

Opening Words from the Compiler

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In September 2019 a group of mostly women, and two young children, boarded a plane from Yangon to Dawei, a city in southern Myanmar. There was a woman farmer from the dry zone, a few feminist writers and creative art directors from Yangon, educators and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, members of the LGBTQ community in Yangon, a woman union leader, activists, a babysitter, and two Burmese that were living in the United States. This eclectic group met with local women's rights activists, artists, and a few journalists living and working in Dawei. Together, they discussed feminism, women's issues in different regions of Myanmar, challenges to being LGBTQ in Myanmar, and local activism.

This issue is part one of a two-part special volume that is an outcome of this gathering. It took us, “the Dawei Collective” as we now call ourselves, four years to bring this volume into the daylight. It survived the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 military coup, and the ongoing civil war. Its authors braved violence and tragedy, dealt with intense emotions, and most of all, shouldered the duties of the revolution. By publishing this volume, the collective aims to amplify the voices of women and LGBTQ people during this critical juncture in Myanmar's history. We are claiming a space for ourselves, our sisters and LGBTQ community members. Although originally conceived of before the coup, this volume aims to help readers understand why women and LGBTQs from diverse backgrounds are a formidable revolutionary force that can push other revolutionaries to incorporate important issues related to gender and sexuality into their politics.

I am a compiler, not an editor, of this special volume. I selected, and sometimes begged, people from diverse backgrounds to write about their experiences. I worked with many practitioners and those from the field—be it a literal farmland field, a battlefield, or an urban workplace—closely from 2019 to 2023.

Compiling the publication you are now holding meant sometimes going through six or seven drafts of each individual article. The authors of this volume's articles (except me) are all practitioners, i.e., not formally trained academics. Some are fighting on the frontline during the revolution, some are engaging in ideological war against the beliefs and practices that embolden and sustain the patriarchal military, and some are providing lifelines for women through mutual aid networks. They are not motivated by impact factors, tenure, promotion, and other institutional incentives to write and publish. Many of them actually think that few people want to know about their lives and hear their voices.

We encouraged each other that our voices are worth hearing and that by writing we could, at the very least, inspire our fellow feminists and LGBTQ communities. Most authors wrote their articles in Burmese and then other young people boycotting the military regime translated them into English. They narrated and reflected on their life experiences and the events surrounding them, conveying their meanings and messages, in a shared vernacular language, as opposed to academic jargon. Academic journals pose many challenges to people who embrace life, acquire firsthand knowledge, come up with their own solutions to the world's problems, and never desire to talk to supposedly 'educated' audiences. The expectations of academia and real life are very different, and this volume is a mediation between the two so that the academy and practitioners' worlds and fields can benefit each other. The contributors oppose any hierarchization of academy and community.¹

There were struggles and tensions while bringing this volume to fruition. The Managing Editor of the Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship (IJBS) wanted to follow the publication's style guidelines and conform the articles to what one would normally see in more academic journals. Some authors felt his comments on their contributions were combative. There

¹ I thank Pyo Let Han for inspiring me with this idea of a binary of two classes, the academy on the one hand, and the community or the lay world on the other.

was also a question about who should cite whom. Most academic journal readers probably know Burma through scholarly eyes, and when writers make knowledge claims, a common question posed is, “How do you know this?”. Many authors experience this when writing for an English-language audience. Is a writer’s firsthand account reliable, if she cannot cite anything? Is she plagiarizing an established scholar’s works if her interpretation about her own community parallels existing scholarship? Does her work have less value or lack rigor if she does not reference any literary canon?

This volume is full of such tensions and highlights important questions such as: Whose voice matters? What references matter? There is a big gap between the academy and the field, the former expecting the latter to emulate or produce the kind of work they do. A subtle—though related—point is that many recent Myanmar non-governmental organization (NGO) employees have at some point left their jobs, or departed from the field, to pursue the kinds of educational degrees taken seriously by ‘expats’. Authentic voices that do not quote (Western) scholars but are directly from their fields are yet to claim their rightful place in the academy or elsewhere.

While working on this volume, I thought that we academics might be ‘academic washing’ real women’s lives and experiences by talking about them, over them, and on behalf of them. Though with good intentions, academics codify words and concepts and many, particularly English readers, expect such codified language when reading about a particular topic. Local practitioners often write in Burmese, when their works are translated into English, there can be unexpected interpretations and the ‘academicization’ of their voice if translators and editors are not careful.

Other challenges included our choice of audience. The authors wrote what they saw and experienced, having little idea what their audience might be, as for most of them, IJBS is the first journal or printed media they have ever written for. The mission of IJBS is to publish research and writing from Burmese scholars and thinkers in both Burmese and English, and when

possible, in other languages of Myanmar. However, this means that the English-language articles are edited with a native English-speaking audience in mind, which always requires discussion and negotiation.

While editing the article “Those Who Suffer from the Sickness of Society” for this issue, the journal’s Managing Editor commented that “some readers might be offended” by the authors’ claim that sex work should not exist. As the issue compiler, I supported the contributors’ viewpoint and prioritized their voice: “Let readers be offended”. I learned that these authors wrote not to comfort or confirm their readers’ potential worldviews, but to inform, and more often, to try and get readers to feel what their sex worker research participants feel; they wrote to highlight the injustices they have seen, and more importantly, feel along with the oppressed. In that article, the authors concluded that if given any choice at all, women and trans women would not choose sex work. A more accepted view in wealthy Western liberal democracies is that if sex work is legalized and sex workers have their rights protected, then society should accept sex workers’ choice of occupation. The authors of this article think such a view is oppressive, since they believe no one would sell sex in an ideal, i.e., oppression-free world. The authors are unapologetically loyal to what they saw, felt, and what they think should be, in a future new Burmese society. Undaunted by the weight of foreign scholarship and preexisting views, their honest opinions are refreshing and provide insights into the Burma they know and interact with daily.

The same authors were very sympathetic to and sensitive about the people they interviewed. I found it difficult to refrain from suggesting some words to them. For example, one interviewee trans woman sex worker spoke about experiencing an event that the authors, and I, understood clearly as an act of rape. However, the authors chose to use the term ‘injustice’ rather than ‘rape’. I believe this is because they were heartbroken and worried that using the word ‘rape’ would further hurt the victim. Labeling things to highlight injustices and going through collective traumas cannot be reconciled sometimes.

Another challenge for this special volume was translating LGBTQ terms from Burmese into English, reflecting intersectional linguistic complexities. Based on class, gender, and region, many groups use different Burmese words for the acronym LGBTQ, and discussions were provoked when translators used the word ‘gay’ for the Burmese word *a-chauk*. Some authors avoided the term *a-chauk* and chose the term ‘trans woman’. For men who dress as women, three potential words coexist (*a-chauk*; ‘trans woman’; ‘gay’) and the authors, translators, and editors had to achieve a consensus on terminology. In the end, the authors used ‘trans women’ for men dressed as women, and *a-chauk* for trans women and feminine men in both Burmese and English. We hope readers will be able to accept some words such as *a-chauk* without considering it as being prejudicial, as it can be a label chosen by feminine men, and men dressed as women often from a lower socio-economic status; its reclamation can be an act of empowerment. These quandaries are reflective of young Burmese people’s struggles to be ‘politically correct’ when they write, while still being true to themselves.

The first article of issue one of this special volume, “Is There Such a Thing as Myanmar Feminism?”, offers a short history of feminism in Burma and orientates the reader on how to read ‘Burmese’ feminism. This article reminds readers not to come looking for Western feminism, or for waves of feminism, if they really want to hear authentic Burmese feminist voices and understand how there are many forms of feminism across the world.

The second article, “On Feminism and Revolution”, is a conversation between young people who have different roles in the ongoing revolution against the Burmese military; it is a snapshot of ideological revolution initiated by young people amidst the wider revolution. Ever since the 2021 coup, radicalized and radicalizing young people are attempting to change Burmese society with ideas, and this conversation captures one such attempt. The article highlights the dangers of militarization and why it is important to discuss difficult topics amidst the ongoing revolution. There should not be a hierarchy of values and goals, such

as the notion that dismantling the military must come first with other issues only to be worked through later.

In the third article, “The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement”, Sophia Day Myar explains how the word ‘national’ in the Burmese language is gendered, emboldening men and excluding women. She describes how Karenni men and wider society sideline women from politics and public forums, and how the very structure of government, with many men in official positions, deters women from engaging in politics or in local governance. Reflecting on her personal experiences growing up as a Karenni woman, she analyzes how Karenni society discourages and disempowers women.

The fourth article, by the contributor Alotethama (*alotethama* means worker in Burmese), “Life as a Worker, Life as a Union Leader, and Becoming a Feminist”, is the life story of a woman union leader who lost her factory job because of her labor activism. As part of her narrative, she boldly claims that unions should not exist if they are destined only to become another layer of oppression for workers. Such a claim seems self-defeating, but NGOs and labor unions should take note and understand the rift they could create by institutionalizing unions and bringing workers and unions under the rule of law, if the rules are written by lawmakers who sympathize with capitalists over workers.

The next article by A Shinn and Katniss, “Those Who Suffer from the Sickness of Society”, is an ethnographic account of gay men who dress as women and engage in sex work and their perils. This article is one of the rare accounts of gay sex workers who probably fare the worst in Myanmar society, and whose lives are often seen only through the lens of medical intervention and via HIV/AIDS campaigns.

The sixth article by Maria Begum, “How Education Can Help Rohingya Women Avoid Human Trafficking”, highlights some of the barriers Rohingya women face within and outside their communities. The author points to the shortfalls of NGO programs and emphasizes that long term investment in women’s

education is the only sustainable way to help Rohingya women liberate themselves.

The last article by Aung Zaw Myo, “Spring Revolution: New Opening(s) and Old Heteronormative Narratives”, highlights how LGBTQ people reclaimed certain words such as *a-chauk* after the 2021 coup and how other revolutionary groups pushed back. By analyzing slogans and interviews, the author discusses how LGBTQ people are building solidarity with women to challenge heteronormativity in post-coup Myanmar.

From September 2019, when the workshop inspiring this issue was held, to November 2023, when IJBS published this volume, members of the Dawei Collective have influenced each other through their collaborative work on this volume as well as their other on-the-ground activities. While writing and finishing these articles, we have also helped build schools, a nursery, provided mutual aid to our sisters and beyond, and most of all, kept each other company and helped survive through perhaps the most difficult times of our lives.

I would like to thank all the contributing authors and poets. I also want to thank the editors of IJBS, as well as Dr. Aarti Kawlra and colleagues from Humanities across Borders, who first introduced the idea of feminism from the field. I also express gratitude to Northern Illinois University for granting me research leave, and to the Rainfall team that guided, facilitated, and supported the publication of this special volume from beginning to end.

The Dawei Collective dedicates this volume to the sisters and LGBTQ members who have fallen while resisting during this difficult time.

About the Poems

Between the articles in this issue, we included poems that speak to their themes. The Assistant Editor of IJBS helped select the poems, and writes:

I believe there are no borders for the arts. Only poems that found their way into my heart were selected for conversation with the articles in this issue. I read the poems anew after being inspired by the articles and their themes. Poems can talk directly to one's heart. Although readers cannot know exactly the motivation, rationale, and passion of a poet, readers have the freedom to interpret each poem in their own way. I would say the satisfaction of reading this issue's poems alongside the articles is like drinking water after eating Indian gooseberries. Bitterness and sweetness complement each other. I hope the readers can share the emotions and feelings of the authors and poets.