

## Lost in Translation: Feminism in Myanmar

by

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*Scene 1:* A feminist, who is a former political prisoner and one of few women members of parliament from National League for Democracy party (NLD), Zin Mar Aung, was warned by her fellow politicians not to identify herself as a feminist.<sup>1</sup> She was told to focus on the women issues but should not become a feminist.

*Scene 2:* In June 2018, *Rainfall*, the only feminist magazine in Myanmar, celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> issue anniversary at a hotel in Yangon. One of the founders, Pyo Let Han, gave a speech in which she said ‘we are not promoting feminism.’

Is feminism so feared in Myanmar that even feminists learned to downplay their activism let alone mobilizing women and men around their causes? Who are Myanmar feminists and what do they call themselves? What are the barriers to understand and accept feminism in Myanmar political, cultural, and religious contexts? Is there such a thing as Myanmar feminism like Burmese Socialism and Myanmar democracy? What are the popular narratives about women, cultural norms and religious beliefs that silence feminists’ voices? What are the funding and policy challenges feminists face? We set out to answer these questions in our edited volume.

### ***The Problem of Naming***

In Burmese language, the most widely-used words for feminism are မဝါဒ or အမျိုးသမီးဝါဒ or ကွဲထွက်ဝါဒ;<sup>2</sup> each translation is a combination of two words, i.e. ‘female’ and ‘-ism’ or ideology, the first word using the more colloquial term for female, မ, while the second and third words adopting a more formal term အမျိုးသမီး and a Pali word for woman ကွဲထွက် respectively.<sup>3</sup> But feminism is also translated as မိန်းမကြီးစိုးရေးဝါဒ meaning an ideology promoting female dominance.<sup>4</sup> We can now see why the word ‘feminism’ in Burmese language creates misunderstanding at least, and mockery and attacks at most for women declaring themselves feminists and their feminist causes.

Some of the earliest feminists in Myanmar include Anna May Say Pa, one of the founders of Myanmar Institute for Theology,<sup>5</sup> who declared herself a feminist in early 1990s, May May

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<sup>1</sup> Manaw Kya. မြန်မာပြည်နှင့် Feminism. Myanmar and Feminism *Rainfall* vol. 1. Number 2; 2015, pp 16–17

<sup>2</sup> Earliest translation of the term ‘feminism’ is believed to be by Khin Myo Chit in 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Note here that the emphasis is on အမျိုး meaning race. The term could be interpreted as daughters of/for a race. We will discuss more fully on this term later in the chapter in the context of how women cannot be women first but are bound by the markers given to them.

<sup>4</sup> In one of the discussions on feminism organized by Rainfall in 2018, one male participant explains that feminists are women who view men as a threat implying such an ideology is dangerous to men.

<sup>5</sup> Contrary to popular beliefs that link patriarchal oppression with religion, the first institutional adoption of feminism in Myanmar is possibly by Myanmar Institute of Theology, most certainly through the pioneering works of women like Anna May Say Pa who taught the first feminist course in 2002. Courses such as Feminist Theology was offered in mid 1990s, and courses entitled Ecclesia of Women: Feminist Perspective of Church and Ecofeminism in 2007, though these courses were not publicly listed on MIT website. <http://www.mit.edu.mm/mit-academics.html> Accessed 8 December 2018. According to Naw Freecia Htoo, a faculty member from MIT, there were many students

Pyone, founder of a non-governmental organization called NGO Gender Group (NGOGG), PyoLet Han, Shunn Le Swe Yee, Zin Mar Aung, and Khin Myo Kyi, founders of the only feminist organization in Myanmar, i.e. Rainfall. These women were and are still branded as အစွန်းရောက် ‘extreme’, and မောင်နှမမုန်းသူ ‘man haters’.<sup>6</sup> Women’s League of Burma (WLB), Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN), and Burmese Women’s Union (BWU), exile women organizations that championed women issues, did not identify themselves as feminist organizations. Only SWAN listed feminist advocacy as one of their main activities on their website.<sup>7</sup> Clearly fit to the notion of feminism, these powerful women organizations shun the term feminism to describe the type of work they do.

Mistranslation and negative labelling are attributable to the fear of feminism in Myanmar. In Myanmar political and cultural context, feminism is understood as an ideology to promote women domination rather than an idea to fight for women’s rights. This is problematic. Just by hearing the Burmese translation of feminism can turn many people away from feminist causes. Karen Offen in her essay “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach”, explains that the word feminism was referred “more often to the ‘rights of women’ than to “rights equal to those of men””.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in Myanmar earlier translators of the term even stretched their imagination further by referring the term as ‘rights or privileges above and beyond men.’

Explicit in Myanmar (mis-translated) term for feminism is women’s desire to limit and even surpass male power and privilege, and therefore there exists a strong backlash against the term, against feminists, and against feminist movements from both men and women. As Offen rightly pointed out in her essay “the vocabulary of feminism connoted a far broader socio political critique, a critique that was woman-centered and woman-celebratory in its onslaught on male privilege.”<sup>9</sup> Myanmar is no exception. Burmese vocabulary of feminism invited strong criticisms not only from traditionalists, who view Burmese culture with different (and unequal) roles of men and women as unique and this status quo therefore must be preserved,<sup>10</sup> but also from gender activists who consider feminism as an ideology that detracts their gender activism.<sup>11</sup>

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including men taking these courses. Dr. Saw Hlaing Bwa as one of the male feminists in the country writing about Feminism and Theology. Personal Communication, 8 December 2018, Yangon.

<sup>6</sup> Many facebook posts label feminists using Burmese equivalent of f-word, mad, and lonely, among many other things.

<https://www.facebook.com/skm.shwekyal/posts/572828276420137> accessed 17 December 2018

<https://www.facebook.com/iamaungphyoekyaw/posts/1225472990823966> accessed 17 December 2018

<https://www.facebook.com/thiha.nwe/posts/1590243001024508> April 7 2018 accessed 17 December 2018

<sup>7</sup> SWAN recently announced on their website that they will celebrate 20 years of *feminist* advocacy,

<https://www.shanwomen.org/> accessed 8 December 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Offen. “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach” *Sings* vol. 14, no. 1, 1988; pp. 119–157, p. 128

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, Karen. pp. 119–157

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[https://www.facebook.com/feminism.mm/posts/772102459667018?comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22O%22%7D](https://www.facebook.com/feminism.mm/posts/772102459667018?comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22O%22%7D) accessed 10 December 2018

<sup>11</sup> Naw Tha Wah, a government officer implementing ‘National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women’ cautions that even the word gender paints women as aggressive activists. She has to explain that her work involves

Usual skepticism in foreign, imported ideologies and movements are most evident in feminism.<sup>12</sup> It is not a coincidence that existing few writings on Myanmar feminism are penned by Western-trained women.<sup>13</sup> Being feminine is desirable, since it reaffirms women's roles in society vis-à-vis men. Many adages such as 'Men's power lies in their fighting ability, women's power in their hair buns'<sup>14</sup> emphasizing the beauty associated with long hair, and 'Women's demeanour cannot be bought with gold,'<sup>15</sup> warning women to be modest and humble depict a certain type of women in public imagination. Feminism, juxtaposed to this femininity, which engages with gender power and women's lack of access to different forms of authority as argued by Bernice Lott,<sup>16</sup> is misunderstood, unwelcomed, and few locals understood and wrote about it.

Language explains the negative reception of the term feminism. However there exists other more deeply-entrenched challenges. In Myanmar, it is commonly believed that women enjoy equal rights as men.<sup>17</sup> Zin Mar Aung, a feminist politician, adds that the popular notion that Myanmar women enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts in the West explains why there lacks feminist movement in Myanmar.<sup>18</sup> Unlike other '—isms' such as communism, socialism and liberalism imported to and celebrated in Burma, feminism is considered a misfit to the country and its culture, potentially damaging to existing social relationships between men and women.

Feminists are accused of destabilizing relations in both private and public realms. Naw Tha Wah, director of women development division at the government's Department of Social Welfare, uses gender instead of feminism in her work to explain her work. She said even the word 'gender' is seen as an aggressive form and her work includes dispelling beliefs such as gender equality is not to oppose the existing social order but to promote mutual respect.<sup>19</sup> Endless linguistic negotiations take place around the term 'feminism' because of its negative connotation brought about by mistranslation.

Instead of the term 'feminism', terms such as 'gender', 'gender and social justice', 'ကျားမတန်းတူရေး',<sup>20</sup> 'အမျိုးသမီးအခွင့်အရေး',<sup>21</sup> 'အမျိုးသမီးဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်ရေး',<sup>22</sup> and 'women empowerment'<sup>23</sup> are used to circumvent the stigma attached to feminism and more importantly to

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building mutual respect (as opposed to promoting the role of women). It is ironic given the title of her mission. Interview, Nay Pyi Taw, 27 November 2018

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/NotaGINGERblog/posts/350517392418517?\\_tn\\_ =K-R](https://www.facebook.com/NotaGINGERblog/posts/350517392418517?_tn_ =K-R) accessed 19 December 2018

<sup>13</sup> Top five results on 'Feminism in Myanmar' search on google are articles written by women trained in the West (except for one article co-written by Pyo Let Han, who went through her education entirely in Myanmar, but is well-versed in feminist literature.)

<sup>14</sup> ယောက်ျားတို့ဘုန်းလက်ရုံး၊ မိန်းမတို့ဘုန်းဆံထုံး။

<sup>15</sup> မိန်းမတို့အိမ်ခြေရွှေပေးလို့မရ။

<sup>16</sup> Jean Lau Chin, Bernice E. Lott and Janice Sanchez-Hucles (Eds), *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp. 24–27, as cited by Srilatha Batliwala, in *Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud*, CREA, 2011, p. 20

<sup>17</sup> Than, *Women in Modern Burma*, Routledge, 2013, pp. 1–3

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Manaw Kya.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Naw Tha Wah, 27 November 2018, Nay Pyi Taw.

<sup>20</sup> Gender equality, term adopted by WLB and GEN (Gender Equality Network).

<sup>21</sup> Women's rights.

<sup>22</sup> One of the women's programs under the government's Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement.

<sup>23</sup> One of the missions of Mon Women's Organization.

accommodate fears of men that women are challenging their more-privileged position in the society as narrated by Naw Tha Wah.<sup>24</sup> During one of the training sessions as part of *Emerging Women Leadership School* held in Yangon in 2018, ‘Feminism’<sup>25</sup> topic taught by Rainfall was voted as the most favorite topic by all ethnic women participants. Irony is that all female participants when going back to their own places individually admit that they are not going to repeat ‘Feminism’ training. Instead they will talk about topics such as ‘Sex and Gender’ giving the reason that they do not know the terms surrounding ‘feminism’ and are not confident to answer questions on feminism. Also when invited by religious and educational organizations, Rainfall carefully chose more neutral and accommodating topics such as ‘Gender and Social Justice’, and even a blanket term ‘Human Rights.’

Mohanty in her seminal “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” argues:

The relationship between "Woman"-a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)-and "women-real, material subjects of their collective histories-is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address.<sup>26</sup>

Burmese terms for feminism further complicates the process to navigate through the representational image of Myanmar ‘Woman’ and real ‘Women’, who are yet to successfully challenge the male hegemony. Male leaders dominate even in women-dominant movements such as garment factory protests currently taking place in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay.<sup>27</sup>

For many women and men promoting women’s rights, using the term feminism is believed to destabilize relationships between men and women and there is a backlash against feminists and their causes. Not only is the term avoided but many women rights champions also remind each other not to be strongly-voiced and extreme when advocating for women.<sup>28</sup> As Offen highlights the need of a definition for feminism “that can bear the weight of the historical evidence and make sense of it”,<sup>29</sup> Myanmar urgently needs a better translation of terms ‘feminism’ and ‘feminists’, terms that can transcend the fears of both men and women that feminists want to dismantle the social order by putting women ahead of men.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Naw Tha Wah, 27 November 2018, Nay Pyi Taw.

<sup>25</sup> Feminism appeared as a topic from the very first batch.

<sup>26</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,’ *boundary 2*, vol. 12, No. 3, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism. (Spring - Autumn, 1984), pp. 333-358, p. 334.

<sup>27</sup> Communism is portrayed as an ideology that can help liberate women workers, and Marxist males such as Kyaw Ko Ko are adopted as leaders by FuYwun workers. Marxist feminists are thought to be irrelevant in Myanmar’s social movements such as FuYwun.

<sup>28</sup> During a workshop on gender-based violence in Yangon held in 2016, one participant was advised not to be extreme but moderate since she raised the question of whether or there should be zero tolerance regarding sexual harassment. Also in a workshop on feminist building training intended for Myanmar feminists held in Chiang Mai in 2018, a woman rights activist though she identifies herself as a gender advocate admitted that until recently she and other activists avoided the term feminist because of the negative stereotypes surrounding the term.

<sup>29</sup> Offen, p. 134

## *Barriers for the rise of feminist movements in Myanmar*

Besides language, there are other conceptual challenges for Myanmar men and women to accept that feminism questions unequal privileges men and women enjoy. Essence of feminism to challenge male patriarchy and fighting for equity for women often come into direct conflicts with two things in contemporary Myanmar. The first one is challenging patriarchy means challenging two most powerful institutions in the country, i.e. military and sangha or the community of monks. Military is male-dominated and male-led<sup>30</sup> whereas sangha community is exclusively male since the lineage of female monks had long broken.<sup>31</sup> The second one is many Myanmar using Buddhist scriptures, or more accurately morals from popular stories such as Jataka as their bearing of the world around them. Morals from these tales are used to understand, justify, and sustain unequal positions men and women have in Myanmar.<sup>32</sup>

Feminist scrambled Buddhist scriptures together to probe what Buddhist and his fellow monks preached about women, and to justify their adoption of feminism as a guiding ideology. Such an approach, i.e. referring Buddhist scriptures to validate their political stance, could be seen as self-defeating. On the other hand, this tactic reflects the shrewd cultural awareness of some feminists who chose to engage in women discourses in Buddhist context.

One such feminist is Zin Mar Aung. Feminists like her believe they will have to be verse in Buddhist texts to have an equal footing in debates about women. They also try to warn the public about conflicting arguments about women in Buddhist texts with an implicit message one cannot turn to Buddhism as an ultimate arbiter about women. Zin Mar Aung wondered if her society is more willing to believe messages from Buddhist scriptures that undermine women's agency than lived experiences of women themselves. One particular scripture she quoted goes "Ananda, women are difficult to control. Women have small intellect. Ananda, women spend their life and time marrying<sup>33</sup> and in child labor." Such a quote, supposedly from Buddha himself to his disciple Ananda, influences both men and women to imagine their power relations with each other. Zin Mar Aung criticized the society for conveniently forgetting about other Buddhist quotes that do not devalue women.<sup>34</sup> Using the protection of race and religion bill that was passed in 2015

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<sup>30</sup> To date, there has been no women generals or higher in Myanmar army (?).

<sup>31</sup> It is believed to have disappeared between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Than, 2014, p. 6

<sup>32</sup> Common representation of women in Jataka tales such as Vesanssara is in the context of ပါရမီဖြည့် to co-fulfil to-be-Buddha's attempts to reach his goals. These women are known as ပါရမီဖြည့်ဘက်, co-fulfiller of *parami*.

<sup>33</sup> Original Burmese is အိမ်ထောင်ပြုခြင်း which could be translated as marrying or setting up a family/household.

<sup>34</sup> An example of such a message is when Buddha consoled Kawsala King who was upset at the news of the arrival of a baby daughter. Buddha said 'King, the value of a human does not depend on having a body of man or that of a woman. But it depends on the quality of your mind.' It is interesting to note here that such a genderless thinking which emphasizes the culturing of mind over fixation of the body is popular among many Myanmar. မနောကြာ၊ ဘာသာရေး

အစွန်းရောက်မှုနှင့် အကျွန်ုပ်တို့၏ ရွေးချယ်မှု. *Rainfall* vol. 1. Issue 1. pp. 4-5

as an example, she argued that attempts to draft and pass such laws in the name of protecting Myanmar race (and women) reflect that society prefers to view women negatively.<sup>35</sup>

While the first obstacle is immediate, material, and even dangerous, the second one is longer-lasting and more difficult for feminists to overcome. Leading women activists and politicians see a separate movement for women's rights and advancement unnecessary and even dangerous since such a movement could affect social harmony between men and women. There exists in Myanmar politics and cultures unequal access to opportunities and privileges for men and women, and women face discriminations and unequal expectations from society. Yet a Buddhist notion that all differences between men and women are superficial and both men and women should rather focus on the attainment of nirvana where all the divisions including gender and class cease to exist than focusing on the binary between man and woman permeates in Buddhist thoughts. Such a mis-application of Buddhist thought in understanding gender trivializes the profound differences men and women have. It also frames women fighting for their rights as the ones wasting their energy on wrong causes.

### ***Against All Odds***

A possibility of feminist activism seems remote given above all factors, from linguistics to religions. Despite linguistic messiness and a desire from the parts of women rights campaigners to accommodate male fear, feminism could be said to have found her feet or become popular after 2011 especially among urban-based, young, and professional women. Three interlinking factors underpin a sudden rise of popular (though mis-guided, which will be explained later) feminism. First is the widespread use of social media, i.e. facebook in the context of Myanmar. Even though feminism was talked about and even taught at the institutions such as MIT, concepts of feminism remained behind the walls of the school. Facebook popularizes feminism by mostly serving as a platform for individual feminists who could not meet each other and organize as a group. Facebook 'out' these feminists as a group around 2011. These feminists went on to found a feminist study group in 2011, published Rainfall, Myanmar Feminist Magazine, in 2015, and organized in 2017 the first public feminist event 'A Journey: Finding yourself as feminist' by feminists. But during this event, only half the panelists declared themselves feminists and were comfortable with the term feminists. The other six were willy-nilly feminists giving reasons such as 'we do not have any labels', 'we need to know more about feminism to call ourselves feminists.'<sup>36</sup>

Second factor is connected to the first, i.e. increased availability of international books and online materials in post-censorship Myanmar. Feminists such as Pyo Let Han found feminism helpful to understand and give a name to her disappointment and anger as an eight year old after learning in one of the Jataka stories that the King Vessantara donated his wife, Maddi, and his children, Zali and Khahazein, to a Brahim. The eight year old did not understand why the King could donate his wife and children, and why there does not exist any explanation rather than describing what she sees this act, commonly interpreted the King fulfilling his *parami*, as an

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<sup>35</sup> It takes three years to draft and pass the Race and Religion Protection Laws whereas The Prevention and Protection of Violence against Women Bill (PoVAW) is not yet passed after five years of its launch in 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Rainfall facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1940327022921369/> accessed 09 December 2018

injustice.<sup>37</sup> Vernacular books around her did not include explanations with words such as male/female power disparity and patriarchy to help her interpret Vessantara's act outside of Buddhist cultural framework.

Even though there exists a translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* by a male writer, Mya Than Tint,<sup>38</sup> the text is not accessible to general readers because of the difficult writing. For her young self, another puzzling piece is why the women characters from the books she read are so different from her grandmother, who raised her four children as a single mother after her husband left her for another woman. Characters from the books she read rarely reflect the real woman who braved all the adversities with dignity. The closest fictional character that reflect strong women in her life is Ahtwe from တမ်းတတတ်သည်. Author Kyi Aye painted Ahtwe as a mystical figure whose charms captivated a local young boy. She was an unconventional woman who fought against the enemy, i.e. the British, and took the local boy away from her family. The story resonates with her since the character was based on a real woman, a princess, who was a granddaughter of King Mindon. She found answers in feminist books why popular culture rarely represents women she knows. Representation of culture trumps representation of real women, and vast bodies of books with a small room for lived experience of women bewildered a would-be feminist. Affordable access to internet and the opening of the country proved to be beneficial at least for being able to solicit vast bodies of literature from outside the country relatively easily.

Finding alternative answers to Vessantara's act coincide with the timing of Myanmar opening, and this is the third factor to explain the rise of feminism in early 2000s. Even though there were courses on feminism and discussions about it in the 1990s, and translations of feminism, most notably, *Second Sex*, which was published in 1995, early 2000s saw the writings and public discussions as well as attacks on feminism in wider audience, and most of them take place on social media. One should question though why feminism did not spread beyond the walls of MIT and we'll explore that question further in another chapter in this book.

### *Current forms of feminism in Myanmar*

Despite the fear of the words 'Feminism' and 'Feminists', there is an increasing interest in feminism among young people. There are many facebook active feminist groups such as 'Feminism Myanmar', which has 13,578 likes and 13,771 followers.<sup>39</sup> This public page discusses topics such as sexual harassment, housework and women, and why women are not allowed to go up pagodas. Other facebook feminist groups include 'Myanmar Young Feminists' (44 likes, 46 followers),<sup>40</sup> 'Myanmar Feminist' (5 likes, 5 followers), 'Feminist Network from Myanmar

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<sup>37</sup> One of the ten acts Buddhas-to-be have to fulfil before they attained enlightenment.

<sup>38</sup> The book is entitled မိန်းမတို့အကြောင်း or 'On Women,' first published in 1995.

<sup>39</sup> 'Feminism Myanmar', <https://www.facebook.com/feminism.mm> was first created in January 2018. accessed 10 December 2018

<sup>40</sup> Myanmar Young Feminist', <https://www.facebook.com/myanmaryoungfeminists> accessed 10 December 2018

(Burma)’ – (closed group)<sup>41</sup>, ‘The Purple Feminists Group’ (537 likes, 541 followers)<sup>42</sup>, and ‘Feminist Network from Myanmar’ (a closed group with 673 members).

Two most active groups are ‘Feminism Myanmar’ and ‘Feminist Network from Myanmar (Burma)’, where members share articles from international websites on feminism, feminist perspectives on customary laws from APWLD (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development), #metoo, and accounts of sexual violence by different members.<sup>43</sup> Administrators probably deem it dangerous to allow an open access for their page.

The type of feminism that becomes popular among young people has roots in today’s women struggles against sexual harassment, and gender stereotypes such as women must stay at home, and good husbands can feed their wives (women do not need to work). Popular feminism is less likely to fight structural injustice perpetuated by patriarchal institutions discussed in pages 4 through 7. Online discussions about feminism reflect popular feminism in Myanmar, which focuses on individual liberation and implementing policies to protect women, i.e. waiting for male-led governmental institutions and systems to grant women’s rights rather than women fighting for their own rights by any available means.

### ***Other forms of feminism?***

One of the leaders of women workers and the current assistant secretary of the garment factory workers’ union, Nwe Yin Win, analyzed the rise of the workers as spontaneous without leadership. Workers decided to protest when oppression from the employees became unbearable. Over 1,800 workers from different factories (in Hlaing Thaya) joined the first wave of protests and the reasons for protest include overtime, drafting, and reinforcing disciplines without workers’ consensus and other unfair regulations.<sup>44</sup>

Began as a movement against unfair wages and regulations against all workers, women workers have now discerned discriminations based on sex. Like most rights and justice movements, women workers are deeply uncomfortable talking about and demanding their rights based on their sex and gender. Women rights are subsumed in workers rights and they believe that if workers were granted rights they deserve, women’s rights would also be honored by default. Women workers adopted anti-capitalist causes, but anti-capitalist movements did not incorporate women rights.

### ***If you can’t fight them, join them: Activists to Parliamentarians***

Famous male leaders from Aung San, Nu<sup>45</sup> to Min Ko Naing<sup>46</sup> publicly announced they preferred to be writers to politicians. Min Ko Naing after his last release from prison in 2011 now spends

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Feminist Network from Myanmar (Burma), accessed 10 December. 2018 ‘The Purple Feminist Group’, <https://www.facebook.com/thepurpleofmyanmar/> accessed 10 December 2018

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Su Lay Ngun, ‘Anything is possible if we are united.’ *Rainfall* vol. 2, issue 1, 2018, pp. 6-9

<sup>45</sup> Aung San and Nu were both leaders of the Burma independence movement and the first government of the independent Burma, AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League). Aung San was assassinated in 1947 whereas Nu became the prime minister during the country’s first democratic elections in 1947.

<sup>46</sup> Min Ko Naing, also known as Paw Oo, became one of the student leaders during the 1988 uprising.

his time writing poems and painting. A contrast could be seen among female leaders. Most women parliamentarians especially those entered the 2015 elections on NLD tickets were activists and NGO workers before they joined ‘politics.’ Even the definition of politics by one of the women politicians and parliamentarians is different. Shwe Shwe Sein Latt, an MP of NLD, believed that politics within the framework of parliaments and legislatures would have a significant impact. To women like her, her activism and social works outside the parliament are not politics, since they have few impacts. Only those who could draft and enact laws have political powers and the work they do could be claimed politics.<sup>47</sup>

Joining the parliament not only means entering politics but it also means joining the world of men. Since the leading activists for women’s issues view voices of NGOs empty blasts, NGOs could be seen as ‘feminized’ whereas parliament is ‘masculinized’. Shwe Shwe Sein Latt was discouraged by the enactment of the protection of races law, which bars Burmese Buddhist women marrying non-Buddhists. To have more significant impacts for their work, women believe they must enter politics and become parliamentarians. One female MP and former activist, Cherry Zahaung, commented ‘I switched to political arena (နိုင်ငံရေးနယ်ပယ်) as I can do more in a government.’<sup>48</sup> Politics and making laws therefore seem to be ultimate goals for women activists and human rights campaigners. Whereas for many male activists and politicians, parliament is not their ultimate destination. Politics is a reality, a reward, and is even romanticized whereas male leaders like Min Ko Naing can afford and prefer to leave it. After all, men do not need to enter politics to prove their worth and power.

Women and men leaders having two end goals—to be a writer and a parliamentarian—suggests politics is natural for men something which they can enter and leave at will and more easily than women. Whereas women have to make more efforts to join politics and difficult to leave as there involves more personal investments. Women have to fight more to be recognized as politicians and law makers; they believe they could achieve more as law makers, believe in parliamentary process more and think less of their important works outside of parliamentary and legislature frameworks.

There comes an irony. If social work or NGO work in the context of Myanmar is feminized, instead of bringing politics into social work, women are taking their politics out of their work making a one-way (and upward for them) switch between two very compartmentalized worlds. By doing so they reinforce the binary between social work and politics as well as feminized social activism and masculinized politics. The sample is small but for a few women MPs who were activists in their sectors and regions,<sup>49</sup> they genuinely believe they can do more as representatives of the government and even help change the views of the public towards the government.<sup>50</sup> Instead of politicizing social work, women leaders are feminizing politics, i.e. portraying and trying to tame government as a servant of people as women do historically and traditionally to their family

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<sup>47</sup> Ni Mo Hlaing, *Rainfall*, vol. 1, issue 3, 2015

<sup>48</sup> Pyo Let Han, ‘A Long Journey from the Chin Hills to the Parliament’, *Rainfall*, vol. 1, issue 3, 2015, pp. 34-37

<sup>49</sup> Prominent activists include Cherry Zahaun, Zin Mar Aung, Su Su Nway, Shwe Shwe Sein Latt, Thandar, all of whom entered politics (and elections) on an NLD ticket.

<sup>50</sup> Han, p. 35

members and others in the community, as mothers, sisters, and of course as ‘women’ expected by society. A recent study points out when there is gender equality, women are more likely to follow their passions. In countries such as Nordic countries, where there exists more support for women, there are fewer women engineers.<sup>51</sup> A parallel can be made for the world of social work in Myanmar where women are traditionally expected to excel. Since there is less support and little value for their social work, women are almost compelled to join parliamentary politics to have an impact. Women in politics on façade could be an indicator for women empowerment but as the article in *The Atlantic* suggests, it also means there is little value for their work outside of male-dominated politics, and to enjoy wider support, women activists decided they must join politics.

But women in politics have limited goals. Few aim to become a president and they can’t answer the question what they would do if they became presidents. Presidency for a woman is not even a dream and women politicians cannot imagine themselves as presidents. Also party politics trumps personal ideology especially for NLD women MPs. Being a party’s candidate is more important than being a woman and the former can even compensate for being a weaker candidate, i.e. a woman. Zin Mar Aung, an NLD MP, said I asked my potential voters to vote for the party. Despite being a long-serving student leader and brave activist, she discounted her qualities as a leader and activist as if they mattered less for a woman. Being a woman politician sends very mixed messages to would-be feminists and young girls. Women could be leaders only when they have a party backing.

### ***Fissures among feminists***

With the rise of feminism, fissures also appear among many feminist groups. As Naw Tha Wah rationalized,<sup>52</sup> men need to be engaged and accommodated in feminist movements, and this is considered to be one of the main divides between radical feminists and more traditional feminists. We are aware of inevitably further compounding many challenges feminist faces caused by terminology, and in Myanmar feminism landscape, radicalism implies men should be confronted and made uncomfortable for their privileged positions, at least as a first step, if entire patriarchy system cannot be brought down immediately. Akhaya with their ‘I am a good man’ campaign exemplifies an approach to engage men.

Myanmar’s democratic struggle has long been funded by the West, and current donor landscape further divides feminists. Not only funding but also feminism from the West has been widely promoted. In feminism and gender training, most trainers are non-Myanmar,<sup>53</sup> and training models are universal. Situated feminism, feminism that adapts to challenges and cultures of

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<sup>51</sup> Olga Khazan, ‘The more gender equality, the fewer women in STEM’, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/02/the-more-gender-equality-the-fewer-women-in-stem/553592/> accessed 10/08/2018

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Naw Tha Wah. Nay Pyi Taw, 27 November 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Even WLB, which celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> year anniversary recently with senior women leadership who fought for women causes outside and inside the country hired westerners as trainers instead of leading the feminist and gender training course themselves. This shows Myanmar feminists are yet to challenge western feminism and more importantly, superiority of the West. Add date of the training here.

Myanmar is missing. Western hegemony and aid money are two factors that can be linked to the lack of feminist solidarity and coordinated feminist movements inside Myanmar.

Mohanty writes:

I think feminist pedagogy should not simply expose students to a particularized academic scholarship but that it should also envision the possibility of activism and struggle outside the academy. Political education through feminist pedagogy should teach active citizenship in such struggles for justice.<sup>54</sup>

Mohanty's advocate for activism is not adopted but shunned in Myanmar. Myanmar's emerging feminism is overshadowed by popular democracy funded by many donors. Activism including calls for direct action is shunned whereas parliamentary democracy is widely promoted. Aung San Suu Kyi during the early days of her government gave an analogy in which she referred activists as lumber jacks. She said the country now needs sculptors and lumber jacks' role is over. Activism is publicly undermined and activists viewed as crude, devoid of intellect and diplomacy, and their tactics can derail Myanmar 'fragile' democracy. Donors listen to concerns of Aung San Suu Kyi, or rather, their vision of Myanmar democracy aligned with hers, and their funding for parliamentary-based democratic activities inevitably weakened and divided activist groups.

Devoid of activism, feminist movements are yet to rise though feminism is a popular concept now. Groups such as Rainfall that strive to build a movement faces many struggles. Among many women groups they work with, languages, religions, and cultures cannot be used as a common ground to build solidarity. All ethnic minorities and different classes could politicize their different personal and individual struggles yet activism and political campaigns outside of parliamentary process have lost their support. Political momentum outside parliament has stalled, and that underpins the lack of Myanmar feminist movements.

Safe feminism booms amidst donor-led democratic and development initiatives inside Myanmar. White ribbon campaigns, 16-day activism that advocates for the end of domestic violence against women, and feminism that affirms the traditional roles of women were widely accepted and participated.<sup>55</sup> Donors-led initiatives and fear of losing funds are epitomized by the most recent #metoo events. There was a lack of consensus among feminists as to how the perpetrators should be brought to justice. Feminists who want to use the #metoo as a rallying cause were warned that perpetrators, particularly those who work in the NGO sector, would hurt most if the funding to their organizations is stopped. In the end, no case was filed against male NGO perpetrators of sexual harassment against women. Funding defeats rule of law, and donors are at

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<sup>54</sup> "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles Author(s): Chandra Talpade Mohanty Source: Signs , Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter 2003), pp. 499-535, p. 523

<sup>55</sup> Some of the campaigns use terms such as ပန်းပွင့်နှင့်တူသောမိန်းကလေးများ၊ မိခင်လောင်းများ meaning girls that are like flowers and to-be mothers.

the apex of power hierarchy in the sector that seeks to promote democracy, diversity, equality, and social justice. Money silences activism.

Popular feminism also attracts many following, particularly among urban-based, English speaking women. Vagina Monologues and Drunk Feminism (changed the name to Loud Feminism at the last minute) were organized 2018; these events were very popular and 2-day event for the former was extended to 3-day. Though these events popularized feminism, some feminists are worried that feminism will be further misunderstood as a popular, western-centered cause rather than an ideology that can unite women to fight against patriarchy and militarism. De-politicized feminism currently popular in Myanmar, though not a unique phenomenon in wider political context, is what delays meaningful feminist movements. Also local feminists who are striving to find their own vision of feminist through decolonized lens feel alienated.

### ***Conclusion***

This working paper addresses many challenges feminism in Myanmar faces and reasons why feminist movements are yet to take place in Myanmar. This paper is published as part of an event to launch a book-project for 'Feminism in Myanmar', and 'Feminist Reader' in December 2018 in Yangon.