

Coming to See Gender Discrimination as Structural

A Scholar's Journey

Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi and Matthew J. Walton

Dr. Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi is a pioneering anthropologist of gender in Myanmar. She was the first female Burmese Senior Research Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, and has been the Convenor of that college's International Gender Studies programme. Her dissertation from the Australian National University was given the 'Excellence in Gender Studies' award and her academic career has been characterized by close engagement with a range of different groups in Myanmar, conducting research, organizing seminars and trainings, and generally advocating for greater awareness of and political action on institutionalized gender inequalities. Dr. Matthew J Walton is currently an Assistant Professor of Comparative Political Theory in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. From 2013 to 2018, he was the inaugural Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford. His work focuses primarily on Buddhist political thought, as well as on ethnic and political identities in contemporary Myanmar.

Mar and Matt worked closely together during their time at Oxford, convening the Oxford-Myanmar Policy Brief Series, as well as hosting numerous scholars, activists and political figures at seminars and conferences. They were also co-leads of the research project *Understanding 'Buddhist Nationalism' in Myanmar: Religion, Gender, Identity, and Conflict in a Political Transition*, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (ESRC). In that capacity, they worked together over several years, conducting interviews and carrying out analysis of sermons, journals and speeches made by monks and laypeople associated with Myanmar's 'Buddhist nationalist' movement.

They are still producing academic outputs from this project, which also had a policy-oriented component, providing regular briefings to NGOs, CBOs, embassies and others to disseminate their findings and help to produce a more nuanced analysis of this recent movement.

Mar and Matt met over Zoom in June 2021 to conduct an interview about Mar's academic and intellectual trajectory, discussing how her ideas on gender and its effects had emerged from her activism and merged with her academic work, dynamics reflected in many of the other contributions to this volume. They also reflected on persistent gaps in robust gendered analysis in Myanmar's current political environment and in scholarship, as well as inspiring changes seen not only in the current generation of researchers featured in the preceding chapters, but in young people taking part in the protest movement against the February 2021 military coup.

Matthew J Walton: Mar, thanks so much for sitting down with me to have this conversation about your research and your personal and intellectual history. We've worked together for several years, from our time together at Oxford to today. It's great to get a chance to ask you about some of these things that I have an implicit understanding of, but we haven't directly discussed before. In your work, you examine a lot of the gender norms in Myanmar that are communicated and enforced across generations through traditions, sayings, practices, and other modes like that. What was your own experience of these things, growing up – in your family, in school and other contexts? And on the other side, were there people who encouraged you to challenge or question those traditions and that received wisdom?

Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi: So I must say that I grew up in a family that was very progressive and very open. Actually, my father, you could even say that he was very famous for being very accommodating, very tolerant and progressive. After all, he had five daughters as well as a diligent lady of the house!

Growing up in such an environment, I didn't really see or think about those dynamics until the early 1990s, when I accidentally met with trafficked children selling tissues or flowers in Khao San Road and the Banglampoo tourist area in Bangkok and later with young girls and women who were sold into prostitution in Thailand. I was interested in their lives, their existence, their struggles, their strength. Really, just the fundamental causes of how they came to be in that position: Why they were there? How did they arrive? Could they return home? What would happen to them? Any possibility for

escape? I had already studied education and child psychology and I love children, so I was passionately interested in their lives, and if possible, to help them escape. As I closely investigated, I was in awe and shock to witness their struggle, strength, survival skills and ‘success’ in their everyday life in the midst of exploitative and structurally violent situations of racism and sexism. Even then, I didn’t really know what I was doing was anthropology, ethnography, empirical field work research, but I myself became a participant observer for transformative action and outcomes.

Many were being abused and being smuggled from Burma and many didn’t know their families, or the names of the villages that they were from. I also saw how the situation and environment perfectly made them into easy targets. Because there were also many young girls among them, I began to think what would happen to them a few years later. That is when I realized how many young Burmese girls were being trafficked and sold into prostitution. They were desperate to come to Thailand with the hope that they would work in shops and restaurants to send money home. But they ended up being trafficked and sold into downgraded brothels as prostitutes. Many were too young to understand the meaning of ‘selling bodies’; they thought they had to ‘cut their bodies to sell’. And yet they still felt they were obliged to send money to their families – but were too ashamed to tell them the truth. But they also felt that they needed to protect the honor of the family and themselves by not telling them the truth.

For me, I started to see a very clear pattern of gender-based structural violence experienced by Burmese in general and women in particular. Flower-selling girls or body-selling young women were being exploited in particular ways because of being female. Even in that environment and that situation, they still had to carry out specific ‘feminine’ responsibilities and were disciplined into ‘feminine’ traits through concepts of ‘shame and fear’. It was even clearer when I began to do research and interviews with young men dying with HIV/AIDS at the Mae Tao Clinic near Mae Sot, along the Thai–Myanmar border. I could see how the patriarchal system and specific cultural patterns were also leading to premature and violent deaths of Burmese men. Even though I was not familiar then with theories of structural violence, based on this empirical evidence I could see a clear pattern and structure of gender and how both genders – but particularly women – were caught up in its pathological nature.

These experiences instilled in me an intellectual curiosity and compelled me to do research with passion and commitment on the root causes of structural violence and for transformative action, for the last 30 years. They grounded me to become a passionate social feminist anthropologist for evidence-based transformative action for social and political change in Myanmar.

MJW: Let me push on this question of your own childhood a little bit more. You grew up in a progressive, open household empowering women; that's still, sadly, relatively rare. But when you look back were there any moments of experience that hinted at structural inequality along gendered lines? Maybe not in your family, maybe not among your parents, but were there moments of tension that maybe you didn't realize then but that looking back now you think of it differently, or through a more explicitly gendered lens? Maybe like a cognitive dissonance that you didn't fully make sense of until later?

MKMMK: Looking back many years later, I was naïve of being in a privileged family and social class. I did not see beyond the surface and also did not have a 'gender lens' back then. Under a determined, ambitious, elegant-looking, cultivating, active, hard-working, disciplined and diligent mother, I saw my soft, tolerant, and accommodating *father* as the victim! Because she just did everything – so perfectly, and it seemed easy for her – I thought she was in control and had power. I did not see then how hard she worked or sacrificed herself to excel at all the tasks, singlehandedly. She was also a sharp, wise and ambitious decision-maker within the family. Then I saw only black and white: strong, ambitious, disciplined mum and gentle and easy-going dad.

I still am in awe to think about my mum's feminine capabilities and capacities. As a young girl, I woke up every morning under her religious prayers. I saw elegant-looking flowers on her head, *thanakha* on her face, a pot of tea in front of her while she read a newspaper, all done after her garden work and playing badminton and all done before I woke up! She looked as if she had everything made available for her. It seemed she had all the power to control everything. I did not realize she was a 'doer', she could not take 'no' for answer. Women can't be daydreaming, they have the responsibility to put food on the table, to manage the finances: even if, for example, their income is lower than the cost of living. By believing education is the only way to change lives, they are willing to sacrifice for their children's education. But my mother always had an even bigger dream compared to many. And so, when my mother said,

‘My dream is to send all my daughters to Oxford!’ I laughed and screamed out ‘MUM!’ Even though I laughed, I learned the name of ‘Oxford’ as a kid; that is how she instilled her ambition and dream in me.

I came to Oxford for my great mother, who would have been studying in Oxford herself if opportunities were given to her and if she could be free from all the feminine-specific burdens she held. But when I arrived at Oxford, my mother was gone, I did not even have a chance to say goodbye to her after not seeing her for so many years. Since I left, or rather escaped, Burma, I could not help but think how much my mother struggled or sacrificed to succeed and to be a well-respected leader in her communities. She rejected all patriarchal social, religious, cultural and political discriminatory ideological-based feminine traits and constraints in her life. Perhaps there was also the contribution of my dad, who was a liberated, progressive, gentle man who did not take patriarchal privilege. But all in all, this was my great mother’s achievement. She made me who I am and who I became. Now I am her No.1 fan even though she is no more. I owe her everything, and every dream that I have, it is for her. Without her, I would not be who I am.

MJW: In encouraging you and your sisters, did your mum urge you just to be the best, to work hard, to go to Oxford, those kinds of things? Or did she talk about it in terms of structural gendered discrimination at all – like, as a woman you’re going to have to work harder?

MKMMK: No, not in those terms. She was one of the most knowledgeable people and critical reader and thinker that I know of in my life. She was a very progressive and liberated person even then. She wanted us to stand on our own feet, she wanted us to maximize our capacities based on the equality of being human (not based on gender), whatever we decided in our lives. She would say, ‘If you want to be a regent queen, work for it. If you want to be a queen, marry a king. If you just want to be *side car* [trishaw] driver’s wife, that’s up to you. All are in your hands. So go for it. Get whatever you want. But empower yourself first!’

MJW: How would you say your own feminist perspective developed? Specifically, when did you start to describe and understand it *as* feminist? My assumption is that theorizing about it started well before you were in university and started to work in feminist theory, so I’m curious about how it emerged from your practice, in the initial work you were just describing?

MKMMK: I think it started clearly since I was young and when I observed my mum and dad treating each other based on humanity and equality and not based on prescribed gender norms. But working with trafficked girls and women in Thailand helped me to become conscious of gender as a structural issue. This was in the 1990s. Then, when I attended a seminar about women in history and later, I became involved in that project and became a close friend with one of the greatest historians, Prof. Penny Edwards, I began to see how idealized Myanmar women and gender have been politicized and constructed in Myanmar. Reading *The Second Sex*, I saw that when Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the coming into being of ‘a woman’, that she is ‘not born, but rather becomes a woman’, it further supported my hypothesis, based on my experience.

I began to be interested in how much influence the ideologies of religion, politics, and society had on the construction of gender identities (both masculinities and femininities) and what were the consequences. Both Penny Edwards and Ma Tin Zar Lwin, who explored how missionaries constructed Karen femininities, had made great contributions for gender studies. They were the prominent and pioneering scholars of gender studies in Myanmar. They had in-depth understanding of gender and structural discrimination.

Recently, I was invited by the National Unity Government (NUG)’s Ministry of Women, Youth and Children to discuss the women’s movement in the American and French Revolutions, as part of their campaign against gender-based violence in Myanmar’s conflicts. I opened with a question: Why not discuss Burmese women? Was there no revolution in Myanmar? Were no women liberated enough to be involved? Or could we dare ask whether Myanmar women were already liberated that they did not need a revolution like the French and Americans? Why only western feminists? Do we think feminists were here only in our time? Or the fight for women’s rights or equality issues emerged only under the influence of Western enlightenment theory?

Feminism for me is the fundamental equality of human beings: the equality of women despite gender, race, religion, and classes. Gender is not just about women’s rights or women’s issues. It includes variable spectrums of power relations, including intersecting identities such as sexualities, class, political ideology, religion, social identities and so on. Gender inequality is relational. It is rooted in uneven dynamics that give disproportionate power/burden to one group over another based on sex, that creates one-sided, disproportionate suffering, constraints, burdens, discrimination and even violence.

MJW: So part of the challenge is in situating gender contextually, intersectionally. But there's also the challenge of simply making gender visible, de-naturalizing our socialized understandings and making space to discuss this critically. We see in Rose Metro's chapter in this volume the ways in which these gender norms are not just reinforced – even in allegedly progressive contexts – but also normalized, in ways that make it more challenging for children to not only notice them *as inequalities* but also name them and speak back against them, to parents, teachers and other authority figures. In doing so, they risk being seen as going against Myanmar traditional values.

MKMMK: When these gender ideologies are being internalized through education, propaganda, religious discourse, cultural prescription, and popular culture, gender inequality is even justified with political and social stereotypes, and gender norms become almost second nature. But this also demonstrates that it isn't just about what girls are learning; in order to fight for equality of women, we also need to understand about men: why they do what they do? How are they learning these norms? And just as importantly, what happens to them under patriarchal privilege and power? Are they better off?

That's why I have been also focusing my research on this subject. In a chapter in my thesis, on 'Men and Masculinities: Construction of man and masculinities from the influence of religion, colonialism, nationalism, militarism, and migrations', I showed that the patriarchal privilege and power was also toxic to Myanmar men, especially the less-educated mass populace (compared to women). It dominated the population through disproportionate prison sentences, rates of substance abuse, and greater premature and violent deaths compared to women. These extreme institutionalized patriarchal power dynamics magnify vulnerabilities and suffering to both genders, but particularly women. That's why I have always argued that gender-based violence has a pathological nature, and solutions based on individuals will not combat gender-based violence. We need proper, comprehensive and anthropologically based research to find solutions for both genders.

But at that time when I started my PhD there were no books on gender [in Burma]. Only Daw Mi Mi Khaing's book (*The World of Burmese Women*, 1984). And that didn't satisfy my curiosity. Earlier a prominent Burmese writer, Saw Mon Nyin, published *Myanmar Amyothami* [*Women of Burma*] in 1976 but that book was only really listing the women figures in history. That was published for the BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party). So, when

I started, I had to deploy every type of source I could find: songs, literature, cartoons, Buddhist stories, sayings, popular culture as well as interviews with people ranking from the President to trafficked victims and HIV/AIDS patients.

I started a PhD purely out of intellectual curiosity, to understand the root causes of gendered and structural/cultural violence, because I want to find solutions and transformative outcomes and end the social suffering of women and men. I know the nature of these problems are pathological. Trying to investigate this, I was told that my PhD was not just one simple research, but ten PhDs joined together. I was trying to capture all of these aspects: pre-Buddhist culture, modernity, colonization, militarization, even migration and I was told that this was like ten theses! But what got me through was my promise that I made whenever I had to bury young women who died of HIV/AIDS in Thailand after being trafficked and sold. They died alone in a foreign land and without being willing to tell their families because they were too ashamed or did not want to bring shame to their families. So even now their families may not realize it. Their life stories inflamed me with frustration, anger and desperation.

But I was finding the same evidence from all types of scattered and dusty evidence, hidden in the corners of yellowed pages, tombstones, missionary and ancient travellers' accounts, popular culture outputs (literature, *pwè* [arts], *zat-pwè* [performance arts]), in the education and knowledge system, as well as throughout current issues of human suffering, exploitation and human rights/women's rights such as HIV/AIDS, trafficking and forced migration. This gradually revealed the same structural dynamics.

MJW: And did you feel at that point, what you were putting together in terms of your on-the-ground experiences with trafficked women and others, starting to situate that in the broader context of Burmese socio-religious culture, was it consistent with the feminist theory that you were learning? Did it challenge it? Expand it? Basically, how did the theoretical work you were incorporating integrate with the empirical?

MKMMK: As you know my thesis involved not only women but also men, and not just contemporary but also in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Burma under the influence of religion, colonialism, nationalism and militarism, but also cross border migrations (trafficking and forced migration). For me, comprehensive knowledge can contribute solutions. Like a treatment for

cancer, we need to diagnose thoroughly. And also as a researcher, I feel I have moral responsibility to contribute practically, not just doing research for my own interest, for publication, grants or jobs. I also feel I have a responsibility to bring the voiceless and marginalized to speak themselves. [The film that accompanied my PhD thesis] *Dreams of Dutiful Daughters* was designed to make them speak for themselves. The connection from different spectrums made a powerful force, showing how these dynamics were making women who they are, the forces through which Burmese women were being shaped as the idealized 'Burmese woman'. Putting a puzzle together piece by piece, you start to see the pattern, but also how you can dismantle it.

MJW: You've already talked a bit about your research work with trafficked women and children in Thailand. I want to ask more broadly, how has your research and your perspective been influenced by women you've worked with in the field, across different parts of your career: women in ethnic armed organizations, elected MPs, university professors and others in recent years. How have these encounters shaped your views?

MKMMK: First, I think the scarcity of research on women in Myanmar in general, and in history in particular, liberated me in a way, as I had to look at *everything* myself for my PhD. When I started my research on gender, there were then no PhD theses on gender or women in Myanmar. The more difficult it was to find resources, the more desperate I was, the more determined I became. I feel a sense of obligation for my mother, for the women of Myanmar and our ancestors. For me, my mother is an unsung heroine, like many women. I want to do justice for her and for other mothers. I need to put Burmese women on the map and in their original place.

My obsession made every person became my potential informant, every place became my research field site, and I am like a permanent active participant observer, working to analyze and investigate everything that appears. Even Burmese student activists from the 88 Generation who came for protests in Canberra became my field of studies, as many of them would come to stay with me during the protests. There were many female activists who were students, forced into exile, who received military training in the jungles and then moved to Australia and were still actively involved in the democracy movement in Myanmar. These women were courageous and daring soldiers. But as soon as they gathered, the girls would start to organize the food, almost as if it were second nature. Only one male activist was

the exception [to this gendered division of labour]. These women were soldiers! They hunted in the jungles! They trained with the men. They were comrades. But in terms of distribution of labour, women would go straight to the kitchen. Distribution of labour is gendered and structured so much so that it became second nature.

MJW: That mirrors the way that Khin Khin Mra and Deborah Livingstone describe the ways in which new opportunities for women's participation in political institutions were still 'nested' within persistent patterns of inequality or gendered norms, perhaps slowing down the pace of reform, because opportunities to participate didn't automatically translate into influence, if women's voices and perspectives weren't being respected and included.

MKMMK: Absolutely. Due to my position as the first senior Burmese female researcher at the University of Oxford, I was able to access to women in the social and political spectrums, that included access to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, to activists and ethnic women in conflict, or sex workers. But I would see the same patterns, no matter the context. For example, as you know, I organized a *Cooking in Conflict* project, but I found that women living in the midst of armed conflict shared the same patterns across ethnicities, religions and geographical boundaries. In other words, structural discrimination was being internalized and re-enacted as a form of violence all over the country.

MJW: You mention the *Cooking in Conflict* project, and I see that as a creative way of not just recognizing women's work, but of bringing community-oriented conversations out of academic spaces to the locations where women are more comfortable sharing and reflecting. Of course, that's work that some of the groups represented in this volume – such as the KWO, KWAT, WLB – have also been doing for many years. The chapters in this volume on feminist mobilization highlight similar spaces and types of community-building and peacebuilding work that women have done generation after generation, but too often don't get included in political analysis because they're not part of formal institutions, like parliament or the peace process. But even in those places, as Naw K'nyaw Paw relates, women can be constrained by patriarchal practices and traditions.

MKMMK: I agree. Often with regard to femininities, the word 'tradition' is overtly used to justify repression of women. For me, I'm interested in how 'traditions' such as *hpoun* and *pwè* were used to construct, reinvent and

politicize femininity and female sexualities. In this way, they measured and obligated women under the fixed and idealized model; women were not born this way, but made to become a new 'Buddhist Myanmar lady'. We saw this especially during the nationalist era, with the construction of the idealized Myanmar woman. The 're-invented' Myanmar woman had to be proper: that meant feminine, submissive, pure, chaste, refined, modest, obliging and thoroughly domesticated, in accordance with imported Victorian feminine values. Myanmar women were never like that! It contrasted with well-documented images of Burmese women in precolonial Burma, before they encountered the Victorian gentlemen. The shock and horror reported by early travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators, seeing Burmese women wearing split skirts, smoking long cigars, managing business, roaming around the village, fighting, suing each other and protecting their interests, unlike their sisters in the West.

The situation in Myanmar since colonization reflects how Myanmar is continuing the battle of imposing ideologies and identities on women. On one level, it says, 'Myanmar women did not need to demand their rights because their traditions already provided for them', and on another level, they still continued the outdated Victorian vision of gender norms and indeed *added to* the antiquated foreign laws of the British, that were developed for India but which are still used in term of dealing with sexual violence today.

MJW: We can see the persistence of these norms in the struggle that women activists have faced to pass the PoVAW [Prevention of Violence Against Women] law. Aye Thiri Kyaw's chapter in this volume examines the challenge activists have faced in even getting the issue of domestic violence to register with the public – and with mostly male legislators – *as a political concern* that needs to be addressed. It's too easy for people to take the confining and biased legal framework as a given, rather than something that can be altered to better address current conditions.

MKMMK: And the additional danger is that if women challenge these norms, they are subject to discipline, abuse, even violence, treated as if they're under influence of Western countries or even as traitors. We also saw that in the death threats that some woman activists faced when they criticized and opposed Ma Ba Tha's 'Race and Religion Protection Laws' in 2014 and 2015. Some gender-related laws in Myanmar are still being developed based on foreign concepts such as the British common laws that overshadow the

customary laws. Now you see, today under the influence of modernization, now marriage registration has become fashionable. But Burmese marriage has always been civil; no religious approval or government registration is needed. Same for divorce. We need to find ways to incorporate all traditions of gender liberation, not simply take one method and reject others.

MJW: These patterns that started to come together earlier in your research, do you feel you've continued to see them more recently, in your interactions with women in upper economic classes or social elites such as female MPs, university professors? And similarly, where have you seen these patterns being disrupted or challenged?

MKMMK: Since Burma re-opened after 2011, with the influx of donors, INGOs and NGOs, gender has been in focus. But a rights-based approach has its limits. Gender-based violence in Myanmar has a pathological nature. We need to treat it like cancer. We need a proper diagnosis, painful chemotherapy, then allocate time for recovery and aim to take the root out completely. As I just said, outdated and inappropriate colonial and customary laws (based on India's *Laws of Manu* and applied in Burma as a province of India) are still being used to deal with gender-based violence. That's why we need not just a rights-based approach, but a broader emphasis on social change.

MJW: You and I have written before, with Melyn McKay, about the possible limits of rights-based discourse in fostering a broad-based women's movement in Myanmar. Specifically, we were concerned about the fact that, despite the validity of rights-based critiques of Ma Ba Tha's 'Race and Religion Protection Laws', activists using those arguments were finding limited resonance with women who understood the challenges in their lives in different terms. Throughout this volume, we see the importance of localized understandings and practices, but also a necessary engagement with state institutions and formal processes, such as Hilary Faxon's attention to land use and land legislation in her contribution to this volume. But we also see examples of people not just adapting to, but leading and pushing for the kinds of broader social change you're talking about here.

MKMMK: Social change begins with behaviour change, behaviour changes starts from changes of thinking. Thinking will not change without changing knowledge and education. So, in order to enact social change, we need new

knowledge and critical thinking. We need to be critical of our own knowledge and perceptions, about our histories, religions and cultures, because we continue to learn about politics, religion and other spheres from a location within this patriarchal system. And this can't be superficially fixed. We have to go beyond a quick-fix solution and challenge people's thinking, myths, assumptions, values, histories, identities, ideologies and belief systems. And then, when we talk about gender, we have to look at men as well, in order to understand how a patriarchal system messes up everyone, even as it affects women in particular ways.

MJW: The way you discussed that earlier, and in some of your published work, reminds me of some of the foundational work in Critical Race Theory, like the way that W.E.B. Du Bois talks about the 'wages of whiteness'. In his view, White people are benefitting from racial privilege, just as men are benefitting from gender privilege, but at the same time, most men, like most White people, are also being hurt and repressed, or at least limited by these structures in some way, whether that's class-based exploitation of some White groups or the destructive psychological pressures of an idealized, rigid hyper-masculinity.

MKMMK: I agree with you. This is an imbalance of power, where one individual, one system or one group has it over another, and the systems are related in this way. In a way, I'm grateful that, during my PhD, because I didn't have other resources to rely on, I had to dive into everything, to build it all up from nothing. I read extensively, so I was able to encounter some of these things about race and gender together, seeing these comparisons. I studied a lot about Aboriginal communities, and about race and gender together, in the context of gender-based violence and other issues.

This 2021 Spring Revolution is historic and for the first time, we see ideological and identity-oriented revolutions in Myanmar that include gender. I mentioned before how 'traditions' such as *hpoun* and *pwè* have been constructed in support of masculine privilege under patriarchal institutions. As just one example, my previous work on *hpoun* [a type of power or merit reserved only for men in Burmese Buddhist belief] was also related practically to the 'Panty Power' or 'Panties for Peace' movement in 2007 [which involved female activists sending their used underwear to Burmese embassies as a way of antagonizing members of the regime, drawing on beliefs that women's undergarments would sap the *hpoun* of men]. And in

the current anti-coup movement, we see the same dynamic in the ‘Htomain Alan Htu’ or ‘Sarong Strike’ [where women are hanging out their skirts and undergarments, to challenge the views that women’s bodies are ‘polluted’ and a danger to men]. This activism is really questioning *hpoun*. Belief in *hpoun* is a clear example of how people have internalized a belief system and how traditions can be re-invented; people follow it without question and even attack those who challenge it. At the same time, critical thinking young men who have enjoyed freedom and liberty as a global village’s citizen for the last decade or so, also do not accept this. Some of them joined in to support women and challenge these ‘traditions’, even by wearing the *htamein* as *head* dresses.

MJW: It’s interesting that we have seen some deeper discussion of issues such as this recently. It’s not only a superficial move to hang up the *htamein* for strategic purposes, but what’s surrounding it are conversations between male and female activists challenging these beliefs and structures. Right now, we see those mostly on social media, so we might have reason to be sceptical as to how deep those conversations can go, just because of the conflicting imperatives in the current crisis context. And in a way it might be similar to the movement in 1988, where people really didn’t have the time or the bandwidth – in the midst of resisting the military – to address these issues fully. So it’s about creating a platform to keep these broader conversations going. And even if these questions aren’t fully addressed in the moment of resistance, there are scholars, activists, who are continuing to push it forward.

MKMMK: This is really exciting and I’m hopeful to see the dawn of real social change and turning the tables on these issues.

MJW: I have one final question for you Mar, following on from that. We’ve seen this exciting proliferation of feminist research – *explicitly* feminist research – related to Myanmar, in the last decade and a half, certainly a far cry from when you were just starting out, when there was just a trickle from scholars like Chie Ikeya and Tharaphi Than. Now there’s a whole generation of graduate students and independent scholars and activists who define themselves *as* feminists, doing self-consciously feminist research, some of whom are represented in this volume, but many more of whom are carving out other spaces for their work, in addition to academic channels. I want to ask, what are some of the most

exciting developments in this space for you, but also, where are the spaces, the topics that you think still need to receive more attention?

MKMMK: One of the exciting things for me is witnessing how young women and men are debating on social media even without labelling themselves as feminists. It is also exciting to see young men are very active in these debates and we can see that they are interested in structural changes. They are applying theories that they learned in recent years. But they also need to understand their own culture and the root causes of these structures and how they've come into existence. It is still difficult because there is such a limited history of women or social history in Myanmar. If we want values change, social change, we need to go beyond 'partial knowledge'; it has to be comprehensive. Global views, local solutions with transformative action. They are now speaking up, speaking out, and speaking loud on the issue of gender equality.

Their courage is admirable. I am particularly proud of young women and men who are involved in this debate using their progressive ideologies to question patriarchal privilege and power and the structural justification of gender-based violence. That is something significant. That is something historic. This is also a revolution of embodied, sexual politics. If you're going to fight for social change, you need to be able to change behaviour. In order to do so, you need new knowledge and new thinking. It's still change from *within* the culture, but we need to continue to push for this different thinking, to make progress on social change. That's why we need anthropological and social history research focused on transformative action for social change in order to continue to make a difference.

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