

Is There Such a Thing as Myanmar Feminism?

Tharaphi Than

Abstract

Attempts by foreign feminists and scholars to understand Myanmar feminism are limited by the languages, histories and concepts with which they are familiar. Subsequently, many struggle to identify ‘feminism’ in the Myanmar context. This article, written from the perspective of a Burmese feminist scholar, charts some of the unique characteristics of feminism in Myanmar from the early twentieth century to the 2021 coup period. It argues that the current revolutionary moment has facilitated a change in Myanmar feminism: the personal has become political, and women and LGBTQ communities are using the political rupture to make demands and highlight gender-based oppression.

Introduction

The title of this paper is intended to be provocative. The emphasis is on feminism and how we can understand and study it in a Myanmar context. When we hear the word feminism, we often associate it with the first, second, and third waves of feminism as understood in the West.¹ When feminists and feminist scholars from outside Myanmar look for feminism and women’s movements in Myanmar, they are only equipped with the language and examples with which they are familiar. Many get lost trying to identify what fits under the umbrella term of ‘feminism’ in the Myanmar context. There are no clear answers to, “Were women organized? Did they mobilize themselves and the

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered at the University College London Institute of Global Prosperity on 6 December 2021. It is dedicated to those who have fallen and/or sacrificed in the many revolutions of Burma or Myanmar. In writing this article I benefitted from correspondence with two Burmese feminists, Pyo Let Han and Shunn Lei.

country for the right to vote?”, i.e., questions based on understandings of first wave feminism; or “Are women allowed to work? Are women in Myanmar paid equally as men?”, questions from the second wave; or “Are women subject to domestic violence? How is sexual liberation viewed by women?”, questions associated with the third wave in Western discourses.

Asking these questions in the Myanmar context could easily disorientate a feminist scholar. This is not because there is no such a thing as Myanmar feminism but that feminist movements have not occurred linearly, or as waves as understood in the West. The preconditions for the emergence of feminist movements are different to those in the Western context. The question then is: what is Myanmar feminism? Or rather, how can we understand feminism in the Myanmar context? What structural oppression or patriarchal norms do Burmese women fight against?

This article is guided by these three questions. The first two are interrelated. To be able to answer them, I provide some brief historical background. Burma’s first election was held in 1922. Women who owned properties could vote to elect 80 out of the 103 members in the legislative council. As part of British India, Burmese women’s voting rights were considered the same as women in Britain, where ratepayers were able to vote. But even in 1922, the historical trajectory of women’s rights in Burma was very different from women’s rights in Britain or those in countries where a woman’s agency was tied to the question of whether they could elect representatives using their own ballot and voice.

Protesting Government Taxes

In the nineteenth century, Burmese women held 10 per cent of village administrative positions across the lowlands and owned property in their names. Village head positions were passed down along both male and female hereditary lines.² Several

² For more, see Tharaphi Than, 2014.

matriarchal communities also existed in the highlands. In this context of nineteenth century Burma, electing democratic representatives could have been seen as a step down or step backward in women's equality. Women did not mobilize, nor were they mobilized, for the right to vote and participate in elections.

Rather, in the colonial Global South, feminist movements were often intertwined with independence movements. One of the earliest women's movements in Burma was around household taxes—not voting rights. As the British colonial administrative organs expanded and tax regimes increasingly restricted the economic activities of rural households, nationalist political organizations mobilized their members around tax issues.

Women joined the women's wings of such organizations and called themselves *Kumari*. They avoided paying tax and participated in and led boycott movements.³ They boycotted imported products including sheer fabrics and tortoise shell combs (the Burmese term for 'turtle' is the same as the shortened form for 'English', these were 'English combs'). This early *Kumari* movement, associated with the independence movements against colonial rule in British India, shows how women's movements in Burma were often subsumed by larger movements, unlike those in most of the countries of the Global North, where women's movements were not subsumed in independence or nationalist movements to the same extent.

Burmese women's struggles have always floundered in the shadows of other national movements. The term "national" is often rendered in the Burmese language as "concerning men" and "men's causes", rather than "concerning the nation" or "concerning the state", and such linguistic slippage highlights how Burmese women have found it almost impossible to launch their own genuine women's movement. The cause of the nation is what everyone—men and women together—must strive for, and during the twentieth century there was a general belief in Burmese society that it would be selfish for women to fight for

³ *Kumari* is a Sanskrit word meaning 'princess'. *Kumari* groups were closely affiliated with political organizations in early twentieth century Burma and women organized themselves in local *Kumari* groups.

their own causes.⁴ The idea is that “once everyone is freed, women will be freed also”. The predicament of women is bound up with everyone’s predicament. This coupling of women’s issues with the nation, and describing causes for the nation as men’s causes, or the ones that men should naturally lead, poses the greatest challenge for women’s movements and women activists in Myanmar. Women political leaders learned to adopt the strategy of adopting men’s causes “for the nation” as their own in order to survive in a hostile political environment.

Kumari women were active in the *wunthanu* (“love for one’s race”) movement, but women’s niche in the independence struggle was largely carved out by male monks and male laypeople. Taking inspiration from the Ghandi movement, *wunthani Kumari* women urged all women to support local products and encouraged them to produce their own clothes. At the same time, wives of civil servants launched forms of elite activism such as supporting orphanages and organizing “Pansy days”, i.e., fundraising activities, in government schools and offices. The roles women took on in the independence struggle and in welfare activism were delimited by religious, cultural, and political leaders who were mostly male.

Women students actively participated in student strikes from 1910 to 1938, the last of which was to show solidarity with oil workers who were striking and marching from oil fields in the dry zone to government offices in Rangoon. When the oil workers went on strike, pictures of young girls throwing their bodies across the factory gates of oil refineries captured the nation’s imagination. They were, like their sisters before them in the *Kumari* movement, portrayed as supporters of the national movement. Many of the demands the oil workers made were related to improving living conditions in households. The families of many oil workers did not have enough oil to burn lanterns at night, preventing their children from studying: situations like this were directly connected to British colonial exploitation of Burmese workers.

⁴ This endures today. See “The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement” in this issue.

The fact that most women supported the nationalist independence movement meant women did not launch their own women's movements during this time. Women leaders, often daughters of senior government ministers, were seen as champions of nationalist causes rather than as champions of women's issues. During the first third of the twentieth century, the successes of highly educated women such as Daw Mya Sein, the first Burmese woman to graduate from Oxford University, who represented the country at the Burma Round Table Conference in London in 1931 and fought for national causes such as education and peace, overshadowed the struggles of other less-privileged women.

Supporters, Not Leaders

As mentioned, women were framed as supporters by the nationalists and agitators by the colonialists in the independence struggle. They played second fiddle to male nationalist leaders and monks. Certain prominent individual women, such as Daw Mya Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, have generally been regarded as somehow representative of Burmese women in general. But highly educated women like them are rare in Burma. They attract disproportionate attention, overshadowing the context from which they came, and the real political, social, and cultural positions of most women in Burma. Over time, perceptions of elite women like these, including the village headwomen and royalty like Queen Shin Saw Pu of centuries past, and more recently these women educated at prestigious global institutions like Oxford University, perpetuated the message that Burmese women enjoyed high status in Burmese society.

In reality, young girls and women face more hardship than boys and men and do not enjoy equal status with them at all. For example, the drop-out rate from school for girls is higher than for boys, and men consistently receive higher incomes than women. Only the lowest-paid jobs, mostly in the public sector, and in petty trade, are the domain of women.

Returning to the main question posed by this article, feminism cannot be understood separately from other movements in Burma. Women themselves feel deeply uncomfortable portraying themselves as feminists or fighting for issues related to gender and sexuality. When I interviewed women doctors and soldiers in Yangon between 2005 and 2006, they refused to talk about working for women's causes. In fact, they often viewed their own activism as politically neutral.

Feminism is inherently political, but Burmese activism has been depoliticized since the 1960s when the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) ruled the country. Two examples stand out: the work of a leading Burmese woman doctor, and women soldiers. The doctor was quite angry when I described her work for the poor and her study of politics before joining medical school as radical. Women getting attention was at that time a radical act. Between the icons of Daw Mya Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi, there were hardly any women who could lead both women and men and who carved out political or activist careers for other women.

Women soldiers were originally recruited to establish the first women's army in Burma. But they mostly spent World War II in supporting roles, nursing soldiers, and mobilizing the rural public against the Japanese. After the war, they traded their military uniforms in for civilian clothes, and in their own words, "buried their political lives".⁵ It is worth emphasizing that depoliticizing women's activism silences women. Many Burmese women adopted non-political lives after a short spell of political activism, as exemplified by these original Burmese woman soldiers. A continued pursuit of political activism was and still is almost impossible when there is a clear demarcation between what men can and should do and what women can and should do.

⁵ For more on Burmese woman soldiers, see chapters four and five of Tharaphi Than, 2014.

Structural Barriers and the Invisibility of Women

Understanding feminism in the Burmese context requires one to pay attention to the larger political and social landscape in which women are situated and comprehend the structural oppression and patriarchal norms that they must contend with. In Burma's democracy since independence, the biggest impediment for women's political activism has been mainstream party politics. Women political leaders often choose to retire or leave their parties to operate in opposition movements (underground or otherwise). The BSPP never had any senior women executives, but the wives of the party's leaders championed social welfare causes. The three nationwide workers' and farmers' conferences the BSPP organized in its early years (known as Duya, Kha-baung and Ohndaw) did not feature a single woman speaker and women were also largely absent in the rank and file of the BSPP. Since independence, women's participation in politics reached its lowest point during the periods of BSPP and military rule.

Deterring women from joining politics went hand in hand with carving out particular careers and roles for women in society. In an education program created during the post-World War II democratic period called "Creating New Lives and Education" if directly translated from the Burmese language, but formally titled "The Education Plan for Welfare State" in English, women teachers were described as "frontier soldiers".⁶ There was a push for women to be soldiers, but with chalk and books, not as combat soldiers in a traditional or guerrilla army. Still, this showed an ambivalent attitude from the government about the role of women in society, and women pilots were occasionally featured on magazine covers. Many governments have sought to inspire young girls with pictures of women soldiers, especially pilots, but these token soldiers were never actually given combat roles in Burma. Equal opportunities for men and women in the army started and ended on magazine covers.

⁶ For more on the Pyidawtha Plan, see Government of the Union of Burma, 1954.

In addition to a government incapable of articulating and creating roles for women in their administration and most other job sectors in the country, the gendered roles of society also impeded the individual and collective progress of women and continue to do so. Healthcare and education are considered suitable areas of work for women, but if women want to attend medical university, they must score higher than men on their qualifying exams. Engineering is considered a man's profession and to be admitted to an engineering school, women must score higher than men as well. Either way, women are doomed.

Parents think teaching is a dignified and suitable occupation for women and that a teacher's uniform provides protection. They therefore encourage their daughters to strive to become teachers if they work at all. Such government jobs are poorly paid, and it is often hard to juggle the work with family life. Many women professors at universities remain unmarried, possibly for two reasons: 1) they cannot support their own families with their salaries, and 2) to rise higher in the academy, one must devote one's life to pursuing one degree after another, leaving no time for a partner.

Based on the 2014 household census, about 10 per cent of jobs in Myanmar are in the government sector,⁷ but a majority of women actually engage in the private sector. Women might successfully run and manage a business, but when that business is brought into a guild or conglomerate, it is men, not women, who go on to represent it. Women, no matter how competent and successful, are discouraged from leading large profitable businesses due to bureaucratic hurdles and the mistrust of men in trade associations. Just like in politics, women are less represented than men in the better-paid corporate and large enterprise parts of the private sector.

The gendering of politics, bureaucracy and business, i.e., the labeling of them as the domain of men, remains the biggest obstacle for women. The visibility of certain women in power in Myanmar, often those that come from political dynasties, and/or are the daughter or husband of a powerful man,

⁷ Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2023.

obfuscates the real powerlessness of most women in Myanmar. Positions of power and influence in government offices and services are off limits to ordinary women.

Hilary Faxon and Pyo Let Han note that a majority of women farmers do not have land titles in their names.⁸ In other words, many women work on land that they do not legally own. The land bureaucracy is complicated and offices are hostile places for women to visit. The lack of land titles held by women results in them being unable to envision themselves as farmers, let alone land owners. The word *lehthama*, ‘farmer’ in English, is used exclusively for men, and like in politics, women are limited to supporting roles in agriculture, such as being transplanters, weeders, and harvesters, etc. As more and more young men leave Myanmar, most to engage in agricultural work abroad, the women they leave behind must take on farm work in addition to managing the house.

Though there are millions of women farmers in Myanmar, state authorities and NGOs persist in their image of a typical farmer as being a man tilling the land with water buffaloes or a tractor. They are wedded to a stylized image of men and masculinized strength—never of women. No official poster or communication with women tilling the land has been issued by the Myanmar state or NGOs to display or encourage the empowerment of women.

Invisible Barriers and the Plight of Women

So far I have discussed the structural barriers for women to achieve positions of power in government and the bureaucracy. But there also exist invisible cultural barriers. One of them is the concept of *hpon*, the prestige and power afforded to men in Burmese society. The belief that women are inherently inferior to men because they did not accumulate enough karmic credits in their past lives contributes to discriminatory acts such as families separating women’s undergarments from men’s clothes,

⁸ Faxon & Pyo Let Han, 2018.

often forcing women to dry their longyis and undergarments inside the house, and religious authorities preventing women from climbing to the highest platforms at Buddhist pagodas and religious buildings.

Politics and the concept of *hpon*, i.e., structural and invisible barriers, trap women in certain jobs and keep them landless and without title. Powerful actors such as the military misuse and abuse cultural norms and beliefs to their advantage. They reinforce the superiority of men by referring to and propagating ancient stories from the Buddhist *jataka* canon, perpetuating justifications for the structural barriers against women's fuller participation in Burmese society. The insidious interplay of politics, militarism and *hpon* in Myanmar is difficult to unravel.

Here it is worth pointing out the dangerous side of the influence of Western feminism and its methods. Myanmar feminism is not easily visible, and between 2010 and 2020, when more gender-based funding streams became available in the country, many women activists felt pressured to make themselves seen and visible, so that their work could be easily identifiable by wealthy Western NGOs as (what they considered to be) feminist work or gender activism. They deviated from the path of the activists during the first 50 years of independent Burma, the path that often aligned with the missions of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) or the Communist Party of Burma. Many activists in the twenty-first century have carved out space in mainstream urban circles, rather than sticking to or being stuck in remote or border areas. Many women's organizations chose to prioritize change from within the hybrid civilian rule parliamentary system, though some EAO women's organizations remained skeptical.

Culture, not politics, was portrayed as an obstacle for change during the era of hybrid civilian rule from 2010-2021. Ending domestic violence became a common cause that could rally many women's organizations; the "16 Days of Activism" campaign allowed opportunities for bite-size activism to those who could not be full-time activists. Reports of gender-based

violence and how to tackle the problem were widely discussed at all levels, from national to local.

Plays like the “Vagina Monologues” and the very term “feminism” became more accepted in Myanmar toward the end of the 2010s. Popular global trends such as the “White Ribbon” campaign and the #metoo movement were discussed and used as benchmarks. But the urban-based, NGO-driven gender activism was detached from the movements coming out of EAOs’ women’s wings, which continuously pointed out the entrenchment of military rule and the precarity of women’s lives under it.⁹ Women’s movements in the 2010s were subsumed into global campaigns, and efforts for gender equality by and large centered around ending domestic violence and promoting women’s representation in parliamentary politics. The emphasis was on individual freedom and achievement. Collective liberation was considered unpragmatic at best and unachievable within short project cycles funded by NGOs. Women’s movements could not champion the movements by Myanmar farmers and garment workers where women fought for land rights and a decent wage.

To recap, politics, bureaucracy and project-based activism have disempowered the women activists fighting for collective liberation through cross-cutting issues such as land rights and fair pay. The tunnel vision of global and Western feminism, institutionalized as it is to prioritize voting rights, sexual liberation, pay parity, and women’s representation in the government, meant that newly influential NGOs were reluctant to support movements without these hashtags. Tensions arose when attempting to separate feminist movements from wider nationalist movements by Bamar or other ethnicities. There was conflict between the new NGO-supported feminists and the old guard of activists that see women’s issues as only part of larger campaigns for justice in Myanmar.

⁹ As seen in Shunn Lei Swe Yee’s article in issue two of this special volume, “How Mainstream Gender Activism Failed Marginalized Women, 2011-2021”, to be published in 2024.

Feminism in the Spring Revolution

The final section of this article concerns the rise of feminism in the aftermath of the 2021 coup and the factors that enabled it. Since the coup, many have criticized any politics that straddles radicalism, i.e., a politics that deviates from mainstream, popular, or elite politics. The coup proved beyond doubt that the diarchic relationship between the military and the leading political party failed. Radical voices and radical politics including feminism were brought to the fore in the abrupt brief opening of political space following the coup. Feminism in the context of Myanmar is radical politics because it highlights the fact that if women are not freed, society is not freed. Groups such as Thu Pone have highlighted the importance of liberating women while the revolution unfolds.¹⁰ The 2021 Spring Revolution has seen efforts to center women's issues and calls for equality.

In the current era of social media and instant news delivery, women's participation in politics and activism, from the cities to the countryside, from the plains to highlands, changed from visible activism to online activism—though many women are continuing to engage in the resistance as fighters and supporters. Following the coup, varied forms of women's activism—from the hoisting of women's sarongs in downtown Yangon, to marching with the slogan, “I will wear what I want, just don't rape me”, to city women demonstrating as war refugees and holding young children, have erased any question of whether women “belong” in politics. Ruptured politics has made feminism visible.

There are four groups of women that are currently most visible. These are participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), protesters, backline supporters, and women fighters. The CDM has weakened public services provided by organs of the military's State Administration Council, completely halting them in some areas. Protesters, especially those protesting in the countryside, are mostly women. Rural and minority women might not be as visible as city protesters, and some of them,

¹⁰ Thu Pone, 2013.

especially those fleeing from active conflicts, might not choose to protest in the streets, but they are active supporters of the revolution, contributing financially, sheltering fighters, and more importantly giving moral courage to resistance fighters. Nuns, teachers, professors, and legal professionals are now on the frontline fighting and teaching children in conflict areas.

The quick evolution of the anti-coup resistance movement to a wider revolution shows that radical and fringe politics matter. Feminism was strong in Myanmar before the coup, but only one version of it was legible by the outside world, especially the Western world. Fringe politics in the physical and metaphorical sense, i.e., the politics championed by minorities that continuously highlights the inherent violence of the patriarchal military and civilian state, has moved to the center, and feminism has found new alliances—after all, feminism itself has always been fringe politics.

Institutional violence is born out of militarized society and violence begets violence. Stopping violence against women has been a central call of minority women activists such as Shan, Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya people. There have long been campaigns against the use of rape as a weapon of war in Burma and Myanmar. In 2021, the plight of minority women in the hands of the Myanmar army was incorporated into the “16 Days of Activism” campaign to raise awareness of violence against women. Women’s activism, gender equality movements and feminism have progressed and feminists are less likely to be accused of being merely “angry women” by men and those with power.

Conclusion

The ongoing goals of the revolution reflect the needs of the most oppressed, including women and LGBTQ people, and other minorities including Rohingyas. A successful revolution cannot be measured by bringing about change only for the privileged majorities, but what it achieves for the least privileged and most oppressed in society. In the midst of revolution, visibility of the invisible, and voices of the voiceless, give hope to people that

society collectively is making progress toward equality. Amid suffering and bloodshed, there is hope.

In Myanmar feminism, it used to be that the personal was not political, or rather the personal could not be made political, but the 2021 coup has changed that. Women and LGBTQ communities who were active before the coup are now using this political rupture to center their demands and highlight ongoing gender-based, systemic oppression. Burmese revolutionary society has come to understand that a revolution with no parallel platforms to tackle these systemic oppressions will be an incomplete one.

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