

The Concept of Coming Out and Social Inequality in Myanmar

Ni Aye

Abstract

In this article, I give explanations about my own decision, as a biological female who identifies as a tomboy, and the decisions of my friends, about whether to “come out” or not, and if so to whom, and under what conditions. People whose family members accept their gender and sexual identities and appearance can live as they are in Myanmar to a certain extent. But those whose family members do not accept them rely on being part of a peer network of people with similar identities. Only then can they enjoy life. This article highlights how the concept and practice of coming out is unique in the Myanmar LGBTQ community and different from Western notions in particular.

Childhood

My name is Ni Aye. I was born a biological woman in Magway Region and grew up in an oilfield where my father had a job. I attended Basic Education Middle School there (my school later changed to become a Basic Education High School) but finished matriculation at a private school in Mandalay. I then graduated from Magway University, but since 2010, have been living in Yangon.

I preferred wearing men’s clothes when I was young, but I was not sure about my sexual orientation. There was no discrimination, oppression, or repression in my family. My father was a government chief engineer at an oilfield and my mother used to be a shopkeeper, but she stopped work when she married my father. My family sometimes bought me female-gendered accessories and clothes, but they never forced me to use or wear them. Likewise, I accepted what they bought for me, but still tried to express myself by not using or wearing them. After a

while, my family just bought me the things I liked and suited me. They did not ask me any hard-to-answer questions about why I did not like or use some of the things they bought for me.

Everything went fine for me at primary school, but I started to feel uncomfortable in middle school. I had to wear a *yinbone*, a tight-fitting, long-sleeved blouse that sits on the waist, and a *longyi* (here referring to a girls' school uniform and traditional female costume), but as a way to get out of this, I wore a shirt over it. Most of my friends and I would play around at school in our short pants, whether boys or girls. We only wore a *longyi* over short pants during class time.

I still did not understand my sexual orientation yet, I think because I had never seen another person like me in my community. I did not think that I was unique, but was fitting in with the accepted norms and lived normally like others. I did not step out of my safe, comfortable environment, and I thought that there would be a similarly safe environment waiting for me elsewhere.

I transferred to a female boarding school in Mandalay when I was in ninth grade. At that school I noticed that the short-haired headmaster was like me. She wore a shirt, a *yaw longyi* and velvet slippers. I was convinced that I could also live like that. I started to think more about my identity¹ during my matriculation days. I began getting interested in girls. I saw that some female friends had the same style as me and even had girlfriends. Some people called them *bawpya*, meaning flattened testicles, a term I first heard only at that school. I was afraid of being called *bawpya*, or the other common term *yout-ka-sha*, i.e. man-to-be, so I told my friends not to tease me like that and tried to prove (by not having a girlfriend) that I was not a *yout-ka-sha* or *bawpya*.

I wore a *longyi* but not with *a-htet-sin* (literally meaning 'above cloth', a piece of black cloth in the upper part of the *longyi* which is used to prevent it from loosening up by accident and to distinguish female *longyis* from male ones). I did not know how to respond when my grandmother who bought me the

¹ Here the Burmese word *pyitdeehmu* is translated into "identity" but can also mean "existence."

longyis asked why I did not use *a-htet-sin*. I answered that “I did not want my longyis to be mistaken with others” in the boarding school. I met many people like me during these high school days and started to realize that I could live like them, but I kept down-playing my identity in fear of being discriminated against like other similar people around me.²

Like I said, my parents never questioned my fashion and sexual orientation, but equally, I never bothered to explain my preferences to them. They even supported me to adapt to the outside world. My mother measured my body size and sewed bodices for me when I was young. After I arrived in Yangon in 2010, I asked my friends and bought a biner, which is a type of vest with bodices inside. At that time, biners were directly ordered from Thailand and cost around 20,000 Myanmar Kyat each.³

The main point here is that my mother understood and respected my identity. My mother might have wanted me, her only child, born biologically female, to be a real girl. But she did not push me to conform or place me in any difficult situation. Instead she solved everything that came between me and wider society. Throughout my life, I never stated my gender or sexual identity to her, nor did she ask me explicitly about it. She herself went to a girl’s boarding school in Pyin Oo Lwin during her childhood. Some girls liked each other and lived together in her community, and she, herself, also had a girlfriend at one point.⁴ For her, my way of living was not too out of the ordinary.

However, relatives from my father’s side were not pleased to see me living like a boy. Whenever I met them, they snubbed me. But my mother stood up for me. My relatives gossiped that

² Throughout the article the English terms surrounds/around, community, society, and neighborhood are used for the Burmese word *paqwankyin*.

³ Nowadays, transmen have founded their own sewing factories and distribute biners domestically. There are now two domestic brands costing between 6,500 to 15,000 Kyat. The situation improved even more when they started using brand names and distributing them to rural areas.

⁴ Girlfriend is a translation for the Burmese word *achitdaw* referring to a girlfriend of a girl. The relationship is often asexual, and the term and the practice is popular in many single-sex girl schools.

since my mother had experience with girlfriends, she had groomed me to be a lesbian.


University Life

When I started university, I realized that I was really interested in girls—and got my first girlfriend. When I took her home, I introduced her as a friend and my parents willingly treated her like their real daughter. At my university graduation ceremony, protocols of the Ministry of Education (shown in figures 1, 2, and 3) required male graduates to wear a Western suit or *longyi* and female graduates to wear a Burmese *yinbone* and *longyi*. My mother asked me if I could wear a jacket and trousers, but it was not allowed. For a woman to apply for a graduation certificate, only photos with a *yinbone* were accepted, so I had to use the computer program Photoshop to digitally superimpose my face over the body of another woman wearing a *yinbone*, and received my degree in absentia.

In my 30s, I lived as a man. But if anyone asked me if I wanted to be a man, I said no. I just enjoyed wearing clothes free style.

Figures 1, 2, & 3

Dress code announcements for university graduation ceremonies.



ပြည်ထောင်စုသမ္မတမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်အစိုးရ
ပညာရေးနှင့်ကြီးကြပ်ရေး
အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာဦးစီးဌာန
မိတ္ထီလာတက္ကသိုလ်

(ခမ်းခြံစိမ့်မြောက်ဘက်ဘူခင်းသစ်) လျှောက်လွှာခေါ်ယူခြင်းနှင့်
ကျင်းပမည့်ရက် မကြေညာခြင်း

၁။ မိတ္ထီလာတက္ကသိုလ်က ၂၀၁၆-၂၀၁၇ ပညာသင်နှစ်အတွက် ၂၀၁၇-ခုနှစ်တွင် ကျင်းပခဲ့သော စီးပွားသိပ္ပံဘွဲ့၊ စီးပွားသိပ္ပံ(ဂုဏ်ထူး)ဘွဲ့ စာမေးပွဲများ နှင့် မဟာဝိဇ္ဇာသိပ္ပံဘွဲ့ စာမေးပွဲ၊ မဟာသုတေသနဘွဲ့ သင်တန်းများကို အောင်မြင်သူများသည် မိတ္ထီလာတက္ကသိုလ်(ခမ်းခြံစိမ့်မြောက်ဘက်ဘူခင်းသစ်) တက်ရောက်ရန် (သို့မဟုတ်) အဝေးရောက်ဘွဲ့လျှောက် လျှောက်ထားနိုင်ပါသည်။

“ ဘူခင်းသစ်ကြေး ”

တက်ရောက်ဘွဲ့ကြေး	- ၁၅၀၀/- (ကျပ်တစ်ထောင်ငါးရာတိတိ)
အဝေးရောက်ဘွဲ့ကြေး	- ၁၀၀၀/- (ကျပ်တစ်ထောင်တိတိ)
လျှောက်လွှာတင်သွင်းရမည့်ရက်	- (၁၁-၀၂-၂၀၁၇) ရက်နေ့ မှ (၂၉-၀၂-၂၀၁၇) ရက်နေ့ထိ၊
ဘူခင်းသစ်ကျင်းပမည့်ရက်	- (၁၃-၀၂-၂၀၁၈) ရက်နေ့ မှ (၁၄-၀၂-၂၀၁၈) ရက်နေ့ထိ၊
အခမ်းလေ့ကျင့်မည့်ရက်	- (၀၂-၀၂-၂၀၁၈) ရက်နေ့၊

၂။ သတ်မှတ်လျှောက်လွှာပုံစံများကို စာမေးပွဲနှင့်ဘူခင်းဌာနတွင် ရယူခြင်းခွင့်ရှိပြီး လွန်ခဲ့သော (၃)လ အတွင်း မြန်မာဝတ်စုံ၊ တိုင်းရင်းသားဝတ်စုံ၊ အနောက်တိုင်းဝတ်စုံ(အမျိုးသား) နှစ်သက်ရာဝတ်စုံကို အပြည့်အစုံ ဝတ်ဆင်၍ သင်ရပ်စွာ ရိုက်ကူးထားသော (၂" x ၁ ၂") အရွယ်၊ ခေါတ်ပုံ (၃)ပုံနှင့်အတူ နိုင်ငံသား စိစစ်ရေးကော်မရှင်၊ မိတ္ထီလာရှိ ပူးတွဲ တင်ပြ လျှောက်ထားရမည်။

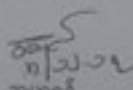
၃။ ဘူခင်းသစ်ကြေးများကို မိတ္ထီလာတက္ကသိုလ်၊ မေ့လက်ခံရောင်းရက်တွင် ဝေးသွင်းရမည်။

၄။ ရင်းပေးမှတစ်ဆင့်သွင်းသူများသည် သတ်မှတ်ကြေးများကို ဓာတိုက်ဓွေငွေလွှာ (Postal Money Order) ခြံပေးလိုနိုင်ပါသည်။

၅။ ယခင်နှစ်များက တွဲရစာမေးပွဲ အောင်မြင်သူများသည် အဝေးရောက်ဘွဲ့အတွက် လျှောက်ထားနိုင်ပါသည်။

၆။ အခမ်းလေ့ကျင့်ခြင်းနှင့် ဘူခင်းသစ်တက်ရောက်မည့်သူများသည် မြန်မာရိုးရာယဉ်ကျေးမှု လျှော်ညီယော မြန်မာဝတ်စုံ၊ တိုင်းရင်းသားဝတ်စုံ၊ အနောက်တိုင်းဝတ်စုံ(အမျိုးသား) မှ နှစ်သက်ရာဝတ်စုံ အပြည့်အစုံဝတ်ဆင်၍ တက်ရောက်ရမည်။ အကယ်၍ သတ်မှတ်ထားသည့်အတိုင်း ဝတ်ဆင်ခြင်းမရှိပါက ဘူခင်းသစ် အခမ်းအနားကို တက်ရောက်ခွင့်မရှိမည် မဟုတ်ပါ။

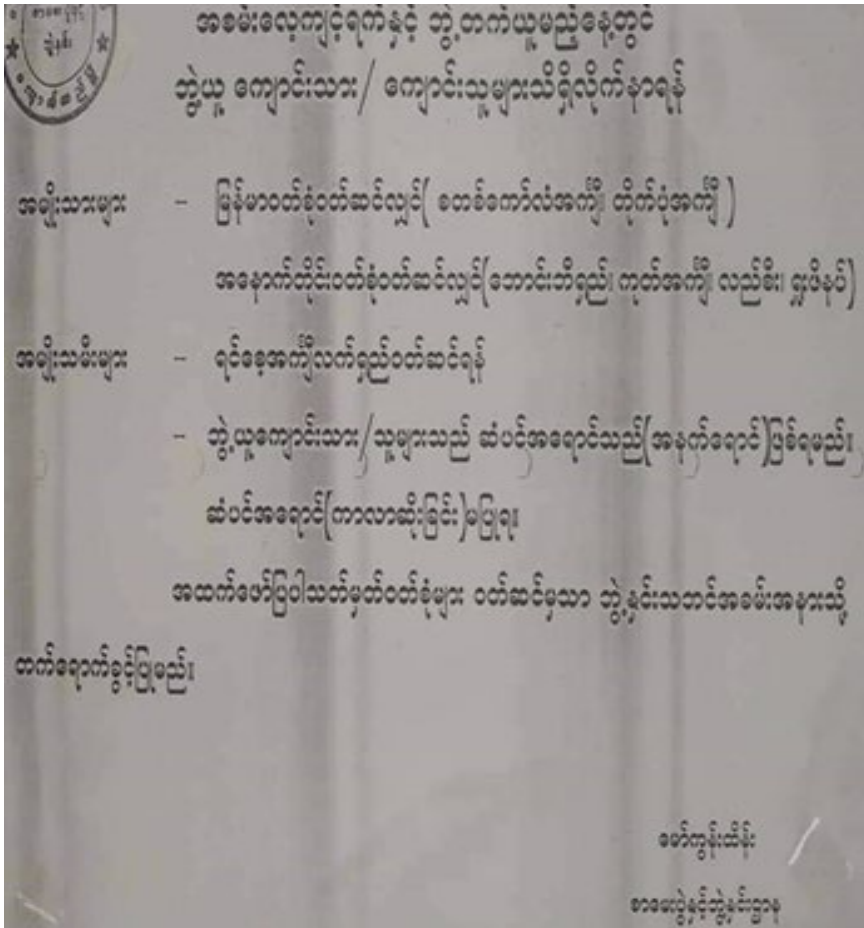
၇။ အသေးစိတ်အချက်အလက်များကို စာမေးပွဲနှင့်ဘူခင်းဌာန၊ မော်ကွန်းထိန်း(၀၉-၂၅၈၉၂၀၉၂) ဆက်သွယ်မေးမြန်းနိုင်ပါသည်။



အမာရင်

မော်ကွန်းထိန်း၊ စာမေးပွဲနှင့်ဘူခင်းဌာန

မိတ္ထီလာတက္ကသိုလ်



Discrimination and Oppression in the Workplace and Urban Environment

When I had to prepare a curriculum vitae to apply for jobs in Yangon after graduation, one of the requirements was for a photo of the applicant in women’s dress. I went to a photo studio wearing what I wanted and then told the photographer to use Photoshop to superimpose my face over another woman’s body. After some time in Yangon, one of my tomboy neighbors told me that most of her friends were like me. During our conversations,

we shared our childhood experiences, discussed our lifestyles, and learned about our different life experiences.

My first experience being harassed and discriminated against was when a group of boys from the teashop at the corner of the street shouted at me, “Little *bawpya*, where are you going?” In job interviews with three major companies, I was told that they would hire me only if I dressed as a woman. I wondered about the reason why they asked me that question was because I went to the interviews wearing shirts and trousers. Subsequently in other interviews as well, I was asked if I was fine with being called *nyima* (little sister), which I assumed was to check if the employers could treat me like a woman, and if I could conform to their expectations.

Why did they ask me this, even though they obviously saw that I was wearing masculine clothes? Still, I used to answer that I was fine with it, and whatever pronouns or relational terms they used for me would never affect my work if I was hired. People who saw me for the first time addressed me using *ko* (a prefix for male adults). My style (dress) matched that pronoun, and there was no issue. But the banks caused trouble.

When I write my name in general, I do not use prefixes like *maung* or *ma* (general gender prefixes for males and females). But the person at the bank counter inspecting citizenship scrutiny cards (CSCs) made sure to call out my name with *ma*: “Ma Ni Aye, you may withdraw your cash”. The crowd at the bank stared at me because another counter where we did not have to show our CSCs addressed me as *ko*. Both male and female pronouns were used to address me, and this attracted attention.

My other friends, however, have names which were totally discordant with their gender.⁵ They feel uncomfortable because their names are feminine, but they dress like men. They rarely use their CSCs; instead, they prefer driving licenses, which are conveniently devoid of gender prefixes.

Public bathrooms are the most common everyday struggle we must go through. Back then I usually used women’s toilets

⁵ Ni Aye is a gender-neutral Burmese name.

and when I entered, people would warn me, and while queuing people gave me strange looks, yelled at me, and some even called security. Therefore, I had to think twice before urinating. When I had to go outside the house, I carefully planned my route and did not drink a lot of water, always holding it in to avoid having to use public bathrooms. I actually contracted urinary diseases and suffered from kidney issues because of this, resulting in hospitalization. Later, I started using the toilets for disabled people, or otherwise, I used the female toilets only when my mother or other female friends were with me. Most of my friends, however, used the male toilets because they could not be bothered with the hassle of female toilets. We gave each other eye-signals, or exchanged coded words to ensure that the toilet was unisex, and that it was safe to go.

Words Used to Address Women Who Live Like Men

Apart from *bawpya*, other common terms for women who live like men are *bawkwel* (broken testicles), *belkwel* (men with a “split”, referring to a vagina), *youtkyamain* (a combined word for men and women in Burmese), *hnapine-dapine* (one-half), *homay-out dimayout* (leading nowhere), tom, tomboy, and transman. There are also other phrases that reflect society’s norms. For instance, when people hear that two women have fallen in love, they ask who is the man and who is the woman, and express feelings inferring that something went to waste. Other mockeries include, “two lids banging against each other calls a tiger”, and “two trays banging against each other makes a sound”, and of course, “did they make a wrong wish in a past life?”. But sometimes a man with an interest in a woman who is in a same-sex relationship will say it is fine as he would get a “bonus”.

To women who dress as men, people have many explanations and say many things—few good, mostly derogatory—such as, “they (do it for) higher status”; “it is just safer”; “when the time comes, (they) will marry men”; “they are only like that because they have not had (sexual) relations with men; should I correct them? Send them to my house”. When lesbians who

dress like men have female friends, they are accused of being sexually interested in them; and when they have male friends, they are accused of trying to prove their masculinity by befriending only males.

Societal expectations include, “you must act manly if you dress like a man”; “don’t talk like a woman”, “if you appear as a man, you must be strong, decisive, and able to face anything, you should not cry”. Some insulting words include, “Do you dare to go topless, then?”, “Do you dare to fight me? Let’s exchange blows. Tuck your *longyi* between your legs and come out!”.

So far, I have explained some factors in LGBTQ people’s decisions to come out,⁶ as well as the conditions under which they do so. LGBTQ people endure a context of variegated discrimination and oppression, in schools, workplaces and wider society, often since childhood. I will now outline some excerpts from discussions with LGBTQ friends regarding this choice of whether to come out or not.

How Does the LGBTQ Community Understand Coming Out?

It is not easy to trace how or when we in the LGBTQ community started using the term “coming out”, but it spread through social media and foreign films/series watched by the community. To write this section of the article I discussed the concept with five friends: a 29-year-old woman of the Inn minority,⁷ who dresses as a woman, considers herself a bisexual and was living and working in Yangon; a 28-year-old lesbian, who dresses as a woman and lived in Yangon working as a business researcher; a 27-year-old lesbian, who dresses as a woman, and lived in Yangon with the family of her girlfriend; a 30-year-old woman who dresses as a man; and a 27-year-old woman, who dresses as a

⁶ The Burmese phrase translated here is *pwintpwintlinlin-chapyi*, meaning to lay it bare openly, or talk about it honestly.

⁷ The Inn mostly live on Inlay Lake in Shan State and share linguistic similarities with people from Dawei and Pagan.

man, worked at a governmental department, and had an interest in other women.

They each came out to their wider community no matter whether the latter accepted them or not, and they all wanted to encourage others like them to come out if they wanted to. One friend found it difficult to accept that she was bisexual, but once she accepted herself, she then came out to her parents and community as well as on social media. She also revealed that she was in love with another woman like her. Her coming out was a calculated exposé after living in fear in an oppressive atmosphere among her friends, parents, and relatives. Most of my LGBTQ friends agreed that the process of coming out would not be needed if we lived in a society where we were seen as equal to others, normal, and if society was not discriminatory.

My friends understand the barriers preventing people from coming out and have a positive view of those who manage to do so. One of them told me that her mother and her neighborhood knew that she was only interested in women, and she did not need to declare who she was or come out. Almost everyone accepted her in the beginning, but she faced some discrimination later. Those who live in Yangon enjoy freedom afforded by the acceptance of the city, and the nature of a city that ignores and does not get involved in one's life.

One of my friends had to take time to accept herself as a lesbian, but once she accepted her identity, she gradually let those close to her know about it too. Her family accepted her, making it much simpler. She fell in love with a transman, and she was not concerned about what others might think as long as she was happy and her choice did not affect others.

One tomboy was afraid to be regarded as a *bawpya/bawkwel* by her community as she thought it would bring shame on her parents. Despite realizing her sexual orientation in ninth grade, she denied she was a tomboy when asked. She even tried to live like a normal woman at university. Only in her second year did she get a girlfriend and meet other tomboys, who inspired her to come out. Still, she did not let her parents know until after graduation and she started working. Then, because of her

girlfriend, she told her parents and relatives that she was a tom-boy. Her father and relatives condemned her, and her mother did not speak to her for six months. Two years later, her parents finally understood and accepted her, and at the time of our conversation, she was building a life together with her girlfriend.

Conclusion

Based on discussions with my friends, I conclude that those who won the respect and acceptance of their family about their identity do not feel a need to come out. Those who experienced oppression, restrictions, and disrespect from within their own family are more likely to come out. Discrimination and harassment for being interested in the same sex, for not conforming to societal norms at school, and for avoiding using the sex listed in one's identity card, is very serious. Some discrimination includes affixing gender titles to names without the consent of the subject and strict protocols and oppression regarding dress at university graduation ceremonies. This discrimination, from birth, through education, to the workforce, and throughout everyday life such as using public toilets, push LGBTQ people to question their own identity and whether they should come out or not. This process of coming out would not be needed if we lived in a society that saw us as equal to others, as normal, and if society was not discriminatory.

At the end of the day, we LGBTQs should not demand others accept our identities, but learn to embrace ourselves with humility. Our society should not remain one where LGBTQs feel they can come out only when they are richer, better, and prettier than others. In other words, our society should be a place and space where we all can live as human beings, equally as others, without having to announce who we are.

The concept of "coming out" itself is proof of the social, political, and cultural discrimination against the LGBTQ community. We should not feel that we have to come out to be accepted and receive respect from other members of society.

