

Struggles of a Woman Armed Revolutionary

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Abstract

In this article, I recount the struggles and obstacles that I faced as a young Burmese feminist student who joined the armed resistance against the 2021 military coup. Being one of the youngest officers in a revolutionary armed group, and a female, I explain the troubles that I experienced when dealing with issues of sexism and patriarchy within this male-dominated institution. I also question popular narratives of the role of women in the revolution which contrast with my lived experiences.

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In 2023, while I was lying in my barracks, I overheard people saying that women are supposedly enjoying leadership positions in the current revolution against the Myanmar military. I had also recently read that women take up around 70-80 percent of leadership positions in almost every aspect of our revolution. Myanmar women are doing two things simultaneously: revolting against the way society treats them as the second sex and refusing to follow male leadership. The thought of finally being able to break societal norms and beliefs that only men can perform in warfare, politics and administration, is encouraging. However, are these discussions, being led by intellectuals, public figures, and the media, accurately reflecting the reality on the ground? Can our revolution change perceptions which have been deeply ingrained for so many years? In this article, I try to answer these questions.

I come from a middle class family and had the chance to read widely from a young age. My family provided me with a good modern education and met my needs. I also had the privilege to study oppression, sexism, and intersectional feminism from feminist organizations in Yangon during my teenage years.

I did not need to question my identity and ability because of my comfortable background and social circles. I did not feel like I faced discrimination based on my gender. My friends and I freely exchanged ideas without gender barriers. In this way I grew up in my own little circle with almost no friction, ideologically or otherwise.

After the 2021 coup, I fled from Yangon to one of the liberated areas in the southeast of the country to undertake basic military training. I turned my back on my routine, with its familiarity, warmth and safety, to take refuge in the jungle. It was then that my life really began. I knew not an ounce of fear despite being a woman. But within a year of arriving, everything turned upside down.

The very first thing I had to face was dealing with too many heroes, men who took it upon themselves to try to protect and take care of me, who was in their eyes a young, delicate girl. The journey to the jungle was long. There were four or five transit points before we reached our destination. We had to travel by car, by motorcycle and on foot. When we got to the first temporary refuge, we had to build bamboo tents to stay in and rest for a few days. Our job as women was to get rid of the weeds and grass. We were not very effective, as most of us were students with no experience of hard labor, but we had the strong will to make it work. I actually wanted to help my travel companions construct the tents: I wanted to know the measurements, the types of bamboo and the amount of bamboo needed, I wanted to know how to make a tent floor, cover and roof. Despite my curiosity and willingness, I was restricted to weeding.

We continued our arduous journey after this first break. We had to walk from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., hiking and climbing mountains and crossing waist-deep streams. It was in the late monsoon season. There were gray skies, darkish green forests, blue mountains, and mist all around as far as one's eyes could see. After traveling for three hours, my backpack became a burden. Trying to stay balanced while hiking on wet mountain soil took a toll on my aching calves. The mountains seemed like they would

continue for an eternity, and along the downward slopes I resorted to sliding along on my bottom.

I received many offers from men to help me with my backpack. I had to scream at them to get them to understand that I was really refusing their unsolicited assistance. People see us, women who fled into the jungle, as admirable, pitiful and fragile young girls who chose a path that is hard even for men. Although we struggled alongside one another, the men believed they needed to be stronger than us and were responsible to protect us. The normalization of men as being supposedly more powerful and taking the role of protector is obvious. But be that as it may, it is difficult to point it out to them. They will just say that they are helping us because they are empathetic and view us like their own sisters. That they are helping us to make our journey and work easier. They are trying to conform to societal norms to be a good, strong man for women who are weak and away from home, expectations based on a simplistic duality that sees men as strong and women as weak. I was frustrated by their perverted stares and uninvited offers of help; I felt degraded and treated like a subhuman.

When we women are treated by men as weak and pitiful creatures, even though we chose the same revolutionary path, we are forced to put in even more effort. Before basic military training started, I was in a group with another woman and five men working on preparations for construction work. One day, we had to clean and divert water into a stream in a glen. The group started work at 7:30 a.m., but after three hours, the other woman and I had still achieved absolutely nothing. To be precise, we were not allowed to contribute any work. When we were about to pull away some old bamboo, the men said, “Don’t do this sister, you will cut your hand. Let the men do the job” and then did it themselves. They also stopped us from contributing with the excuse that the water was too deep. When the men discussed the task at hand, my advice and opinions were drowned by their loud voices. I did not like having nothing to do that whole morning.

I was there to fight and work no matter how hard things were. But the only tasks we women were given were errands for the men, like fetching their cheroots or keeping their lighters away from the water. I was furious. I forcefully splashed knee-deep into the water in front of the men. I took the biggest piece of bamboo and threw it away, making a mighty bang. Five of the men were shocked and tried to stop me. I did not listen to them and called the other women over to work with me. When the men were about to use physical force to stop us, I said, “We are here to work” with a straight face and stern voice. I did not want to hear, “Sister, leave it. We, your brothers, will do it” even one more time. The point I am trying to make is that we women must put in extra effort to do the same job as men because we have to fight against being treated like we cannot do even basic things for our own survival. We must prove to the men that we are much stronger than they think we are.

There have been a lot of other examples since I joined the revolution. Despite men protesting to ban us from climbing to the highest parts of structures, because they believe women will tarnish their *hpon*, we did it anyway and constructed a roof. We had to clench our fists and grind our teeth whenever military trainers made sexual jokes such as “Women are always at the receiving end”. There were many women doing push-ups counting at the top of their lungs when all the men had already given up exhausted. Since the trainers judged women based on gender stereotypes, rather than ability, we had to work extremely hard not to be eliminated from training, to disprove their belief that women are weak, and to not be looked down upon. But the only thing the trainers said was, “See, guys. Even women can do better than you”—naturalizing the idea that men should always do better than women at physical activity.

The incident discussed above where we women had to fight to be given the opportunity to work is an example of a situation where we women were of equal rank as the men. What about a situation where a young female student needs to give orders to older, but lower-ranked men? Well, let me tell you.

A month after basic military training, I was promoted from private to squad leader. There were seven men aged between 25-40 years old in my squad. Four of them were respective leaders in basic military training, such as the head of trainees, troop leader, squad leader and so forth. When I conveyed my decisions and opinions in squad meetings, I had to talk over the top of those four men. They were embarrassed that a 20-year-old, fragile female only recently graduated from basic training was assigning duties to them and that they were required to salute me as their squad leader. They saw me as no more than their little sister. They saw no authority in me. They did not request permission when they were absent from meetings. They did not complete their tasks. They did not report to me. They even went to the point of giving orders that bypassed me, without my command, and communicated directly with a male officer above me in the chain of command.

They backed me into a tight corner with their various tests of disobedience. One day, I assigned a task to a private with a deadline of 2 p.m. After I did my own work, I went to check on him. He had not finished his work—and was even drunk. When I asked why, he replied in a scornful voice:

“Because I don’t want to.”

There were also other male privates and leaders hanging out with him. Not doing one’s assigned task and being drunk during working hours made my blood boil. Knowing that the issue could not be resolved on the spot, I tried to hold my anger and walked away. Laughing voices from the drunk men followed me.

“Don’t sulk, little squad leader.”

This was the first time I had been insulted like this in my entire life. I had to run away somewhere private to cry.

The next day, I explained to the squad how wrong that behavior was and gave them a warning. How I had to respond to this humiliation was limited by my position and ethics as squad leader, and commitment to the organization.¹ In other words, I

¹ By organization, the author means the nascent armed resistance organization they belonged to.

handled the situation as a leader rather than as a woman directly challenging the sexist attitudes of the male soldiers.

Those days were tough. I hid my face in a blanket and cried silently every night. I had squad leader and other additional responsibilities. I was so busy that I forgot to eat sometimes. I would be occupied with work from 6 a.m. onwards and only returned to my barracks at 2 a.m. I did not get a chance to socialize with female soldiers from other squads as I had no time. One day, I canceled all my work and visited the other female soldiers' tents. I overheard:

“She’s nothing but a pretty face. How can a girl like her lead?”

Yes, the girl being talked about was me. I went back to my tent with my head down. Obviously I went to sleep that night in tears.

While I was working hard in my military duties, crying myself to sleep, and reporting to my superiors that I no longer wanted to be a squad leader, I was promoted to platoon leader. From my point of view, there were only two kinds of people in platoon leader meetings: the first type directly did not give a toss about my opinions, and the second only pretended to listen to me because they were romantically interested in me. I had to maintain a stony face to have my opinions recognized, let alone be taken seriously. The only reason for my subordinates' reluctance to work with me was that I was a female commander. This was not some subtext to be unearthed, but a blatant confession from them. Rather than receiving respect as a troop leader and commander, I was verbally harassed and gazed at during social gatherings with drinks and music. I had to be stronger, more aggressive, and more decisive, to build my image slowly. But I struggled on, there among patriarchs and under the patriarchy.

My personal space was breached during our discussions and social gatherings outside formal duties, especially those with alcohol and music. Men stared at me with lust, tried to flirt with me, and came close to me when lighting my cheroots, trying to touch my skin, hair, and top. In the beginning, I had zero tolerance, and responded swiftly and strictly if men behaved badly

toward me or my junior female comrades. I said their acts could be reported as sexual harassment. But as time went on, I lost confidence in myself and my sense of security being a woman waned. I doubted my beliefs, stance, and existence. I felt threatened as a woman and questioned my womanhood.

An army must inculcate some form of ideology into its soldiers. One advantage for me was that as a superior I had a chance to choose how to teach my juniors. Not only did we have physical training, but also theory in basic military courses. In theory classes, I tried to include topics like gender equality, sexism, harassment, intersectional feminism, and the relationship between militarism and patriarchy. I tried to make these ideas accessible for those who had never had the chance to encounter them before. I took baby steps and introduced men to these topics piecemeal. The reactions varied—some understood quickly; some pretended to understand, and some held onto their biases, such as the idea that women are so inferior that they cannot even go onto the platforms at Buddhist pagodas.

However, it is hard to entirely blame my resistant trainees. Many people in the group lived hand to mouth; they toiled from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. under the blazing sun and had no opportunity to reflect on issues such as sexism and patriarchy. Under the oppressive system of capitalism, and with the internalized teachings from culture and religion, many male soldiers sustained the patriarchy by looking down on women. The problem is that the society we live in is a patriarchal one. Those who do not accept the patriarchy are still oppressed by it. I witnessed this in my comrades' behaviors. Those who had no problem with me being a female leader were mocked by their sexist comrades. The sexist soldiers accused the unproblematic ones of trying to make a good impression on me, calling them "Mama's boy" and saying things like, "You don't break the rules, because you're afraid of her"—while some could brush this goading off, it pierced others' masculine egos.

Although there were a lot of skeptics among my trainees, constantly making comments like, "Soldiers don't need to know about things not related to fighting and war!", I still persevered

sharing about these topics and raising awareness. I believe understanding sexism and such things is fundamental knowledge that should be spread in whatever communities we belong to, and these ideas will be helpful in building a new society after the revolution. Still, after much effort and time, I came to realize that it is not easy to change deeply internalized ideologies quickly. Criticisms continued to mount: “Women are suitable for securing rations, record-keeping and communication, but not for leadership.”

Reflecting on what I have been through for this article, my journey leaves me doubtful about many questions. Have we really been able to topple gender-based oppression in this revolution? Although it is portrayed in the media, are we really seeing women’s leadership on the ground? Is the repetition of supposed “women’s leadership in the revolution” merely a promotion of (global) feminist agendas and in fact a distorted projection that women are winning an ideological revolution?

So far, my lived experience on the ground proves that women’s agendas have not advanced much in this revolution.

At least not yet.

