

The Frontier of Feminism: Emotional Labor

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Abstract

Worldwide feminism has come a long way since the nineteenth century, when the first female factory workers fought for justice and achieved the right to vote. Women have made strides on educational, vocational, and economic fronts, and partially on the domestic front, and now have increased rights in many parts of the world. However, women's unpaid emotional work, which is marginalized by patriarchy and capitalism, remains inequitable and a key challenge. Women perform most of the emotional labor in many societies, including those in Myanmar. The marginalization of the economics of emotion in social development and economics is a glass divide maintained by patriarchy. Any advances made in women's rights are burdened by the compromises women must make to care for and maintain the psychological and social wellness of people and communities, be they local, regional or international. The place of emotional labor is particularly significant in a country like Myanmar, where people have been traumatized by up to two centuries of colonialism and authoritarian rule. Without equity and choice, the feminist movement will struggle to dismantle patriarchy. Emotional labor is therefore one of the last frontiers of feminism.

Introduction

While women have tried their best to resist patriarchy in their own lives for centuries,² feminism as a global movement began with the labor strikes by female factory workers in the western hemisphere. From the years 1834 to 1845, the female mill

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² Some of the many women forebearers to the feminist movement who individually advocated for women's rights and equality include Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges, and He-Yin Zhen.

workers of Lowell, Massachusetts in the United States of America (USA) held strikes and started a workers' union to protest against the low pay and harsh conditions that they had to endure.³ They did not have much success in transforming the political landscape but did petition a law to be signed to limit their working hours to 10 hours per day. They fought to protect themselves, instead of relying on men—their 'natural protectors'. In nineteenth century USA law, men were the legal guardians of women.⁴

In Myanmar, feminist movements started in the early twentieth century with a focus on equality of inheritance, marital rights, and abolishing violence against women.⁵ In the beginning, the feminist movement was an elitist and culturally conservative movement that advocated for the same privileges as men, and the entrenchment of women's role in society, therefore reinforcing existing gender stereotypes. Then, during the independence struggle, the feminist movement was incorporated into the nationalist movement. Later on, during the oppressive period of socialist and military rule, the authentic sisterhood of working women, students, and activists made human rights the basis of the women's movement. Over time, the Myanmar feminist movement came to fight for equitable political and economic space for women.

Although many writers describe women in Myanmar as observing equal rights to resources and social status as men, decades of oppression and armed conflict, and the economic deterioration of the country, have left women's rights issues a lower priority for national leaders compared to other pressing socio-political matters. The women of Myanmar continue to fight for their rights in the twenty-first century. However, the fight is usually confined to education, labor, livelihood and land rights, and protection from gender-based violence, which many women

³ American Federation of Labor, 2022.

⁴ Women and the Law, 2010.

⁵ Aye Lei Tun et al., 2019.

in Myanmar are subjected to, and connected to that, the rights of women to their own bodies.⁶

Feminism has made great strides since the nineteenth century when the female mill workers in Lowell fought for justice, and feminism in Myanmar has made further strides since the country's accession to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1997. Although there is still a long road ahead for sustained gender equality in Myanmar and elsewhere, women have had success on the educational, vocational, economic, and (partially) domestic fronts, where they are entitled to rights similar or equal to those of men in most parts of the world. However, there remains one form of labor that they struggle to gain equality in: emotional work. The extra emotional work that women engage in is only now starting to be recognized.⁷ As a form of unpaid labor, emotional labor is devalued in capitalist and patriarchal societies.

In consequence, humanity is devalued as well. For it is in our ability to empathize, to nurture and care, to embrace each other in kinship, and in our altruism, that we find our morality and humanity. It is also with our ability to feel and manage emotions that we can create works of art, develop visions for the future, endure to achieve our dreams, learn lessons effectively, and form cultured societies. As such, the work of nurturing and caring for emotional needs and facilitating the growth of emotional intelligence is a pillar of human civilization. Such a value should not be undermined, but it has been. One need only see how little funding is allocated to the mental health and social work sectors in Myanmar,⁸ or how very little is paid to childcare workers and teachers in wages as reported by CCI France Myanmar.⁹ It is obvious how devalued emotional labor is in Myanmar and globally.

⁶ A Google search with the keywords "women's rights Myanmar" undertaken from Myanmar in 2019 resulted in current affairs articles mostly focusing on violence against women, livelihood access and labor rights (see Asian Development Bank et al., 2016; Ei Thandar Myint, 2016; UN Women, 2019; Wai Moe, 2015).

⁷ Emotional Labor, 2016; Johnson, 2018.

⁸ Nguyen et al., 2018.

⁹ CCI France Myanmar, 2019.

Forms and Distribution of Emotional Labor

Emotional labor does not have a consistent definition in the social sciences literature. For Hochschild, emotional labor consists of managing and presenting emotions in our lives.¹⁰ This emotional work is aimed to promote the wellbeing of others and to provide emotional support.¹¹

For some, emotional labor includes mental labor. Mental labor consists of planning and action regulation for other people.¹² Though there may be distinctions between emotional and mental processes as forms of intrapersonal work, some aspects of the two are interwoven. This is especially seen if mental labor is executed in the context of fulfilling relational roles and maintaining relationships. Emotional labor is most seen in intimate relationships, such as between parent and child, family members, and within marital and intimate relationships. Some emotional labor also exists in the service and care industries, such as in hospitality, nursing, counseling, teaching, support positions in organizations, and in humanitarian and activist work.

The most extreme violation of emotional labor is gender-based violence against women, such as rape. Physical, emotional and sexual abuse are major forms of violence that even children suffer due to the unmet emotional needs of perpetrators, who are also victims. Patriarchy has a dehumanizing effect on males, which has facilitated their sense of entitlement and objectification of others.¹³ In Myanmar, gender-based violence often occurs during civil war, perpetrated by soldiers who are usually traumatized themselves through their socialization as fighters and by battle experiences. It also occurs in marital homes by male spouses who, as household breadwinners, experience the complex trauma of economic insecurity and microaggressions

¹⁰ As cited in Brook, 2019.

¹¹ Umberson et al., 2015.

¹² Resch, 1989, p. 103.

¹³ hooks, 2004.

experienced through strict gender role socialization by hegemonic culture.¹⁴

In the domestic space, while the average man across the world may be becoming more involved at home with childcare and chores, much of this is mental and physical rather than emotional work. Through exposure to global trends with the opening of the country between 2011 and early 2021, men in Myanmar may also adopt this pattern. However, women still bear the brunt of mental and emotional work far more than men.¹⁵ This is true for most women in Myanmar, where supportive caregiving and nurturing is expected of them.¹⁶ Men may cook for their families for example, exercising mental labor in planning for meals, and physical labor in preparing and cooking the meals, but they may not consider what family members actually like to eat, or how to manage the menu to accommodate family members so they feel loved and respected for their unique selves. This consideration of others' preferences is emotional work. Fathers may help with changing baby diapers or supervising children, but they may not play with them, or may only be responsive to, rather than be proactively attentive to, children's ongoing needs, unlike mothers.

Being involved in a routine of care and attending to the minute changes of an infant's needs creates a holding environment for a child. Winnicott discusses the significance of the emotional and psychological holding provided by a caregiver by describing how an infant feels safety, comfort, and a sense of integration.¹⁷ From this perspective, fathers *take care of* the child, while

¹⁴ Although there is little research exploring the cultural and sociopolitical trauma that men in Myanmar have experienced, this hypothesis is informed by a rich literature in other countries, where soldiers who have been through war receive more diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as by anecdotes from men in Myanmar, and bell hooks' writings on men's will to love (2004).

¹⁵ Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017.

¹⁶ Pyo Let Han discussed the concepts of production and reproduction labor, and their relevance to women's rights (2019). Also refer to Silvia Federici (2012).

¹⁷ Winnicott, 1960.

mothers *care for* the child. In other words, fathers take the care and use it on the child—it is a task that he accomplishes—while the mother holds the constant availability of care to be given to the child, as a service she provides. The investment in these two manners of care is different. When something is approached as a task, it is brief and needs only a momentary assertion of effort. When something is a service, there is a requirement of availability and interactivity that demands the creating and holding of space, so as to be readily responsive. This takes an extended, consistent, and sustained assertion of effort. Thus, the quality and quantity of mental and emotional labor provided in the care of children differs between fathers and mothers in most societies.¹⁸

Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion describes containment as the caregiver receiving and transforming emotional projections from the child, so as to do for the child the emotional work of self-regulation.¹⁹ Children inevitably have tantrums and display resistance during their developmental growth. As such, parents have to receive and transform emotional projections from their children. They have to manage the strong emotions felt by both parents and children, and then teach the children more productive ways of meeting their needs. To do so in a manner that is not punitive or reactive requires containment efforts by the parent. Mothers often provide emotional support for their children, while fathers engage in behavioral discipline. Behavioral control, which is done more by fathers, is an activation relationship through which children are triggered to regulate themselves. It requires less holding and containing because it is an external behavioral contingency response. However, emotional support requires the emotional work of receiving another's emotions and transforming them into regulated affect. This is observed more in mothers than in fathers.²⁰

Of course, fathers who provide more emotional labor in their care than mothers do exist. However, by and large, it is

¹⁸ Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017.

¹⁹ Perry, 2010

²⁰ Bentley & Fox, 1991; Van Lissa et al., 2019.

mainly the mothers who take on the lion's share of the emotional labor of care in the form of a holding environment and containment for children. This imbalance of emotional labor is not limited to child rearing and can also be seen in other caregiving relationships, such as between couples, and between adult children and their elderly parents. Women tend to engage in more emotional labor: discussing relationship issues, supporting partners' emotional needs, and regulating their own emotions to create harmony in intimate partner relationships.²¹ Sixty-six percent of caregivers to elderly parents and other family members and friends in the USA are women, and the value of their informal care is between US \$148-188 billion per year.²² Although research on women's emotional labor in Myanmar is scarce (since social science research, let alone psychology research, is scarce there), one can assume that the situation is similar because of the conservative gender role assignments in majority society.

Marginalization of the Economics of Emotions

It is the work of both women and men to feel and manage emotions. When men are not accountable for emotional work, they are also disadvantaged under patriarchy, as discussed by bell hooks:

The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.²³

²¹ Umberson et al., 2015.

²² National Center on Caregiving, 2003.

²³ hooks, 2004, p. 66.

Depriving men of the ability to feel and manage emotions deprives them of their humanity as well. Humans are hard-wired with mirror neurons to have empathy toward others.²⁴ Directing the energy that arises from instinctive emotional reactions, which are activated by diverse experiences with others, into productive actions for the betterment of all humans requires regulation of the emotional self. Thus, emotional work is part of all human responses to one's environment. It is not only women's subjective realities that are oppressed and marginalized under patriarchy, but also the experiences of other groups, such as sexual and ethnic minorities, children and youth, the underprivileged class, *and* men.

In my clinical and teaching work experiences in Myanmar, I have encountered many women with better emotional vocabulary and skills to manage and regulate their feelings than men. During workshops related to stress management and self-care, it was usually female participants who were able to share ideas about healthy techniques and methods for relaxation and stress relief. As such, some men in Myanmar have been disadvantaged by limitations under patriarchy to learn linguistic and other effective avenues for regulating their emotions. In professions where such emotional skills are part of a duty of care, the effect of the psychic self-mutilation of men is clear: witness the scarcity of male counselors, male nurses, male teachers and so forth, in Myanmar.

Why and how this part of human experience is “killed off”, devalued and marginalized can be traced to the values of the patriarchal system. Patriarchy is defined by its separation, competition, and hierarchy.²⁵ When empathy arises from connections made between people, there is a sense of mutuality, which breaks down hierarchy. With connections, separation becomes difficult to maintain. Connections also create collaboration and cooperation, which are counterintuitive to competition. The feminine experience is characterized by connection.²⁶

²⁴ Acharya & Shukla, 2012.

²⁵ Sultana, 2012.

²⁶ Jordan et al., 1991.

Feminism, with its valuing of feminine experiences and human rights, should be and has been about connection, collaboration, and subjectivities. One characteristic of the subjective is the emotional realm.

Tharapi Than and others discuss how feminism has been disguised under the labels of gender and social justice or women's empowerment in Myanmar.²⁷ In this way feminism becomes directed toward gender equality and women's rights. These labels and causes have more to do with power distribution, objective justice and abstract morality than with the subjective needs of humankind, and the social and gender relations that feminism addresses and reconceptualizes, as with Adrienne Rich and bell hook's versions of feminism.²⁸ Feminism in Myanmar is not sufficiently directed toward the nurturing, caring for, and healing of people's suffering. It has not been directed to the emotional and relational connections that we need in order for us to heal and influence ourselves and one another.

According to Handunnetti and Nang Phyu Phyu Lin,²⁹ Myanmar media and culture continues to portray women as family figures and homemakers, roles that provide emotional and mental labor. The significance of this is not addressed sufficiently in current feminist movements. The above-mentioned research found that in media representations most women's work ends with childbirth and motherhood. Nurturing and caregiving, which are the main features of motherhood, are forms of emotional and mental labor. These transitions in the kind of labor from paid to unpaid are missed in considering not only the participation but also the contribution of women in the social and economic development of the country.

Although feminism is a humanist movement for the fulfillment of all human potential, when it comes to addressing the

²⁷ Tharapi Than et al., 2018.

²⁸ Adrienne Rich discussed the work of mothers and women as nurturers for men in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986), while bell hooks discussed the emotional work in men and women in several of her works on love, such as *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (2004), and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2021).

²⁹ Handunnetti & Nang Phyu Phyu Lin, 2016.

fulfillment of the emotional and wellness needs of others, feminism loses its significance, even in the humanitarian sector, when compared to other fights for social change. It is seen mostly as the private work of women in their communities. As such, within feminist movements, there is a blind spot in how societies, that have been existing under patriarchy, need to heal and transform their subjective experiences alongside the restorative justice for human rights. In studying this last frontier of gender equity and feminism, I have come to understand the extent of the marginalization of emotional labor under patriarchy, and to conceptualize the economics of emotions.

The Economics of Emotions

My own experiences as someone of female gender, a mother, a wife, a humanist activist, and an entrepreneur, led me to question the role of femininity, in relation to opportunities and constraints, strengths and limitations, in life, and therefore, led me to the economics of emotions. To add to this mix is my own cultural heritage as a person from Myanmar, with sociopolitical and familial histories that influence part of my personality to favor emotional sensitivity and intuition. I came a long way before recognizing and accepting that “wearing my heart on my sleeve” is not only a natural and authentic part of who I am as a person, but also a strength to be reckoned with. This acceptance and realization started me on a series of questions about how emotions are valued in many diverse human cultures.

Across cultures and throughout history, women are often tasked with holding the emotional, social and moral life of their families, communities and societies.³⁰ This social role places much responsibility on women and brings benefits to them. We are connected as humans and social beings. In psychology, emotions are studied in the context of the social environment, and theories of personality are about theories of interaction between emotions and social behaviors.³¹ The Chinese anarcho-

³⁰ Cruea, 2005.

³¹ Eisenberg, 2006.

feminist He-Yin Zhen wrote several essays about the social relations embedded in gender that underlie her understanding of feminism.³² The social exchange of emotions, with the costs and gains of emotional transactions, and gendered labor distributions, form the basis of my understanding of the economics of emotions in patriarchal societies.

My experiences of marrying a businessman and studying economics during college heavily influenced my application of economics to the emotional realm. My conversations with him inspired me to create a language for the concept of emotional economics. Our shared interest in the study of humanities was also fertile ground for my exploration of philosophy, including Buddhist ideas, and those of Erich Fromm and Jean-Paul Sartre. Much of my philosophical orientation is toward the existential school of thought and it is from there that I understand humanism. Meanwhile, through my closest female companion, I have gotten in touch with the experience and power of the feminine and explored feminist ideas, informed by the feminist perspectives of Adrienne Rich, He-Yin Zhen, Simone de Beauvoir, and bell hooks. In this regard, I think of feminism as humanism.

My studies in family systems and general systems theories as a professional marriage and family therapist introduced me to Gregory Bateson's concept of the theory of communication in systems,³³ Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology of systems,³⁴ and John Gottman's model on marital relationships.³⁵ These theories informed my thinking on how relational transactions, emotional resonances, and systemic roles impact human behaviors. My professional home in psychodynamic perspectives also shapes my thinking about human psychology, unconscious dynamics, drives and needs, the intersubjectivity between people, and the larger symbolic archetypes in our psyches. Such aspects of the human experience play a significant role in what motivates us, and how we act on our conflicts and toward our needs.

³² Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013.

³³ Bateson, 1979.

³⁴ As cited in Evans, 2023.

³⁵ Gottman & Silver, 2015.

The social context of my upbringing plays no small part in the development of my hypothesis on the economics of emotions. I was born in Burma (Myanmar) to parents who were middle class professionals during somewhat turbulent times. There were student protests against the military socialist government that had isolated and bankrupted the nation. My parents met for the first time within months of the 1974 student protests of the U Thant funeral crisis. There were several protests off and on during the early years of their marriage, then I was born in 1977.

My father was born in 1943, during the second world war when Japan occupied Burma, at a time of transition between colonial rule by the British Empire, and independence for Burma. The story that was told about his birth was that he was in his mother's womb, close to term, when a bomb exploded near my grandmother. She jumped into a ditch to avoid the impact, and a piece of shrapnel flew so close past her head that it cut off her hair bun. A few more inches closer and she would not have survived—and neither would my father have. I would never have come into existence. My father hid as a child in the jungles and the outskirts of towns for the first five years of his life. The war ended in 1945, the country gained independence as a nation state in 1948, and insurgencies broke out very soon after. There has never been a single day of total peace in the country since.

I mention my father because he has lived with anxiety most of his life. Understanding the circumstances of his birth, and the sociopolitical history of the country he grew up and lived in, helps explain why this is so. My father's anxiety is no anomaly for people of our cultural and national heritage. Through my own involvement and participation in Myanmar's communities, I have come to learn that anxiety and emotional sensitivity plays a huge role in who we are as a people. Research on adverse childhood experiences highlights how early life experiences of stressful events such as unsafe and inadequate living environments, abuse, violence, and incarceration of family members have a significant impact on the development of the human brain, chronic diseases, behavioral issues and mental illness, unhealthy

lifestyles, and cause psychosocial difficulties in education and occupation.³⁶

I, as a woman, a wife and a working mother, but also as a queer woman who identifies as female, and as a person from a country burdened by colonialism, war, oppressive rule, and displacement, have so far explained how emotions have value, how emotions manifest in daily lives and social exchanges, and how they are central to the economics of being human. Though the drive to understand human economics from an emotional perspective comes from my personal history, the study of it is universal, spanning across cultures and nations. As I mentioned earlier, much of the development of emotional economics comes from various established theories on feminism, human behavior and psychology. However, since emotions are subjective experiences, it would be inappropriate to study them through a completely objective approach. Thus, the study of emotional economics involves subjectivities: of myself as researcher and of the subjects studied. Feminist research models include the subjectivity of the investigator so as to reduce the power imbalance of the researcher and subject, and this research is an example of that.³⁷

Economics, in its essence, is the study or knowledge of the production, consumption and transfer of resources and commodities.³⁸ It is often discussed in terms of monetary value, represented by goods and services. However, money is not the only wealth in society. Health is wealth, and with it, mental health is wealth as well. Without healthy bodies, healthy minds and healthy cultures, which are our human *resources* and thus our human *capital*, we cannot contribute to the wealth of society. The World Health Organization describes mental health as an integral part of health, with mental illness severely reducing

³⁶ Felitti et al., 1998.

³⁷ Brayton et al., n.d.

³⁸ Khumalo, 2012.

productivity at work.³⁹ Characteristics of each culture can also affect how human capital is accumulated.⁴⁰

The emotional economy is an invisible economy. This is because the value and worth of emotions cannot translate to concrete measures such as money and trade, due to the nature of emotions as subjective experiences instead of objective products or events. However, the common language of economics can symbolize the value that emotions bring to the economy, not just in trade and gross domestic product, but also in the social and cultural development of our people as a nation. Given women are tasked with this invisible form of emotional labor, especially in conservative and patriarchal societies like Myanmar, it is important to consider the immense significance of emotional labor provided by women to the economic and social development of the country.

Concepts in the Economics of Emotions

The main concepts of the economics of emotions center around emotional transactions, and with that the mechanism and effects of such exchanges, such as emotional currency, emotional labor, emotional capital, emotional bankruptcy, and emotional reserves. Before we define each concept and their processes, the definition of emotion has to be first made explicit. Emotion, for the purposes of this article, is the “complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological changes that influence thought and behavior”.⁴¹ This includes embodied arousals, expressions manifested in behaviors, and subjective experiences.

Emotions are felt experiences, and therefore cause physiological responses in the body. These responses are triggered by both neurochemical reactions and hormonal stimulations.⁴² The neural network and endocrine activation often occurs in the presence of environmental stimuli. Neuroscience and stress

³⁹ World Health Organization, 2022.

⁴⁰ van Hoorn, 2016.

⁴¹ Cherry, 2022.

⁴² Cherry, 2022.

studies show links between environment and physiological reactions that become embodied memories for humans, changing their physiological make-up.⁴³ The majority of these studies have focused on samples of traumatized people, so their generalizability to populations who have not experienced intense attacks on their physical and psychological safety is questionable.

In Myanmar, many people were oppressed under colonialism from 1824 to 1948, and under authoritarian regimes from 1962 to the present era. Although there is no way to measure the prevalence of trauma in the entire population of Myanmar, it would be reasonable to conclude that a significant, if not majority of the population, has been traumatized through encounters with the life challenges and oppression encountered under such regimes.⁴⁴ Studies on emotional memory, language and learning suggest that physiological phenomena can be applied to non-traumatized populations as well.⁴⁵ Educational leaders recognize the significance of a strong foundation of social and emotional skills in the development of students' learning, skills, and attitudes.⁴⁶ Before any learning skills of academic subjects can be taught, the social and emotional skills have to be taught first. Without educated individuals, the economic, cultural and political development of the nation cannot be built.⁴⁷

With emotions playing a significant role in mental processes of memory and learning, and in relationships between people, emotional labor that manages and regulates the necessary emotional environment for these aspects of daily living and human development becomes a valuable resource. How much the person who provides the care can bring into emotional economics will determine the quality of the outcome of human existence. The person's ability to engage in emotional economics is influenced by their "richness" in emotional currency, emotional

⁴³ Van der Kolk, 2014.

⁴⁴ Su Su Maung, 2017a.

⁴⁵ Tyng et al., 2017.

⁴⁶ World Bank, 2018, p. 112-114.

⁴⁷ King, 1947; Mintz, 2017; Shor, 1992.

capital, and emotional reserves, and the prevention of emotional bankruptcy. These terms are explained below.

Emotional Labor:

As mentioned earlier in this article, emotional labor is managing and presenting emotions in various aspects of our lives and may include the mental labor of planning and regulating the actions other people.

Emotional Currency:

This refers to the behaviors used for transactions of emotional labor. These tokens of exchanges include an exhaustive list of relational behaviors, responsibilities and tasks, that all share the themes of care, connection and transformation. Examples are soothing talk, affectionate gestures like hugs, stopping one's work to pay attention to another, staying home so another person can have their own leisure time, cooking someone their favorite meal, repressing one's opinions to not hurt another person's feelings, giving up on one's goals to fulfill another person's dreams, etc.

Emotional Capital:

This refers to social and emotional skills, resilience factors, and the tolerance threshold that a person has when engaging in various emotional currency exchanges in order to provide emotional labor. Examples of emotional capital are stress management skills, communication skills, internal capacity for empathy and compassion, and patience. This may be affected by how separate or connected the public and private lives of a person are, and how much of the same capital is shared between the two realms. Emotional capital can be replenished through the emotional labor provided to the person from others within their support system and the overall cultural system.

Emotional Bankruptcy:

When emotional capital is low or depleted, caregiver burnout occurs, causing emotional bankruptcy, which is exhibited in specific behaviors in the individual and within relationships. Though individuals may still have social and emotional skills, they lack the energy or motivation to implement them, or when used they no longer produce the same effect. The distress tolerance is low, and the person is no longer resilient enough to bounce back after each effort for connection and care, leaving the person unable to provide care and make connections with others.

Emotional Reserves:

When there is a surplus of support and psychological nourishment, emotional reserves can result. This surplus can be experienced as a secure attachment, a spiritual core within the self that can be easily accessible, a sense of faith, hope and purpose, and memories of positive emotional content that increase self-esteem, feelings of contentment, and a sense of wellbeing. Emotional reserves may exist even if there is emotional bankruptcy. However, the reserve may be protected with limited accessibility to ensure the emotional and psychological survival of the person.

Valuing Unpaid Labor and Feminism

Patriarchy thrives in separation, while emotional labor is conducted in human connections. Women's roles in society are entrenched in connections within and between familial and communal relationships. Jordan and others explain women's identity development as being shaped by the relationships and connections they have with others.⁴⁸ As such, the devaluation of emotional economics is a deep reflection of a patriarchal system that fails to recognize the experiences of women.

⁴⁸ Jordan et al., 1991.

Although the impact of emotional economics, and at its core emotional labor, is more than significant in the overall development and human capital of Myanmar, its value is unacknowledged and marginalized. Capitalism and patriarchy favor the inequitable consumption and production of emotional labor. Who provides emotional labor, who receives emotional currencies, who cares for those who are emotionally bankrupt, who can trade emotional capital, and who holds emotional reserves are structured by an imbalanced system where women and less privileged groups are producers and workers without fair compensation and without equitable reciprocity.

Focusing solely on objective productivity value, such as arguments for equal pay, and access to opportunities in the workforce for women and oppressed groups, would reduce them to commodities in a capitalist world. The emphasis on productivity that capitalism, which is a patriarchal system, endorses, objectifies humans as production machines. Even a feminist's attention to the labor of reproduction, as opposed to production, fits into this mentalization of humans as just participants in the creation of the new labor force in operational terms.⁴⁹ What is inherent in reproduction but is not spoken about in society is the emotional labor required in caregiving. As mentioned, emotional labor is necessary to achieve well-adjusted people who can learn successfully and engage meaningfully across a spectrum of sectors in the world. Though reproductive labor happens in the private realm, the focus on the value of this form of labor has been considered only in terms of the public realm of productivity. The price paid for reproduction—the emotional work—is not considered a legitimate form of labor, therefore garnering associated labor rights and gender equality.

Although equality in livelihood, access to resources, and self-determination are important rights, focusing on them without addressing the relational aspects of women's contributions of emotional currencies, capital and reserves in the creation of people and environments that allow for these to happen only

⁴⁹ Pyo Let Han, 2019.

limits the potential of feminism. It separates the rights of women and groups marginalized by patriarchy from humanism and gendered experiences. As Ramsey-Lefevre argues, feminism is humanism.⁵⁰ According to humanism, the value of human beings should not be limited to capitalism and mechanistic terms such as ‘productivity’. The human quality aspects of human resources bring value to work in terms of soft skills, learning agility and resilience, and as such human psychology and psychosocial wellness have to be considered.⁵¹

It is only in health that humans can thrive and grow. The health of the nation needs to be paid attention to, and this requires the ethics of care—emotional labor—done by the many who participate in nation building on all of its economic, social, cultural and political fronts. Without considering emotional labor, feminism will still be stymied by patriarchy, and women’s role in society will remain marginalized and devalued. For as long as only women are delegated tasks of emotional labor and men are exempted, there will be no gender equality, and men will not be held responsible to participate in this form of nation building. The health of individuals and communities are seen as results of the private needs of the recipients of care and the private motivations of the providers of the care, in other words, they are seen as part of the world of women, and not part of the public sphere, which is still determined by patriarchy as the world of men, with debates in the language of power, which drives policies and programs. Feminism is not just charitable acts and humanitarian work driven by the private passions of individuals and groups, separate from the public cause of the nation building. Feminism is nation building. Just as women nurture their children, partners, and families to health and success, feminism supports and facilitates the nation to health and success.

The separation of public and private work has to be reconsidered and reconfigured in Myanmar, and there has to be an allowance for connections between the two. Women’s work

⁵⁰ Ramsey-Lefevre, 2013.

⁵¹ Su Su Maung, 2017b.

should not exist only in the private feminine realm of emotional and relational work, or only in the public masculine realm of the economic and political—the unpaid or the paid—but should be in both realms. This integration of the private and the public, and that of the feminine and the masculine, is the antidote to patriarchy, along with the fight for restorative justice and equitable rights.

Patriarchy must be overturned, because patriarchy separates the paid, public and masculine lives from the unpaid, private and feminine lives, which is reflected in the separation of emotional labor from the labor of reproduction, production, and nation building. The reconfiguration of the relationship between public and private realms, and the mutual integration of gendered experiences must occur. As such, feminists ought to be inclusive of the need for social changes in the construction of gender and the structural roles of producer, provider, and consumer of emotional economics in society.

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