The business required some capital investment in rice, oil, and sugar, but with 40,000 Myanmar Kyat from her father and access to computers and the internet, she was able to quickly build a business that sold upwards of two lakhs worth of snacks per month, and five lakhs per month during Eid. When she saved enough money, she bought an ID card for eight lakhs and enrolled in law school – a favorable outcome.

Neither as poor as Sharifa and Mohammed, nor as privileged as Chit Lay and San Oo, Nur, 58 falls somewhere in between. Myanmar Muslims from Mawlyamine, Nur and her husband live with their middle son and daughter-in law in the back of their tire shop east of the Yangon river. Nur's husband, Farouq, used to have a t-shirt shop in the downtown Bogyoke market. They would buy the shirts from Singapore for about 2,000 Myanmar Kyat per shirt and sell them for about 4,000 Myanmar Kyat. However, business was slow in the 1980s and 1990s, and they often only sold two shirts per day, which would barely cover the cost of renting the market stall.

Every day, Nur would walk to the market to bring a lunch box for Farouq: "I passed all the jade shops, and thought, maybe

I can open a jade shop and earn more money.” So, in addition to her work as a housewife and mother, Nur began purchasing jade from Chinese brokers in Mandalay, and selling the jade at a counter down the hall from her husband’s t-shirt shop. Eventually, he abandoned the t-shirt business and joined her in the jade business. Reflecting on her decades working both within and outside the home, Nur says: “I didn’t really think about it – I was just always trying to find a way to help my husband. I love my husband and didn’t want him to struggle alone.”⁴⁴ Although they once owned a small house on 28th street, they sold the house in the mid-1990s when they left their stall in Bogyoke market due to rising rents, old age, and poor health. Nur regrets selling the house, which is worth 20 million Myanmar Kyat now. Nur is also worried for her granddaughter, whose mother was resettled with her younger children in Colorado, USA. The granddaughter was left behind when Mustafa, Nur’s daughter, left for Malaysia a decade ago. Now, the girl is 15 and faces an increasingly precarious fate as Nur and Mohammed grow elderly and sick.

In each story, we can see the cruelty of state violence, structural violence, and abandonment, as well as determination and resilience. The women’s diverse experiences also point to the importance of exploring class striations within Yangon’s Muslim communities. Impoverished and middle-class Muslim women in Yangon have many things in common, but one stands out for the purpose of a worker-led struggle for gender justice: forced inclusion in precarious, informal, and non-waged sales labor that accompanies exclusions from spaces of religious, cultural, and national belonging.

Producing New Spaces

The electricity had just gone out in the second story apartment where Hamidah was teaching a two-day makeup class to three Muslim women of varying ethnicities and ages. One was 15, another was 20, and the third was 38. Only the young girl and

⁴⁴ Nur, personal communication, 2018.

Hamidah wore hijab. We turned on our cell phones for light as Hamidah explained how to properly cleanse and moisturize skin, prevent and treat acne, and use anti-aging products and sunscreen, information she had gleaned from Malaysian and Singaporean YouTube videos and several books that her mother had bought her. The other women took notes on their mobile phones, and the authors found themselves sheepishly checking their own skin in the mirrors. The lights came back on, and the group moved to the front room to begin learning to use foundation, concealer, eyeshadow, and false eyelashes.

The eldest student laughed about wanting to be able to help her teenaged daughter with makeup, and that she wanted to learn to look more beautiful for weddings. The youngest student traveled all the way from Mawlyamyine for the makeup class and explained that she had an interest in beauty wanted to learn to apply makeup professionally to enhance her looks and be more confident. The other student was very quiet, but expressed a similar interest in beauty, wishing to learn to properly use makeup and “be more beautiful.” Hamidah identified a trio of complementary eyeshadow shades and application styles for each of the women’s skin tone and eyes, followed by a demonstration of eyeliner applications for “day” and “night.” After an hour of practice, we completed our “looks” and gathered our belongings to re-enter the crushing heat of Yangon in September. Hamidah and the young girl stood near the window at the front of the apartment as Hamidah demonstrated how to wrap her hijab in the popular Malaysian style, the gauzy fabric swooping into symmetrical folds that draped just right around the girl’s shoulders. We snapped selfies and exchanged phone numbers, and the women dispersed out onto 25th street. Later that day, Hamidah posted the selfies to her Facebook page, where they received 150 ‘likes’ and dozens of enthusiastic comments.

In a city, and a country, where hijabs are signifiers for threatening Other-ness, spaces like Hamidah’s makeup classes and Facebook page provide life-affirming experiences of inclusion, joy, and comfort for Muslim women. For young women, es-

pecially, these spaces offer mentorship and the possibility to explore their own identities. As Maria, the administrator for the Hijab Girls Photo page explained, Hamidah and other hijabis' tutorials and photos inspire her to be confident and proud of her religion and identity, even though "Buddhists misunderstand hijabis and niqabis and Islam". Notably, she does not wear hijab now because she attends a public school, but she earnestly hopes to wear hijab one day, and lives out her fantasy of being "free" to practice Islam more devoutly by taking selfies where she wears hijab, niqab, and various makeup looks she learned from Hamidah. Her Facebook page has over 20,000 likes, and she is passionate about spreading positive images of women who cover throughout the Myanmar cyberscape: "I love hijabis and niqabis, and I share photos and knowledge about Muslims in Myanmar to help educate people." For Maria, hijabi cyberspace enables the exploration of self that is too often stifled in other Burmese spaces, especially the school. Hijab Girls Photo affirms not only the existence and belonging of hijabi and niqabis in Myanmar through a diverse and extensive collection of visual images but offers an enthusiastic celebration of simply being a young Muslim girl.

Alongside the proliferation of hijabi social spaces online, Muslim women are actively forging and participating in new political spaces of struggle against both social exclusions and capital's inclusions. For Muslim women, especially Rohingyas, public activism is almost entirely out of reach in Myanmar, especially at a time when journalists are being arrested and imprisoned for reporting on state-sanctioned violence and genocide. However, Muslim women's identities as workers, women, and mothers are fertile ground for struggles over the right to life and life chances in Myanmar. Specifically, the activism of people like Dr. Aye, a hijabi sexual health educator affiliated with RAINFALL, a gender study organization and radical feminist collective, are challenging standard liberal democratic discourses about women's rights in Myanmar. Where large organizations like the Gender Equality Network operate within the parameters of the Myanmar nation-state, collaborating with the National

League for Democracy and obeying censorship laws, Dr. Aye and RAINFALL reject liberal gender equality projects that maintain the ontological centrality of patriarchy (for example, prioritizing quotas for women in government) and leave racism and Islamophobia unproblematized.

As RAINFALL co-founder and current MP Zin Mar Aung has said: “laws created under a patriarchal system will certainly be patriarchal.” Hence, institutionalized sexism has allowed patriarchal and capitalist power to survive and thrive in contemporary Myanmar. If we continue to avoid centering the destruction of patriarchy and capitalism together within feminist struggles, feminism will only continue to shore up hegemonic power in Myanmar. In striving to fulfill a mission to theorize a radically just feminist movement in Myanmar’s locally and historically specific contexts, RAINFALL works with farm leaders, labor leaders, and ethnic minority community leaders to build a strong, inclusive feminist platform. Muslim women are key partners in this struggle, and their experiences echo the writings of Marxist and Marxist-feminist scholars who warn that struggle over the wage is incomplete, as unwaged workers remain excluded.⁴⁵ Many Muslim women (and women throughout Myanmar) do informal hawking and sales work, as well as unwaged work, so organizing around wage labor has little to offer. Only through collective struggle alongside thousands of farmers, laborers, housewives, and members of marginalized communities can we tackle the immense injustices of gender, race, and class oppression in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Our study of hijabi women’s everyday lives in urban Yangon aims to show that Muslim women’s varying experiences of exclusion and precarity involve more than discursive Othering and state violence. Where extant literature highlights practices of discipline and violence against Muslims, our research identifies

⁴⁵ Brass, 2011; Denning, 2010; Federici, 2012.

how capital articulates with social difference to shape the emergence of new labor subjectivities. Yangon hijabis' experiences of everyday exclusion and subjugation reflect both historically specific mechanics of religious and cultural exclusion as well as explicit inclusion in flexibilized, precarious hawking and sales work. Notably, these inclusions are uneven and striated by class positionings, in which precarity has varying material results, ranging from extreme poverty to debt or dependence on family members or a relatively comfortable life.

Amid everyday experiences of Bamar Buddhist supremacy and lives characterized by double shifts, Muslim women are actively producing and participating in spaces characterized by joy and belonging, as well as political activism. Muslim women's self-affirming practices suggest multiple possibilities for making lives both within and in struggle against the specific structures and processes that limit their life chances in Myanmar. As Melissa Wright observes⁴⁶ of women's organizing against maquiladora femicides, the specific experiences of womanhood can be utilized as a key position from which broader, more radical, political goals can be achieved.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783-790.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press.
<https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=2003>
- Arendt, H. (1973). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/origins-of-totalitarianism/oclc/614421>

⁴⁶ Wright, 2011.

- Andrijasevic, R. (2009). Sex on the move: Gender, subjectivity and differential inclusion. *Subjectivity*, 29(1), 389-406.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2009.27>
- Brass, T. (2011). *Labour regime change in the twenty-first century: unfreedom, capitalism and primitive accumulation*. Brill.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004202474.i-314>
- Charney, M. (2018, February 16-18). Unnamed lecture [Paper presentation]. International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.
- Cheesman, N. (2017). How in Myanmar “national races” came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47(3), 461-483.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476>
- Coulthard, G. (2014). *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.
<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/red-skin-white-masks>
- Denning, M. (2010). Wageless Life. *New Left Review*, 66, 79-97.
<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii66/articles/michael-denning-wageless-life>
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.
<https://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Frantz-Fanon-The-Wretched-of-the-Earth-1965.pdf>
- Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press.
https://pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=1086
- Frydenlund, S. (2020a). Motherhood, Home, and the Political Economy of Rohingya Women's Labor. In E. Prasse-Freeman, P. Chachavalpongpun, & P. Strefford (Eds.), *Unraveling Myanmar's Transition: Progress, Retrenchment and Ambiguity Amidst Liberalization*. Kyoto University Press &

- NUS Press. <https://www.kyoto-up.or.jp/books/9784814002450.html>
- Frydenlund, S. (2020b). *Support from the South: How refugee labor reproduces cities* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Colorado, Boulder.
- Herr, R. S. (2014). Reclaiming Third World Feminism: Or Why Transnational Feminism Needs Third World Feminism. *Meridians*, 12(1), 1–30.
<https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.12.1.1>
- Human Rights Watch. (2013). *Burma: Revoke 'Two child policy' for Rohingya*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/28/burma-revoke-two-child-policy-rohingya>
- Khin Mar Mar Kyi. (2013). *In Pursuit of Power: Political Power and Gender Relations in New Order Burma/Myanmar* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Australian National University.
<http://hdl.handle.net/1885/155981>
- Li, T. M. (2010). To make live or let die? Rural dispossession and the protection of surplus populations. *Antipode*, 41, 66–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00717.x>
- Mahmood, S. (2011). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.
<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691149806/politics-of-piety>
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Duke University Press.
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/border-as-method-or-the-multiplication-of-labor>
- Mbembé, J. A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public culture*, 15(1), 11–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>
- Mountz, A. (2010). *Seeking Asylum: Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border*. University of Minnesota Press.
<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/seeking-asylum>

- Nyi Nyi Kyaw. (2015). Alienation, Discrimination, and Securitization: Legal Personhood and Cultural Personhood of Muslims in Myanmar. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13(4), 50–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2015.1104971>
- Nyi Nyi Kyaw. (2016). Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar: the 969 movement and anti-Muslim violence. In M. Crouch (Ed.), *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist relations and the politics of belonging* (pp. 183–210). Oxford University Press.
<http://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199461202.001.0001>
- Phyu Phyu Oo. (2016). Muslim Women’s Education in Myanmar. In M. Crouch (Ed.), *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199461202.003.0007>
- Povinelli, E. A. (2011). *Economies of abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press.
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/economies-of-abandonment>
- Prasse-Freeman, E. & Phyo Win Latt (2018). Class & Inequality. In N. Farrelly, I. Holliday, & A. Simpson (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar* (pp. 404–416). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743677>
- Pratt, G. (2012). *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love*. University of Minnesota Press.
<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/families-apart>
- Schissler, M., Walton, M., & Phyu Phyu Thi. (2017). Reconciling contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim violence, narrative making and memory in Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47(3), 376–395.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1290818>

- Walton, M. J., & Hayward, S. (2014). *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*. East-West Center.
<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/contesting-buddhist-narratives-democratization-nationalism-and-communal-violence-in-mya>
- Walton, M. J., McKay, M., & Khin Mar Mar Kyi. (2015). Women and Myanmar's "Religious Protection Laws". *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13(4), 36-49.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2015.1104975>
- Wright, M. W. (2011). Necropolitics, narcopolitics, and femicide: Gendered violence on the Mexico-US border. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 36(3), 707-731. <https://doi.org/10.1086/657496>