

How Mainstream Gender Activism Failed Marginalized Women From 2011-2021

Shunn Lei Swe Yee

Abstract

This article assesses mainstream gender activism in Myanmar between 2011 and 2021, particularly its impact on progressing gender equality and on feminism. I draw on my personal experiences in gender activism and present four case studies of discussions I shared with different groups of women across the country from 2014-2020: Naga, Chin, Karen and urban Bama women. Major activities such as the White Ribbon and #metoo campaigns, and the Vagina Monologues, were hoped to indicate increased awareness of and participation in women's issues by the public. However, such examples celebrated by mainstream gender activists and organizations do not represent well the struggles of the women from my four case studies. Mainstream activism fails to address the patriarchy that underlies and contributes to sustained injustice in Myanmar and is monolithic in targeting mostly Burmese-speaking groups. Such programs sustain hierarchical structures through their funding and not only fail to promote women's rights, especially those of minority and marginalized groups, but also undermine the different forms of struggle these marginalized groups experience. The mainstream gender activism pushed throughout 2011-2021 hindered the rise of an emancipatory feminism capable of liberating all women in Myanmar, however, resistance to the 2021 military coup offers opportunities for a genuine women-led feminist revolution aimed at dismantling all systems of oppression, including the patriarchy, and incorporating marginalized women.

Introduction

This article describes how the activities of urban women and gender organizations failed to meet the needs of marginalized

women in rural areas of Myanmar from 2011-2021. It is based on my own activist activities, including field trips to Karen and Chin states, as well as to Nagaland,¹ taken during the period of 2014-2020. Through my experience as a feminist activist based in urban Yangon, a cosmopolitan city with many activities, bustling non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and parliamentary politics, I came to realize that something was missing from the gender activism of most conventional organizations—be they local or international.

The opening up of the country from 2010, and Aung San Suu Kyi leading the National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in parliamentary politics from 2012, led to space for civil society organizations (CSOs) to do the same, to lobby and consult with members of parliament rather than only rely on protests and social movements to achieve their goals. When performing a Google search inside Myanmar for the term “gender” in 2022, the first three results were gender organizations: the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP),² the Women’s Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON),³ and the Gender Equality Network (GEN).⁴ Surprisingly, the Women’s League of Burma (WLB), an exile group founded in 1999, did not appear on the first page of results, despite it being an umbrella organization with 13 member organizations with longstanding activities on gender, democracy, human rights and social justice.⁵

¹ Nagaland encompasses territory in the northwest of Myanmar and northeast of India. In Myanmar, parts of Nagaland are administrated as the Naga Self-Administration Zone by state authorities.

² AGIPP is a Myanmar civil society alliance formed by national organizations and networks working on women’s rights and gender inclusion, and some working on peace and security.

³ WON is a network of 30 organizations set up to support women’s community groups across Burma working to contribute to the wellbeing of women and men across the country.

⁴ GEN is a diverse and inclusive network of more than 100 CSOs, national and international NGOs, and technical resource persons working to bring about gender equality and the fulfillment of women’s rights in Myanmar.

⁵ The WLB aims to increase the participation of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights, to promote women’s participation in the

Apart from the aforementioned, other gender organizations such as the NGO Gender Group,⁶ the Gender and Development Institute,⁷ and Thingaha Gender Myanmar,⁸ also engaged in gender activism throughout the decade in question. They implemented gender empowerment programs such as women's leadership trainings, programs on men's engagement in gender equality, gender mainstreaming in government institutions, and workshops on gender-based violence. Activities also involved women's rights training, introductions to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other United Nations (UN) mechanisms, women's empowerment and women's leadership trainings. They also ran public campaigns, which varied from educating the public about women's rights and violence against women, to breaking down gender stereotypes. Other CSOs such as Equality Myanmar, Capacity Building Initiative, Paung Ku, and Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home) also incorporated gender as a cross-cutting issue in their own programs on issues such as natural resource governance, land reforms, federalism, democratization and the peace process. While these organizations widely implemented gender projects across Myanmar during the study period, a substantial proportion of the population, especially marginalized women, did not have the chance to benefit from them.

national peace and reconciliation process, and to enhance the role of the women of Burma at national and international levels. After the NLD won the 2015 national election and formed government in 2016, several exile activists and organizations focusing on democracy and human rights, such as the WLB, returned to Myanmar and expanded their work inside the country.

⁶ NGO Gender Group is a civil society group focusing on gender equality and policy advocacy and is a member of GEN.

⁷ The Gender and Development Institute is a non-governmental CSO established in 2010 with a vision that "women and men from all ethnicities in Myanmar are free from discrimination and violence, and equally enjoy the fruits of justice, peace and sustainable development" (Gender and Development Institute, 2022).

⁸ Thingaha Gender Myanmar is a CSO founded which was founded in 2013 as a gender focused organization after operating as a smaller group since 2003.

Women and Gender Organizations' Activities

Popular activities of gender organizations from 2011-2021 included the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence⁹ and its White Ribbon campaigns, the Whistle for Help campaign,¹⁰ the Vagina Monologues,¹¹ the International Women's Day (IWD) celebrations,¹² the #respecther campaign,¹³ the #womentooohavehpon campaign,¹⁴ and many more. Organizations also made recommendations for promoting gender equality in Myanmar in many working papers and reports, which were often technocratic in nature, and distanced from communities and their immediate needs. These efforts had titles like *International Standards Guiding Gender Inclusion in Myanmar's Peace Process*,¹⁵ *Women's Budget Priorities in Myanmar*,¹⁶ and *Strategies to Promote Gender Equality*. These came to be widely cited and referenced by NGOs working on gender issues.¹⁷ This was part of the wider policy advocacy work of organizations with members of parliament, political parties and policy makers in the civilian

⁹ This is an annual international campaign from 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, to 10 December, Human Rights Day, started by activists at the inaugural Women's Global Leadership Institute in 1991 (UN Women, 2022).

¹⁰ A campaign to stop sexual harassment on the street by the Akhaya organization (Linton, 2016).

¹¹ This famous play by Eve Ensler was first performed by international and Burmese players in Yangon in March 2018, with subsequent repeat performances (Hogan, 2018).

¹² CSOs and Myanmar civilian government organs like the Department of Social Welfare recognized and celebrated IWD each year with various activities and events.

¹³ This campaign was started in February 2018 by the Myanmar Art Social Project with help from various individuals and the United Nations Population Fund.

¹⁴ This social media campaign by Aye Thiri Kyaw, Nandar, Dr. Phyo Thiha, Pyone Thet Thet Kyaw and Dr. Thet Su Htwe aimed to promote respect and equality ('အမျိုးသမီးများသည် ဘုန်းရှိသည်', ၂၀၁၉).

¹⁵ Alliance for Gender Inclusion, 2017.

¹⁶ Pramer et al., 2018.

¹⁷ Salween Institute, 2018.

government. This work aimed to produce policy guidelines to ensure women's participation in politics and public life.¹⁸ This advocacy work not only aimed for legal reform by targeting policy makers but also tried to raise awareness of gender issues in the general public. Organizations' public-facing IWD campaigns followed yearly themes broadcast by UN Women such as #BeBoldforChange, #PledgeforParity, and #EachforEqual, and usually focused on violence against women and sexual harassment. This policy and public advocacy work, i.e., mainstream gender activism, worked toward legal reforms within the existing system, which seems easier than outright challenging the system in an attempt to dismantle it through a mass feminist movement.

Changing trends in Myanmar gender activism were partly driven by how organizations were funded. Donors included the Canadian government,¹⁹ the multi-donor Joint Peace Fund,²⁰ the United States (US), United Kingdom, and French embassies, and the European Union.²¹ With the launch of the NSPAW, it looked like many donors would invest in women's rights alongside the peace process. Between 2010 and 2020, women's rights and gender equality issues were part of the development agendas of donors and UN agencies. These broad issues received more attention than the priorities of marginalized groups, for example, holding the Myanmar military accountable for its ongoing crimes against women. Communities in Karen, Kachin, and Shan states, and Nagaland, expressed their frustration to me

¹⁸ One outcome of this was the creation of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW), supported by GEN, a 10-year framework to advance the status of women in the areas of livelihood, education, health, violence against women, economics, decision-making, implementation mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, girls, and emergencies (Burma Launches National Plan, 2013).

¹⁹ Canada's Ambassador to Myanmar, Karen MacArthur announced CA \$5 million to support Myanmar women's rights organizations on 9 March 2019.

²⁰ The Joint Peace Fund committed millions of dollars to strengthen women's participation in the peace process. The fund stopped publishing its grants list after the 1 February 2021 military coup.

²¹ The EU in particular funded the peace process and tried to strengthen Myanmar's parliamentary and electoral systems, including supporting women's participation in these areas.

personally about the impact of some peace process and women-in-politics themed projects. These campaigns and advocacy can be seen as creating a polarized hierarchy: urban, educated people, which usually means high-income Bama Buddhists, on top of the structure, with low-income, non-Bama, non-Buddhist communities from peripheral geographic areas at the bottom.

Some urban campaigns did not go far enough. For example, in the #respecther campaign introduced earlier, urban women expressed their concerns about sexual harassment on city streets to raise awareness of domestic violence in the home. Violence against women is an important issue, and many women can relate to it, but the campaign itself only targeted surface issues and failed to demand men change their behaviors and attitudes.

Other organization activities only reinforced patriarchal thinking, by for example stating that ‘good men’ do not harass women, thereby normalizing the harassment of women by men,²² or by reaffirming men’s *hpon*, a Buddhist justification for men’s superiority over women, through the #womentooohavehpoon campaign, rather than advocating to abolish it altogether. Many campaigns also highlighted freedom of choice and individualism, such as the Vagina Monologues, which ignored the privileges and socioeconomic advantages the performers and activists behind the production had over more marginalized women. Slogans, posters and advocacy work promoting individualism and lifestyle feminism such as #respecther, #mybodymyrule, #womencandoit, #shecandoit, and such messages deemphasized the need to form political solidarity among people oppressed by gender and disrupt the current system made unjust by patriarchal values.

These campaigns and advocacy measures did not challenge patriarchy. Instead, they reinforced concepts of what a ‘good man’ and a ‘good woman’ should be. Organizations like Thingaha Gender Myanmar constantly promoted the idea of positive masculinity through their workshops and campaigns.²³

²² Akhaya Women Myanmar, 2018.

²³ Thingaha Gender Myanmar, 2019.

Campaigns like these encouraged men to engage with gender equality and respect women's rights through a form of 'benevolent sexism', a more subtle form of sexism which appears to be positive, but still places men at the center, protecting and guaranteeing women's rights.²⁴ Other organizations focused on the idea that "women can do it", suggesting that if women only worked harder, they could reach leadership positions in politics, economics, religion and other areas. But this ignored that only some women have the means to reach leadership positions and fails to address structural inequality. These campaigns discounted the different experiences of people from different social classes, such as factory workers and those in conflict zones, or with marginalized genders or non-Bama identities. The lack of intersectional analysis by these campaigns, and lack of understanding of how class, ethnicity, religion, ability, geographical location and access to information all play a part in (re)producing multiple layers of oppression, prevented them from identifying and fixing the root causes of structural inequality.

A Lens for Critique

As noted, most mainstream gender campaigns and activities up to 2021 lacked reflexivity, with their leaders failing to consider their positionality and privileges. Their lack of intersectionality meant they failed to understand the different struggles of women, from factories in urban satellite towns to non-Bama upland communities. Factory workers struggle against low wages, exploitative working conditions, such as poor facilities with no room ventilation, limited lunch and bathroom breaks, and no access to clean drinking water. These struggles are directly linked to global capitalism and its effects on workers. Non-Bama upland communities on the other hand live under the extreme threat of extractive industries such as mining and logging, and what is arguably the world's longest running civil war. Further,

²⁴ Mastari et al., 2019.

they are pressured to assimilate to a dominant culture and language, often Bama.

Gender campaigners and advocates prioritized the needs of the few, whose privileges and leadership positions perpetuate oppressive capitalism, over the needs of the majority, who are oppressed by capitalism. It is important to acknowledge the marginalized voices of the population when striving for an inclusive and just society in Myanmar. Learning from the lived experiences of marginalized women could help create an alternative platform to mobilize the feminist movement in Myanmar and achieve justice by dismantling patriarchy. Gender activism should embrace intersectional analytical tools to understand multiple layers of oppressions for different social classes and groups.

We can characterize mainstream gender activism in Myanmar as being an example of liberal feminism, as described in *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*:

Dedicated to enabling a smattering of privileged women to climb the corporate ladder and the ranks of the military, (liberal feminism) propounds a market-centered view of equality that dovetails perfectly with the prevailing corporate enthusiasm for ‘diversity.’ Although it condemns ‘discrimination’ and advocates ‘freedom of choice’, liberal feminism steadfastly refuses to address the socio-economic constraints that make freedom and empowerment impossible for the large majority of women. Rather than seeking to abolish social hierarchy, it aims to ‘diversify’ it, ‘empowering’ ‘talented’ women to rise to the top. By definition, the principal beneficiaries are those who already possess considerable social, cultural, and economic advantages. Everyone else remains stuck in the basement.²⁵

²⁵ Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 21.

Arruzza et al. make it clear that an intersectional approach that understands feminism as both anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian, rather than limiting feminism merely to gender equality and women's rights, is crucial.

It is urgent that critical movements in Myanmar talk about larger systemic violence rather than specific isolated issues. The question of justice for all the women of Myanmar should be the priority, rather than questions that guarantee only certain groups access to resources and opportunities. Mainstream gender activism in Myanmar has created a new image of privileged women climbing to leadership positions to work effectively for gender equality, what one campaigner summed up as “using power to fight power”.²⁶ Emphasizing the struggles of privileged groups aiming for leadership positions hinders underrepresented groups of women from reaching their own potential. It also continues to obfuscate the varied experiences and different forms of oppressions experienced by different women and groups. The women from Karen, Kachin and Shan states, and Nagaland, that I met during my own activism helped me realize that gender equality is not an achievable moment in time; rather it is a long-term commitment to constantly fight for social justice and the dismantling of patriarchy by building feminist allies and political solidarity across groups. This is the only possible way to narrow the gap between underrepresented voices in contemporary gender activism.

Case Study I

In January 2018, I took my very first trip to Nagaland in north-west Myanmar. The military-appointed vice president, Myint Swe, was attending the Naga new year festival. On the roads on the way there, women carried heavy loads of banana trunks and firewood in wicker baskets on their backs while walking back

²⁶ Female leader, personal communication, November 2018.

from their *jhum* fields,²⁷ six or seven miles from their homes along mountainous roads. This image struck me: it was very different from the images I was used to seeing at IWD events in Nay Pyi Taw and women's forums at big, fancy Yangon hotels.

Women played a crucial role in this Naga new year national-level festival event, yet none were on stage or in the many official photo opportunities. Instead, men in uniforms were given all the attention. Local women cooked for over 3,000 guests at the festival, making sure everyone was fed well. When Vice President Myint Swe opened the ceremony by cutting the ribbon, some young women in full makeup stood adjacent to the important men, with nothing to do, mirroring the images constantly displayed in the media and public spaces projecting and reinforcing men as people of significance and women as their subordinates. Not only do such images portray Myanmar as a society dominated by men, but they also reaffirm socially constructed gender roles where men are always in the center and women on the fringe. Even though these gender norms are also widely practiced among Naga people, women in Nagaland face double exclusion, similar to Rohingya and Muslim women who suffer more than just state violence and the othering of their existence;²⁸ they are excluded in their own society as well as by mainstream gender activism. I made another four trips to Nagaland which helped me understand the entrenched gender-based hierarchy there and how Naga women are sidelined in every aspect of society.

One trip in February 2018 to the remote Naga village of Kyu Yan Nauk Nyu, Nanyun Township, stood out in particular. There was no proper road, only a rough one made by the locals with the tools available, and the drop from the side of the road was immense. The road was at least 3,000 feet above sea level, surrounded by mountains. One morning when walking around the village, I saw many women waking early and cooking or pounding rice and corn at their homes before departing to the *jhum*

²⁷ *Jhum* is a Naga word for slash and burn cultivation, carried out on the slopes of hills.

²⁸ Frydenlund & Shunn Lei, 2021.

fields. At the house I was staying in, young women of around 20 years of age woke at 5 a.m., walked for ten minutes to fetch water from the well, then prepared breakfast and supervised the kitchen and domestic affairs.

I was there with a friend who was running a training program on civic education and human rights. Approximately 50 people from four or five villages attended the training, out of which only a handful were women. I was disappointed that even these very few female attendees could not stay in the room all the time. Later I discovered that they were in and out of the kitchen preparing lunch and refreshments for everyone in the training workshop.

When I got a chance to talk to the group about women's rights, the women's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. Later in the evening, I was told that they wanted to chat about their lived experiences and how their rights were violated, but since they did not speak Burmese, they could not come to see me. They did not know about CEDAW and had never heard of the activities of mainstream gender activists and organizations in Myanmar. They did not know about the consultation meetings or policy papers that different gender and women's rights organizations published. But they agreed it did not feel right that most of their time was spent in the kitchen and the *jhum* field while the men lay down at home, waiting for their fermented rice beer to be served to them. These Naga women's lived experiences did not feature in the publications and acronyms I was used to. No one bothered to listen to their voices.

In May 2019, I had a chance to organize a discussion with Naga women in Lay Shi Township.²⁹ It was my fourth time in Nagaland. It took me three days to travel to Lay Yum village from Yangon. Along the way I saw women working relentlessly in harsh conditions. It was not their fault that they had no opportunity to get into leadership positions and advocate for gender equality or women's rights. They simply did not have the

²⁹ A three-day discussion organized by the Rainfall Gender Organization in May 2019 in collaboration with the Naga Women Association in Lay Yum village, Lay Shi township.

resources that other privileged women in the city used to climb the career ladder and become champions of women's rights and gender equality. The women in important positions organizing gender activism in the cities perhaps do not know that not everyone starts from the same position.

Naga and other non-Bama women experience double exclusion: exclusion from their own communities and exclusion from mainstream gender activism. They face structural violence in their customary and common laws. A Naga woman leader from the Naga Women Association told me that women there experience sexual assault and inheritance disputes and the all-male tribal council of elders insist on addressing these issues through their customary justice system. She said no one bothered to question whether women receive the justice they deserve. In the Naga customary justice system, disputes over territory or land can be resolved with the tribal council, but not domestic violence cases. In the case of sexual assaults, the tribal council usually decides to compensate the victim with a *mithun*,³⁰ the most valued domestic animal in Nagaland. If the *mithun* is not accepted, the council would try to close the case anyway as they believed it was a disgrace for the village.

Around 60 women came and joined the May 2019 discussions. There were many mothers who brought their children. A mother of five told me she had to prepare food for the pigs and chickens three days before our event, and she had to do all the household chores for the rest of the family to make up for her absence while she was at the event. Her 11-year-old daughter came along with her to look after her infant sibling while her mother joined the discussion with us. One mother of three sons shared with the group that her husband committed an affair and drove her out of the house. She had no job, no income and her husband did not support their sons. Yet she expressed that she did not want a divorce. Her story highlighted how many women are financially dependent on their husbands. She may have been

³⁰ The *mithun* is known as a gayal in English, a large domesticated bovine found in Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and in Yunnan, China.

afraid that she would be treated as a social outcast if she became a divorcee.

A number of women discussed the Naga customary law that prohibits women from inheriting ancestral property from their parents, as this property goes exclusively to the oldest son in the family. During hours of discussion, they shared that they considered the customary law that foremost favors men as unjust. They expressed that they worked together with their parents since they were little in the *jhum* field, helping the parents with the crops, yet they did not receive any acreage share simply because they were daughters and not sons. When I asked some Naga men about the customs, they said it was the way it should be and nothing should be changed. They did not seem to think that sons being the exclusive inheritors was unfair to daughters.

Over these discussions, I saw how the national CEDAW and NSPAW could not guarantee these Naga women the justice they deserve. These women had never even heard of these initiatives. They also had never heard of the stalled Prevention and Protection of Violence Against Women Bill or the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, signed by the Myanmar military regime in 2007. They had no access to organizations working on gender, women's rights or indigenous peoples' rights.

A group of young women said they did not know what kind of laws were included in their Naga customary laws or who sat on the tribal council. Most women in these discussions expressed that it is unfair that they do not have inheritance rights on ancestral properties but they felt alone in their opinion. They were excluded from mainstream gender activism and its attempts to communicate to the international community and urban elites that Myanmar had arrived as a progressive country of gender equality respecting women's rights, only further justifying mainstream activists' activities and international aid agendas.

The west part of Lay Shi township is the area of the Tangkhul tribe. In Nagaland different tribes practice different customary justice systems, but they all have inheritance (and other) laws favoring men over women. These laws are a

significant factor in why Naga women do not enjoy their full rights as citizens or as equal members of their communities. The three-day meeting in Lay Yum village was not long enough to fully learn from and share with one another. Some attendees had to work a week in advance to be able to attend for just three days. The roads were impossible to travel when the rain came. When we talk about oppression and exclusion from mainstream politics or gender activism, there are many layers of oppression that we need to acknowledge. Different groups of women face different forms of oppression, many based on their socioeconomic status, cultural group, or religion.

Case Study II

I went to Kanpetlet Town in southern Chin State in October 2018 for a two-day workshop with Chin women, who said they had never attended a discussion session prioritizing gender issues before. The south of Chin State is quite religiously diverse in comparison to the north. Mountains rise west of the Bama plains, home mostly to Christians, but also to Buddhist populations and animists residing in remote villages. The two-day workshop started with the female attendees being asked about their own lived experiences and continued with discussions about gender. Almost all of the attendees were either Sunday school or kindergarten teachers. Participants shared that sexual assault and domestic violence cases were resolved by compensating the victim with a pig or a *mithun*. The elders in the village tried to make the case that sexual assaults were not significant and to pretend their village was free of conflict. There was no justice here for women, and no recognition of the damage, whether physical, psychological or emotional, inflicted on female victims. The participants also reported a similar inheritance system to the Naga.³¹

Just like in Nagaland, the Chin discussion participants had never heard of CEDAW, other mainstream gender events, or

³¹ For more on patriarchy in Chin cultures, see the work by the Ninu Women in Action Group (Asia Pacific Forum, 2016).

even the word gender.³² This was not the fault of these women. Without policymakers and community leaders willing to implement the recommendations from these conventions, these international treaties and events bore little meaning to them. When they encountered the layers of oppression and exclusion from within and outside of their community, no one came to their aid.

On the second day, while talking about different feminist movements in history, participants were eager to discuss feminism even when it was framed as a movement for social justice which addresses not only women's rights but injustices in a broader struggle. We watched *Iron Jawed Angels*, a movie about the suffragette movement in the US in the 1900s, which depicts how justice is earned through sacrifice and the constant radical challenges that women have made in history.

The patriarchy Chin women experience was different from that felt by urban factory workers or women in active conflict zones in Karen and Kachin states, although since the February 2021 coup, Chin State has also turned once more into a conflict zone. Chin customary laws are so strong that it is not enough to reform only national laws. The question of justice for Chin women needs a more subtle and thorough approach incorporating their lived reality and respecting their cultures and knowledge systems.

Case Study III

I was invited to a five-day training in Kawkareik Town, Karen State, organized by the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) in the first week of June 2019. On the first day, I asked 30 participants, all of them women from different areas of Kawkareik Township, and most of whom had never taken part in such a discussion before, to define social justice. I also asked them what

³² The word gender does not exist in Burmese or other minority languages. The words that people commonly use are simply male (*kya*) or female (*ma*).

the local word for social justice was.³³ When exploring these questions, the training participants created a timeline of local events, rather than national-level political events, such as the 1962 coup, 1988 coup, 2007 revolution, 2008 referendum, etc. The timeline of Karen women in the training was simple yet illuminating; it was all about the injustices that they experienced, the sexual assaults, the burning of the villages, the killings of their family members by the Myanmar military. The names they used in their timeline were those of women raped by the Myanmar military or Democratic Karen Buddhist Army³⁴ (DKBA) soldiers who had not yet received justice. The women said that major political events such as the 1947 Panglong agreement, the 1990, 2010, 2012 and 2015 elections, and the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference were part of a masculine political timeline that did not relate to them. For these women, major national events so often hailed as great political achievements by Bama people did not symbolize justice or triumph over injustice. Karen women were still denied social justice throughout the years of relative opening in the 2010s.

On the second day of the training, 3 June 2019, a rape case was reported. The victim was a Karen woman who was picking fruit on a durian plantation when a trespassing Myanmar military soldier raped her. The KWO was trying to put the case forward to a civilian court. Every day and night the women involved expressed security concerns, although there was supposedly a ceasefire between the KNLA³⁵ and the Myanmar military at the time. The Myanmar military was expanding roads into villages in Karen State, and some of the women were afraid that military soldiers would come to their village and rape them at

³³ *Dadidadjan* (တတိတတိတတိ) was the term they used.

³⁴ The DKBA is a paramilitary group of Buddhist soldiers and officers that split from the predominantly Christian-led Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in 1994 and signed a ceasefire with the Myanmar military.

³⁵ The KNLA is the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU), the leading political organization representing Karen people. The KNU was founded in 1947 and aims for a genuine federal union in Myanmar based on equality and self-determination.

night. They were also afraid of being used for politics by men, i.e., being shown off as a token without being able to actively participate (something male KNU leaders were wont to do). Most of the women in the discussion were discriminated against by men in the KNU and elsewhere and lacked education and powerful decision-making positions. Many expressed that they were working for the liberation of the Karen people, yet their contributions were looked down upon and undermined. When we discussed intersectionality and building the feminist movement, they quickly agreed that building an alliance with other marginalized women could collectively launch a movement for social justice.

I learned from this experience that the justice Karen women were demanding was very different from the concept of justice mainstream gender activism advocated in big fancy hotels. Karen women's vision of justice does not include receiving millions of dollars for justice projects or ticking off a feminist bucket list. They were demanding well-deserved social justice and for their lived experiences to be taken into account by current policies, law drafting processes, and in a larger context, to be included in local, regional, and national affairs concerning women.

Case Study IV

Most of my friends are ethnic Bama from Yangon with opportunities to access all kinds of different information. When we talked about social justice, oppression and discrimination before the coup, my friends felt uncomfortable with the idea of engaging in gender activism. One friend even told me she felt such activities were not impactful and she felt distant from them. This does not mean she did not experience sexual harassment or gender discrimination. Rather, the point is that large-scale mainstream gender activism, with its millions of dollars of expenditure, was failing to bring about change even for urban young people. One friend told me she had no clue why the peace process and women's participation in it was important for Myanmar.

The Rise of Liberal Feminism

The characteristics of mainstream gender activism include promotion of individual empowerment, freedom of choice and teaching young women and queers to stand up for their rights, spreading slogans such as “my body, my rule” and “women can do it”. They reinforce a mantra that strong women can juggle household chores with a professional career, ignoring the fact that not all women have equal access to resources and many experience different forms of oppression. Women in high positions are often portrayed as strong women who can shatter the glass ceiling. However, the privileges and socioeconomic situations that facilitate access to jobs are rarely questioned. Marginalized women do not have many resources because of structural inequalities and systemic oppression. But the focus on individual empowerment is widespread in mainstream gender activism. There is no awareness of class or other difference.

In a media interview, a chairperson of the NLD Central Women’s Committee said regarding rigid stereotypes of women in Myanmar:

(They) are entrenched more deeply in ethnic areas and could be less prevalent in lower Myanmar. Some people simply can’t shed such conservative attitudes. But as there are (now) more ethnic political parties, perhaps they’ll be able to help get rid of those attitudes.³⁶

This reflects a tendency of Burmese-speaking women to try and educate non-Burmese-speaking women and look down on illiterate women and those with low formal education.

³⁶ May Sitt Paing, 2017.

The advocacy for a 30 percent quota³⁷ in parliament is another form of ignorance about the different layers of oppression and lived experiences of marginalized women. Women capable of joining politics within that 30 percent quota are often women with supportive family backgrounds or those who are already in leadership positions. The underrepresented and marginalized women discussed in this article's case studies will always be left out by a liberal feminism agenda that only creates another layer of oppression and reinforces social hierarchies.

Mainstream gender activism reinforces gender binaries and creates a group of gatekeepers that does not speak for marginalized communities in Myanmar. By deradicalizing the potential feminist movement and the political solidarity of different ethnic women, factory workers and other marginalized communities such as LGBTIQ, this activism blocks radical dialogues and movements from gaining traction in Myanmar. This hinders the building of alliances and political solidarity needed for feminist movements to ultimately dismantle the system of oppression and patriarchy.

Conclusion: Change During the Military Coup

The lived experiences of marginalized women are not reflected on the policy agendas or consultation processes for drafting laws for women. The intersectional approach, enabling us to understand the different layers of oppression and structural discrimination marginalized women experience, was not utilized by mainstream gender activism from 2011-2021. Instead, this activism often deradicalized the feminist movement and misled the public by portraying feminist movements as risk-free and even fashionable.

It is important for donors and organizations to analyze systems of oppression and the interlocking system of patriarchy before investing millions of dollars in activism that may never

³⁷ The 30 percent quota for women's participation in parliament and the political process was advocated strongly by organizations like GEN, AGIPP and other international organizations.

benefit disadvantaged women. The feminist movement in Myanmar today does not need additional policies, or injections of millions of dollars, but rather a critical lens to understand the different layers of oppressions and struggles of marginalized women. That lens needs to be not only decolonized but also radical enough to abolish social hierarchies and prevent the rise of religious nationalist movements and militarism.

Since the military coup in February 2021, the fight for gender equality and women's rights has been incorporated into the anti-coup resistance movement, with women reclaiming their position in society. This resistance has been initiated, catalyzed, and advanced by factory workers³⁸ and striking civil servants joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Military rule since the coup has made it impossible for CSOs and NGOs to continue their work and activities, resulting in most organizations changing their approach or focus areas. Many have joined the fight against military rule alongside the factory workers, young student fighters and women fighters across the country.

While the coup pushed the activities of NGOs to the margins, marginalized communities such as factory workers, students, and farmers are now positioning themselves at the core of the anti-coup resistance movement. This resistance takes many forms: the CDM, the Blood Money Campaign,³⁹ boycotting products produced by military-owned businesses,⁴⁰ daily protests on the streets and in the villages, and mobilizing communities against the military regime's repression. The justice for women question has shifted toward a collective struggle against military rule while still reclaiming women's place in society. We can study such directional shifts in women's rights and gender equality movements through new slogans such as "this fight can't be won without women" and "fight sexist misogynistic

³⁸ Ko Maung, 2021.

³⁹ Blood Money Campaign is a collective of Myanmar activists campaigning to stop revenues reaching the Myanmar military junta, an alliance of local & international strike committees, CSOs, and unions, led by youths (Blood Money, 2021).

⁴⁰ The Boycott List, 2022.

regimes”. Groups such as the Myaung Women’s Guerilla Group,⁴¹ Myanmar’s first all-female armed rebel group, are emerging. Such a radical shift will potentially steer Myanmar’s women and gender movements to center the needs and lived experiences of marginalized communities, which are at the center and front line of the revolution. The material conditions of women from the periphery equip them with knowledge and power to fight for social justice on their own terms. To some extent, the military coup and anti-coup resistance movement has awakened people, especially those in Yangon and Mandalay, to the fact that the oppression and atrocities experienced by different ethnic groups, including the Rohingya, are interconnected with their own lives, and cannot be ignored. If there is any time to be hopeful for a radical women’s movement, it is now. Rural and urban, elites and marginalized, men, women and LGBTIQ can now collectively imagine and strive to liberate each other from the military and from all forms of oppression.

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⁴¹ All-Women Militia, 2021.

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