Introduction

Political Transitions and Gendered Transformations in Myanmar

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In the early hours of 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power in a coup, arresting leading politicians and declaring a state of emergency. Min Aung Hlaing, the military commander-in-chief, quickly assumed office as the chairman of the newly-formed State Administration Council and abolished the mandatory retirement age previously in place for his position (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung 2021; Sithu Aung Myint 2021). In the immediate aftermath of the coup, many observers referred to gender as a perspective through which to understand both the coup and the way public protests against it played out. Feminist scholars and activists argued that the coup was facilitated by the stubborn persistence of militarized, masculinized politics in Myanmar. They pointed to the fact that the 2008 Constitution grants the military 25 per cent of the seats in parliament, and that in the 2020 elections, a mere 17 per cent of elected representatives were women (Bjarnegård and Barall 2021; Khin Khin Mra 2021). Several commentators have also highlighted the prominent role played by women in the subsequent resistance campaigns against military rule (Aguilar and Quadrini 2021; Beech 2021; Khan 2021; Mimi Aye 2021). In the cities, young women from garment factories and student unions have led protest actions, and almost a third of people appointed to the National Unity Government, a political body contesting the junta's claim to legitimacy, are women (Anonymous 2021; Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Sue Ye Lin 2021). In ethnic minority areas, women have built upon previous experiences of surviving war and resisting oppression to mobilize against the coup and find ways to provide for everyday needs in the absence of a functioning state (Quadrini 2021), while on social media young female

activists are spearheading campaigns to raise awareness about sexual violence perpetuated against anti-junta protesters. As Mi Sue Pwint, veteran women's activist, resistance fighter and peace negotiator, argues in this volume, this extensive involvement of women in leadership positions, and the presence of political commitments to gender equality in resistance movements, sets the ongoing protests apart from previous popular uprisings against military rule in Myanmar, such as those in 1988.

Thus, in seemingly contradictory ways, the coup and its aftermath have been represented as revealing the state of gender relations in Myanmar, bringing into relief both what changed and what has stayed the same for women and men in Myanmar during the period prior to the coup. To understand the 2021 military coup and the current configuration of masculinized, military dictatorship, as well as the unprecedented role played by women in the on-going pro-democracy protests, we argue that it is necessary to examine the gendered dynamics and effects of the decade of political transition in Myanmar which came before it. This is the aim of this volume. In the pages that follow, the contributors to this book engage in a careful, comprehensive analysis of the gendered transformations, and persistent continuities, that characterized the reform period that started with U Thein Sein's ascendance to political office in 2011. This event ended decades of military rule and marked the beginning of a hybrid, semi-democratic regime (Tin Maung Maun Than 2014; Stokke and Soe Myint Aung 2020; Thant Myint-U 2019; Zin Mar Aung 2015), leading to the return of many exiled organizations and activists (Thin Thin Aye 2015; Bjarnegård 2020; Olivius 2019), and a nationwide ceasefire process which, for the first time ever, brought multiple armed actors together in a dialogue with the central state and its military (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung 2017). However, the end of military rule did not mean an end to war, militarization, ethnic persecution and human insecurity in Myanmar. Indeed, in Kachin state armed conflict resumed, and in Rakhine state discrimination against the Rohingya population culminated in a genocide (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019; Sadan 2016). In contested border areas populated primarily by ethnic minorities, state-led reform initiatives facilitated state expansion and militarization, unleashing significant public protests and unrest (Olivius and Hedström 2021; Meehan and Sadan 2017). In other words, unfolding transitional processes generated new tensions as well as opportunities for women and men living across the country.

As feminist scholars of peace and conflict studies, development studies and democratic transitions have long argued, periods of drastic political change are always conditioned by gender relations, hierarchies, and norms (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Tripp et al. 2009). At the same time, these processes of change and historic waves of upheaval also reshape gendered dynamics and lived realities (Marchand and Runyan 2010; Cockburn 2010). As elsewhere, this was the case with Myanmar's political transition between 2011 and 2020. As detailed by the contributors to this volume, this period saw a vast expansion of women's civil society activism, the adoption of pioneering gender equality legislation, and the arrival of an international peacebuilding and development industry promoting international gender equality norms in their support to Myanmar (Hedström, Olivius and Kay Soe 2020). However, the gendered dynamics and effects of Myanmar's transition have not yet received sustained scholarly attention, as we discuss further below. Providing a comprehensive account of the multifaceted processes of gendered transformation that have taken place in the past decade, this book contributes a much-needed historical corrective, and helps us make sense of the current political situation in Myanmar. This is because the changes that the transition brought about shape the way resistance is playing out now, and the ways in which Myanmar's political landscape might continue to be reshaped.

Gendered Transformations and Political Transitions

Myanmar gained independence from the British in 1948. During the era of parliamentary democracy that followed, the country was soon embroiled in civil war as political factions 'reflect[ing] every side of the political spectrum' took up arms demanding greater autonomy and rights (Smith 2007: 1). This included left-leaning, communist and a number of ethnic minority insurrections (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung 2011) fighting against the central regime. In attempts to quell these rebellions, the military, led by General Ne Win, assumed power through a caretaker government between 1958 and 1960. Two years later, in 1962, General Ne Win again seized power. This military junta would rule until 1988, when thousands of people took to the streets to demand reforms. Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as the figurehead of this revolution, which led to multi-party elections being held in 1990. However, the military junta did not honour the election results but instead

cracked down on presumed opponents and political dissidents. Military rule continued, albeit in new iterations.

As activists fled the cities in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising, they were received by ethnic minority insurgents who had fought the military for decades. Myanmar is a highly ethnically diverse country: a large percentage of the population belongs to communities that differ from the majority Bamar people in language, custom and religion, and the largest armed opposition groups are organized around ethnic belonging. In this context, military rule has in effect been employed as a response to demands for greater rights and autonomy from minority groups, ostensibly to prevent disintegration and disorder (Callahan 2003). It is therefore ethnic minority communities that have experienced the brunt of the conflict and oppressive policies on the part of successive military regimes. This included in particular the infamous 'four-cuts' counterinsurgency policy, first executed under General Ne Win's rule, which targeted ethnic minority communities by forcibly relocating or destroying entire villages, resulting in massive human suffering (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung 2011). However, these ethnic communities, particularly in the border areas from which ethnic insurgencies emerged and operated, also became a key political space for the mobilization of women, and the formation of a range of women's organizations challenging gender inequality, both within oppositional movements as well as within Myanmar more broadly (Olivius and Hedström 2019).

While the primary focus of this book is on the period between 2011–2020, we situate our analysis of this period against this longer historical backdrop, and in relation to the current political landscape. However, most chapters in the book take events *after* 2011, when U Thein Sein took office, as their starting point. During the first few years of the transition, overall changes in the political and economic situation led to a significant influx of international donors, the establishment of a peacebuilding and development industry and the lifting of sanctions (Thant Myint-U 2019; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2012). Foreign direct investments quadrupled, from US$1.9 billion in 2011/12 to US$8 billion in 2014/15 (World Bank Group 2013, 2015). A de-regulation of military-era draconian laws meant a return of political exiles, a rapid increase in media outlets and, for the first time in the nation's history, widespread and affordable access to the internet (Brooten 2016). The women's movement flourished, with the return of prominent female activists and the establishment of several large networks focused on

women's rights across the country and within different political processes (Olivius and Hedström 2020). The transition from outright military rule to semi-civilian rule was further cemented in the 2015 elections, when the National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in the first openly contested, and respected, elections since 1960. Although the military was guaranteed a quarter of all seats in the parliament, as per the 2008 Constitution, the extent of NLD's win meant that they secured a majority. Women, alongside male civilian politicians, slowly began to replace the male, and often elderly, generals who had for long held all power (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017). Aung San Suu Kyi, unable to become president under rules that prevented anyone with foreign family members from holding that post, became State Counsellor, a new post created specifically for her by the parliament (Thant Myint-U 2019). Myanmar's transition was, to many observers, now firmly underway.

However, overarching reforms were not always progressive, and were unevenly experienced across the country. While more affluent urban households and communities saw an increase in living standards, political freedoms and rights, the rural poor often faced a decrease in living standards. Top-down development projects, the prevalence of illicit economies controlling access to markets, and the appropriation of over a million acres of land from rural households by corrupt officials and businessmen meant that the transition was understood differently depending on *who* experienced it (Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju 2021; Hedström and Olivius 2020). Among Kachin communities, living close to the Chinese border with Myanmar, events after 2011 meant a return to outright war, and Rohingya, Arakanese and Hindu communities living in Rakhine state experienced both communal violence and genocide (Schissler, Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017; Aye Thiri Kyaw 2020; Cheesman 2017; Sadan [ed.] 2016). Extensive land-grabbing led to an upsurge in urban slums, while increased poverty and the ready availability of cheap drugs resulted in widespread drug use, especially among younger men (Rehmonnya.org. 2013; Sai Lone and Renaud Cachia 2021)

As this overview makes clear, teleological models of transition as a linear progression toward liberal democracy, held both by policy makers and scholars on democratic transitions (Linz and Stephan 1996; Diamond 2012), do not neatly map on to events in Myanmar. Rather than applying this dominant conception of democratic transition, to help make sense of the country's recent history we argue that there is much to learn from

recent advances in peace studies on the concept of post-war transition (Klem 2018; Gusic 2019; Olivius and Hedström 2021). Critiquing the idea of war-to-peace transitions for employing linear assumptions similar to those in the democratic transition literature, Bart Klem (2018) suggests that the term 'post-war transition' can be used to describe the period of substantial, multidirectional societal changes that follow the end of war – but without assuming progress or a set direction, not least because these changes can be contradictory and unpredictable. While Myanmar's transitional years cannot generally be characterized as a post-war context, this way of thinking about the transition is useful. It allows us to conceptualize and approach Myanmar's transition as a period of intense, contradictory and multifaceted changes, without assuming either linear progress or a fixed end goal.

While these transitional changes are conditioned by, and contribute to reshaping, gendered relations and norms, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the gendered effects the transition has precipitated in different areas of Myanmar. With some important exceptions, much of the literature on Myanmar's transition has interpreted politics narrowly (see for example Egreteau 2016; Bünte 2014), focusing on the formal, public sphere and on the representatives of the armed forces, as opposed to looking at informal activities, movements, civilians and foot soldiers. This edited volume, bringing together academics and activists working in a variety of disciplines and across the country, contributes to a dynamic and growing conversation exploring the relationship between gender, conflict and transitional politics in Myanmar. Rather than employing a singular focus and theoretical framework, contributions to the volume employ gender as an analytical handle to draw on a number of different theoretical and methodological approaches to expand our collective understanding of transitional politics in the country, through attention to everyday situated experiences as well as to formal state processes and institutions. This breadth helps us better explore how notions of femininity and masculinity, and ideas about 'appropriate' gender roles, were deployed, negotiated, reproduced and/or resisted in the Myanmar transition.

Through this comprehensive analysis of many aspects of transitional change, the volume also contributes to advancing broader debates in feminist scholarship of relevance to understanding political transitions. Broader feminist scholarship has, to a significant extent, been characterized by disciplinary thinking and a resulting fragmentation between fields focusing on different aspects of societal change. As an illustration, feminist peace research tends to

focus on the gendered dynamics of peace processes and peacebuilding efforts (Shepherd 2018; Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018; True and Riveros-Morales 2019); feminist political economy scholars explore issues relating to economic development interventions (Martin De Almagro and Ryan 2019; Pratt and Chilmeran 2019); and feminist security scholars examine the securitized and gendered effects of violence and upheaval that both shape and span the period from conflict to peace (Hansen 2001; Sylvester 2013; Wibben 2010). Given the interrelated nature of these processes of post-war and post-dictatorship transformation, this fragmentation prevents sustained analytical attention to the intersections between, and accumulated effects of, political, institutional, economic, social or cultural processes of change.

We therefore argue that a more consolidated, multi-disciplinary feminist approach to political transitions taking place in proximity to armed conflict and authoritarian rule is needed. Myanmar constitutes a timely and critical case for advancing this research agenda, generating theoretical insights with wider significance as well as new empirical knowledge about the multifaceted processes of change currently taking place in the country. In this book, we aim to break these silos down in order to gain a fuller understanding of the gendered dynamics of Myanmar's transitional period, and assess its implications for the future. This means that this project is necessarily inter-disciplinary, drawing on disciplines such as peace and conflict studies, development studies, gender studies, as well as Myanmar studies.

By using gender as a starting point for our analysis, we do not intend to fix or isolate gender from other forms of power and identity. Indeed, we understand gender to be a social – and fluid – construct that permeates all aspects of lives, from the household to the highest level of governance, and as existing in a dialectical relationship with the past. It is '[an] ordering principle' (Peterson 1998: 42) constructing differences between that and those deemed masculine and that and those deemed feminine. In other words, gender differences construct power differences. Understanding gender as a social construct does not relieve the term of its real-life impact: socially constituted differences shape peoples' experiences of, and access to, transitional politics in the everyday. We use the concept of gender to identify and analyse how these gender differences and hierarchies are reproduced or resisted through intersections of ethnicity, sexuality, religion and gendered identity, and in transitional politics and across time. This is particularly important as ideas about 'appropriate' gender roles in Myanmar tend to be justified through reli-

gious and cultural discourses, which mask the unequal distribution of power embedded in gender relations, regardless of ethnic or religious background, sexual preference, or class (Gender Equality Network 2015).

Further, in view of dominant liberal ideas situating the 2011 reforms as the beginning of gendered change and transformation in Myanmar, it is important to stress that while this book focuses on events taking place after 2011, we do not suggest that changes in gendered norms and relationships that occurred during the transitional years were somehow unique to that decade; rather, gendered transformations have been at the heart of political change and upheaval both before 2011 and after 2020. In Myanmar, gendered identities and transformations have been at the locus of broader political changes and upheavals since the fight for independence from the British in the late 1940s (Ikeya 2011; Tharaphi Than 2014). Representing the past decade of political transition as the beginning of women's political mobilization and women's empowerment would therefore be wrong, just as presenting the coup as the end of women's political resistance and political involvement would be incorrect. Instead – and as the discussions in this book make clear – transitional opportunities and openings were both predicated upon and interrupted by shifts in and contentions of gendered relations and identities related to political events and gendered transformations seemingly located in the past. While the transition created space for feminist mobilization and women-led civil society advocating for women's rights and equality in policy and decision-making, possibilities for real and substantial change were nevertheless limited by patriarchal and militarized politics. Several chapters in the book give detailed accounts of attempts during the period to change women's representation in politics as well as laws and policies, but also demonstrate the obstacles to and limits of such change. This suggests that the fact that there were not enough changes with regard to gender in politics and governance contributed to the reinstatement of military politics once again. This helps us reconsider the idea that the reforms of 2011 represented a definite break from earlier political and economic transformations, or that the coup in 2021 heralds a completely new era of political rule. The chapters included in this volume trace this complex mix of change and continuity, contributing to a nuanced and granular analysis of gendered transformations in relation to overarching political transitions and reforms.

Key Themes of the Book

This volume identifies and explores the gendered dynamics of Myanmar's transition in three interrelated political spheres. Firstly, a set of chapters interrogate the openings and obstacles for gendered change in formal politics and governance, demonstrating that while the transition did bring about significant institutional change, gendered inequalities and norms that upheld male superiority and excluded women persisted alongside, and continued to shape, formal changes. Secondly, a set of chapters explore the changing landscape of Myanmar women's feminist mobilization, capturing the expansion of women's movements both in terms of numbers and in terms of diversity during the period, and examining how women activists responded to a changing political context. Thirdly, a set of chapters analyze the gendered politics of everyday lives and struggles; of friendship, land, labour and love. Here, the interplay of change and continuity becomes especially visible. While transitional processes had a direct impact on the everyday lives of women and men, for example through economic investments and development projects, many forms of gendered marginalization and insecurity have remained across time and throughout macro-political waves of upheaval. Below, we introduce these three themes and the individual contributions to the book further.

Transitional Politics, Institutions and Policymaking

The first political sphere that is explored in this book is the sphere of formal political institutions and policymaking. The transition did not only mean that the generals exchanged their uniforms for civilian clothes. While democratization was undoubtedly always limited – or disciplined, as the military would have it – there were, nevertheless, significant changes to the rules of the political game after 2011. The representation of women in elected office remained low, however. In the 2010 election women candidates were largely absent, and while the number of women standing for election increased for the next general election in 2105, and again in 2020, the number of elected women remained the lowest in Southeast Asia. Norms and stereotypes about women's inherent incompatibility with politics ensured the preferential treatment of, as well as votes for, male candidates (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017: 3; Asian Development Bank 2016: 157). The military quota, functioning in

effect as a quota for men, skewed the numbers further in favour of men. Thus, notions of male superiority carried over into transitional political institutions and the formal sphere of decision-making. Nevertheless, the transition did open up new opportunities for women's organizations to engage with the state and make a difference in formal policymaking processes (Hedström, Olivius and Kay Soe 2020; Faxon, Furlong and May Sabe Phyu 2015), not least with regard to the violence that women continued to experience (Aye Thiri Kyaw, this volume; Women's League of Burma 2014; Khin Chan Myae Maung 2018; Tanabe et al 2019; Phyu Phyu Oo and Davies 2021). This was a rather drastic change, which in tandem with the expansion of women's organizing led to the emergence of a new strand of women's activism that targeted their advocacy towards the Myanmar political system rather than towards international audiences. Moreover, various reform processes opened up space to challenge dominant gender norms from within the machinery of the state. The three chapters in the first section of the book reflect these transformations through analyses of the gender politics of specific institutional changes, policy processes and reforms.

In their chapter, Khin Khin Mra and Deborah Livingstone draw on a feminist institutionalist framework to interrogate the effects of local governance reforms on women's political participation and representation. While institutional change opened up formal opportunities for women, these were constrained by the persistent power of norms linking masculinity, politics, and leadership: new institutions were 'nested' within older ones. The authors thereby provide theoretical insights into the slowness of social and political change and into the interplay between formal and informal institutions. This means that the chapter has important implications for the current political situation, telling us that while formal democratic reforms can be rolled back, institutional and political change within the Myanmar state in the past decade has taken place at many levels, and will not be easily undone by the new military junta.

In her chapter, Aye Thiri Kyaw reflects on the efforts of women activists to exploit new political openings and arenas and push for the adoption of a law against violence against women, the PoVAW law. While there were partial successes that testify to the changing opportunities for women's organizations to advocate for policy change during the transition, the chapter also highlights the obstacles experienced by women's rights activists in politicizing men's violence against women. This pushes us to consider

how gender informs recognition of what counts as a political problem, and demonstrates the pervasiveness of gender inequality and violence despite significant political changes. Thus, while the transitional period produced an opening for women activists to engage with policymaking processes, pervasive ideas about the formal political sphere being a male space, as well as actions taken by military leaders and politicians to materially ensure that this notion is realized, have constrained women's access to transitional policies and institutions.

The tension between change and the reproduction of existing norms and power relations is also foregrounded in the chapter by Rosalie Metro. In 2016, the Myanmar Ministry of Education (MOE) began working with international donors to revise basic education curricula. This type of partnership and international support was itself a new feature of the transitional period. In her chapter, Metro demonstrates how this process became a site of contestation of ideologies around gender. Whereas international development organizations prioritized globalized ideologies of 'social inclusion' and 'gender equality', existing textbooks presented local conceptions of what Metro terms 'gender harmony'. The curriculum revision process was characterized by both resistance to change and the translation and adaptation of new norms, reflecting the complexity of change in gender norms as well as the power dynamics between international development actors and the Myanmar government.

Feminist Mobilization, Resistance and Movement Building

In Myanmar, the English word 'feminism' is understood, at least in the mainstream, 'as an ideology to promote women domination rather than an idea to fight for women's rights' (Tharaphi Than, Pyo Let Han and Shunn Lei 2018; also see Zin Mar Aung 2015). As gender scholars from Myanmar note, feminist resistance and organizing for gender equality therefore come into direct conflict with the country's 'two most powerful institutions', the military and the *sangha* (Tharaphi Than, Pyo Let Han and Shunn Lei 2018; Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2019). Both military and monastic institutions wield a great deal of (masculine) power, which they are loath to give up, as the 2021 coup effectively illustrates. Despite this, the transitional period saw an exponential increase in women's activism in Myanmar. Prior to 2011, limited space for civil society generally meant that an organized women's

movement had primarily been able to form outside of Myanmar; in particular, in the Thai–Myanmar borderlands, where ethnic armed organizations as well as oppositional political movements had found a conducive political environment. This was the context in which a number of ethnic minority women's organizations mobilized and joined together under the umbrella of the Women's League of Burma (Women's League of Burma 2011; Olivius and Hedström 2019; Cárdenas and Olivius 2021).

This history of mobilization in exile, with its achievements and challenges, is explored by Mollie Pepper in her chapter. Here, Pepper situates women's diasporic activism as a form of grassroots peacebuilding, which was transforming conflict before the initiation of any formal peace process. Further, the chapter captures how the transition has reshaped the landscape for Myanmar women's activism, bringing a geographic shift back into Myanmar, along with the reorientation towards the state discussed above. This has opened up opportunities for engagement with the formal peace process, but has also brought new challenges for returning exile activists. However, as Pepper argues, focusing only on women's formal participation in peace and transitional processes 'obscures the highly active feminist peace and resistance politics being enacted by diverse women in the country'. Her emphasis on informal spaces enhances our understandings of women's peacebuilding outside of recognized and clearly demarcated political institutions, and demonstrates how women's activism around the nationwide peace process is part of a wider feminist movement in which women attempt to leverage their peace activism into gains for women's rights *beyond* the peace process.

In a related process, and due to the unevenness of transitional processes, the shift discussed above within women's mobilization and forms of activism had very different effects for – and was embraced to varying extents by – different women's organizations and activists. In her chapter, Magda Loréna Cárdenas provides an in-depth case study of one organization, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT). In Kachin areas in Northern Myanmar, the onset of the transitional period did not bring increased freedom for civil society, but a resurgence of armed conflict (Sadan 2016). While many women's organizations in exile moved much of their work back into Myanmar, for KWAT the security and freedom of working in Thailand remained crucial. In her chapter, Cárdenas examines how KWAT has navigated the contradictions of this situation in relation to three key audiences and partners: the international community; the wider Myanmar women's

movement; and the Kachin Independence Organization and their armed, ethno-nationalist struggle. In doing this, the chapter provides key insights into the tensions and disruptions brought by Myanmar's uneven transition, along with theoretical insights about the space for feminist mobilization within armed, nationalist movements. These have broader relevance for Myanmar women's activism, as many organizations have emerged in close relationship with male-dominated ethnic struggles, but also for feminist scholarship and activism beyond Myanmar as a case study.

The two conversation pieces between activists and scholars included in the book also illustrate, in a similar way, how the lack of formal recognition of women as leaders is in contrast to their actual lived experience and the labour they put into ensuring the survival both of their immediate families and of their broader communities, as well as into achieving revolutionary goals. In the first, Zin Mar Phyo and Mi Sue Pwint explore the many ways in which women's political participation is informed by their overwhelming reproductive responsibilities and care work for their families and their communities, as well as by dominant gender norms, which frame young women as being in need of protection. Sharing insights accumulated from over three decades of activism, Mi Sue Pwint reflects on the hard labour and the focus needed to keep working towards democratic change and gender justice, as well as on the strategies women use to overcome gender-specific challenges.

In the second conversation, Naw K'nyaw Paw and Maggi Quadrini discuss the nature of the participation of women in the resistance movement in Karen state. They explore how in Karen state, the region in south-east Myanmar where Naw K'nyaw Paw hails from and works in, women's leadership experiences have fluctuated in relation to changes in the dynamics of conflict: women have historically emerged as leaders during and in the aftermath of attacks by the Myanmar Army, when men have fled the areas – yet women have often been asked to step back upon cessation of outright hostilities (also see The Karen Women's Organization 2010; Zin Mar Oo and Kusakabe 2010). Thus, as Naw K'nyaw Paw explains, women have had to contend with three type of challenges: the violent, ethnic oppression of the Myanmar state targeting the Karen community; the patriarchal practices of the Karen revolution; and the military campaigns executed by the *Tatmadaw* (the Myanmar military). Despite these obstacles, women have played, and continue to play, a key role in resisting oppressive military regimes and contesting patriarchal leadership through their actions and activism, through

both armed and non-armed means. Indeed, K'nyaw Paw concludes that the sustained inclusion of women in political activism and leadership is of paramount importance in ensuring a future in Myanmar that is not only free and fair, but also feminist.

Labour, Land and Everyday Lives

Feminist scholarship has a long tradition of foregrounding everyday lives and experiences as sites of knowledge production, emphasizing the political nature of mundane, embodied, everyday relationships and practices (Ruddick 1995, Enloe 1990, Das 2007, Sylvester 2012). Following this tradition, we argue that the everyday constitutes a key political sphere where we can examine the real-life, on the ground, gendered dynamics and effects of Myanmar's transition (Hedström 2021; Blomqvist, Olivius and Hedström 2021). We understand the everyday as a space permeated by gendered relations of power, where people's actions and experiences are shaped by gendered norms and hierarchies. It is a site of violence and oppression as well as of resistance, love and care (Berents 2015; Hedström 2021; Elias and Shirin Rai 2015, 2018; Marijan 2017; Väyrynen 2019; Agatha Ma and Kusakabe 2015; Rahman 2019). This is clearly visible in the chapters in the third section of the book, which provide a careful and granular analysis of the gendered everyday politics of the transition.

Hilary Faxon's chapter centres on rural women's perspectives and everyday practices as a key source of knowledge enabling us to understand Myanmar's agrarian transition. In the past decade, new land legislation has been passed as part of broader liberalization reforms, facilitating investment but at the same time dispossessing many rural people making a living from customary and communal land use. This has led to new rural dynamics, such as increased labour migration, primarily by men. Using a participatory methodology involving photography, and a feminist political ecology approach, Faxon demonstrates powerfully how rural women's own visual insights can ground our understanding of gender in the transition in lived relations of soil, struggle and care.

The chapter by Jenny Hedström, Elisabeth Olivius and Zin Mar Phyo explores everyday experiences conveyed through life history interviews and focus groups in Mon and Kayah states, two conflict-affected areas which at the time of the interviews enjoyed ceasefires and relative stability, to under-

stand how macro-processes of war, ceasefire, and post-war development efforts manifest in gendered everyday realities. The findings point to the complex co-existence of change and continuity, where reductions in armed violence and greater freedom and livelihood opportunities over time have been accompanied by new insecurities caused by transitional reforms and processes of change, and by the persistence of other insecurities such as an absence of welfare provisioning. These dynamics have affected men and women differently: for example, while armed violence, which primarily targeted men, decreased, structural violence, which disproportionally affected women, persisted. Among new insecurities has been an escalating drug epidemic, which saw men falling victim to abuse and women picking up the resulting burden of caring for them and keeping families alive. Moreover, life histories make clear how present realities cannot be disentangled from past experiences of violence and insecurity. These experiences continue to shape experiences of the present and expectations for the future, and complicate a conventional temporality of political transition.

Shae Frydenlund and Wai Wai Nu's chapter highlights memories of friendship and co-existence between Rakhine and Rohingya women, and provides an important antidote to simplistic readings of ongoing violence is Rakhine state. Shifting the scale of inquiry from the national to the intimate spaces of everyday life, they demonstrate that recent communal violence is not an expression of inherent ethnic animosity, but is linked to the intensified pursuit of Burman hegemony during the transitional period. Through this, the authors show how interethnic personal relationships and cultural practices are politically and economically significant activities, which are simultaneously impacted by and productive of broader transitional processes of political and economic change.

The chapter by Dan Seng Lawn, Henri Myrttinen and Jana Naujoks, provides a unique analysis of how the intersection between disabilities, gender and displacement have shaped people's lives since the resumption of conflict in Kachin state. This adds important insights from people whose perspectives on Myanmar's transition are rarely heard. Moreover, the chapter contributes new knowledge about how the impact of disabilities are mediated and compounded by gendered norms and expectations, not only to literature on Myanmar but also to wider literature on gender and disability – for example in relation to norms about men as providers and how his plays out in a context of armed conflict in particular.

In their conversation piece, Terese Gagnon and Hsa Moo discuss Karen women's work for peace and justice both during and after periods of armed conflict. As their dialogue makes clear, women's work in providing care and subsistence are important, yet overlooked, sites where transitional politics are felt, produced and contested. The chapter demonstrates how women's work often remains unrecognized by male allies, and how the everyday is a site where women constantly have to resist efforts to put them 'back in their place'. Despite this, through their everyday care work women carve out space to transform conflict and to shape visions for a gender-just peace.

Future Directions

The timely analyses offered by our authors' contributions provide important insights into the gendered dynamics and effects of transitional changes. As Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi and Matthew Walton note in the afterword to this book, this represents a new generation of scholars doing robust gendered analysis of political events, providing a more complete picture of past and present transformations. For example, there are chapters in the book that consider how gender norms are defined and contested within transitional politics and across conflict-affected landscapes, and with what consequences. Several chapters pay attention to the relationship between ethnic minority identity and gender in the context of political reforms and peace negotiations, including in relation to land disputes, educational reforms and peacebuilding efforts. One chapter examines the relationship between masculinities, disability and everyday life; and yet others highlight the ways in which women's movements, non-state armed actors, state bodies and narratives shape the experiences of women and men during conflict and transitional periods. Drawing attention to the diverse ways in which gendered relations of power intersect with ethnic, religious and urban-rural inequalities, contributions to the book caution against homogenizing and simplistic readings of women and men's experiences of transitional politics. Through this, they capture the different socio-economic and political transformations leading up to, and shaping, the events that took place in early 2021, which helps to deepen our understanding of how gender relates to wider macro-level events such as coups, ceasefires and other types of political crises. This makes the insights provided by different contributions to this book critical for the development of comprehensive theoretical analyses – not only of the military coup, but

also of its aftermath. In other words, to understand what is happening now we need to know what happened in the past.

This book, then, both broadens our knowledge base relating to gender and political transition and contributes a much-needed analysis of this; and it also identifies several new avenues for further research, by pointing to changes in gendered relations and norms that have occurred over the last decade. How do these shape the ways in which women and men mobilize and resist, or comply with, the demands of the military junta? For example, in what ways are developments in women's rights and in the ways in which they organize over the past decade informing women-led responses to the coup and to the policies of the National Unity Government and of other democratically-aligned institutions? How and why are gendered superstitions and stereotypes employed and utilized in popular responses to the coup, such as in the sarong strike (*Htamain Alan Htu*)? As Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi asserts in the afterword to this volume, the '2021 Spring Revolution is historic and for the first time, we see ideological and identity-oriented revolutions in Myanmar that include gender'. To understand why these gendered transformations are occurring now, the insights of this book are crucial.

There are some research strands that are less explored in this book. In its exploration of the gendered dynamics of Myanmar's transition, many chapters in this book give particular priority to understanding women's experiences and their changing social and political position. This focus is motivated by the historic and academic exclusions that continue to render women and their lived realities invisible. However, future research should delve deeper into the interplay between norms associated with masculinity, violence and politics, and explore gendered experiences and politics beyond the male–female binary.

For example, there is a gap when it comes to the role of norms associated with masculinity in relation to the socialization and mobilization of soldiers within the Myanmar military, and also when it comes to understanding the experiences of both men and women in the armed forces of the state. While the conversation pieces touch on the experiences of female soldiers in non-state armed groups, there is no detailed or systematic discussion of this included in the volume. Applying a gendered lens to the behaviour of armed groups, whether state or non-state, would contribute analytical depth to theorizations of gender in ceasefire processes and in war. Moreover, with the notable exception of reports commissioned by International Alert

(Naujoks and Myat Thandar Ko 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) there is still a paucity of data when it comes to how and in what ways norms and ideas around masculinity have developed in relation to conflict and post-conflict processes in Myanmar. How do different ideas about masculinity affect peacebuilding processes; and how do they affect everyday life in conflict-affected areas? In what ways do notions of protection and the ideology of patriarchy shape the politics of the junta? What are the long-term effects of masculine gender roles on the physical and mental wellbeing of boys, men and people with other gendered identities? How do these gender norms affect security and access to rights, socio-economic opportunities and justice? A focus on these relationships would likely reveal an even higher level of complicity of gender in politics, conflict and transitional processes in the country, and identify important entry point for researchers interested in learning more about the varied gendered dimensions of communities and societies emerging from, or spiralling into, violent conflict and crisis.

Another gendered dimension that remains understudied is the effect of LGBTI and queer identities on transitional processes, and vice versa. Important exceptions to this silence includes Lynette Chua's study on the development of queer politics and activism in Myanmar (Chua 2019) and David Gilbert's work on gender, sexuality and everyday life in Yangon (Gilbert 2013; also see Chua and Gilbert 2015). Recent reports, blog posts and academic research exploring and localizing LGBTI, queer and same-sex experiences within and across Myanmar's borders have contributed important insights into issues of gender diversity, heteronormativity and queer lives, spaces and politics.[1] Several of these interventions are building on studies and contributing to conversations foregrounding the gendering of *nat* spirits, or *nat kadaw*, as a way to contextualize and explore gender and sexuality in Myanmar.[2] A deeper understanding of how this affects and is affected by macro-political changes would add much richness to how gender is practiced, experienced and performed in transitional societies.

These limitations notwithstanding, the insights provided within this edited collection contribute to our understanding of the gendered dynamics of the decade of transition, and of the recent military coup and its effects.

1 See, for example, Ferguson 2014; Colors Rainbow 2013, 2016, 2017, 2019; Ohnmar Nyunt and Muthoni Murage 2017; Ohnmar Nyunt 2020.

2 See, for example, Brac de la Perrière 2007; Ho 2009; Keeler 2015; Coleman, Pathy Allen and Ford 2018; and Jackson and Baumann (eds) 2022.

Especially given the new political landscape unfolding in Myanmar, knowledge about how we got here, and why, is crucial in exploring and explaining both overarching political transitions and everyday gendered transitions during times of upheaval and change. Such insights demonstrate the importance of gender to transitional dynamics and provide critical lessons, which are of relevance not just for Myanmar but also for transitional societies elsewhere.

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