

Opening Words from the Compiler

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We, the Dawei Collective, are proud to present the second and final issue in the Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship's Special Volume on Feminism. This issue features articles by feminist writers and practitioners about their understandings of feminism and the ways in which they attempt to change their lives, communities, and the entire country through feminism. Call it bold, but they each tap into feminism to find deeper meaning to their work inside Myanmar and, more importantly, to remain brave while resisting the patriarchal military.

Reading their articles and working closely with them makes me think about how each author uses feminism as a bedrock of radical ideas, a tool to overcome fear, anxiety, and frustration during their personal and public lives, a medium to express their thoughts and worldviews, a venue to connect with like-minded women and men, and as an experiential learning site for young women who left their education to join the revolution. They use feminism as a barometer for the progress of the revolution, and collectively, they push it to become more inclusive and less patriarchal. As they steadfastly resist the male-dominated military and refuse to compromise their core values, they challenge their male counterparts to do the same and take the revolution all the way, i.e., far beyond merely dismantling the Burmese military.

The articles in this special issue show that women's bodies are a site of resistance and also a lens through which to understand resistance. From their bodies, or in other words, their embodied experiences, this issue's contributors see the revolution as being defined too narrowly, and not sufficiently accommodating women. Women and their bodies are seen as a distraction, annoyance, and even a threat to the revolution. This issue comes from just some of the many revolutionary women that want to challenge these beliefs and practices rather than accept them quietly.

Lived experience demystifies academic theories, and today younger people are engaging with feminism in a deeper and broader way, bringing what were once regarded as elite ideas down into the field, and enriching feminist discourse with practical lessons, examples and case studies from the ground. Both issues in this special volume normalize the non-academic writing of lay women in Myanmar, also known as practitioners or knowledge holders. Both issues in this special volume have been careful not to impose academic jargon, objectivism (or rather, accepted subjectivism), and political correctness onto their contents.

My role as compiler is to make room for authors to present their own stories in their own ways, on their own terms, and to mitigate the fear of being misheard or misinterpreted. A compiler facilitates self-expression and the ability to communicate without intermediaries. For example, an author can choose to write 'Kachin' instead of 'Jinghpaw', reporting exactly what she experienced, away from the prying eyes of scholars and other observers, and accusations of misunderstanding Kachin history.

Authors in this issue describe and provide insights into their immediate surroundings and workplaces, bridging the personal with the political and attempting to find and provide meaning through their stories. Most articles capture the urgency of problems as observed or lived. However, as time and distance came to separate the original drafts from their publication, some writers came to feel distant from their own articles, and the contexts in which they originally wrote them, and considered modifying the tone of their contributions to be less emotional and passionate. I encouraged them to preserve the raw emotions they conveyed when first drafting the articles. This process shows how many academic articles end up lacking emotion and have little effect in connecting communities, as they are produced far from the site of events, in terms of time, space, and emotion.

The Contributions

War can serve as an escape for some husbands to break free from family problems, leaving their wives behind to shoulder responsibilities. In addition to their traditional roles of homemaking and child rearing, women must take on the emotional labor created by an absent father and navigate the precarity of life in conflict zones. The article “Visible and Invisible Barriers for Women in the Karenni War Zone” by Collins and Gynn highlights the suicides of some of these women who could not cope but were prevented from going to the front lines. However, after initially writing this article, the authors observed some change in the status of women soldiers. As armed resistance to the coup continued, male leaders in the Karenni region began recognizing the bravery and capability of women, allowing them to fight at the front lines.

The article also touches on the divide between the city and countryside, capturing the frustrations of women who fled from the city and are now trapped by strict demarcations of what women can and cannot do in Karenni conflict areas. They dare not openly challenge the practices in their new refuge—perhaps a learned survival tactic. Instead, they quietly prove their worth and expand their space in the new territory, taking on roles as teachers, medics, and even fighters.

Feminism, as learned in the field, is most transformative when local women are empowered to fight for their own causes. Women in Karenni areas are breaking free from internalized sexism, proving to themselves and others that they can belong to and fight in any part of the resistance, not just in the kitchens and offices. This highlights the importance of empowering oneself and fighting for one’s rights. External interventions have limits and good intentions can be misinterpreted; worse, they could jeopardize the fragile unity between Bama and minority groups and the broader goals of the revolution.

In the second article, “Who are Kachin Women? Being (and Being Portrayed as) a Kachin Woman”, by Wala Kaw, who herself is Kachin, the author questions how Kachin women are

represented and framed within a Bama-dominated society that stereotypes Kachin people as beautiful Christian singers and dancers. At the same time, she notes how Kachin society burdens its women with gendered expectations—to protect their Kachin identities, to be able to cook traditional food, weave, and preserve tradition. She notes that while Kachin women photographed with Aung San during his trip to Kachin State before his assassination captured the imagination of the nation at that time, these women were in fact relegated to a supporting role, being objectified as mere adornments for an important visiting man—and this objectification continues today.

The author challenges readers to see Kachin women beyond superficial stereotypes and frames and to understand the everyday discrimination and oppression that Kachin women face in Kachin State and elsewhere. This discrimination includes being denied apartment rentals in Yangon, Kachin school children being teased by their Bama teachers for their accents, and authorities scrutinizing Kachin people when checking their identification cards. From people mispronouncing Kachin names to associating Kachin people with ‘black’ conflict areas, the author describes how Kachin women feel unwelcome, like they can never feel they truly belong even in a cosmopolitan city like Yangon. The author also highlights how some Kachin women are striving to speak out for themselves and others and how the current anti-coup resistance movement could help society to see ‘rebel’ and ‘resister’ identity markers as part of Kachin women identities, and to understand the real lives of Kachin women beyond narrow stereotypes.

In “How Mainstream Gender Activism Failed Marginalized Women From 2011-2021”, Shunn Lei Swe Yee argues that by investing in the democracy-building process in Myanmar, international donors inadvertently deprioritized the issues of marginalized women, particularly those from ethnic states and zones such as Naga, Karen, and Kachin. Minority women’s activism holding the Burmese military accountable for atrocities committed against them did not attract as much attention as

mainstream activism like the #metoo movement and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence.

The author questions the international community's understanding of women's empowerment, arguing it is often limited to women being able to participate in projects that are led by men, including peace-building, policy, and passing laws in the legislature. A narrow focus on popular women's activism silences and excludes marginalized women, and Shunn Lei Swe Yee criticizes mainstream gender activism for prioritizing international agendas over local ones. Her article rightly points out that focusing on piecemeal change can backfire—as we have seen with the 2021 military coup. The ongoing resistance is testament that gender inequality is still damagingly entrenched in Myanmar society, and only social and political upheaval can bring about meaningful change. This contribution also highlights how marginal and radical voices came to center stage in resisting the coup, as women worker unions led mass protests and the women-only armed battalion the Myaung Warrior Group emerged. For Shunn Lei Swe Yee, revolution is the only hope for radical and marginalized groups, including LGBTQ, to liberate themselves from the military and other oppressions.

“Struggles of a Woman Armed Revolutionary” by Hnin Wai highlights the gap between elite understandings of the status of Burmese women and the reality these women face on the ground. While serving as a soldier in a People's Defense Force (PDF), the author writes about growing up in Yangon, in a relatively secure space, with educational opportunities, and the care and respect of her family and friends. Once she arrived at a conflict zone outside the city in the aftermath of the coup, she was treated differently by the men there, who saw her as a woman in need of their support and protection. She was not allowed to perform the same duties as men and was instead encouraged to undertake trivial tasks as assistants to men; her identity as a woman was prioritized over her identity as a revolutionary. She and other women felt the need to overcome this discrimination and belittlement by working harder than the men around them.

This demand to be treated equally was even considered anti-revolutionary by the men around Hnin Wai.

The author's experience as a woman soldier highlights the narrow goals of the current revolution, whereby many participants do not recognize women's contributions, nor foster a culture friendly to women. High-ranking women face more challenges as their subordinates struggle to take orders from a woman. In her PDF, the notion of who deserves to take a leadership role is based simply on a person's gender. From Hnin Wai's article, we can conclude that even revolutionary military institutions reinforce gender norms and even misogyny by mobilizing people under rigid and narrow goals of defeating a common enemy, without expanding these goals to promote women and other oppressed groups.

In "The Concept of Coming Out and Social Inequality in Myanmar" by Ni Aye, the author reflects on coming out as LGBTQ and questions if the Western concept of LGBTQ fits the Burmese context. There is a tacit understanding between some parents and LGBTQ youth in Burma about the latter's sexuality, and such unspoken acceptance allows children to be able to lead the lives they want without having to declare a sexual identity, i.e., 'coming out'. The author writes that her life was a long journey of negotiations between communities and individuals that accepted her as she was and those that wanted her to conform to their own preferred sex and gender norms. She outlines discriminatory and oppressive practices by the state and employers such as demanding LGBTQ individuals dress according to the gendered honorifics printed on their identification cards: Daw, U, Ko, Ma etc. She notes how LGBTQs must discipline their bodies to avoid discrimination, for example, by not using public women's bathrooms in 'men's clothing', sometimes leading to bladder problems. Ni Aye challenges readers to not focus too narrowly on whether or how one 'comes out' or not, but instead to work toward a society that does not require such 'coming out', where people of all genders and sexualities can live safely and in peace.

In “Different Forms of Workers’ Alienation: A Feminist Perspective” author Pyo Let Han uses her insights from working alongside women in Yangon’s satellite towns to explain how capitalism disconnects women workers’ futures from their present, separates them from their families, and alienates them from rural livelihoods. They survive merely to fuel the capitalist economy. Using locally rooted phrases such as *mathay-tamin mathay-hin*¹ to explain the subsistence of women workers, Pyo Let Han draws readers’ attention to understanding how the ‘development’ of a country and foreign investment can actually demean women’s dignity by reducing them to female bodies with obedient minds, to an army of surplus labor, forcing them to sacrifice their dreams and valuable time for a pittance.

The author highlights the invisible, unpaid contribution of women workers’ family members such as mothers and sisters to the act of production under capitalism. Women workers’ lives were not improving even before the 2021 coup, but they have certainly worsened since, becoming even more precarious, as women cannot report abuse and exploitation to anyone. The author argues that because women workers cannot afford to consume what they produce, either as farmers or factory workers, they are alienated from their work. This alienation and exploitation is central to the article, and the capitalist economy that makes it possible is sustained by patriarchy, which keeps women in a lowly place and expects them to work robotically, in miserable conditions, for low wages.

In “The Frontier of Feminism: Emotional Labor” by Su Su Maung, the author aptly highlights something missing from feminism in Burma. She argues that “feminism in Myanmar is not sufficiently directed toward the nurturing, caring for, and healing of people’s suffering” and claims that women in particular perform large amounts of unpaid emotional labor without recognition. Her article paves the way for more studies of hidden labor and is even more fruitful when read alongside Pyo Let Han’s contribution in this issue, together helping us understand

¹ မသေထမင်း မသေတင်း။ “Food needed to not die.”

the different kinds of labor undertaken by women and their families. Su Su Maung also introduces concepts and terms used in emotional economics such as emotional labor, emotional currency, emotional capital, emotional bankruptcy, and emotional reserves. She demands the overturn of the patriarchy as it separates and reinforces a polarity of masculine paid labor and feminine unpaid labor.

A Note on the Poems, or About the Traumas of the Modern Era

Thitsar Te

In this second issue in the Special Volume on Feminism, I undertook the responsibility of curating poems once again. The task was not easy. I tried to link articles in the issue with corresponding poems. This meant I had to understand all the articles deeply and search for suitable poets. The result: five diligently selected poems for your perusal.

It is often said that literature reflects the essence of its time. Within these five poems, one can detect the traumas inflicted in our modern era. Zaw Yin's "Evening" paints a picture of a society left suspended between progress and stagnation: "The bridge crossed the river / The developed and modernized new state / Was always left behind in the middle of the river". In Min Lwin's 'Ferris Wheel', the uncertainty pervading many lives is vividly portrayed: "It was not yet filled with passengers / Just resting in the air temporarily / The Ferris wheel riders / Had to wait". The poem "Flowers Continue to Flourish In Defiance of Noxious Fumes" by Hlaine illustrates the resilience of life: "When one wilts into fertilizer / Yet another grows into a flower". In Htin Lynn's "Tomboy", one's quest for freedom under the stars speaks volumes about personal liberation. Finally, Ma Kyay's "Remembrance" shows the deep wish of someone from Yangon for a basic joy: "When I get to eat rice cold / with pungent *ngapi-ye* / for dinner / to heart's content".

The traumas depicted by each poet echo the broader social fabric of Myanmar. As a reader of poetry, one can be drawn into these reverberations and become deeply connected to them. As mentioned earlier, the interplay between poems and articles enriches the reading experience. However, this does not diminish the enjoyment of either form in separation. Whether you delve into the poetry, articles, or both, remember that each is a unique form of art, offering distinct pleasures. Enjoy them as you see fit.