

WAVES OF UPHEAVAL IN MYANMAR



GENDERED TRANSFORMATIONS
AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

edited by
JENNY HEDSTRÖM &
ELISABETH OLIVIOUS

Waves of Upheaval

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Political Transitions and Gendered
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Foreword

Chie Ikeya

The complex nature of the path that women in Myanmar tread in negotiating gendered relations of power amidst profound political and economic transformations – the topic explored in this book – was highlighted poignantly for me in 2014. In that year, I co-organized an international conference on ‘New Approaches to Myanmar History’ with Dr Margaret Wong, the Chair of the History Department at the University of Yangon, Myanmar, intended as a small step towards reviving scholarly ties. In what I read as a sign of how much had changed in Myanmar since 2011, the conference took place without much ado. Organized around four themes – Buddhism, art and architecture, transnational and intra-Asian history, and women’s and gender history – it attracted over 180 attendees and generated lively translingual exchanges in Burmese and English. However, there was a moment in the late afternoon panel on women’s and gender history that crystallized what had *not* changed. Presenting on the topic of ‘Women in Myanmar History’, Dr Wong spoke favourably about relations between men and women in the country. Women in Myanmar, she emphasized, had historically enjoyed autonomy, freedom and a social standing as the complementary counterpart, not the inferior, of men. Marriage and motherhood were not institutions of oppression but domains in which true partnership between men and women was forged and the full potential of women was actualized.

Now this was, in my view, an idealized rather than historicized portrayal of women in Myanmar. And it was not, by any measure, a novel way of understanding the history of the country. In fact, it was an abiding trope seeded by the encounter with British imperialism. British colonial authorities praised Burmese women as the freest women in the Orient, unencumbered by the patriarchal practices such as polygamy, veiling, and child marriage that were presumed to be endemic to other Oriental civilizations. The teachings of the Buddha had made Burma an exceptional society that conferred upon its

women independence and social equality, they insisted. British imperialists deployed this image of Burmese women, which constituted Burma and its population as essentially Buddhist, to ‘otherize’ Muslims, as despotic, degenerate and fanatic, and to conjure fear and panic about the dangers of Muslim empires and domination. This colonial form of knowledge was appropriated and propagated enthusiastically by colonized subjects who considered the Buddhist Burman the heart and soul – and the rightful master – of a sovereign Burmese nation in the making.

The purported liberty of Burmese women is not just a matter of national pride. Its imperilment, imagined and otherwise, has served to authorize the detention, displacement, and dispossession of those who are rendered foreign and domestic enemies of the nation, as we have recently witnessed in the persecution of the Rohingya as ‘Bengali terrorists’. It is a foundational national myth that has underwritten a system of discrimination and differential inclusion that consigns racial and religious minorities to second-class status. It is a sacrosanct belief that has harmed and marginalized the very women it ostensibly celebrates and honours. The idea that Myanmar has never needed feminism because it does not suffer from sexism – confirmed by official pronouncements by the government that discrimination against women does not exist in the country – has banished from collective memory the contentious history of women agitating, organizing, and mobilizing to address the penalties of being a woman or a girl in Myanmar. It is a deceptive narrative that has suppressed public discussions of, and attempts at redressing, the complex and diverse experiences and legacies of systemic gender inequality.

What compelled Dr Wong to deliver such a conservative talk on women in Myanmar? My guess is that it was a calculated decision, one that speaks to the constraints and challenges that women in Myanmar face. Few women, not least those belonging to an ethnic minority, as does Dr Wong, who is Sino-Burmese, had risen to the position at the university that she then occupied. The historical profession, as with academia more generally, in Myanmar is a male-dominated world. Ministers of education, rectors of universities and directors of research centres are almost exclusively men. No doubt she anticipated that a women-organized event such as our conference, publicized as a rethinking of the way in which Myanmar history had been told and taking place at a ‘historic’ moment of Myanmar’s liberalization, might hurt egos and stoke anxieties among her male colleagues. Tellingly, she had invited three honoured guests to the conference, all of whom were

male emeritus professors. Throughout the day, they were seated, in turns, at the head of the conference table flanked by a handful of junior male faculty. While they played the ceremonial role of masters of the event, the cadre of women faculty, senior and junior, who handled all the preparations for the conference, sat at a remove in a corner of the room, in a symbolic self-deprecation of their intellect. The gendered labour and performance of the Burmese women at the conference served to affirm their fidelity to their nation, to their men and to the normative values of their nation in a time of transition.

The gendered dynamics of the political transformation in Myanmar are probed and unravelled with care and clarity in this volume, which represents a new generation of feminist scholars, researchers, teachers, and activists working on, and often in, Myanmar. The contributions not only dispel the national myth and belief about gender equality in Myanmar; they also disrupt the nationalist ‘move to innocence’: the strategy of blaming British colonialism and capitalism for any traces of gender oppression (along with virtually all forms of social strife, not least racial and religious). As the volume shows, over the last decade of transition out of military rule to quasi-civilian rule, the powerful and the privileged in Myanmar have consistently dismissed opportunities to tackle gendered structures of inequality, insecurity, and violence, not just reinstating but in fact enhancing male privilege and patriarchal institutions.

Many of the contributors to this book were beneficiaries of the military-led political and economic liberalizations that began in 2011, which enabled local and international researchers and students to conduct in-person, on-site fieldwork in locations, over durations, on topics and materials and with funding and freedom that had all been unthinkable for many decades. As a result, they were afforded an intimate exploration of Myanmar’s transition and its impact. Together, they have forged a community of talented and determined interrogators and interlocutors of a kind that I could have only dreamed of when I began researching modern Burmese history 20 years ago. They stand as proof that women’s and gender studies is no longer a lonely, neglected corner of Burma-Myanmar studies but a force to be reckoned with.

In the following pages, they offer richly textured accounts and analyses of the meanings and implications of the political developments of the last decade for women in Myanmar. Based on micro-level studies of everyday life, they foreground the analytic frameworks of gender and intersectional-

ity – that is, the intersection of gender with other categories of difference and systems of power such as ethnicity, class and religion. All contributions underscore the differential positioning of people in Myanmar and their different experiences of and perspectives on the political transition, even as they highlight broad, persistent patterns in gender inequality and insecurity across and beyond the period of transition. Even as those closer to the elites, namely Buddhists and Burmans, gained economic mobility and security, historically minoritized groups became more marginalized, widening disparities. In some parts of the country, such as in Kachin state or in Rakhine state, attacks, displacement and human rights violations by the Myanmar military intensified. Elsewhere, ceasefire deals, development agendas and business investments in former conflict zones deepened familiar forms of precarity such as forced labour conscription by the military, land grabbing, and heroin and methamphetamine epidemics. Only in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup in which the Myanmar army weaponized itself against the ethnic and religious majority Burmans and Buddhists was there widespread reckoning with the fact that the regime change had done little to dismantle the violent political economy that has prevailed in Myanmar. Political and economic liberalization had proceeded without demilitarization.

The ‘transition’ has therefore made feminist organizing and mobilizing against militarized, masculinist regimes of governance more, not less, urgent. At the same time, it has presented women with new opportunities and pathways for bargaining with patriarchal, militarist authorities and institutions. Many, though not all, women who had once devoted their lives to armed struggles against the Myanmar government have become leaders, brokers and supporters of peacebuilding movements. Their participation in the peace process, as the volume demonstrates, is not attributable to some intrinsic feminine inclination to peace. They are motivated into action by their embodied knowledge of the disproportionate burdens and repercussions of armed conflict on women and children. They have borne the brunt of inhabiting and repairing spaces of unrelenting destruction and dispossession. Long after wars have officially ended and ceasefires have been concluded, women have continued to perform the everyday work of rehabilitating bodies, lands, livelihoods, families and communities that have been tortured, mutilated, and plundered.

Writing almost three decades ago, the feminist scholar Anne McClintock observed that ‘nowhere has a national or socialist revolution brought a full

feminist revolution in its terrain’ nor has ‘feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than the maidservant to nationalism.’ Myanmar has been no exception. Nevertheless, the last decade has brought visibility to women’s political engagement and participation in unprecedented ways. Women in Myanmar are shaping public debates and collective narratives more powerfully than they did in the past. Their efforts to name and challenge systems of gender-based exclusion, exploitation, and violence have made the public denial and erasure of these problems and injustices more difficult, but not impossible or implausible. Indeed, the history of Myanmar, as elsewhere, teaches us that periods of upheaval – whether they be wars, revolutions, economic crises, or military coups – are always watershed moments for women in both material and symbolic ways. They invariably entail political and social campaigns to control and regulate the lives and bodies of women in the name of a greater cause, such as the controversial ‘national race and religion protection laws’ (2015), which outlaw polygamy and restrict interfaith marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men. The contributions assembled here illuminate the promises and perils of large-scale transformations and the vital importance of gender as an analytic category in understanding those transformations.

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We also want to extend our heartfelt thanks to the reviewers of individual chapters in the book, and to the reviewers of the collection as a whole, who gave us useful and generous feedback. At NIAS Press, Gerald Jackson has been a steadfast supporter, and the excellent copyediting undertaken by Monica Janowski was much appreciated.

While the kind of research that underpins this book is, at this time, no longer possible in Myanmar, the community of scholars and activists which this book represents will continue to critically analyse the political situation, draw attention to injustice, violence and oppression, and in various ways support ongoing struggles for a just, equal and democratic Myanmar.

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