



Discussing Feminism Within the Revolution

Thu Pone

Abstract

This article takes the form of a selection of excerpts of group discussions hosted by the *Thu Pone* (rebel) online discussion group on the topics of feminism and revolution. In it, participants discuss their thoughts on the kinds of feminism they each subscribe to, on gender politics and the struggle against oppression, revolutionary strategy, disarmament, and on a post-revolution world as envisioned by feminists. The discussions these responses were excerpted from took place in October 2021 and their publication here provides a snapshot of this important ongoing ideological revolution, which is nested within the larger revolution against military rule in Myanmar.

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During the revolution that has swept Myanmar since February 2021, many online discussions about what were once considered radical ideas have emerged. One such discussion was initiated by the *Thu Pone* (Rebel) group. Young people from Rebel gather online regularly and discuss topics ranging from what it is like to be LGBTQ at the forefront of the revolution, to the killing of children by the Burmese military in Let Yet Kone village, Sagaing Region. This article is presented in a discussion format,¹ with individuals responding to group questions and to each other in sequence. The excerpts provide a snapshot of an ideological revolution that is occurring within the larger revolution against

¹ While authorship of this article is attributed to the overall *Thu Pone* group, and nominal pseudonyms are used for some discussants, others are referred to by a numbered group pseudonym (“Thu Pone #1”). Discussants sometimes refer to theories and books, but this article does not contain in-text citations or a reference list.

military rule. Young Burmese people are grappling with feminist ideas and theories and many are now deciding to become feminists at this important juncture of Burmese history.

What type of feminist do you consider yourself to be?

Me Me Lwin:

I feel like I've had a chance to engage with every feminist theory and am influenced by all of them, particularly radical and socialist feminism, but also by liberal feminism as well. Is it possible to decide that we are a particular kind of feminist after absorbing the concepts of just one book?

Thawdar:

I guess I am either a liberal or a radical feminist. I'm enthusiastic about learning and writing about LGBT issues and sexual harassment. I'm also interested in learning about the right to abortion, as it strikes close to home. My cousin, as well as another friend of mine, both got pregnant in their teens due to lack of knowledge about sex. My friend underwent an abortion and my cousin gave birth.

Htet Htet:

I think I'm closest to Marxist theories of feminism, since the Marxist theory and framework best explains what is really oppressing people. But Marxism ignores gender-based oppression at times, which is a challenge. I also like transnational feminism since it transcends national boundaries.

Ko Kaung:

I want to abolish all forms of oppression. I am an anarchist. Having gender standards only leads to oppression. Gender identity should be abolished if people are being oppressed by it. If gender, on the other hand, is just a concept to express a person's existence, and is not the basis of oppression, then it doesn't need to be abolished.

Thu Pone #1:

I have come to understand that gender-based oppression is borne out of the existence of gender identities. I want to make a proposition. Marching towards a gender free society is only possible without patriarchy.

Zeyar:

I like radical feminism. I like its point of view on getting rid of the patriarchy and how gender power works. Some radical feminists make claims like, “the pornography industry is sexually exploitative” and “having sex is about males expressing male power over females”. For me, the word “male” should not be put before the word “feminist”. To get rid of the norms of society, a man needs to ask himself if he is ready to let go of the benefits that he has been given by the patriarchy.

May:

I learned feminism not from theories but through my work. I left my previous feminist environment and moved to a new workplace where I met new people. They considered me to be a hot-headed feminist. Although I’m a quick and ready-for-action type, they characterized my feminism based on their views about me rather than my activities. I am who I am, and I do not like gender-based oppression. I do not label (the kind of feminist) I am.

Lin Htut:

I still do not dare to consider myself a feminist since I’m still trying to figure out (what feminism is). I’m very much influenced by the writer bell hooks though.

Thu Pone #2:

I also can’t decide what kind of feminist I am and accept that I am just a feminist, but not liberal. Being a radical feminist is not something one can ascribe to oneself. I believe others have to define us that way.

Ma Ei:

We have faced oppression and discrimination since we were young. I came to understand oppression through (everyday) interactions in society. I started to think that my work should be buoyed by a certain “-ism”. I used to think that I lean towards the left. I just happened to learn about feminism in 2015. I like radical feminism and I am studying it. I still have no idea what kind of feminist I am. I do not put myself in any particular box. I believe in building a new society where there is only justice and no oppressive mechanisms.

Thu Pone #1:

A society where there is justice and no oppressive mechanisms is the ultimate goal of feminism. I find myself leaning towards leftism and would like to be a radical feminist although I have no idea whether I am or not because it is something to be determined by other people rather than by myself. I do not dare to say that I am radical.

Ko Hein:

I didn't learn about gender-based oppression from feminist theories. Being gay, I've faced so much oppression throughout my life. I do not like the fact that I was attacked because of my identity. I grew up in the military where there is a lot of gender-based violence. I came to understand this oppression well when I started studying feminism. For LGBT people, norms around male identity, which are rooted in patriarchy, are toxic. It's difficult for me to consider what type of feminist I am, because I'm partial to leftist theories, I like radical and Marxist feminism.

Ni Ni Win:

I never thoroughly read about every type of feminism. I like the ideology of radical feminism, however, I still think that I lack sufficient knowledge to consider myself a radical feminist. Most people think that I am a liberal feminist, but a superficial one. I think it is because I say things based on what I see and hear in my [immediate] surroundings.

Su Su San:

I think feminism is helpful to explain oppression based on gender, race, and class. I'm a feminist who would like to march towards a new and just world.

Htet Myat:

I haven't read seriously enough to put myself under a certain type of feminism. Over time though, I see myself as a feminist who is leaning towards Marxism. As long as capitalism is yet to be abolished, people from any identity or any sexual orientation cannot enjoy absolute freedom. Limitations will still exist.

Thant Kyaw Swar:

I am gay and a LGBT activist. I became a male feminist because I experienced (the negative consequences) of patriarchy. I enjoy theories of liberal feminism.

Thu Pone #1:

Why did you say that you are a male feminist? Do you mean you were born with male genitals?

Thant Kyaw Swar:

There are some people who do not express themselves as a male although they are LGBTQ. I, however, regard myself as a male feminist as I use the 'he, him' pronouns.

Thu Pone #1:

Everyone has the right to be a feminist. Do we need to explain our feminism with qualifications like what sex or gender we are? Adding the word "male" (to the label feminist), can imply that only women are natural feminists. If one considers oneself a feminist, one should think about the significance of language.

Htet Htet:

I would like to discuss this idea that the label "male feminist" alludes to the fact that only women engage in feminism. To

answer the question of whether the gender system should be abolished or not is, I think, just like using socialism as a buffer before a truly Marxist society can be established; gender identities will still be around until oppression ends. Can these identities then collapse when oppression no longer exists?

I would like to bring up a theory proposed by D’Emilio here. He claims that gender identity was born together with capitalism. Here is a question to think about: would gender identity reach its end with the end of capitalism? We should speak out for women in the pornography and sex industries. These industries shape women as sexual showcases and encourage females to take up sex work. If the job of sex work did not involve discrimination, it would be chosen equally by men and women.

Mi Thae:

To explain the term “male feminist”, we have to go back to how we understand feminism. Feminism may be a discipline, a perspective, or a tool to analyze oppression. Based on how one (utilizes) feminism, there will be many views. For me, a feminist is someone who is taking any type of feminist action. It would be difficult to consider oneself a 24-hour feminist. Becoming a feminist is not like being converted into a religion. Just because one is a feminist, there is no guarantee that one’s actions will always be just or will always be feminist actions. Being a feminist is acting. I consider myself a worker, a worker working with culture. What I mean by culture is the culture of identity in a society or culture of oppression; an intellectual worker rather than a manual laborer.

The term “male feminist” is similar to putting the word “female” before jobs considered exclusive to men. For instance, female soldiers, female trishaw drivers, female bus drivers and so on. Women doing these jobs are considered out of ordinary. During the National League for Democracy’s time in government, when a female took the position of police chief, I remember one man commented saying the woman was worthy of the job as “she is trustworthy like a man”.

I also want to discuss the reason why we are talking about abolishing gender. I think we are saying such things because gender contributes to injustice rather than justice in society. Gender subscribes to a value system, the system that downgrades women and upgrades men. So rather than abolishing gender or trying to establish a genderless society, we have to tackle patriarchy, which is the source of gendered standards and norms and sexism. Why don't we like the gender system? It's because it has established a value system through which we have been discriminated against, oppressed, and undermined.

Thu Pone #2:

I reflect on how I came to know feminism... How have we been framed by the gender system since childhood? As Mi Thae stated elsewhere, gender norms are more obvious to us when we enter early adolescence. Pressure from people around us increases during puberty. For example, my family forbade me to go near the home altar when I had my first menstruation event. My family, school and neighbors all told me not to go near boys when I became an adolescent. I was so depressed and didn't want to be a woman anymore. I wanted to be a man.

To link with what I have said, it is not that I dislike being a woman. I just do not enjoy the norms that determine the frame "woman".

Thu Pone #1:

Judith Butler, feminist and gender theorist, says in the book *Gender Trouble* that more genders are emerging these days and people are adding more specifics before the terms gender and "LGBT". Butler uses the term "gender performativity" to explain that gender is a performance. If we want people to accept the gender we affix ourselves, there must be a performative act to prove the said gender. For instance, a trans woman needs to perform like a woman so that people accept her as a woman. She needs to use female accessories and things she thinks are used by women. This is proof that gender prescribes norms. We have to perform according to those norms.

Mi Thae:

To answer what kind of feminist I am, I am one that is now on a revolutionary path. You can say I am a so-called anarchist. I see patriarchy and capitalism as one, as they function together. If we want to get rid of them, we have to wipe out their products first, but we are also interested in rebuilding. Here, rather than trying to fit into deterministic frameworks where the ‘Y’ era follows ‘X’, we are instead walking towards any future free of oppression. We should accept that feminism will reach its end only when it is no longer needed—I object to deterministic ideologies.

Me Me Lwin:

To be a feminist is to be against sexism and all kinds of oppression. If one opposes sexual discrimination but is indifferent to other forms of oppression, one cannot be considered a feminist. One can take confidence in one’s philosophy, yet one needs to reflect on oneself if one’s ideologies and actions are challenged. A feminist must have thick skin when criticized.

Htet Htet:

I became a feminist when I started questioning injustice and inequality and found a feminist way to do so. I think the class gap is the root cause of injustice, since many forms of oppression are based on it. A feminism that accommodates the norms pushed by the nation and is satisfied with what the state grants is not satisfactory. I see feminism as a movement, but a movement with a leadership problem. Feminism should be a way for everyone to voice their opinion. You cannot say you are a feminist if you cannot let go (of your privileges) and fight against what is really contributing to oppression.

Thu Pone #1:

I think we must adopt the slogans of activists: “I will be liberated only when you are freed”.

As a feminist, do you support armed revolution?

Ko Htoo:

I believe that the armed revolution (in Myanmar) is an important part (of the whole revolution). However, I do not support it entirely. There will still be some issues that have to be resolved through negotiations later. Before such negotiations, we need to show that we have the masses' power against the oppressing group (i.e., the military). To prove that we have such power, armed resistance is required. However, it should not be the ultimate ending. The end of an armed revolution is seldom beautiful. Once the ground is leveled, there will be issues we have to discuss and negotiate with the oppressors. If this (two-part process) does not work, we will have to find an alternative.

Ko Kaung:

If we try to negotiate with the armed oppressors with only our bare hands, they will refuse, because they have arms. Therefore, we have no option but to pursue armed revolution. This is the path we must walk. We must reveal our power. We demonstrated peacefully nationwide at first. The revolution transformed into an armed one because the military is too stubborn. If we want freedom, we must revolt against the armed oppressors with arms of our own. There must be armed revolution when the conditions require it.

Thawdar:

I understand the logic that we can only achieve negotiations if we are armed. However, people tend to become corrupt when they gain power. So, we should think about the consequences at the same time. I saw a satirical post on social media about why the National Unity Government (NUG) has not armed its supporters yet: because the NUG doesn't know how to disarm them later. The other day, I saw the statement of a certain People's Defense Force (PDF) group saying they would amputate the hands of any thieves they caught. How can they think they have the right to do such things? We have to think about how to

defend ourselves if groups believe they can do whatever they want just because they are armed.

Ko Hein:

Currently, the answer to whether we support the armed revolution is obvious. Everyone knows that we do not need to be fascists to revolt against a fascist army. I think there's no need to go into this too much. However, I do not support an armed revolution open to influence by patriarchy and gender-based oppression. We have learned from experience that being a soldier is a man's profession. There are norms like, one needs to be manly and strong to be a soldier. This is a result of patriarchy. There is discrimination against LGBT people who are fighting in the jungle. If a person who is sexist and homophobic chose to join the armed revolution, they would most certainly discriminate against LGBT soldiers. I believe that joining the armed revolution without having enough awareness is dangerous. Moreover, I see that patriarchy is one of the biggest pillars sustaining the fascist army. Unless we can rip up (these root causes), we cannot confidently say that armed revolutionaries are fighting for an oppression-free new society.

Ko Htoo:

I am worried about women. There are NUG-led organizations, local PDFs and urban forces in the armed revolution. There are three or four different types of armed organizations. The NUG may have thought about how to educate their soldiers. They provide arms and rations only to the groups they can trust, since they cannot provide for everyone. The NUG is afraid that groups will change their behavior when they gain weapons. I'm worried about urban guerillas and local PDFs. As I have said before, there are cases of *dalans* (civilians who act as informers for the military) being attacked; their ears cut off and bodies thrown into rivers. If this behavior spreads throughout the armed revolutionary groups, they themselves might become new oppressors.

During the interim era before a federal nation is established, organizations with arms may revolt against the federal

government again, if they do not want to follow the new guidelines. I'm concerned about these organizations that cannot educate their members. I have a concern that some armed organizations might cause trouble after the revolution. I'm concerned that they might fall into the same trap as the military and think they are also superior to others.

Thu Pone #1:

I wonder if the NUG is thinking about the same questions. The NUG still has racist and sexist members even during this revolution in which many are challenging societal norms and beliefs. For example, the NUG continues using terms such as "Protection of Women and Children" in the women's affairs ministry. The NUG thinks women, like children, are to be protected and taken care of.

Thu Pone #3:

Rather than wondering if patriarchs exist in the PDF groups, we should recognize that an army by its very nature is patriarchal. Being strong, brave and tough is considered ideal in the army. Women have to adopt these norms. The army is also a hierarchical institution, and power flows from top to bottom. Patriarchy is structured like that too. Different genders are organized around power and the army institution itself is patriarchal.

Thant Kyaw Swar:

I would like to discuss how LGBT people may be discriminated against in the revolutionary training camps. People are thinking more about—shall we say—identity politics, in this revolution. They are thinking about oppression based on their ethnicity, class and gender. The most oppressed groups are speaking out about gender equality, eliminating ageism and racial discrimination. The 1988 revolution was guided by human rights and democratic norms. This time, we can see that the code of conduct for soldiers by the NUG Ministry of Defense mentions ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. Also included in the code of conduct is requirements not to physically, mentally or

sexually harass women and LGBT people. I believe these are improvements from the 1988 revolution. Whether or how the code of conduct is followed on the ground is another matter now that some revolutionaries are armed.

Zayar:

I will argue as a proponent of the armed revolution. When military soldiers came to our school campus, even before the military coup d'état, they verbally abused and sexually harassed our female students. If the whole mechanism of the government is to be controlled by the military, these cases will likely escalate. So rather than choosing to stay under the military regime, we must overthrow it. But even if we overthrow the army, the ultimate goal of feminism, to throw out the patriarchy, would remain unachieved.

Myanmar is a conservative country and Buddhism is basically the national religion. This situation always encourages the debate: man or woman—who is superior? What we need to do first is to liberate ourselves from the military junta, and when there is no harassment, no sexual objectification, and when we can establish an open society, we must undergo feminist waves just like Western countries did. To reach that, we need to first get rid of the military regime. Moreover, war tends to empower those already in a dominant position. Male dominance and rape are by-products of war. Thus, we need to lay down codes of conduct and regulations. It is not just the NUG, but also the armed revolutionaries that must have the right attitude and adopt robust codes of conduct.

Thu Pone #2:

I second the argument that we have no other option but to fight back with arms. So I support the armed revolution. One of our discussants mentioned the NUG's statement that they decided not to arm their supporters because they do not yet know how to disarm them. The NUG propagated that ridiculous and hypocritical idea only to hide their *inability* to arm the people. What I believe is that (the very existence of a) military itself is a form

of oppression. As long as there is a military and militarism, oppression will remain. Thus, there must be no military if we want to head towards an equal society and fight against things that contribute to (sustaining) injustice. This is what I believe. Militarism itself is built by “one blood, one voice, one command”, and everyone has to follow specific norms. If one deviates, one is considered an enemy. The military indoctrinates people by saying that, “We have the responsibility to defend people. Thus, everything we do is justified”. This is militarism. As long as there is still a military, there will be militarism. If we want to establish a society with no oppression, there must be no military. Some people say that the Myanmar army is only awful because it is not a professional army. This is pretty ridiculous. If the army is professional, they will still oppress—”professionally”.

Htet Htet:

I, as a feminist, personally support the armed revolution as it’s the most suitable strategy for the current situation and the best mass, collective movement, before a cultural revolution can be called forth. As long as there are two classes—protector and protected—the situation is dissatisfactory. The mechanisms of the state must be destroyed in order to align with the goals of feminism. A state system only uses the military to defend the rich and privileged and those in power. Armed revolution is only a short-term solution, however. When the time comes, handing all the arms back to another national army or otherwise, and creating new classes of ‘protectors and protected’ once again, is not right. If it is necessary for everyone to take up arms, then there should be no single armed organization (controlling everything). I second the arguments made by others to abolish the military entirely.

Ko Kaung:

I think the reason why the ‘protectors and protected’ dynamic exists is because some people oppress others with arms and power, and others always feel a duty to protect the oppressed. If we could remove the desire to control other people, we could also remove power as well. If there is no dominance in a society, there will also be no such classes as protectors and protected. None of the people need to be protected. If power and oppression are brought down, protectors are no longer needed.

Mi Thae:

I think it is no longer the time to debate whether we support armed revolution or not. The time to judge, as a feminist and from a moral perspective, the goodness of that decision has already passed. Rather, it is now the time to think about exactly *how we support* the existing armed revolution.

Let’s talk about weapons. They are just materials. They can do no harm if no one uses them. The question, “Why do we need to take up arms?” should be thought about first. What I am thinking about is the relation between men and arms and how we can cut off such relations. If we thoroughly understand that the only reason we have to use weapons is because it is essential for our revolution, disarmament is not that difficult. The problem is, which leaders are going to explain to the public the reason to take up arms? It is a problem of leadership. Leftist groups are still unable to control the masses. They are still struggling to spread leftist ideologies among the people. Who does most of the population support? It is the NUG, whether we like it or not. Yet the NUG cannot lay down the ideological foundation of why people should take up arms. Realizing that all power relations, top-down systems, and power contributes to oppression, I would like to abolish everything that brings about oppressions. I also do not like the military. In reality, however, now is the time to be practical, and we have no option. At this time, the only work to be done is to persuade people of the importance of taking up arms.

Thant Kyaw Swar:

I do not support war under normal circumstances. However, this time, we have to be rational. The root cause of all our problems is the military and we must get past them to achieve gender equality and remove racism. As long as the military exists, problems will remain. Some people advocated for negotiations, and yes, eventually, we must sit at the table. But the military must be held accountable for their war crimes and atrocities. I support the armed revolution but I am not a militarist.

Khin:

I would like to talk a bit about the armed resistance. Women participate in it also—in fact, their participation is vital. Let's take a look at other conflicts. In Gaza, women wearing hijabs throw stones and defend themselves against Israeli airstrikes. This is genuine women's empowerment. I believe this kind of resistance is essential. For me, feminism itself is a revolution. Thus, I support it.

Have you ever thought about what a new society created by feminists would be like? Which standards or criteria should be used to establish it?

Ko Htoo:

I learned about feminism through domestic violence, which I saw in my home. Later, I stood with my mom (who was abused), but I realized she had internalized patriarchal thoughts and beliefs. It was through so much talking with her that I learned how to spread feminist knowledge. What I expect from a society with a feminist vision is equity. To that end, the rule of law is necessary. We have so many things to do after this revolution.

Ma Ei:

The society I want to live in is one without a state. Oppression exists because there is a ruling class. I want a society with no ruling government.

Mi Thae:

I want a society in which I can live leisurely, where I can simply be with my kitty and drink whiskey in the evening. However, the current system does not allow this. The systems are unjust and I cannot live within them. I want to live a peaceful and quiet individual life, but since we are all members of a community, we must also contribute towards society. I want to see a society where both individuals and the community can collectively and simultaneously prosper.

Thu Pone #2:

People around me have said that, if I decide to go on being single forever, who will look after me when I am old, and who will look after me when I am ill? But I ask: Do we need to get married and produce children to be cared for? Can society not provide care to us? For me, a system that can provide this for everyone is enough.

Mi Thae:

People argue about theories and practice and try to define liberation and freedom. But right now, if we dare to face death and resist, we will find ourselves liberated. Theories are just misleading us from this basic concept.

Htet Htet:

Another thing is, who came up with these theories? Or who dominates theoretical arguments? They are mostly dominated by and proposed by Whites. We need to produce new theories useful to us, and ones we can really apply. Starting from these kinds of on-the-ground discussions, we can theorize. I really like what we are discussing here.

Thu Pone #1:

For us, we would like to work together with LGBT people. Beyond theories and talk about feminist issues, we also engage with feminist politics. LGBT concerns are feminist concerns. Labor issues are feminist concerns. The oppressed should work

together with the mindset, “I will be liberated only when you are freed”. To be able to do so, we must come together under the banner of intersectionality to help analyze the multiple layers of oppression.

Thu Pone #2:

This discussion was held in search of a type of feminism agreeable to Myanmar. What we want to reiterate is that we should not stop at equality, i.e., equality for individuals, but we must go all the way to intersectionality. We should measure equality based on the most oppressed people at the bottom. If they are liberated, equality is then achieved. If we use intersectionality tools, we can easily see who is at the bottom.

For example, women, of course, are oppressed, but among us, female workers and farmers are oppressed much more than others. They, however, at least have identification cards, and can come to the cities and work at factories. Women from internally displaced people camps, and especially Rohingya women, do not even have the right to move to the city, or permission to make a living, etc. They are subject to arrest and they have no fundamental rights as humans. For them and for their stories, we must continue talking about intersectionality.

Thank you all.