



## Those Who Suffer From the Sickness of Society

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### Abstract

This article shows how the daily struggles of trans women sex workers in Myanmar are consequences of a sick society. From family members who do not accept their relatives' gender and sexual identities, to employers who forbid their trans employees from displaying as women in the workplace, to clients and authorities who subject them to violence, including sexual violence, trans women are alienated from many mainstream occupations and relationships. Society does not see them as whole human beings. Through several rare interviews with trans women sex workers, this article provides insight into their struggles, survival tactics, camaraderie, and the dark side of a society that exploits sex workers.

### Introduction

What do you picture in your head when you hear the word “human”? Do you picture a man? Or a woman? Few would picture a LGBTQ+ person, particularly one that is transgender. Prejudices and preconceived notions of what makes a human being stop most people from seeing LGBTQ+ people as human. Society categorizes us into different gender types and individuals learn to react to and act according to the gender norms they are socialized into. Society often regards LGBTQ+ people as subhuman and deviant; unable to conform. Among and within this oppressed LGBTQ+ group, different forms of oppression exist. This article focuses on one subgroup of LGBTQ+, trans women sex workers,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article uses the term “trans woman” to refer to people who identify as women, and often act as women, but may not have female sex organs, or may be receiving hormone treatments. The Burmese version of this article also uses a transliteration of the term “trans woman”.

who are oppressed in multiple ways yet are constantly overlooked and neglected by wider society.

Not only are sex workers oppressed and neglected by wider society, but many people are happy to condemn them if they encounter them. People regard them as having bad karma, as taking an easy way out to learn a living, and as parasites that corrupt society. It is fair to say that trans women face more sexism than other LGBTQ+ people on a daily basis, and sex workers even more so. It is imperative that society better understands them, how they suffer from oppression and how they handle these challenges.

This article, based on interviews with five trans women sex workers in Yangon, brings their stories and lives to light and highlights a sickness in Myanmar society: we condemn and oppress these people, yet are also happy to exploit them and their labor. The article is led by research participants, who speak for themselves, in extended quotations from the interviews.

## Oppression of Trans Women's Sexuality and Identity

*I am on bad terms with my father. When I was in my village, I could not dress like a woman, so I would borrow clothes from others and get changed outside the village to go to festivals. When people saw me and told my dad, he would throw bricks at me and chase me with a sword. He saw my actions as disgraceful, diminishing the family's pride and prestige. My whole father's side of the family did not accept me. But mom was on my side. When dad beat me, mom would hold my hand and we would run away together. These are the reasons why I am in Yangon out of touch with my family. They would not like what I do.*

So said Ma So Pyay,<sup>2</sup> who moved from Rakhine State to Yangon and is currently making a living as a sex worker. Another trans

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<sup>2</sup> All the names in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identities of our research participants.

sex worker, Ma Khin Khin, who is from Hlaingtharya Township of Yangon, also discussed how clothing choices affected relations with her family:

*I have been dressing as a woman for years but I have to wear long pants when I go back home. I can dress up there a bit, but not in full female attire, such as a matching top and longyi, in case the family's reputation suffers. Here, I dress like a real woman. Back home, my family feels ashamed if I dress like a woman, but one day I would love to go back to my home village dressed up and feeling pretty.*

She continued:

*My sister is the opposite. They<sup>3</sup> are a trans man and they can't stand the sight of me. The feeling is mutual. I wanted to identify as a woman since a young age, so we were at odds with each other when I dressed as a female. Later they accepted me only when they could no longer convince me (to remain a man). My family has said nothing about my sister dressing as a male though. When the neighbors referred to me as a-chauk ma,<sup>4</sup> I feel humiliated. In fact, being a-chauk is not a choice; it is karma. My sister and I are hostile toward one another because when we occasionally fought, they would say things like*

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<sup>3</sup> In the Burmese language, the third person pronoun *thu* does not distinguish between gender (i.e., he/she). To be faithful to the gender-neutral nature of *thu*, we use the pronoun “they” when translating direct quotes in this article.

<sup>4</sup> In the popular Burmese lexicon, people often call trans women *a-chauk* (“dry one”) or *a-chauk ma* (with a feminine suffix). Gay men dressed as women or gay men having feminine qualities also often use *a-chauk* to refer to themselves and each other. They call gay men that dress as men *a-chauk* “in hiding” or a *pone ponesanlay neq a-chauk*, shortened to *a-pone*. Trans women that dress as women are known as *a-pwint*, or blossomed/open ones. Another vernacular word for gay men (but rarely used in LGBTQ+ communities) is *mein-malya*: “to be a woman”. For discussions of these categories by foreign scholars, see Chua (2018) and Gilbert (2013).

*“you wear female outfits” and “you get fucked in the ass despite being a man”, pardon my language. Sometimes people verbally assault me for working as a sex worker in addition to being a-chauk. But you work with what you have. Whatever they say, I just take it lying down. Their derogatory words and cursing would not change my remaining a-chauk.*

Ma So Pyay and Ma Khin Khin’s experiences put on display the oppression suffered by trans women at the hands of their own families. This oppression is internal as well as external. Trans women internalize gender-based violence and oppression through daily teachings, conversations with others, and religious norms. Ma Khin Khin accepts that her being a trans woman shames her family in the neighborhood, and with that acceptance she in turn oppresses herself. She believes that her identity really does destroy the family’s reputation. She internalizes and justifies gender-based violence and oppression. She believes that being a trans woman is due to her karma, further oppressing herself. Even among transgender people, different forms of oppression exist between trans women and trans men. Since the standards and expectations for women (and the worth of a woman) are lower than men in mainstream society, trans women face more oppression than trans men, since the former are considered to live up to women’s standards.

### **Difficulties in the Current Economic and Political Situation**

Since the 2021 military coup Myanmar’s economy has weakened. People at the bottom have suffered the most from the lack of recovery, and further deterioration, of the economy since the already challenging COVID-19 pandemic period. The current political crisis has worsened the lives of trans women sex workers like Ma Khin Khin and Ma So Pyay, who were already facing hardship. Ma So Pyay described her current working conditions:

*Normally I charge 3,000 Myanmar Kyat for sex. It is a fixed price but sometimes I get 5,000 or 8,000. My income is not stable and it is getting worse. The expenses for going out to work is 4,000, so if I only make 5,000 a day for four days in a row, I take a break for a few days. It is not worth it if I cannot recoup transportation costs. No one dares to go out at night during these (post-coup) days. I do so only because this is my job, but really there are no customers around. Drivers only come to us (to have sex) when their families are doing well. I want to earn as much as I can. Usually I refuse drunk clients as they are hard to handle and I might have a problem if I cannot tolerate their attitude ... And normally, if I think a client might underpay me, I don't take them. But these days, I can rarely refuse as I have to pay back a government loan, which costs me 9,000 Myanmar Kyat every single day. So, I have been working regularly. I took a break the other day as I won the lottery and so one day's expenses were covered.<sup>5</sup>*

Ma Khin Khin said:

*Currently I am working as a street-based sex worker in the industrial zones with my friend. Sometimes if they get a client, I come back alone. If we both get clients we come back together. We walk from here to the Bayintnaung bridge.<sup>6</sup> To be frank, most people do not trust us, as a-chauk, because some a-chauk steal from their customers. They are no longer interested in us when they recognize us as a-chauk. Some days we don't even get a*

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<sup>5</sup> The most common illegal lotteries are the *hnitlone* and *thonelone* lotteries, which means two digits and three digits. People bet on the last two and three digits of certain companies on the Thailand stock market. One can buy tickets locally or online through Facebook. For an example of a two digit business, see 2D-နှစ်လုံးထိ, 2023 in the reference list.

<sup>6</sup> One of the main bridges connecting satellite towns such as Bayintnaung with Yangon.

*single customer. Sometimes we come home with 10,000 Myanmar Kyat, but 2,000–3,000 is more frequent. We earn over 10,000 maybe once or twice a week. I wear makeup and go out pretty. For outfits, sometimes I wear simple Myanmar traditional dress and sometimes shorts and revealing tops ... We stay here in Hlaingtharya.<sup>7</sup> Around Bayintnaung I don't know when police will show up: here I at least know who is who. Sometimes, I walk up to the edge of Bayintnaung and back again.*

Many sex workers like Ma Khin Khin choose to walk the streets instead of working from a fixed premises. From our interviews, a trans woman sex worker earns between 2,000 and 10,000 Myanmar Kyat per day. Sometimes they earn nothing. Because of this, they are compelled to work every day. When faced with starvation, some choose to rob and steal.

Ma So Pyay discussed the dangers trans women sex workers encounter at night:

*I leave home around 6:30 p.m. and return at 10:00 p.m. I walk both ways and don't whine about it. Others come to work from here and there. Besides financial hardship, I worry about my personal safety working at night. A fellow a-chauk was stabbed while trying to help me during a robbery. A man had told me to put my hands behind my back and give him a blowjob. I am not a fool. I refused and slapped him on the face. When another a-chauk arrived to help me, the man stabbed them twice. Luckily, they survived. Back then, the junta was demolishing roadside shops so there was a lot of scrap wood on the roadside. I picked up a plank and hit the aggressor and batted his knife away. I challenged him to hit me first and he clocked me in the temple. Then I knocked him down with the plank by landing a hit on his nape. I fought like crazy, like a female hero from a Chinese*

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<sup>7</sup> Like Bayintnaung, Hlaingtharya Township is another satellite town with many garment factories.

*action movie. I am brave. I will not wrong others and I will not stand for insults. The man came back to find me for revenge later. After taking a break for two days, I went back to work again—this time carrying a pair of hair scissors.*

Ma Khin Khin also said:

*We have to look out for danger. I keep my money in my bra. Once, when a mugger commanded me to hand over money, I said I had none, and offered the contents of my bag. They let me go free (after finding nothing). Sometimes I have to fight back with my umbrella when attacked with knives. When one a-chauk I took under my wing was robbed at knifepoint while working, she ran back to me with torn clothes. Ever since, if a client seems shady, I stay away. I only go to places nearby and places near bus stops. I fear being assaulted if taken to distant places. I just assume that if somewhere is deserted, I could be robbed there.*

Ma Khin Khin and Mo So Pyay put their lives on the line every night they go to work. They also have to worry about being assaulted and/or detained by police and soldiers. Ma Khin Khin said:

*They interrogated me on the streets. They detained me in a police cell, but did not send me to jail. I always have to watch my back for police and soldiers. When I encounter them, they ask what I am doing. I lie and say I am coming back home late from a makeup and hair class. I've been interrogated many times; only one out of ten police nicely tell me to go home, the rest scoff and attack me. I was slapped so hard once that I couldn't even eat. Just merely walking under the streetlights is enough for them to arrest us to fill their arrest quota. Though I plead*



*with them, they hit hard and once knocked me out completely.*

Ma So Pyay and Ma Khin Khin's narratives about how their lives are threatened and how they must fend for themselves shows that in this post-coup period when militarism is on the rise, and when killings and arrests are arbitrary, some fare worse than others (especially if they choose to remain unarmed). If a trans woman sex worker is killed by a soldier, police or civilian, there may be some sympathizers, but few would go out of their way to seek justice for them. The value of a trans woman's life is different to others.

### **Difficult Choices for People Gendered as Female**

One of the commonly-cited reasons for trans women to engage in sex work is the lack of alternative or 'conventional' vocations for them, especially if they do not have much education. Low wages and high living costs for migrant workers in Yangon are another reason. The closeted gays (*a pone*) in satellite towns go to work at factories during the daytime. Those who have already come out and publicly dress as women (*a pwint*) may work at beauty parlors, but in general, *a pwint* are more likely to engage in sex work.

Trans women sex workers are regarded by customers as a cheap substitute for female sex workers. This reality highlights society's perception that trans women are less than women. Intersectionality of class and gender is most profound in the lives of trans women sex workers. Most of them come from poor families in the countryside and have been rejected by their families and home communities. They cannot find regular jobs and settle for exploitative, dangerous sex work in the satellite towns of Yangon.

In mainstream Burmese society, all LGBTQ+ are gendered as female and therefore are subject to gender-based violence and oppression. Society views them as people who can provide sexual entertainment and pleasure. Sex work is naturalized as being

a female profession.<sup>8</sup> In a set of heterosexual men and women, and homosexual men and trans women, who are all of the same social class, the heterosexual men are the least likely to do sex work but the trans women (and other women) are the most likely to turn to sex work, especially in today's context of military rule and economic deterioration.

Based on our interviews, most trans women feel they are forced into sex work. Since society normalizes women's role as pleasing and entertaining men, many see sex work as a viable profession for women (and trans women) in destitution, and few question why trans women engage in sex work. Trans women in turn accept their role as a provider of sex and entertainment to men. Society pushes trans women into sex work by keeping doors closed to them. Trans women themselves find the battle to prove their worth in other professions an impossible feat. Many trans women also do not have the money and skills needed to train for other jobs. Ma So Pyay added:

*It is generally assumed that sex work is more lucrative than other occupations as we can make the same wage from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. as other workers make in a whole day. In factories, one often gets only 4,800 Myanmar Kyat per day. You can say we are taking the easy way out, but I do not want to engage in sex work; there's just no alternative. I feel hurt, sick and suffocated doing this. I am too tired to move when I get home. Sometimes I can't even bathe properly and fall asleep right after washing my hands and legs. I can't even eat. Sometimes at work I am tired and have a migraine but must endure it as I have already taken the client's money. I want to change things if I can ... (but) I haven't even passed third grade. I can read Burmese and even the Abhidhamma<sup>9</sup> but only know A-B-C-D in English. If I were educated, I would not*

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<sup>8</sup> Though male sex workers exist, there are far less of them than sex workers identifying as women (trans or otherwise).

<sup>9</sup> One of the three main texts known as the 'baskets' or *pitaka* of Buddha's teachings, the other two being the disciplines and the *sutta*.

*work (like this). Sometimes people want to harm us—military authorities, thieves, and clients who won't pay ... I once won the lottery and invested the prize money to sell salads but it did not produce good returns.*

Ma So Pyay highlights that people use the term 'easy' to describe sex work, but her reality is far from that. Because society portrays sex work as an easy way out, she describes her situation this way with shame. Trans women sex workers' guilt is another oppression on themselves. They blame themselves rather than recognizing the shortcomings of a society that keeps doors closed and pushes them into sex work. None of the trans woman sex workers interviewed for this article felt like they chose to become sex workers and none professed to liking their job. They said that if they had the opportunity, they would do other work.

### **The Importance of a Feminine Physique for Trans Women Sex Workers**

Ma Phyu Phyu is a trans woman who prefers to work at night: "I look like a more masculine gay type, so I don't get many clients during the day". Trans women with "more feminine physical qualities" work via the internet or during the day. Trans women sex workers who have undergone sex reassignment surgery can ask for a minimum of 50,000 Myanmar Kyat per job, showing that the more feminine character and features one has, the higher their earning power. Women must take care of their appearance and body to make good money in sex work. Women and trans women have to constantly strive to be liked by (usually male) customers. The different expectations for women and men, particularly around sex, add more layers of oppression for trans women sex workers. For example, Ma Phyu Phyu said that she desires, but cannot afford, sex reassignment surgery and hormone injections. Her desire for the surgery suggests possessing female sex organs is important to some trans women. Ma Nge Nge, another trans woman, shared her experience regarding hormonal pills and medication:

*I took them once. There are 28 pills per cycle. The more I take depo<sup>10</sup> shots and hormone pills, the more tired I feel. I can't move quickly. Sleep deprivation affects me and I can't work hard. When the therapy was effective, my skin and body became beautiful. But the effects wore off after I took antiretroviral therapy (ART)<sup>11</sup> medications. I became nothing but skin and bones. I still wear shorts now but I know I am no longer as pretty as before. I want to be beautiful so I went to the clinic for hormonal therapies but the doctor wouldn't prescribe them while I am on ART medications. I can't even afford injections and pills when my expenses outstrip income. I can no longer maintain my beauty like before.*

For trans women, taking hormonal pills or injections is considered necessary, even at the expense of their health. Society does not accept trans women in their (unaltered) bodies and natural state of beauty. Trans women must also conform to the beauty standards and expectations of their clients. Their wellbeing, self-confidence, and sense of security suffer when they can no longer maintain their beauty.

### **How the Experience of Sex Work Differs Between Trans and Other Women**

The nature of the work and the wage earned differs between trans women and other women sex workers. Ma Phyu Phyu charges 5,000 Myanmar Kyat per client but often receives only 3,000. Many female sex workers completely refuse to have oral sex, but it is an expected service for trans women sex workers. Other women sex workers go to guesthouses or hotels to work,

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<sup>10</sup> Depo-Provera is a common contraception used by many women in Myanmar either in pill form or via injection.

<sup>11</sup> Used to treat human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

but trans women mostly do their business in a nearby bush or in cars. Ma Khin Khin explained that:

*When clients come in taxis, it is often safe for us to do our business on the roadside. Sometimes, when I am lucky, clients take me to guesthouses where I can work with peace of mind. On the streets, I have to look out for police, soldiers and robbers.*

When arrested, trans women can be tried under section 30(d) of the Rangoon Police Act 1945, which carries a maximum sentence of three months. Women can also be charged under the Law Amending the Suppression of Prostitution Act 1949, with a possible sentence of one and a half to three years. Though trans women are not regarded as women under the law in normal conditions, they are when the police need to fill their quotas. It is ironic that trans women are only determined to be “women” by the police when they do not want to be. They are doubly doomed—male clients harass them and treat them with contempt, as cheap substitutes for female sex workers, and police treat them as real women only when they need to hit case quotas for their superiors.

Ma Nge Nge explained: “Since we are not ‘real women’, we are mistreated by clients no matter how much we get paid. The clients feel like they can do whatever they want to ‘this *a-chauk*’ since they are paying us”. This is the world view of a trans woman who is always a woman-to-be, *a-chauk*, but is never a real woman, constantly struggling to appear as one and live within the expectations of society: “I have seen *a-chauk* being cursed and attacked with *pun*<sup>12</sup> spit from passing cars. They were just standing prettily there on the road at night and had red stains of betel nut spat all over their body”.

Trans women have to make the same efforts as women in providing care for their families. Society benefits from the labor

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<sup>12</sup> *Pun* is a mixture of betel leaves and nuts, tobacco leaves, and lime (calcium oxide). People chew these puns or betel quids for narcotic or stimulant effects, similar to chewing gum in some respects.

and effort of anyone gendered female and making sacrifices to look after their families. In this context, society regards trans women and women as the same. Ma Khin Khin explained:

*Even if my body aches, I work. I have rent to pay. I only shirk work when I can no longer get out of bed (from exhaustion). My husband brings in money just once a month, so I must earn regularly to cover his ongoing expenses like cigarettes and betel nut. For meals, if I cook this week, (my friend) Ma Pyone Yi will cook the next week, by sharing the things we get.*

### **The Oppression Against Sex Workers**

“Some people really look down on trans women. People in cars aim for us on the road, or help the police when they chase us saying we engage in a filthy profession”, said Ma Nge Nge. Trans women sex workers’ customers are mostly men and the police that detain them are also men. Patriarchal oppression is evident in the mistreatment of trans women sex workers.

One problem all sex workers must deal with is male clients’ unwillingness to use sex protection like condoms. “I use protection. However, if the clients don’t want to, I usually won’t. Some use nothing”, said Ma Pyone Yi. Ma Khin Khin also shared:

*I carry protection but clients don’t take it. Sometimes it fails. Sex workers try to persuade clients to use protection, in case of disease. But I have to go along with their preferences—as I am the one who needs the money.*

Aversion to protective sex and contraceptives exists not only in sex work but also in intimate relationships such as marriages. Those with the (penetrating) power are seen as powerful and enjoy privileges. Since women and men are seen in a binary of powerful and powerless, women or those gendered as women are seen as the receiver of the male power. Binaries such as subject and object or doer and receiver inevitably put those gendered

female, such as trans women, below men, making them unable to challenge men's unbridled desires and risky sex practices. Refusing to use protection is in fact exercising power.

Men often argue that condoms get in the way of pleasure and tend to downplay the risk of infection from sexually transmitted diseases, and of the woman getting pregnant, in order to maximize their pleasure. In addition to misusing and abusing their male privilege, male clients in sex work unfairly take advantage of their position of power as purchaser of the service. Since trans women are spared from the risk of accidentally getting pregnant, they are subject to more abuse from their male clients. One can understand three things from male clients not using protection: 1) how men exercise power afforded by their male gender; 2) oppression of the capitalist system on the working class by disaffecting them from their labor; and 3) the purchasing power of the clients and money as an oppressive tool against sex workers.

The suffering of trans women sex workers does not end here, they also must face violence and bullying. Ma So Pyay shared her experiences:

*(Some people) picked me up from the 20-mile marker on the main road in Shwepyithar Township. They were just barbaric. They didn't pay me; they took me to Pun Hlaing Golf Course, where it was dark, and punched me. Yet we have faced worse things. We try to solve any problems that arise but some clients are unreasonable. If we must, we just give up and comply. But we will never deal with them again. There are times when we cannot fight. When they act like criminals and force us (to give them oral sex), we cannot say no. One time, I had to do it for the police until the morning without any pay as I was weak and could not fight back. My colleagues and I were detained by plain clothes police. The others were let go but I was forced to do it for them. I did not get home until 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. and was without a single kyat.*

This was not the only time Ma So Pyay was ‘subject to injustice’, leaving her broken physically and mentally. She narrated her ordeal to us:

*I was once forced to provide (oral and anal sex) to over 30 people in one night for no pay. Afterwards I was barely alive. I was just a rookie at that time and went with a young male client as he was handsome. When we arrived at a timber yard in Htauk Kyant,<sup>13</sup> I was surrounded by cars and motorbikes, like a carousel. I was scared as they threatened to kill me if I didn’t do what they said. The force of 30 people was no joke. I was scarcely breathing at the end of it. I was exhausted and couldn’t even call a taxi without help.*

Ma So Pyay shared this experience with a laugh, to make things lighter for us. Society which would normally belittle sex workers might feel ‘fake sympathy’ for people like Ma So Pyay. We use the term ‘fake’ here because people often fail to see the multiple layers of oppression sex workers face, but can feel sympathetic when they encounter a snapshot of their troubles, such as rape. Sex work is symptomatic of collective oppression. No interventions—whether educational programs, plain old benevolence, or legalization of sex work will be effective at reducing this oppression as long as society remains plagued by sickness.

### **Is Sex Work Easy?**

As remarked by Ma So Pyay earlier, people often claim sex workers are “taking an easy way out”. We should examine if the work is really easy. Amidst the current political situation under military rule, sex workers risk everything—including their lives. Ma Pyone Yi recounted how she became a sex worker:

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<sup>13</sup> A neighboring town of Yangon, about 20 miles north of downtown Yangon.



*I am from Pyapon Town.<sup>14</sup> My mom is dead. I haven't seen my father since I was young, but I am in touch with my family. My sisters don't like me living like this. I have been here in Yangon for a long time. I don't have to support my family anymore though. I wanted to be a doctor when I was young and studied hard. But when I was in ninth grade and my younger brother began attending school, I had to leave (in order to sacrifice for them) to work in Yangon.<sup>15</sup> My head teacher tried to keep me at school but I was the only child able to work in the household. I lied about my age to get a job at a factory, saying I was 18, but I was only 13 when I started working. Now I'm 26. I worked for ten years at the Good Morning factory (bread and cakes) ... (and) moved to Industrial Zone 1. I accepted a million Myanmar Kyat as compensation and left when I couldn't meet their targets.<sup>16</sup> After a break I worked at the Premier coffee factory for two years. I also worked at a beauty parlor on weekends and I had a job cleaning fish. I only stopped that as it was no longer profitable. If I could have continued cleaning fish, I would not have chosen sex work. To work again at a factory, I would have to cut my hair short (working at a factory as a trans woman is no longer viable).*

Most trans women are alienated from family members. They often left their families as the latter did not accept their identities. The rate of trans women in formal employment seems very low, based on our interviews. Even if a trans woman has the desired educational qualifications for a formal job, she may not be hired. Uneducated trans women fare the worst and have few job options. As mentioned already, factories do not employ open trans women.

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<sup>14</sup> One of the major rice growing towns in the Ayeyarwady delta.

<sup>15</sup> It is commonly thought that there are high opportunity costs to putting multiple children all the way through school.

<sup>16</sup> Workers are timed to meet production targets.

Society dehumanizes trans women sex workers and they consciously accept this treatment as just punishment for their profession. Ma Phyu Phyu explained: “I have been working for seven-eight years and I do not feel like I have to work too hard for my money”. But Ma So Pyay said:

*It is a general assumption that sex work makes more money than other jobs as we can earn a whole daily wage of other people in about three hours. But I absolutely don't want to engage in this work. I do so because there is no alternative. It is also our fault for taking the easy way out. If I had not taken an interest in what others said to me—such as being able to earn 30-40,000 Myanmar Kyat per day, I might not have ended up doing this work.*

Trans women sex workers accept the societal perception that sex work is an easy way out, but beyond the facade, if one really looks, one can see that sex workers work exceptionally hard, and this takes a physical, mental, and emotional toll. Based on our interviews, sex workers seem to perceive their work not strictly as hard labor, despite being subject to violence and harassment as shown in this article, and they generally refrain from complaining about their stress and exhaustion, instead accepting this suffering as a form of punishment. They feel that they do not have the right to complain, or express their sadness, reflecting an internalization of the stigma around trans identities and sex work in mainstream society.

Beside the difficulties of sex work, longing for home but being unable to return there adds to trans women sex workers' struggles. Ma So Pyay said:

*I am so downhearted now because I have no one to rely on. I would become homeless and starve if I got sick and couldn't work. I want to go back to my family and live with them. I called them a few days ago and they told me to come back straight away. I won't go, but I said I would*

*be back at Tazaungmone<sup>17</sup> just to make my mom feel better, as she is getting old. The problem is I have no money to travel. It would not be right for me to go back like this. I would have to tell my family frankly about my situation (being HIV positive) and go back and forth from home to get medicine from Sittwe Town.*

Most sex workers in Yangon are domestic migrants and the capitalist urban economy benefits from exploiting them. Trans women sex workers face multiplied stigma—as trans women, as sex workers, and often as people living with HIV/AIDS. They have to abandon relationships and time with their families if infected with HIV/AIDS. They have to steel themselves to go out at night in the current dangerous current political situation. They have to survive amidst gender-based violence and systemic oppression in their daily life. The perception that sex work is ‘easy’ is also a form of oppression against sex workers.

### **Labor That Should Not Exist in Society**

No one is born a worker but becomes one as per the needs of capitalism. Sex workers are the products of this system too. They choose this work because of financial and social pressures. They often do not intend to take up sex work as a lifetime career. Sex workers do not do it for fun or as a hobby. The reason sex work exists is because, currently, society needs people to provide sexual services and entertainment for others with their bodies. Sex workers understand this demand. Ma Khin Khin explained:

*We have to fulfill (our clients’) desires in exchange for money but they are often reluctant to pay us afterwards. We are only doing this for money. I try to accommodate (clients’) wishes so they return again later.*

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<sup>17</sup> The eighth month in a Burmese calendar.

It is a form of oppression when a person is pushed to satisfy another's sexual desires. This oppression cannot be justified merely by the sex worker being remunerated. In Myanmar, requesting the provision of sex as a service is one of the cruelest acts one person can do to another.

Working day after day without knowing if your customers are police, robbers, violent bigots or rapists, is dehumanizing. Trans women sex workers also often have to take medicines like ART and for tuberculosis. Based on our interviews, they do not express their sadness and feelings freely, as they believe they deserve to be unhappy because of their 'choice' to engage in sex work. Ma Phyu Phyu said:

*When I found out I had HIV/AIDS, I was sad but not inconsolable, because people who are not sex workers contract it too. I got it from working ... I was so down once when I found out but I did not show it or cry in front of the nurses. Instead, I jokingly told them I would be getting fat. I try to control myself as crying won't make a difference ... I had medical checkups every three to six months. During one check-up, (the doctors) found I had also contracted tuberculosis. This was at the end of 2019, just as COVID-19 was starting. I went crazy taking two types of medicines and they made me impatient sometimes.*

Society has a demand for sex work but ignores sex workers' emotional and physical struggles, as if they deserve to suffer because they engage in sex work. Furthermore, while sex workers themselves accept social stigma as punishment, they work through the issues in their workplace in their own way. Ma Nge Nge said, "We had to live discreetly because it is not acceptable to be like this (a trans woman with HIV/AIDS) and doing sex work. We *a-chauk* are oppressed and always viewed negatively".

Amidst multiple forms of oppression, trans women sex workers live their lives in their own way. They have mastered the skills to face danger and protect themselves on the job. Most

of them encounter the problem of not getting paid after the job is done. They try to overcome this issue by demanding cash before the job. Experienced sex workers choose clients by checking their attitudes and behaviors through conversation. It is not wrong to say that this is a built skill: the ability to read people. Ma Nge Nge learned how to bravely counter bullies and teach them a lesson. Also, trans women engaging in sex work have formed camaraderie and look after each other. When Ma Khin Khin and Ma Pyone Yi worked on the street together, the senior Ma Khin Khin helped Ma Pyone Yi by teaching her the dos and don'ts. There is solidarity between the oppressed and sexually exploited.

## Conclusion

The everyday life of trans women sex workers is full of danger. They are subject to multiple layers of oppression. Rather than pitying or sympathizing with them, we should praise their strength in overcoming myriad obstacles in their own way. The dehumanizing stigma attached to sex work must be abolished if people are to really care about each other. Pity alone will not end the oppression of sex workers.

Among sex workers, trans women suffer the most, and these and all oppressed people who suffer at the bottom of society can only be liberated when society is no longer capitalist, militarist, and patriarchal. Feeling bad for the oppressed without opposing oppression is merely ignoring it and is no different from being an oppressor yourself.

The experiences of trans women sex workers highlight the true nature of a patriarchal society that stands on and benefits from gender-based oppression, forcing trans women into sex work, masquerading as 'choice'. Society benefits from trans women 'freely' choosing to engage in sex work, rather than compelling them with violence. Trans women in turn feel guilty for the 'choice' they made.

Is sex work, which does bring in money, but downgrades one in the eyes of society, really work?

Is any work really ‘work’ when it involves being physically and mentally weakened such that one can only participate in it only as something less than human?

Society owes trans women an answer.

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