

Different Forms of Workers' Alienation: A Feminist Perspective

Pyo Let Han

Abstract

Myanmar farmers—from those growing wet rice in the Ayeyarwady delta to beans and pulse farmers in the dry zone—are migrating from their homes to take up new jobs like factory work, due to hardships in the agricultural sector and the effects of natural disasters. Many women work in garment factories in particular, places where workers have few rights. In general, women work harder than men, as they are expected to shoulder the burden of family duties. Women endure this situation even as they are actively discriminated against. Women's capabilities and obligations are exploited by the capitalist class who benefit from using their labor in many ways.

To the delight of capitalists, workers who are competing for job security must oppress each other and themselves. Providing female workers scant daily wages and forcing them to compete for overtime to support their families and children is a way of coercing supposed 'productivity'. Female workers fuel the nation's economy by sacrificing their sleeping and resting hours to the factories, on top of their standard workdays. Yet many women are still unable to meet their families' needs. Only with the help of their children and family members can they survive these working conditions. On top of all that, women workers are alienated from the act of production. This article highlights the gap between what women workers deserve and the difficult position they endure in Myanmar factories, which are unjust workplaces enabled by a patriarchal capitalist system.

Introduction

This article comes from working alongside and conversing with current and former workers in Hlaingtharya Township between

2017 and 2022. It is inspired by women workers' insights about gender and the exploitation they face from factory owners, often based on socially constructed ideas and stereotypes about womanhood, and seeks to highlight their original voices.¹ Women outnumber men in garment factories,² since factory owners prefer 'obedient' women over men, especially those who support dependent family members and are more likely to work overtime and agree to poorer work conditions.

Labor emancipation refers to a change whereby workers, who are currently disconnected from their labor, come to take ownership of it: a time when blue-collar workers, as well as educated and skilled ("white-collar") workers, can sell their labor at fair wages. Currently, Myanmar female migrant workers are not emancipated, and are forced to do what the market demands, instead of what they want to do.

The first feminist movement began with migrant workers in the United States protesting against many forms of oppression. Yet a hundred years later, these same oppressions continue behind closed factory doors in industrializing countries all over the world. World famous brands no longer bother building factories in their own countries. Instead they outsource their operations to countries with cheap labor, especially poor countries, and they hire labor brokers to get even cheaper labor. Labor brokers are also called piecework contractors or Cut-Make-Pack (CMP) businesses. The way that CMPs profit, as just one node in a long chain of contracting, is by squeezing labor from workers.

How Myanmar's Migrant Working Class was Born

Due to ongoing crises affecting agriculture in Myanmar, many rural inhabitants have left their farms to become migrant workers. Natural disasters push farmers into the tight embrace of (factory) capitalists. In this way, ancestral farmers and their

¹ Due to the collaborative nature and style of this article, no "personal communications" references are used in the footnotes.

² By one 2022 estimate, migrant female workers accounted for 90 percent of the workforce in 2021 (Eurocham Myanmar, 2022, p. 5).

children from both upper and lower Myanmar are transformed into migrant workers.

The capitalist class exploits migrant workers by providing meager wages barely enough to survive on and workers rarely gain transferable skills or knowledge. These capitalists can easily leave the country if they no longer benefit from exploiting workers with low wages—Myanmar as a country will only lose. The agricultural system is already ruined as the capitalists have monopolized that sector. When migrant workers give up toiling for meager factory wages and return to their places of origin, they struggle there too, as they have lost their farming skills, arable land, and familiarity with livestock. They must rely on machinery, cutting them off from their traditional livelihoods.

Today, whether on the farm or in the factory, Myanmar farmers and workers have no option but to toil under capitalism. In the early 1990s, following the country's limited opening to foreign investment, many workers from rural areas migrated to work at construction sites in large industrial zones such as Hlaingtharya Township in Yangon. Ma Aye Myaing³ arrived around 1995:

At that time, Hlaingtharya was a mud bath. There were no original residents; it was a town of people from rural areas who came there to work. If you worked all day, you got 100 Myanmar Kyat. I came to the city as I could only earn something like 30-50 Kyat for a full day's work in my village. But I had to return eventually as I couldn't tolerate the harassment directed at us women from various people of different backgrounds. My health also suffered from living in the mud for a long time. Later, my younger sisters had to work in the very Hlaingtharya buildings that I helped to build. We can't escape them, for generations to come.

³ All the names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the safety of the interviewees.

This is only the beginning of a story about women workers building a factory town and the sacrifices they made.

Ma Cho became a migrant worker because she could not bear to see her parents and siblings struggle as poor farmers. She recounted the beginning of her life as a migrant worker, which she compared to prison.

In the year 2000 I followed my cousin to Yangon to hunt for jobs. Before that, I worked as a farmer with my parents. I attended school until 1997 when I was in ninth grade, doing weeding for daily wages during the school holidays. I had to quit school when changes in the course of the Ayeyarwady River collapsed the riverbank and destroyed our fields. I was 17 years old, too young to go to the city to work, so I kept working as a hired farmer in various ways; weeding, planting beans and chilies. My family had to sell our cattle, we had financial difficulties and fell deep into debt. At the age of 19 I came to work in Yangon via my cousins' connections. Being away from my family made me miserable beyond imagination. I worked in fear as the foreigners managing the workplace were very strict. When I got this first job, I didn't know the nature of factory work, and I had to work the whole morning without drinking because I had no water bottle or cups with me. I couldn't handle it, so I would drink from the sink by pretending to gargle while the others were taking a break.⁴

Imprisoned by the Notion of 'Women's Duties'

Myanmar women's lives are more burdened by duty than men's because of the teachings they receive and the gendered division of familial responsibilities that affect them. Life duties are more burdensome for women than for men. Family struggles are

⁴ No one is seen drinking city tap water in Myanmar as the water is untreated and considered unclean.

shared with daughters by parents without hesitation, but sons are spared them. Worker Ma Aye Win is an example; she took many responsibilities in her family, moving from Nyaunglebin Township, Bago Region to Shwepyithar Township, Yangon for work.

When my brothers were young, I had to support them by transplanting and growing rice. When they grew up and said they wanted to work in town, I accompanied them as my mother was worried. Even though my brothers earned their own money, they didn't pay for their own food, and I had to cook for them from my own salary. There was no one left to do the farm work, so my mother called me back to get married. Since then I have had two children of my own, and still my brothers have never remitted anything back to the family. During the second wave of COVID-19, my husband, who was working in another region, said he couldn't come back as he was in lockdown. I discovered later that he had remarried.

I was ashamed to stay in the village after that, so I returned to Yangon with my two children to work as a cook. Once more, my brothers relied on my salary. We got to the point of being unable to pay rent, and I had to apologize to the landlord. My daughters and I now live independently (away from my brothers and mother) and I am back at factory work. Although my mother was angry and said that I'd be ousted without a penny, I genuinely wanted to be out from that situation. I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for my two daughters. I don't know what I was born for anymore. I work for my daily wage while my older daughter looks after the younger one. They are both well-behaved. I would love to live together happily with my parents and children.

Families have very high expectations of their daughters. Most parents expect their daughters to take care of them, their siblings, as well as hand over their entire salaries. Female factory

workers recounted for this article that some parents wait in front of the factories every payday to collect the salaries their daughters earned. Daughters were left only with pocket money for their dormitory rent, forcing them to work overtime.

Meanwhile, when a young male worker interviewee was asked how much of his salary went to his family, he said:

My mother said she doesn't expect anything from me. She doesn't expect a salary from her sons and relies only on my sisters. She always says that if we are not home, she will have to cook less rice, and that is a win. I only have to earn for myself and to play games. My older and younger sisters send money back home regularly so that I'm comfortable.

Mothers' responsibilities at home are very different from fathers', just like daughters' responsibilities are different from sons'. Many mothers do not expect any remittances from their sons because males are meant to become the head of (and responsible for) their own family after marriage. When sons do choose to send money home, mothers are proud of them for being considerate and dutiful. In contrast, they expect daughters to remit their salaries, and blame them when they cannot.

Society sees people in two genders: men and women. It teaches women that they must strive to be dutiful daughters while living with their parents, dutiful wives when married, and dutiful mothers when they have children. These teachings have been naturalized and normalized. But when men are considerate toward their parents, wives and children, they are praised as if taking responsibility is an exception worthy of praise. On top of these family expectations, when women go and work in a factory, capitalism again exploits them. Women shoulder far more responsibilities and duties than men throughout their lives.

Seeing and Feeling Female Workers' Lives: A Feminist Perspective

In 2016 there were officially more than 738,000 people working in garment, textile and footwear factories in Myanmar, out of which about 100,000 were men and the rest were women.⁵ There are even more female workers in (less enumerated) CMP businesses in industrial zones. The reason is employers' assumptions that women are humble, obedient, gentle, and less likely to retort or resist demands.⁶ These supposed feminine traits, reinforced through gender-based oppression, in turn become useful for labor in the manufacturing industry. Then women are forced to oppress each other once again. One of the oppressing tools used is the shame that society has inculcated in women workers. Supervisors verbally insult female workers and attack them based on their personal lives. One worker said:

The seniors at work call my parents names and verbally abuse me. I miss home and feel like I'm a loser when my parents are disrespected in this way because of me. Married people at work are berated even more. When they make a mistake or fall short of quota, they're attacked with obscene words like: "Do you think you are on a bed?" and much worse.⁷ I'm a girl who dresses as a boy. I've been verbally abused for this: "Are you staring (at a member of the opposite sex)? Just look at your own genitals when you go to the toilet." I'm used to such insults: "You're like this because of your karma gained from violating others' wives and children in the past."

⁵ Phu Huynh, 2016. As mentioned earlier, Eurocham Myanmar estimated that 90 percent of all garment workers in 2021 were women, a relative increase (2022, p. 5).

⁶ Employers interviewed for this article said that male workers can be "difficult" to talk to, unlike women.

⁷ Implying they are having sex and not paying attention to work.

This abuse is often normalized by women. One factory worker interviewee told us that when she asked if the 2,000 Myanmar Kyat she gave over monthly to her seniors was for social security, she was told: “No. It is a monthly fee collected in advance for paying respect to our supervisors at Thadingyut (the end of Buddhist lent)”—our interviewee did not have the money to respect her parents by giving them a mere 10,000 Kyat, instead her work supervisors were buying trinkets like bracelets with her hard-earned money:

It’s definitely not cool when they berate us with their arms akimbo, showing off the bracelets they bought with money taken from us workers. We have to buy our clothing items and fabric with highly marked up prices every month from these supervisors, who benefit from us in many ways.

The oppression of workers is doubly awful because senior workers oppress their juniors downward along the chain. In fact, managers and human resources staff are workers too. But they just try to maintain their positions, rather than perform their job responsibilities well, because they too are earning money from their employers. The type of gender-based oppression working class women face is different from that of women in other classes.

The more workers try to oppress each other, the more satisfied capitalists are. Hierarchical oppression, from top to bottom, is therefore incentivized. Overtime pay is also a form of exploitation. In the workplace, “productivity” is extorted in various ways. Workers are asked to dress neatly, leading them to work overtime to try and afford nice clothes. Mothers must work long shifts from 7:30 a.m. until 6 or 7 p.m. The responsibility for taking care of elderly family members is also placed on their shoulders on top of covering their children’s education and pocket money. Some even have to work later than 7 p.m. Ma Cho said of her time in the factory:

I worked overtime regularly until 11 p.m. and there wasn't even a single day off in a month of work, so my health suffered. Even so, I had to keep going without taking a break as I had to send money home at the end of each month.

Ma Cho worked overtime because she wanted to fulfill her duties as a daughter and sister. This is an example of factory capitalists taking advantage of women's willingness to shoulder responsibility and the gendered role society assigns to women. One female factory worker at the Handa garment factory explained:

I like to work overtime. I work and think about how I'll be fine after a shower, no matter how tired I am. I'd do anything for my son and daughter who are left at my home village, after my husband's death. I make money to help my children continue their standard of living and education.

With wages barely above subsistence level, workers often cannot afford to send their children to school. They must rely on and even look forward to overtime wages. Even an additional 4,800 Myanmar Kyat per eight-hour workday makes a big difference to Myanmar's legislated minimum wage, which is insufficient to live on. Female workers worry about their children not finishing school and ending up in the same factories as their parents. Mothers hope that their children can be educated enough to escape a fate in a sweaty, factory hellhole, where workers are kept fed, but barely alive, just so they can reproduce and continue to grind under capitalism.

Most overtime workers are women. When asked about their lives and futures, both married and single women said they want to be able to provide for their families. Female workers can also be refused overtime and excluded until they outperform other workers during the daily shift from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. This is a form of oppression.

In the weeks right after the 2021 coup, factory workers worked only eight hours per day at most, but before then, some were working more than 10 hours a day. They had nowhere to report labor injustices and no government department would take their complaints seriously. One woman worker, sleep-deprived and exhausted from having to work until 10 p.m., said:

I think it's too much to work until 10 p.m. By then I'm way too tired to cook dinner and the restaurants have closed. Lacking sleep and being unable to eat well then makes me lose focus at work. Once I accidentally sewed the clothes I was wearing on my own body, as if in a trance. At night in my sleep I mistook my blankets for garments and shook them off to prepare for sewing. I want to cry when I'm told off for my items not passing quality control (sewing the wrong pattern, missing threads). I can't afford to fall short of the factory targets for even one hour.

Women Workers Fueling Economic Growth With Their Sleeping and Resting Hours

According to the Ministry of Commerce, garment exports from Myanmar under CMP were worth US \$4.28 billion from 1 October 2019 to 31 August 2020. The export value of CMP garments was US \$850 million in the fiscal year 2015-2016, but it tripled over the following two fiscal years. In 2016-2017, approximately US \$2 billion was earned from garment exports. The figure increased to an estimated US \$2.5 billion in 2017-2018 and US \$2.2 billion in the 2018 mini-budget period from April to September. In the fiscal year 2018-19, the garment export sector grew to US \$4.6 billion. CMP garments make up 30 percent of all exports in Myanmar.⁸

The lives of female workers as related in this article are a major component of the country's economic development. But

⁸ THO, (n.d.).

most people do not see such a connection; they think that the country would suffer without capitalist, profit-driven businessmen. In fact, richer countries rely on poorer countries and their multiple oppressions via third-party contractors exploiting labor. Female workers fuel the economic development of the nation by sacrificing their sleeping and resting times so that the garment sector can contribute 30 percent of all export income, a huge amount.

Conclusion

Under capitalist patriarchy, women workers must toil with a heavy heart, in addition to doing household chores such as cooking and washing, the tasks that help them to survive and continue to go to work the next day, and leaving their children with other family members. Eating and sleeping are only for being able to continue to work. They survive on minimal food and by showering in communal areas, and there is nothing left to cut out from their daily lives. Truly resting like a human, with the right to learn what they are interested in, and the right to prepare for their own future, are unreachable luxuries.

Mothers have to request help from their own mothers and mothers-in-law to look after their children. Mothers exchange important time together with their own children for a pittance wage at work. Employers who do not provide daycare centers are profiting from the labor of working mothers and mothers-in-law who look after workers' children. Employers exploit mothers day and night and do not assist breastfeeding mothers or their children who need constant care. Female workers' children and female family members who help workers get to work are also being exploited by employers.

The revenue generated from the garment sector increased to US \$4.6 billion in the 2018-2019 fiscal year, but the living standards of the female workers who create this revenue see no improvement in their lives. The 2021 military coup exacerbated their troubles as they have nowhere to complain about their grievances.

Peasant-turned-worker Ma Bank said:

I grew peanuts when I was a village farmer but I had to use palm oil for cooking.⁹ Then in Yangon, I couldn't afford to buy the shoes that I manufactured at the factory. In Tagu (April), shoes rejected by foreign buyers are always sold for cheap. But only the wealthy and celebrities come by car to buy these substandard shoes. Workers can't afford even these. No workers can afford to buy the clothes they produce no matter how long they work. The wage gap is glaringly obvious and workers still can't own the products they make. How can our society's education and health improve, with these wages that can't even provide a pair of shoes, or a garment made from that very labor? Yet these capitalists build factory after factory and grow their wealth. This clearly shows a large divide between workers' labor and their wages. In pursuit of profit, capitalists take every second of workers' labor.

Female workers can afford only the cheapest food and goods, which are often bad for their health. The everyday things they are compelled to use are far from the luxury items they produce with their lives on the line. They strive to support their families while barely staying alive themselves.

After 2021, many factories closed down, one after another, because the self-interest of their owners was affected by political instability. These owners did not bat their eyes when women workers, who once served them, became unemployed and destitute. Businesses in other capitalist countries that rely on selling and using the clothes, shoes and accessories produced by these Myanmar women workers also did not consider the fate of those newly unemployed workers.

Workers are deprived of their time, with their days and nights sold to the factories. Capitalists provide meager wages

⁹ In Myanmar, peanut oil is considered far superior to palm oil for cooking and eating.

through methods such as ‘skill-based pay’, ‘attendance incentives’, and overtime. This is clearly labor exploitation. In addition, they use gender-based oppressive ideologies (in employing more women than men) and practice gender-based work assignments.

To better understand the alienation of workers from the act of production in Myanmar, two things must be highlighted. First, individuals’ daily functions such as sleeping, eating and household chores are fed to the production process in addition to the working hours spent inside factories, and second, exploitation is enhanced by gender-based oppression. Therefore, patriarchy and capitalism depend upon each other to a point where it is uncertain which one comes first. If one were to go, would the other also?

Workers do not get to enjoy the fruits of their labor when employers and governments reap their labor as income for the nation. Workers also do not get to fully enjoy the social security funds which they have to contribute to monthly. Funds were lent to many factories during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the coup, those social security funds then fell into the military junta’s hands.

The people forced to work in factories since their youth that lent their voices to this article demonstrate that workers’ labor constitutes both their working hours and their supposed non-working hours. People who are buying and exploiting workers’ labor see them as inputs, markets, reserves, and not as individuals with lives.

This is the cruelty of capitalism.

The voices of women workers in this article show that the only ones who profit from the labor of Myanmar’s female factory workers are business owners and consumers in other capitalist countries.

References

- Eurocham Myanmar. (2022, January). *Myanmar Garment Sector Factsheet*. https://eurocham-myanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Myanmar-Garment-Sector-Factsheet_January-2022.pdf
- Phu Huynh. (2016, November). *Asia-Pacific Garment and Footwear Sector Research Note*. International Labor Organization. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_535188.pdf
- THO. (n.d.). ကိုဗစ်ကာလအတွင်း မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အထည်အလိပ် တင်ပို့မှုတန်ဖိုး ဒေါ်လာ ၄.၂၈ ဘီလီယံရှိ။ *The Myanmar Textile & Garment Industry Guide*. [https://www.textiledirectory.com.mm/industry-news/export-import/item/3585-during-the-covid-period,-myanmar-s-textile-exports-were-worth-\\$-4-28-billion.html](https://www.textiledirectory.com.mm/industry-news/export-import/item/3585-during-the-covid-period,-myanmar-s-textile-exports-were-worth-$-4-28-billion.html)

