WOMEN IN MODERN BURMA

Tharaphi Than

ROUTLEDGE

A landmark, gendered history from below that takes on and refutes the easy clichés about the women in Burma. An eye-opening, rich, nearly comprehensive, documented, and critical account of women in literature, war, politics, sex work, education and health. Tharaphi Than's achievement here will be the point of departure for all subsequent studies of women in Burma.

James C. Scott (aka Shwe Yoe), Sterling Professor of Political Science and Anthropology, Yale University, USA

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Women in Modern Burma

This book challenges the popular notion that Burmese women are powerful and are granted equal rights to men by society. Throughout history Burmese women have been represented as powerful and as having equal status to men by western travellers and scholars alike. The national history about women also follows this conjecture. This book explains why actually very few powerful Burmese women exist, and how these few women help construct the notion of the high status of Burmese women, thereby inevitably silencing the majority of 'unequal' and disempowered women. One of the underlying questions throughout this book is why a few powerful women feel compelled to defend the notion that women hold privileged positions in Burmese society. Combining historical archives with statistical data published by UN agencies, this book highlights the reality of women's status in modern Burma. Case studies include why the first Burmese women's army was disbanded a few months after its establishment; how women writers assessed the conditions of Burmese women and represented their contemporaries in their works; the current state of prostitution; how modern-day sex workers are trying to find their voice; and how women fared vis-à-vis men in education.

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To the forgotten women of Burma

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1 Introduction

Official narrative and popular images of Burmese/Myanmar women[1]

The official and popular narrative concerning the status of Burmese women in the twentieth century was that they were granted equal status to that of men. In 2002, Ni Ni Myint, a historian, Director General of the Universities Historical Research Centre and Director of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Centre for History and Tradition, penned a book entitled *The Status of Myanmar Women*, in which she quips: 'Traditionally it has been the custom for women to defer to men, but this has not meant that the oppression of women has been advocated or tolerated in Myanmar society, generally women are considered the weaker sex but are treated as equal as men'.[2]

The national framework of history writing has defended this privileged position that Burmese women have enjoyed over many generations, unlike their 'oppressed' sisters from two neighbouring countries, China and India – albeit with a disclosure or uncomfortable admission of the ubiquitous deference women show to their male counterparts in every layer of the society, as seen in Ni Ni Myint's argument. Overshadowed by this overwhelming objective in writing and sustaining the official version of women's history, the actual political and social landscape of Burmese women has been elided. Instead, Burmese women have been mostly portrayed as powerful agents, who not only enjoy high status in society but are also granted equal rights to those of men. This book challenges this notion and attempts to delineate the real status that contemporary Burmese women enjoy in society against the backdrop of the popular and official narratives about them.

Contrary to national or official history, this is not a book about how powerful Burmese women are; rather, this is a book about why very few powerful Burmese women exist and how the few there are help to construct the notion of Burmese women's high status, thereby inevitably silencing the majority of 'unequal' and disempowered women.[3] One of the underlying questions throughout this book is why a few powerful women feel compelled to defend the notion that women hold a privileged position in Burmese society, and this book also attempts to depict their constant personal struggle – that is, the struggle between feeling obliged to

build or at least spread the message that they live in a utopian world where women's emancipation is celebrated and confronting the reality that sees women being denied their rights by society.

Previous scholars, such as J. S. Furnivall in the 1940s, and western travellers to Burma have made a considerable contribution towards the notion of powerful Burmese women and helped construct the long unchallenged thesis that Burmese society allows women to rise, and few cultural and social barriers exist for such a rise. A common observation made by scholars and travellers to Burma is that Burmese women enjoy profound freedom. Furnivall once wrote that the 'freedom of women' was an attractive feature of the country.[4] Burmese themselves, both men and women, viewed the status of women as unique, often claiming that few countries had achieved more than Burma in liberating their women.[5] Daw Mya Sein – 'the most prominent lady in Burmese public life', according to the editor of her 1944 book – was clear that 'Burmese women occupy a place in society no greatly different from that held by their sisters in the West'.[6]

These views gave many scholars the impression of a Burmese society with few or no gender barriers, unlike the situation in her great neighbours India and China. Chinese women, who had to bind their feet to make them look beautiful, and Indian widows, who had to practise *Sati* at the funeral of their husbands, stood in contrast to Burmese women who, it was said, enjoyed immense freedom.[7] Such oft-cited examples helped scholars, the mainstream media and the masses maintain an enduring image of liberated Burmese women. To justify that view, they searched for social and economic factors that might have brought about this unique, almost exotic, freedom for Burmese women.

The Status of Myanmar Women by Ni Ni Myint can be seen as the *official* defence of Burmese women as holders of high positions in the society. Ni Ni Myint set out to defend Burmese women's high status and her arguments echo some of the writings of the pioneer Burmese women such as Daw Mya Sein, who symbolized and sustained the notion of powerful Burmese women.

> Throughout Myanmar history women have enjoined equal rights with men in the household and economy. In the eyes of law, men and women were equal. Marriage was a civil act; women retained their own names during marriage, and divorce was a simple procedure with no stigma attached to either party. More importantly, women have always had the right of inheritance. Women liked to give precedence to their own men in their own houses because by tradition women acknowledged them as head of the household until their death. This was offered to the husbands because women felt secure in their own rights and status.[8]

Here Ni Ni Myint was in fact echoing what her predecessor – another highly educated woman, Daw Mya Sein – wrote half a century earlier. In 1958, the latter wrote in *Atlantic Monthly* that women favoured men because 'women felt secure in their own rights and status'.[9] The authors themselves are highly educated and powerful women; yet they condemn women who demanded rights as 'insecure'.

A Burmese euphemism for accepting the acquired knowledge to accept one's lower status, at least in the household, is 'feeling secure', and powerful women have passed down the knowledge and use of such euphemisms from generation to generation via their writings. According to women like Daw Mya Sein and Daw Ni Ni Myint, Burmese women do not demand rights, or there does not exist any precedent for Burmese women to initiate feminist movements, as they are content and secure. As recently as May 2012, one of the most prominent women writers and philanthropists, Than Myint Aung, defended the status of women thus: 'I am proud to be a Burmese woman. In our society, there is no such discrimination because a person is a woman.'[10] The overwhelming message for Burmese women is that they must feel secure and content, and feeling otherwise is against both Burmese traditions and Burmese women's traditions.

Burmese women in the twentieth century were, however, by no means unique, and their position could be read as universal. In other words, the world of Burmese women during the Japanese Occupation and after independence did not present them with exceptional opportunities. They experienced political, social and cultural restrictions comparable to those imposed on Indian and Chinese women. Burmese women were looked down upon when they worked outside the home; women writers were believed to be capable of producing only kitchen-sink literature; women nationalists were discouraged from running for office and daughters' education was not deemed as important as that of sons. Daw Mya Sein wrote that '[women were] content to work in the home and for the home', and they seldom left 'the home of [their] parents or [their] husbands to follow independent careers'.[11] 'Content' perhaps was a euphemism, for Burmese women probably believed that it was not worth the fight to demand opportunity and equality.

The perception that Burmese women enjoyed equality and suffered little prejudice removed gender from understandings of Burmese society. In other words, a male/female dichotomy was deemed irrelevant in Burma studies, since both men and women were thought to have enjoyed equal status historically. Burma was therefore seen through a gender-neutral lens. Only one study – Chi Ikeya's doctoral thesis – has analysed the discourse of colonialism, modernity and nationalism in late colonial Burma in the context of gender.[12]

The numerous studies on Burma after independence have focused on such issues as the civil war and the military regime.[13] But few have considered the role of women in these important political and social contexts. Using primary resources and personal interviews, this book reassesses the social, economic and political position of Burmese women in modern Burma throughout the twentieth century. Whereas nationalism profoundly shaped the political and social landscape of Burma from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the late 1930s, party politics, civil war and modernity influenced the country's post-independent social topography. Popular public discussion and debate shifted from the theme of colonialism versus nationalism to continuity versus change or tradition versus modernity.

Burmese women, alongside men, as writers, doctors, lawyers, journalists and editors, helped outsiders to see the social landscape of Burmese women as

unique. But behind these poster girls of modern Burma, from Daw Mya Sein through Ni Ni Myint to Aung San Suu Kyi, the social and political landscape of Burmese women was far from attractive. Interestingly, some Burmese women knew and accepted that the social terrain was far from smooth but decided not to seek to change it. Neither did they attempt to challenge the social and political agencies that sustained it. Khin Myo Chit, a leading literary figure and nationalist who wrote *Three Years Under the Japs*,[14] argued that men came first in many aspects of Burmese political, social and cultural life, and that women publicly admitted that they acknowledged the boundaries between men and women. She also confessed that she would not attempt to cross these boundaries or challenge them openly.[15]

Using women's writings, personal interviews and newspaper and magazine reports, this book attempts to explore the world of Burmese women soldiers, politicians, writers and prostitutes. It challenges the concept of the 'liberated Burmese woman' and shows that Burmese women experienced little freedom. Political institutions did not create a viable space for women; social institutions, such as the media, constantly reminded women to know their place in society, behind and beneath men and women's organizations themselves practised self-censorship, discouraging women from joining male professions.

This book will describe the conflicts between Burmese women and society, the internal dilemmas of women professionals, the sacrifices they had to make when setting priorities between their careers and the traditional roles of women and mothers, the negotiations they had to broker between modernity and tradition, the censorship and criticism they faced from male colleagues and society and the difficult choices they had to make when representing their real selves.

Brief political and cultural outline of twentieth-century Burma

The era of the Golden Press: post-independent media landscape

During the late 1940s and the 1950s, Nu's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government found itself fighting not only insurgents but also defiant elites, who frequently expressed their opposition to the government through the print media. These elites included writers, civil servants and the readers of newspapers and magazines. During these years, there was a great increase in the number of newspapers and magazines published. Between just 1945 and 1948, forty-four different newspapers were published, compared with seventy-eight over the much longer period between 1900 and 1944.[16] Between 1942 and 1962, thirty-nine newspapers were published in Burma – nineteen in Burmese, one in Chin, three in Urdu, two in Tamil, one in Talegu, three in Hindi, five in Chinese and five in English.[17]

With little or no state censorship, or indeed writer self-censorship, the years from 1948 to 1962 were a rare period of a free media. Readers did not have to read between the lines of what was written, as they had in the British and Japanese

periods and as they continued to do under the military regime. However, even though there was no state censorship, the government often guided the debates in the press towards morality and religion through newspapers such as *Bamakhit*. The government was faced with both a physical war waged by insurgents and a psychological war initiated by a corps of leaders of Burma's intellectual life, who were dissatisfied with the government's slow progress towards establishing peace and prosperity. The government accused both groups of being infiltrated by foreign ideologies.[18] Marxism and modernity were the culprits, and the government often argued that these two ideologies turned the insurgents and newspaper-reading modern citizens against their own government.

The government's concern was marked by the slogans of some newspapers. *Pyithu Hit Taing* [*Voice of People*] used 'We'll tell the truth and lead [the masses] towards the right path'. *The* Bahosi's was 'Restoration and modernization of [the] Burmese system'. *Zwe* stated: 'We'll perform our duties diligently'. *The New Times of Mandalay Daily* claimed 'Leftists' unity, economic, education, truth without bias' as its policy and *Bamathit* [Times of Burma] used 'We [have] no party ties and will educate readers by reporting truth'.[19] The government seemed to be threatened by such slogans.

The intimidation of the government was confirmed by the editor of *Kye Mon* (*The Mirror*), Kye Mon U Thaung, who admitted that 'we promoted the ideologies and image of the Red Flag [communist] party, and we had an influence on our readers'.[20] *Kye Mon* claimed that it enjoyed the biggest circulation in the late 1950s,[21] and the popularity of such a newspaper, which endorsed communism, presented a constant challenge to the government. The government, however, had its own mouthpieces, such as *Bamakhit*, the editor of which openly admitted that the newspaper endorsed the government's policies and helped Nu win the 1960 election.[22] Besides relying on *Bamakhit* to promote its image, the government also built its own propaganda machine.

Myawadi, a magazine issued by the military's psychological warfare department and founded in 1954 during the Nu government, inserted pamphlets called *Dhammadaye* or 'Danger of Dhamma'. *Myawadi* solicited funds from individuals nationwide to publish hundreds of thousands of pamphlets during 1958 as part of its campaign to portray communists and communism as a threat to Burma, a Buddhist nation.[23]

A number of newspapers, supported by monks and indeed lay people, depicted Burma as a deeply religious nation, and did so not only by promoting religious literature and religious behaviour but also by condemning literature and behaviour considered as anti-Buddhist or threatening to Buddhism. The state, as well as some newspapers, had clear ideas of what would promote Buddhism and what would denigrate it. For example, *Myawadi* portrayed communism as not only an enemy of the nation but also, and perhaps more importantly, a danger to Buddhism.

Women bore the brunt of the work in the campaign to promote Buddhism. A monk called Arrdeisawuntha once wrote a book on female monks (*Baikkhuni*). Unlike nuns, female monks were regarded as equal to male monks and were

ordained directly by Buddha during his time. They could also achieve nirvana, as male monks did. But Arrdeisawuntha was boycotted by his patrons for promoting the image and rights of women. As *Beikkhuni sasana*, or the tradition of Buddhist female monks, had long ceased to exist,[24] writing about them was regarded as challenging the male-dominated monastic system. Women as well as men boycotted the monk.

During the Japanese Occupation, Dr. Ba Maw, the Adipadi, assigned a publicity officer to each government department, and these officers gave radio lectures to keep the public informed as to what each department was doing.[25] Ba Maw's tactic of promoting state campaigns became the essence of the AFPFL's press strategy. Ba Maw's tactic was adopted by Nu and the army, who established their own newspaper and magazine, *Pyidaungsu* and *Myawadi*, respectively.

After independence, many Burmese writers and scholars were sent abroad by the government for training and education, although the exact number is difficult to ascertain. Never before had such a number of educated Burmese experienced the outside, modern world. On their return, they often compared Burma's tradition with modernity, criticized the non-secular and non-democratic practices of their own government and advocated modernity.

Transition to independence

On 27 March 1945, which came to be known as Resistance Day, Burma brought herself out of the giant shadow of colonialism. The Burma Defence Army (BDA) revolted against Japan. The returning British civilian administration, led by Dorman-Smith, found itself in a completely different political landscape from the one it had enjoyed before 1942. The old signposts and the old political leaders who the British thought could guide them through the new landscape were in fact no longer relevant. The returned British administration's desire to reinsert its authority found little public support, and its pre-war political allies, such as Ba Pe and Saw, found power slipping from their hands. Instead, young leaders such as Aung San, Than Tun and Nu captured the public imagination. In early 1942, the British Information Bureau had noted that 'Burmese nationalism is the key to all Burmese political thought and, as a general rule, it may be taken that the Burman is primarily both anti-Japanese and anti-British'.[26] But the British establishment in Rangoon was clearly unimpressed by what it thought were 'uncultured' men such as Aung San, who had never studied abroad. More sophisticated and cosmopolitan men such as Ba Maw, who studied in France and practised law in London, and even Saw, who although not a university graduate had visited London to meet Churchill,[27] were regarded as more capable – and, more importantly, more reasonable – by the British administration.

The Nay Thurein Conference held on 19 August 1945 was a display of public support for the AFPFL under Aung San. It is estimated that about 300,000 people attended. The conference presented four demands to the British: to end military administration; to recognize the Burma National Army and guerrilla forces,

which had worked alongside Force 136 during the resistance, and include them in a new Burma army; to form an interim national government and to hold national elections for a parliament under the rule of a national government.[28]

In his speech Aung San said that the British had told him that if the Burmese were united, they would grant independence.[29] That was a rather bold assertion, since the White Paper issued in May 1945 had not spelled out the conditions for the granting of independence. In fact the British were more concerned with Aung San's military forces, for it was attempting to disband the Patriotic Burma Front (PBF) at precisely this time. Aung San's confidence in his position and in the AFPFL were reflected in his speech: 'I dared say that there was no individual who would sacrifice more than us [the AFPFL] for our country'.[30] The British simply failed to see how Aung San and his colleagues had built such a powerful position in Burma's politics during their absence from the country.[31]

However, political power was concentrated in a small elite corps led by Aung San, a structure that was vulnerable to two major realignments which, between them, determined the fate of modern Burma. On 19 July 1947, Aung San was assassinated, along with other leaders. With seven cabinet members assassinated in a single day, Burma's future was put in doubt. And on 28 March 1948, exactly three years after Aung San and his army had risen against the Japanese, the communists, who had provided him with logistical and ideological support, went underground.[32]

Nu, AFPFL and unresolved issues of Burma

A self-confessed apathetic politician who would rather have been a writer and have been left to perform his religious duties,[33] Nu came to the front of Burma's politics after the assassination of Aung San and most of his cabinet. Nu led the country to independence and was in charge throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s. Many domestic problems, which Aung San and his colleagues had been confident they could resolve, escalated after independence. As Robert Taylor puts it, 'After Atlee promised Nu independence, the basic issues became fundamentally domestic or internal rather than imperial or international'.[34]

One major issue was the reorganization of the Burma Army, or PBF. The British had attempted to depoliticize the army by appointing a non-Burman as its commander, since a Burman with close ties to Aung San and the AFPFL might influence the army politically.[35] But many in the PBF rank and file did not want to join the new army under British command: the new PBF received only 2,668 applications for 5,200 places.[36] In contrast, the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), a paramilitary force which had been established by Aung San, attracted 25,000 members nationwide.[37] Mary Callahan has argued that it was difficult for the British to suggest openly that Aung San had established the PVO to wage another battle against them, but it was the crucial consideration.[38] In fact, women soldiers who had fought alongside PBF men during the resistance were told to hide any weapons seized from the Japanese, since another war was imminent, this time against the British.[39] The reduction in the number of soldiers

in the PBF and creation of the PVO were important consequences of the conflict between Aung San and the British as to how the army would be accommodated in Burma's politics.

Before 1946, political parties and politicians had worked together towards one goal – independence – under the leadership of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), Dobama Asiayone, the Freedom Bloc and then the AFPFL. But the approach of independence brought division. Red Flag communists, White Flag communists, the People's Volunteer Force and the Karen National Union challenged the AFPFL even before independence was achieved.

The first major divide occurred in October 1946, when the communists were evicted from the AFPFL. Then, on 29 July 1948, the Yebaw Phyu faction of the PVO staged an armed revolt against the government, followed by the communists. Some ministers blamed the armed revolts on the socialists within the government. Defense Minister Bo Letya, Commander in Chief Smith Dunn, Head of Police U Htun Hla Aung and Secretary of Home Affairs U Karsi asked Nu to form a government without the socialists.[40] There were plots, centred on Ne Win, to form a coalition with the underground communists, give the premiership to Than Tun and appoint Ne Win Minister of Defence. Ne Win was to stage a coup within the army, but he backed off and the plot fell through.[41] In 1949, most urban centres in Burma were in the hands of what the government called 'multi-colour' insurgents. One politician, Ba Pe, approached Ne Win and asked for his support for a coup, but Ne Win informed U Nu and the plan was shattered.[42] U Nu remained in power, but only by a thread. As political leaders failed to resolve their differences within the parliamentary structure, they increasingly sought the support of the army, and this inevitably created a political space for the military. The army became a major stakeholder in politics, especially after the civil war began in 1949.

A number of the ethnic minorities also openly challenged the central government. Most notably, the Karens resumed their demands for a Karen state, a demand which emerged from the October 1947 Moulmein conference.[43] Karens under the leadership of the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) and Karen National Union first organized rallies and then rose in revolt.[44] Insein, a northern suburb of Rangoon, was held by the KNDO for 108 days,[45] leaving the government to be mocked as merely a 'Rangoon government' by newspapers such as the *Nation*. The civil wars cost Burma greatly. Not least, hundreds of thousands of people from the countryside were displaced[46] and those who were able relocated to Rangoon and the other major cities. The population of Rangoon rose by 200,000 between 1941 and 1950.

Burma's total population rose from 16.8 million in 1941 to 19.0 million in 1951, and then to 22.2 million in 1961.[47] Much of this growth was concentrated in the urban areas.[48] The population shift into the urban centres was undoubtedly due in part to the destruction of rural livelihoods by war and then civil war, although it should be added that some towns in the Tharrawaddy and Mandalay districts, strongholds of the KNDO and the communists respectively, lost residents.

But, in general, some four million people moved into the major cities after the war,[49] attracted by economic opportunities and the opportunity to get away from the threat posed by insurgents. The threat of kidnapping by insurgents or dacoits drove many wealthier families out of the rural districts into the town and cities, but once there, not all found employment in the formal sector.[50]

The socio-economic problems of independent Burma were overwhelming, made far worse by the civil war and political paralysis. In the early 1950s, there were only four or five towns permanently held by the government. The tracks, trains and bridges of Burma's railways had been extensively destroyed in the war but reconstruction was near impossible given the security situation in the countryside. Burma's real GDP was almost one-third lower in 1950–51 than it had been in 1938–39. Large tracts of land remained uncultivated, or under the control of the communists or Karens.[51]

The first elections under the new independent government were held in two stages in 1951 and 1952, first in towns with relative security and then in those areas still under the control of insurgents. But the elections were flawed. Opposition politicians were arrested, the military police threatened opposition voters and ballots were rigged and papers stolen.[52]

Pyidawtha *or Happy Land Years: 1952–56*

The government not only had to overcome the insurgents; it also had to convince voters that it could bring peace and prosperity. It was in order to meet this challenge that Nu later introduced his *Pyidawtha* or welfare plan. Decades of foreign political hegemony and economic and cultural dominance, compounded by large scale destruction during the war, had left Burma's leaders with a huge challenge as they attempted to rehabilitate the country, both physically and psychologically.

A two-year economic plan was drafted in 1948, followed by an eight-year plan designed by the American KTA Corporation in 1952. The two-year plan was never implemented, partly because of the insurrections, but also because the plan had no financial framework.[53] U Nu then turned to the American Technical Co-operation Administration (TCA) for a welfare plan called *Pyidawtha*, which was first translated as 'Happy Land' by U Nu himself. U Nu claimed that it was modelled on an Iranian plan.[54]

Trager summarized the rationale behind the *Pyidawtha* plan:

> To work harder, to earn more, to insist on the immediate need for greater production – to achieve a gross domestic output which will warrant and make possible an average annual investment of K1,000 million in capital goods – this overall goal of the government requires a nation fit and ready and willing to shoulder the task. The 'good economic position' desired is, according to prime minster U Nu, but one of the five qualities of right nationhood. The other four are good education, good health, good character, good fellowship.[55]

But the *Pyidawatha* plan faced many difficulties and in 1954, U Nu argued that

> until peace is fully restored throughout our land, we cannot push ahead with maximum speed in building our new Burma. We cannot bring crops to market from lands that lie in areas held by insurgents. We cannot complete our river and rail and road and air transportation systems into enemy territory. We cannot construct a dam to provide us with power until the river banks are clear of bandits. This effort now takes nearly one-third of our national budget.[56]

The government was still facing an uphill battle in reconstructing Burma six years after independence. Banditry and insurgency accounted for the loss of one-third of the country's budget. U Nu admitted that the pre-war economy of Burma had been inadequate; yet in 1953, it was worse.[57]

To compound Burma's problems, Kuomintang forces invaded Burma in 1949 and by the mid-1950s the number of KMT troops in Shan State, under General Li Mi, grew to 1,500. A second national election was held on 27 April 1956. This was the year the Pa-Ma-Nya-Ta (PMNT), or Union of Burma National United Fronts, came on to the political scene, challenging the ruling AFPFL. PMNT was a conglomeration of many political parties, including the People's Democratic Party (former Dobama Asiayone), the People's United Party, the People's Peace Groups, the Burma Workers' and Peasants' Party, the Burma Trade Union Council, the Peasants' United Group, the People's Youth Party, the Justice Party and the Mon National League.

Cracks began to appear in the AFPFL in 1956. The personalities of two individuals – Nu and Kyaw Nyein – rather than differences in ideology caused the divergence. By 1958, their differences had become irreconcilable, and on 29 April 1958, U Nu announced that he had brought the Ministry of Home Affairs under his own control: he could no longer unite the different factions. On 6 May, Nu announced that he had decided to side with Thakin Tin, the agricultural minister, and Thakin Kyaw Tun, whereas U Kyaw Nyein and U Ba Swe stood apart. This marked the beginning of a period of political infighting, mudslinging, backstabbing and even the killing of opponents. The four years between 1958 and 1962 were marked by a widening gap between what came to be known as the Nu-Tin (or Clean) AFPFL and the Swe-Nyein (or Stable) AFPFL.

The PMNT backed the Nu-Tin faction, hoping that Nu-Tin would be more sympathetic towards their call for peace than the Swe-Nyein faction, who were arch-rivals of the communists. The council of monks, fearing an AFPFL split, sought agreement between the factions to end the mutual accusations and allegations and to establish a commitment to solve problems democratically and end undemocratic actions, such as resorting to armed revolts. The monks bound the leaders of the AFPFL factions to honour democratic practices while campaigning for the 1960 election.

But the factions did not honour the agreement with the monks. The strong animosity between Nu and Nyein, who called each other a dictator and a socialist

fanatic respectively, forced others, notably the ethnic communities, to take sides. Minority leaders, who once had occupied ministerial positions – indeed, two had become president – were no longer certain that a Burman leader could unify the nation and lead a federal democratic state. Instead the minorities established parties of their own – the Rakhine United Party, the All Burma Shan National Headquarters, the Kachin National Congress, the Karen National Party[58] – to secure their own states.

While the first half of 1958 was marred by political infighting between the Clean and Stable AFPFL, the second half of the year saw attempts by both factions to woo all groups –including, notably, the armed insurgents. This was a dangerous approach, since promises to one group could easily annoy the others. Nu was walking a political tightrope, but he narrowly won a no-confidence vote in parliament in 1958 by eight votes.[59]

Addressing the army during the October 1958 military convention held in Meiktila, Colonel Aung Gyi, Ne Win's right-hand man, argued that to entrust power to politicians was to invite the communists to seize power. He portrayed the army as the sole barrier to a communist takeover. The way was open for the military coups of 1958 and 1962.

Burma under the Burma Socialist Programme Party between 1962 and 1988

When the Ne Win-led military staged a coup for the second time on 2 March 1962, the language used in General Ne Win's announcement indicated that the army had no other option but to 'take the responsibility' of rescuing the country to prevent it from total collapse. General Ne Win also asked the public to go about their lives as usual; civilians should carry out their normal duties and students – especially matriculating students – should finish the exams they were sitting. He also promised that 'Tatmadaw [the army] will try their best to bring physical health and mental peace to the citizens'.[60] Ne Win sounded casual and at four o'clock, he met the Chinese business commission,[61] convincing the country that he and his *Tatmadaw* were firmly in control.

There was a rationale behind this relaxed appearance and confident image. On 6 March, the army announced that the new government, which was now called the 'Revolutionary Council', would rule the country in a Burmese way. And unlike Pakistani and Egyptian military governments, they would appeal to the public – that is, they would not use 'violence'.[62] The Revolutionary Council created a new corpus of language to be used in print media to win over the hearts and minds of the people, and one of the very first terms they coined was *scientific socialism*. Merely two days after the coup, Ne Win and his *Tatmadaw* won over the AFPFL party, which announced that they would help the new Council in its march towards socialist goals.[63]

But there remained a deeply sceptical group which would pose a constant challenge to the Council and which finally put a final stop to the long march towards scientific socialism, and that was the students. On 4 March, the Universities

Students Union, All Burma Students Union (ABSU) and Rangoon Students Union issued a joint statement condemning the Revolutionary Council, and ABSU replaced their president with a new one who could provide clear leadership against the Revolutionary Council. The students seemed to be in the minority, however. A week after the coup, twenty-two countries, including Germany and the United States of America, endorsed the Revolutionary Council, boosting the confidence of the new military government – even though a German diplomat privately advised one of the colonels, Kyi Maung, to 'nip the regime in the bud', warning him that the military government would not go back to the barracks.[64]

One of the early victims of the Revolutionary Council was a woman. Moe Swe, who was a government nurse and then chief medic for the Burma Communist Party, was given a life-imprisonment term for 'rebelling' against the country two weeks after the coup.[65] She became an early example of how traitors and rebels would be punished by the new government. The Council's 'cool' image was severely tarnished when, on 8 July 1963, students from Rangoon University demonstrated against the new university's regulations and *Tatmadaw* responded by blowing up the Student Union – thereby destroying the Revolutionary Council's already troubled relationship with the students.

On another front, Burma's diplomatic and cultural relations with China were severed after 1967 when riots broke out between Chinese residents of Rangoon and the authorities. China ceased its support, under its 'People's Diplomacy Programme', to organizations such as the Burma–China Friendship Association, the all-Burma Peace Committee, the People's Democratic Youth League and the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee.[66] General Ne Win, who became the president of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) founded in 1964, announced that the state would no longer tolerate the activities of these organizations. At this point, Burma was drawing closer to the west, and especially the United States, rather than its neighbours India and China.

Bejing had exhausted its relationship with Rangoon and now supported the opposition, especially the underground Burma Communist Party (BCP). In the meantime, BSPP relations with the west prospered. Burma sought support from the United States, England and Germany for educational and military supplies. Scholars were sent to the United States under the Colombo Plan, yet upon their return, few found jobs that matched their skills.[67]

A common misunderstanding in relation to Burma's education is that the state had failed to develop education and produce a corps of planners, managers and financiers. The state was often seen as incapable of guiding educational institutions to meet the manpower demanded for nation-building. However, a more appropriate framework with which to understand Burma's education system from 1962 is that the state tightly restricted manpower demands. Few people occupied decision-making positions and the state ensured that policies came from its own small circle alone, leaving little room for professionals and educational and research institutions.

The Revolutionary Council formulated the national ideology of the Burmese Way to Socialism in 1962, under which the state attempted to unite the nation.

Socialist principles were the guiding engine of nation-building, as claimed by the government; yet elites felt deeply betrayed by the lack of opportunities to advance their careers and prospects. The BSPP was deaf to the woes of the middle. Instead, one of the architects of the BSPP economy, Colonel Aung Gyi, reasoned that as long as the public were well-fed, they would not care who was governing them or under which government system they lived. And the BSPP economy was driven by the rationale that private business enterprises were all *wi-tha-ma*, or businesses that put profits before people; therefore the state should be in charge of the national economy. During the BSPP era, all business operations, from the press to export and import, were managed under the auspices of the Defense Service Institute, Beatrice Foods (Burma) Limited, Burma Orchids Limited, Burma International Inspection Company Limited, Burma Economic Development Corporation, Burma Five Star Line, Ava House and Myawaddy Press.[68]

Although Mary Callahan writes that the *Tatmadaw* or army was a willing partner in transforming an 'apathetic public' into a socialist citizenry,[69] it is worth asking if the army really wanted to instil the spirit of socialism in the general public, given the view of the public expressed by Colonel Aung Gyi in his economic planning. Mistrust of private businesses seemed to have been an overriding force rather than laying the foundations of a socialist state during the BSPP era, and General Ne Win repeatedly threatened businessmen with the assurance that the state would not hesitate to 'sacrifice' the interests of the businessmen if they were standing in the way of Burmese socialism. During the annual speech given on the peasant's day, in 1963, General Ne Win announced:

> Implementing Burmese Socialism is attempting to feed the whole nation. Bad bureaucrats and the rich were standing in the way. We did not want to be cruel towards our fellow Burmans. I requested you [bureaucrats and the rich] to co-oporate with us. If our request was not complied [with], we would annihilate you as the old Kings did when they established new kingdoms.[70]

A series of nationalizations swept the country throughout the 1960s. The first to go were the private banks, followed by more than 3,000 private stores, and then hospitals and schools. Socialism did not blossom, despite the state's success over the 'profit-first' or *wi-tha-ma* businessmen. Instead, the BSPP had to admit that the public's situation had not improved as much as it should have done after ten years of experimenting with socialism.[71] Indeed, Burma in the BSPP era could be understood as living through austerity years, especially after the experiment with Burmese-style socialism failed.

Women felt the consequences of the state-guided isolation or closed economy acutely; they became recalcitrant participants in the *hmoun-kho* economy that thrived during the BSPP years. *Hmoun-kho* means 'taking refuge in the darkness', and many women had to join the millions of *hmoun-kho* market players, whether transporting goods from thriving *hmoun-kho* towns near the Burma–Thailand borders such as Myawaddy, Myeik and Kawthaung to other parts of the

country, or retailing *hmon-kho* goods through their offices with an advanced credit system.[72] In the second chapter, the literary landscape during the *hmoun-kho* period is discussed in detail.

Burma's economy was in decline throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and rice export data are good indicators for this: rice exports fell from 3.1 million tons per year pre-war, to 1.7 million tons in 1962, at the beginning of the Revolutionary Council's term in power, to 0.5 million tons in 1987,[73] a year before the UN granted Burma LDC (Least Developed Country) status. Despite holding gem sales every year – sometimes twice a year – the government could not bring in foreign-exchange earnings without lifting the block on foreign investment. National debt doubled to US$2.8 billion between 1981 and 1986.[74] The BSPP era came to an end on 18 September 1988 after six months of nationwide protests led by students and underground networks.

Post-1988 Burma

Burma's 'People Power' or '8888' uprising could not break the continuum of authoritarian rule, despite the mass participation of hundreds of thousands of people from different backgrounds. The first announcement by the new government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), reflected the fact that the uprising did not change its course, even though it inspired many young people who continued to resist the state throughout the 1990s. In its statement entitled Statement 1/88, SLORC used the exact same words used by the Revolutionary Council on 2 March 1962 when it staged its coup. SLORC said that 'to save the country from a total collapse in time, Tatmadaw took over the responsibility of the follower powers'.[75]

A military government was back in power, but unlike the Revolutionary Council, it announced on the same day of the coup that it would hold elections after the rule of law and security were restored, transportation security was guaranteed and people's lives had improved. The statement reflected that the government wanted to postpone the elections for as long as possible. The SLORC attempted to convince the country that the new government was a temporary caretaker, and argued that they chose their name to reflect this transient nature.[76] Former Premier U Nu, from whom Ne Win had seized power, asked the newly formed political parties to boycott the elections even before the date had been set.[77]

Chapter 2 considers the ways in which women editors, journalists and writers struggled to establish a position in the literary landscape of twentieth-century Burma. As the boundary between the world of men and the world of women began to fracture, but not disappear, office work – and in particular writing and publishing – began to be seen as a place in which women could advance, while continuing to juggle their home and family responsibilities.[78] The advance of women into writing and publishing also reflected the greater education of women in earlier decades, and education and modernity themselves became major themes in writing by women in newspapers, magazines and fiction work during

this period – in addition to the everyday struggles of juggling work and family life and fighting against soaring commodity prices.

Women soldiers and communists are the central theme of chapters 3, 4 and 5. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which the early nationalist movement encouraged women to become politically aware and focuses on the work of the East Asia Youth League/Asia Youth League, which mobilized as many as 30,000 women into the resistance against the Japanese. Chapter 4 traces the lives of women who belonged to the East Asia Youth League, especially the seven women who became the core of the first women's army, founded in February 1945. Issues of how the army came to be founded, the impact it had on these first women and how it failed to lead to the creation of a professional female corps are discussed extensively. Chapter 5 considers the rapid disbandment of the first women's army and how its members then moved towards the communists, where they were once again sidelined. The chapter also explores the ways in which, more broadly, women were discouraged from playing a prominent part in the politics of newly independent Burma – often by women themselves. Politics, it was argued, was for men, and women could build the new nation most effectively by being good mothers and wives.

Chapter 6 considers modernity. Definitions of beauty and the values that constitute a 'good' woman, as advanced by the newspapers and magazines of the period, are explored. For example, the government consistently advanced the message that only women who embraced Burmese culture and led lives based on Buddhist values could be called 'worthy' women.[79] A principal argument of this chapter is that the modernism synonymous with western culture and ideologies and the adjusted Burmese modernism based on Buddhist culture cast a shadow on the social landscape of Burmese women in this period. The second part of this chapter deals with the matter of trafficked women and migrant women. Using government, UN and NGO reports as well as unpolished departmental statistics, this section also discusses how women are monitoring their biological functions to lessen the burden of reproduction, and hence adjusting to inequality in their own way.

Chapter 7 is about prostitution. During the British period, prostitution was primarily seen as a vector of disease threatening the health of British soldiers. 'Prostitutes were a regular part of regimental establishment, housed in the bazaars, [were] looked after by a matron and accompanied regiments in the march',[80] reported a colonial doctor. But in independent Burma, prostitution was a crime of vice perpetrated by men of low morality: as *Bamakhit*, or *Times of Burma*, explained, a 'lack of moral restrictions contributed to the problem of prostitution'.[81] More importantly, women themselves became the focus of much of the public discussion of prostitution. In the communist press, the *Pyithu Arnar* or *People's Power* journal, prostitutes were often portrayed as the victims of the government's economic failures, the victims of poverty and destitution; elsewhere, they were portrayed as victims of modernity, women who sought, but could not afford, a modern, consumerist lifestyle. Prostitution also provided a justification for the state to take a moral stand – in effect a religious stand – to

tackle social ills, rather than providing practical intervention. Contemporary views of prostitution expressed by prostitutes themselves are also discussed in this chapter.

Notes

1 Burmese in this book refers to citizens of Burma, including Burmans, ethnic minorities as well as Indian and Chinese immigrants who settled permanently there.
2 Ni Ni Myint, *The Status of Myanmar Women*, Myanmar: Universities Historical Research Centre, 2002, p. 65. Ni Ni Myint is also one of the wives of General Ne Win and under her leadership, Myanmar (Burmese) Historical Commission produced many history books that reflect the state narrative in the making of modern Burma and legitimize the state role in uniting the nation and moving the entire country forward. Some of the popular history books produced by the Department of Historical Research Committee include Burma Politics series and History and Culture of Ethnic Minorities series.
3 Contrary to common perceptions, Burmese women, though highly visible in the public sphere – so much so that Furnivall once considered whether Burmese society was in fact matriarchal – did not hold high office after 1962, and there had never been a departmental women minister until 2012. There was once a woman minister, Mrs. Ba Maung Chain, wife of a Karen national leader, Ba Maung Chain. She was elected among sixteen male Karens for the post of Karen State Minister. Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women*, 2nd edition, London: Zed Books, 1984, p. 8; Saw Monyin, *ဗမာအမျိုးသမီး*, [*Burmese Women*], Rangoon: Padauk Hlaing, 1976, pp. 150–153. Only on 4 August 2012 did Burma see a second woman minister. Myat Myat Ohn Khin was appointed the Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation Ministry. Social work, relief and rehabilitation have always been highlighted as traditional duties of women and by appointing a woman to this Ministry, the state reaffirms the traditional gender roles – women as caretakers and men as nation-builders.
4 J. S. Furnivall, 'Communism and Nationalism in Burma', *Far Eastern Survey*, 18(17), 1949, p. 194.
5 *Htun Daily*, 9 July 1956, pp. 13–14.
6 Daw Mya Sein, *Burma: The Country, the People, Their History, Administration, Resources and Trade Communications, Education and Religion, Relations with India, Nationalism, The Future*, OUP, 1944, p. 8. Daw Mya Sein was the headmistress of the National Women's School, representative for Burma at the meeting of the League of Nations (former UN), and visiting lecturer at many international universities. Saw Monyin, op. cit., 1976, pp. 228–234.
7 *Htun Daily*, 11 September 1957, p. 3.
8 Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., pp. 3–4.
9 Daw Mya Sein, 'The Women of Burma: A Tradition of Hard Work and Independence,' *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1958).
10 Peter Aung, 'Burma one of the worst place for women', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, http://burmese.dvb.no/archives/24930. Accessed on 4 May 2012.
11 Ibid.
12 Chie Ikeya, 'Gender, History and Modernity: Representing Women in Twentieth Century Colonial Burma', PhD, Cornell University, 2006.
13 Two of the most cited references on these issues include Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, and Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.
14 Khin Myo Chit, *Three Years Under the Japs*, Rangoon: The Royal Stationary, 1945.
15 Khin Myo Chit, ဒဂုန် မဂ္ဂဇင်းကိုစွဲချက်တင်မှုများ [Accusations on Dagon], *Dagon*, n.d., p. 24.
16 Dr. Nyi Nyi, *မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အမျိုးသားမော်ကွန်း (၁၉၇၅)။ မျက်မှောက်ကာလ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှတ်တမ်း*, [Burma's National Records (1975): Records of Contemporary Burma], Rangoon: Bagan, 1978,

pp. 219–261. More periodicals than newspapers were printed in late colonial Burma. There were 103 newspapers and periodicals printed in 1921 alone. *Census of India*, 1921, p. 189 as quoted in Chie Ikeya, op. cit., 2006, p. 26.

17 Takkatho Htin Gyi, *မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ သတင်းစာများအညွှန်း* [*Reference Book for Burmese Newspapers*], Rangoon: Sarpay Bateman, 1992.

18 *Myawadi*, January 1957, pp. 1–2.

19 Takkatho Htin Gyi, op cit., 1992.

20 Kye Mon U Thaung, *သတင်းစာတို့ ၇၀တ်လပ်သောခေတ်၊ ဗမာ့ခေတ်မှ ကြေးမုံသို့* [*From Bamakhit to Kye Mon*], Rangoon: Pagon Publishing, 1971.

21 *Kye Mon* was first published on 16 April 1957. Founder and editor U Thoung was a former editor of *Bamakhit* [*Times of Burma*].

22 Dagon Khin Khin Lay, *နှစ်ပေါင်းဖြိ၀* [*60 Years*], Rangoon, 1961.

23 By July 1959, *Myawadi* had distributed over one million pamphlets and secured enough funding to publish 100,000 more. *Hanthawaddy*, 6 July 1959.

24 It was believed to have disappeared between the 11th and 13th centuries.

25 Ludu Daw Ama, *အငြိမ့်* [*Dance Theatre*], 1st vol, Mandalay: Ludu, 1973, p. 35.

26 Burma Intelligence Bureau, *Burma During the Japanese Occupation*, vol. 1, 1943, p. 17.

27 He was not allowed a meeting with Churchill, however.

28 *Nay Thurein Records*, Rangoon: Thandaw Sint, 1946, pp. 2–3, as quoted in U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, *Burma Politics: 1958–1962*, 1st vol., Rangoon: Universities Publishing House, 1991, p. 19.

29 *ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း၏နိုင်ငံရေးမိန့်ခွန်းများ၊ ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၄၇* [Aung San's Speeches: 1945–1947], Rangoon: Sarpay Bateman, 1971, pp. 19–27.

30 Ibid., p. 25.

31 Lieutenant General Browning once telegraphed Dorman-Smith that 'I am coming to the opinion that Aung San is much more anxious to be prominent in politics than he is in military affairs and I repeat that his nose should be applied firmly to the grindstone until the whole PBF problem is finally resolved'. Telegram, IOR: M/4/1320, as quoted in Hugh Tinker, *Burma: The Struggle for Independence: Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 1, London: HMSO, 1983, p. 383.

32 Socialists however argued that communists were hiding weapons in their headquarters in Bargayar in Rangoon, an accusation communists strongly denied. When the President of the Burma Communist Party, Thakin Ba Thein Tin, met General Ne Win, during their 'peace' talks in 1969, Ba Thein Tin told Ne Win that the headquarters was not big enough to store weapons and ammunitions to revolt against the socialists, let alone against the entire army. Personal interviews with an exiled communist, China, 2009.

33 Nu, *တာတောစနေသား*, Thailand: DPNS, 2003.

34 Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987, p. 218.

35 Précis of development in the Patriotic Burmese Forces situation and present situation in respect of political activities. PRO: WO/203/4405. as quoted in U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, op. cit., p. 39.

36 U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, op. cit., p. 38.

37 *Pyithu Yebaw*, 1(52), 7 April 1947, p. 2, as quoted in U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, op. cit., p. 43.

38 Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 11.

39 Interviews with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, July 2007, Rangoon.

40 Thein Pe Myint, *Kyaw Nyein*, p. 114 as quoted in U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, op. cit., p. 82.

41 Personal interviews, as quoted in U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, op. cit., p. 83.

42 *Myanma Alin*, 15 October 1954, as quoted in op. cit., p. 96.

43 Win Tint Tun, *အမှောင်ကြားကဗမာပြည်၊ အနီးခေတ်မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံရေးသမိုင်း ၁၉၄၈ – ၂၀၀၀* [*Burma in Darkness: A Short History of Contemporary Burmese Politics* (1948–2000)], Thailand: DPNS, 2006, p. 81. The author of this book was given rare access to records and journals

published by the Communist Party of Burma, archives believed to have been housed somewhere in China. The author, though not historically trained nor an academic, used these archives extensively in this book, but they are not cited as required to meet academic standards. I decided to use this book as a reference, however, since the observations and arguments provided could not be found in any other written source, but is evidence by still living communists and those personally involved during the independence struggle and the resistance movement. This book also provided a balance for another reference book I extensively used in this chapter, U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, *Burma Politics: 1958–1962*, 1st vol., Rangoon: Universities Publishing House, 1991, which is thought to have been commissioned by the Burma Socialist Programme Party.

44 Ibid.
45 *Bamakhit*, 23 May 1949.
46 *Myanmar Alin*, 9 February 1959.
47 Teruko Saito and Lee Kin Kiong, *Statistics on the Burmese Economy: The 19th and 20th Century*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999, p.7.
48 Government of the Union of Burma Census Department, *Towns Classified by Population with Decennial Variations from 1881 to 1953*, Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1954.
49 *Myanmar Alin*, 14 May 1950, p. 3.
50 Government of the Union of Burma Census Department, op. cit.
51 Ibid., p. 40.
52 Aung Than, *ခဖြနှစ်နိုင်ငံရေးအတွေ့အကြုံများ: ၁၉၄၅ – ၁၉၆၁*, [*Political Experiences During Sixteen Years Between 1945 and 1961*], Rangoon: Pyithu, n.d., p. 111.
53 Ministry of National Planning, *Second Four-Year Plan for The Union of Burma (1961–62 to 1964–65*), Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1961.
54 *Hanthawaddy*, 13 January 1954, as quoted in op. cit., p. 113.
55 Frank N. Trager, *Toward a Welfare State in Burma: Economic Reconstruction and Development. 1948–1954*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954, p. 44.
56 Economic and Social Board, Government of the Union of Burma, *Pyidawtha: The New Burma, A Report from the Government of the People of the Union of Burma on our Long-term Programme for Economic and Social Development*. London: Hazell Watson and Viney, 1954, p. 11.
57 Ibid., p. 12.
58 U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, *Burma Politics: 1958–1962*, 1st vol., Rangoon: Universities Publishing House, 1991, pp. 197–204.
59 The actual vote count was 127 for Clean and 119 for Stable. PMNT overwhelmingly voted with Clean MPs, 44 to 1.
60 The original message reads 'ပြည်ထောင်စုမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်၏ ယိုယွင်းလာသော အခြေအနေဆိုးကို ထိန်းသိမ်းစေခြင်းငှာ ဗမာ့တပ်မတော်မှ တာဝန်ယူစောင့်ရှောက်လိုက်ဖြိုဖြစ်ကြောင်း ကျေညာအပ်ပါသည်။' [We announced that Burma army took the responsibility to stop the worsening situation of the Union of Burma]. In Than Pe Myint, *Historical Documents from 1962–67*, n.d., Rangoon: Supaung. This book is a digest of important news, statement and documents published in newspapers and the Burma Socialist Programme Party's publications.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., p. 8.
63 Ibid., p. 6.
64 Ibid., pp. 6–12. Interview with Daw Kyi Kyi, wife of Colonel Kyi Maung, who was with the Tatmadaw at the time of the coup but was later discharged when he dissented against Ne Win, July 2007.
65 She was later granted amnesty a year later, on 9 April 1963. Ibid, pp. 26, 75.
66 Robert A. Holmes, 'Burma's Foreign Policy Toward China Since 1962', *Pacific Affairs*, 45(2), 1972, pp. 240–254, p. 243.
67 Both J. S. Furnivall and Frank Trager, who was a Research Professor in Government and Director of the Burma Research Project at New York University and who also

advised the American government on aid programmes for Burma, wrote extensively in the later 1940s and 1950s on Burma's attempts at reconstruction and recreation. Moshe Lissak, Joseph Fischer, Josef Silverstein and Richard Butwell wrote on Burma's universities and educational reforms in the context of the political and economic crises the new government faced between 1949 and 1955.

68 Tin Maung Win, *နိုင်ငံရေးသမားနှင့်နိုင်ငံရေး* [*Politician and Politics*], Thailand: Khit Pyaing, 2000, pp. 119–220.

69 Callahan, op. cit., p. 208.

70 Here, Ne Win was referring to sacrificial acts or rituals which the rulers practised when they founded new kingdoms or cities. Animals and people were killed to bring good luck in the new mission of the kings. Ne Win clearly saw himself as the king of the new Socialist Kingdom and during his era, all the businessmen, especially foreign business owners, became sacrificial animals, some fleeing the country and leaving everything they owned behind. One of my family's friends recounted his father's story. His father, a Chinese businessman, was shocked when soldiers who came to take over his grocery store, saw the Parker fountain pen in his shirt-pocket and told him they would be taking the pen as well. For Ne Win's Peasant's Day speech, see Than Pe Myint, n.d, p. 130.

71 *Report to the Public Concerning the Situations of Finance, Economy, Society of the Union of Burma in 1972–73*; book 1, Planning and Finance Ministry, 1972, p. 10.

72 For more on hmoun-kho economy, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'The Politics of State-Business Relations in Post-Colonial Burma', PhD, Cornell University, 2001.

73 David I. Steinberg, 'Neither Silver Nor Gold: The 40th Anniversary of the Burmese Economy', in David I. Steinberg, *The Future of Burma: Crisis and Choice in Myanmar*, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990, pp. 35–49.

74 Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 145.

75 *မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ တိုင်းကျိုးပြည်ပြု နိုင်ငံတော်ငြိမ်ဝပ်ပိပြားမှုတည်ဆောက်ရေးအဖွဲ့၏ဆောင်ရွက်ချက်များ သမိုင်းဝင်မှတ်တမ်း၊ ၁၉၈၈ မှ ၁၉၉၁* [*Historical Records of State Law and Order Restoration Council: 1988–1991*], 2 vols., Rangoon, 1991, p. 507.

76 Ibid., p. 25.

77 Nine days before the coup, U Nu issued a statement that he took the power back from the BSPP. *Pyithu Athan*, number 17. He was endorsed by the first democratic party after the democratic era 1962–1988, the Democracy and Peace Party. His statement was a response to Colonel Tin Oo and Aung San Suu Kyi, leaders of the National League for Democracy, who asked BSPP to form an interim government but fell short of forming a government themselves.

78 Khin Myo Chit, စစ်အတွင်းနှင့် စစ်ပြီးခေတ် မြန်မာအမျိုးသမီးများ [Burmese Women During and After the War], in *မြန်မာအမျိုးသမီးကြေးမုံ* [*Mirror of Burmese Women*], Rangoon: Burmese Literature and Print Media Group, 1998, pp. 28–38.

79 Henry J. Wilson, *A Rough Record of Events and Incidents Connected with the Repeal of the 'Contagious Diseases Acts, 1864-6–9' in the United Kingdom, and of the Movement Against State Regulation of Vice in India and the Colonies: 1858–1906*, Sheffield: Parker, 1907, p. 73.

80 *Bamakhit*, 24 September 1956.

81 *Bamakhit*, 23 October 1954.

2 Print media and women journalists, editors and writers

The emergence of national newspapers

The Burman newspaper, established in 1910, marks the dawn of Burma's movement towards independence. Two highly educated Burmese men, U May Aung and U Ba Dunn, wanted to show the colonial government that the Burmese had the ability to publish a newspaper, not in the vernacular Burmese, but in English. Even though their *Burman* newspaper did not survive for long, they had made a strong point. Later, in 1928, a failing English newspaper, *The New Burma*, was bought out by some Burmese, on the principle that there should be at least one English newspaper in Burma published by Burmese themselves.[1] For nationalist Burmese, newspapers came to be seen as non-lethal weapons. And such an attitude – using newspapers to challenge the British – was also evident during the publication of the *Thuriya* newspaper from 1911 to the late 1920s.

When two Arakanese, father and son, bought the advertising newspaper *Akyab Commercial Advertiser* in 1868, they had limited themselves to Arakan; half a century later, Burmese were challenging the British in the heart of their territory, in an English-medium newspaper. Western education, the expansion of agricultural production, the arrival of migrants from upper Burma, soaring paddy prices and the building of the railway produced rich Burmese landlords in the delta, and these landlords invested their wealth in their children's education.[2] Most children of major landlords attended vernacular schools and later Rangoon colleges; the children of the extremely rich went to boarding schools in the hill stations of India or, indeed, to England.

These children, who were more often the sons rather than the daughters of rich landlords, acquired English and therefore modern knowledge. It took the Burmese one generation – the generation of the children of the wealthy landlords – to equip themselves with a modern weapon, language, with which to challenge the colonial administration. A famous Burmese poet and scholar, Zawgyi, added in 1966 that the fact that more and more people could afford to buy books, magazines and newspapers, which had formerly been regarded as a luxury, greatly encouraged the increasing intellectual vitality of the Burmese through this period.[3]

But although many in the delta began to experience increasing prosperity, which gave them better access to information, Burmese nationalism was still in

its earliest stages. Late nineteenth-century Rangoon did not see a nationalist movement: indeed it took Rangoon, which during this period was being transformed into a commercial city from the mere fishing village it had been in 1853, more than half a century to witness its first organized nationalist movement. And the nationalist movement began to emerge at precisely the point when newspapers, magazines, and books became far more freely available, because cheaper, and were being sold to a population that, to an extent, had become more wealthy and thus educated.

Zawgyi, again, argued that three main groups formed the backbone of print media nationalism – landlords, civil servants and lawyers, middle men and artisans.[4] Driven by prosperity, these groups pursued modern knowledge. That pursuit prompted them to adopt new identities and lifestyles – perhaps the lifestyles of the Europeans they saw in their neighbourhood. And as they gained in knowledge and ambition, they became increasingly aware of the limitations that the British colonial administration was imposing on them – cultural and social as much as political limitations.

Visible changes – the British flag instead of the Burmese king's peacock banner, Rangoon instead of Mandalay as the centre of trade and politics, missionary schools replacing monastic education, Chinese and Indians running shops and stores and Indian labourers cleaning the streets of Rangoon and toiling across the agricultural districts – dominated Burmese minds. But it was the social and cultural barriers that came to most severely disturb the emerging Burmese intelligentsia. Burmese were denied entry to European social clubs such as the Pegu Club in Rangoon, and the children of wealthy landlords were forced to travel to India or England to complete their education. When the invisible became visible, Burmese nationalism surged forward: the shoe protest of the 1910s was the first of many struggles against the British.

Zawgyi explained that this nationalism was based on a desire to preserve Burmese identity,[5] a wish to secure western technological advances and a determination to challenge foreign domination in business. Zawgyi argued that these three ambitions dominated the new media, shaping the discourse found in the Burmese books and newspapers that appeared in these early years.[6]

The beginning of the twentieth century saw print media flourish in Burma. The following table summarizes the various books published between 1914 and 1933.

Of 2,133 titles, 673 are books of religion; novels come second, numbering 375. The period between 1931 and 1941 was also known as the era of two-penny books. Because of their affordability, they were readily accessible to the wider public who had not previously had the means to enjoy them. But such literature was considered toxic, and there were protest movements against these novels. In Rangoon, during a Dhamma talk at Myoma national high school, Monyin Sayadaw burned these books and began a campaign against penny books. In response, writers such as P Monin and Nyana, who later became a film director, penned penny books featuring look-alikes of Monyin Sayadaw and his female patrons, poking fun at the anti-penny books clan.[7]

Table 2.1 Books published between 1914 and 1933

Year	*Titles*	*Year*	*Titles*
1914	163	1924	79
1915	147	1925	118
1916	177	1926	128
1917	100	1927	45
1918	90	1928	37
1919	103	1929	38
1920	194	1930	93
1921	123	1931	103
1922	94	1932	130
1923	87	1933	84
Total		2,133	

Penny books' sales gave some writers instant fame and financial security. But some leading journalists and writers regarded them as degrading the status of Burmese literature and discouraged their fellow writers from penning such works. In the mid-1930s, the circulation of each penny book was as high as 30,000, but magazines such as *World of the Books* and a committee on changing ethnic education condemned them as unsuitable for youth and students.[8]

Myint Swe, however, argues that penny books were an important antecedent of the nationalist literature led by the Nagani or Red Dragoon book clubs. He argued that penny books enticed the masses into reading, and the Nagani book club built their success on this wide readership during the Dobama movement. Writer Nyana, a proponent of penny books, also gave credit to these books, suggesting that penny books introduced literature to the public – no matter how low this literature might be – and that once the readers graduated from the kitchen-sink literature standard, they would look for literature of higher value; this, Nyana said, could only be positive for the Burmese literary world.[9] Another outcome of the boom in penny books is that the common perception that women writers are only capable of writing kitchen-sink literature was shattered – not because women were venturing into the non-fiction world, but rather because more men began to write kitchen-sink literature. Women's status in writing improved because men were lowering themselves by writing in a niche previously to be for women writers. And this reflects that change in the women's world often comes from men, although this disheartening reality was never publicly acknowledged by female writers.

By the late 1910s, Burmese politicians had begun to use the print media to disseminate their views and to launch campaigns against the colonial government. There were two turning points in this history. The first was the founding of the *Thuriya* newspaper by two Burmese nationalists in 1911, using capital from families, friends and relatives. One of the founding members, Ba Pe, had become frustrated with the Christian teachers at the school in which he worked, for he saw them as attempting to impose Christianity on the students. A Christian

teacher's public humiliation of an image of Buddha led Ba Pe to resign from his teaching post.[10] Both founders, Ba Pe and Hla Pe, searched for a platform from which to express their frustration, and they created that platform in their own newspaper, to be published three times a week. Their entrepreneurial acumen led them to fund the newspaper by selling shares to relatives and friends.[11]

Thuriya changed the role of the print media from a source of information into a political engine of the early independence movement. It also changed the attitude of readers towards the print media. There had been a long gap between 1874, when the first vernacular newspaper (*Yadanapon Naypyidaw*) was printed in Mandalay, to 1911, when *Thuriya* was founded, before the Burmese came to intellectually challenge the British through print. Out of nineteen Burmese newspapers published between 1874 and 1911, before *Thuriya*, six were religious: one had an explicitly religious name, သာသနာပြုသတင်းစာ or *Missionary*.[12] Not only a religious message but also a religious style dominated these pioneering Burmese newspapers. Poems and long prose were often used to report news, and Maung Thit Lwin, a journalist and writer, argued that such poetic style reflected the taste of what was then the readership, in that it preferred elegant to concise writing. News professionals, however, started educating their readers towards a shorter, precise, practical style of reporting and comment. And the owners of *Thuriya* emphasized that the newspaper was owned by Burmese, written in Burmese[13] and for the benefit of the Burmese.[14] The nationalist tone was clear and *Thuriya* newspaper soon became more than simply a platform for news.

Nationalist writers such as Kodaw Hmaing soon joined *Thuriya*. He was seen as a leading figure in Burmese culture and literature. His poems reported Burmese rural life and showed how it had been undermined and damaged by the changes brought about by British rule. He used the traditional hair-style, *Yaung*, or a bun on top, when many men had adopted *Bo-kay* or the style of white foreigners. Later, U Thein Maung, U Sein and U Htun Pe, who had founded the *Than Daw Sint* [*Herald*], *Hanthawaddy* and *Htun* newspapers respectively, joined *Thuriya*. *Thuriya* became the starting base for large numbers of young, politically inspired educated Burmese who later came to dominate the print media. The influence of *Thuriya* was considerable and long-lasting.

Not only lay people but also monks saw *Thuriya* as a platform from which they could vent their anger against the government. U Ottama, one of the first political monks, who was jailed by the British during the early 1920s and 1930s and who later became instrumental in linking up with Aung San and the younger generation of nationalists, had a *Thuriya* office in the early 1920s.[15] U Ottama advanced his nationalist message through the newspaper. Like Kodaw Hmaing and other journalists, U Ottama, an extraordinary monk who rejected the traditional view that monks should be disengaged from politics and instead travelled widely both within Burma and abroad to preach his nationalist message, found that *Thuriya* closely matched his ambitions and perceptions.

Another writer-monk, Min Hla Gon Yaung, argued that since U Ottama had joined *Thuriya*, the newspaper was the mouthpiece of the YMBA, an organization

pledged to protect Buddhism against imperialism. And nationalists both in and outside the YMBA supported the newspaper both politically and indeed financially.[16] *Thuriya's* founder, Ba Pe, and U Ottama established a close relationship. U Ottama received a regular supply of food, medicine, robes and shelter, the four basic items that he needed to survive, according to the *Vinaya*, and Ba Pe secured the mass following of the monk – in a Buddhist country like Burma, endorsement of a prominent monk was crucial to win votes.

But *Thuriya* offered U Ottama more than the four basic necessities, since U Ottama could use the pages of *Thuriya* to attack the British. And the more daring – and popular – U Ottama became in his campaign against the British,[17] the more copies the newspaper sold, the more capital it could raise and the more the political and social standing of the newspaper's owners and shareholders increased.

Teaching and journalism were often seen by young, educated Burmese nationalists as the most attractive professions, leading to full engagement in national politics. These two professions could connect an aspiring politician to the masses, providing a medium through which they could influence the public. Consequently, many politicians started their careers as teachers, often at the National Schools founded in the 1920s, or as journalists.

Kodaw Haming, U Nu, Thakin Mya, U Razat and U Thant, all began ther careers as teachers in National Schools. Other prominent politicians, such as Ba Pe, a founding member of the YMBA; U Saw,[18] who was premier in 1937; Deedok U Ba Cho, a press minister assassinated with Aung San in 1947; Hanthawaddy U Tun Pe, press minister in Nu's AFPFL administration and U Chit Maung, a speech writer and one of the architects of the resistance movement, were associated with *Thuriya*, *Deedok*, *Hanthawaddy* and *Journal Kyaw* respectively.

Deedok U Ba Cho, Hanthawaddy U Tun Pe and U Chit Maung were known to the public through the magazines and newspapers they published, and indeed the magazine and newspaper titles became part of their public names. The editor of leading newspaper *Myanmar Alin*, U Tin, became finance minister during the AFPFL government.[19]

The print media could therefore be seen as a quasi-political stage on which would-be politicians honed their communication skills, networked with like-minded people and secured support from the general public and business. When they later engaged in politics, their influence over the masses grew markedly, since the population already recognized their names and the newspapers and magazines for which they had previously worked strongly supported them. There was thus a strong relationship between political interests and the newspapers and magazines that supported them.

But in later decades, that relationship limited the power of the press to comment on the administration's actions. Leading newspapers and magazines were often seen as propagandists acting on behalf of political interests. For example, *Thuriya* was clearly a platform for the nationalists to agitate against the British during the early days of the independence movement. But when *Thuriya* decided

to side with its owner, U Ba Pe, who accepted a ministerial position in 1935, the popularity of the newspaper declined.

Kodaw Haming, who had once endorsed *Thuriya*, compared U Ba Pe with a cow whose thirst for spring water was never satisfied, calling him a self-serving, greedy politician, and left *Thuriya*. Such views and departures damaged *Thuriya*, and it never again dominated Burma's political stage.[20] Its circulation declined after 1935, and *Thuriya* finally disappeared in 1953. The feud between Kodaw Haming and U Ba Pe arising from the latter's political ambitions cost the paper dearly.

Given the small scale of colonial Burma's elite, it was to be expected that some educated men and women would follow different trades at different times, or even different trades at the same time. Ba Pe was both newspaperman and politician. A businessman called U Thant ran a jewellery store but also founded *Yeshwinbwe A Lin*, a humour magazine.[21] In brief, a small class of educated individuals and cross-interests dominated the print media and much of nationalist politics in this period.

Some editors and journalists sought to join the wider business world. Upon experimenting successfully with a traditional herbal medicine for blood-related diseases for women – a medicine that he had received from a monk – the editor of *Myanma Alin*, U Tin, decided to become a full-time businessman, selling this traditional recipe commercially.[22] He made a fortune. The links between and multiple interests of the print media, politics and business were thus extremely strong. And educated Burmese men, the elite, moved easily in these integrated worlds.

Women and the press

But such fluidity was not available to women. Women journalists and editors did not aspire to become politicians: they held their pens for the rest of their lives. Wives of famous editors and acclaimed editors and writers themselves, Dagon Khin Khin Lay, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, Independent Daw San and Ludu Daw Ama accepted that they would remain in journalism and publishing.

From 1919, when Daw Phwa Shin became the first woman newspaper editor of *Tharawaddy*, to 1961, when *Yuwadi Daily* was published and edited by Dagon Khin Khin Lay, there were fourteen women editors altogether, editing eight newspapers, eight magazines and seven journals.[23] U Ba Than has argued that their work was not easy, since they were competing against men.[24] They were also working against Burmese society's long-held prejudices against women.

As the Burmese saying goes, 'all wisdom lies in print': the literary world is highly revered. But with such reverence, the world of letters was regarded as safe and well-executed only if entrusted to men. When *Tharawaddy* was first published in 1919, the publisher's name was given as Maung Zan, Daw Phwa Shin's husband.[25] Even though the newspaper was actually managed by Daw Phwa Shin, she did not use her own name as publisher and editor, perhaps through fear that readers would think *Tharawaddy* was inferior because it was run by a

woman. Although she was the leader of a women's group within the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), she did not challenge Burmese society's common attitude that women were inferior to men. Instead, she conformed to the social norm and attempted to convince her readers that *Tharawaddy* was run by her husband, a headmaster.

Women were regarded as capable of writing stories or novels, at best. But the emergence of women journalists and editors in powerful positions started to undermine that view. However, Khin Myo Chit, a strong critic of the widespread discrimination against women, argued that women were able to advance to more powerful positions in the world of newspapers, magazines and books not simply through their own talent and determination, but because male writers began to use female pseudonyms.[26]

Khin Myo Chit explained that famous male writers such as Kodaw Hmaing and Ledi Pandita U Maung Gyi, with their multiple female pseudonyms during the heyday of *Deedok* journal in the 1920s and 1930s, unlocked the secret that the presence of women – be they real or not – could help win readers. This factor encouraged women to enter journalism. According to Khin Myo Chit, women added colour to a male-dominated industry: women were a news item,[27] and that in turn encouraged women into more prominent roles in journalism. Women quickly moved into more prominent positions. In 1922, Daw Hta Hta published the *Kumari* newspaper in Mandalay. Women also gained in confidence: the banner of the *Independent* newspaper, published from 1924 by Daw San, declared 'Lady Editor Ma San' and 'The Most Popular Family Paper'.[28] And the quality of their newspapers demonstrated that they were serious professionals.

The *Independent* newspaper, edited by Daw San, who later came to be known as Independent Daw San, survived for fourteen years until its offices were destroyed by mobs during the Indian–Burmese riots in Rangoon in 1939. The newspaper was in fact the longest-running newspaper edited by a woman. Independent Daw San was able to succeed where Daw Phwa Shin, publisher and editor of *Tharawaddy* newspaper, had failed – that is, to put her name on the banner of her newspaper. She was able to turn hostility against women into an attraction and a promotional feature for her newspaper. She exploited the curiosity of readers in demonstrating that a woman was capable of managing a newspaper.

The name of her newspaper reflected her revolutionary spirit. Twice married, once divorced and then widowed, she related the term 'independent' both to herself and to Burma.[29] She sold all her jewellery and used the money as capital for her newspaper. Even though the banner said it was a family newspaper, Daw San also wrote political opinions, and was often warned by the colonial police for criticizing the government. She projected an image of a woman who was comfortable being in the public domain. Yet, strangely, she would also write under a male pseudonym, U Kwa Si; perhaps she was seeking to protect herself from her readers, or perhaps she believed, or suspected, that in that guise she would be taken more seriously. Yet by the time she published the *Independent* newspaper, she was already accepted as a writer, not only of short stories and poems but also

of opinion articles and political pieces. She was clearly accepted by her readers as a serious writer, but she continued to use a male pseudonym. This is difficult to explain. Daw San clearly possessed the attitude and ability to challenge the norms set against women, but she did not feel completely equipped to portray herself as a revolutionary against her own culture. She allowed *Independent* readers to think that a male, U Kwa Si, was the person who was able to answer their questions and communicate with them. If she had allowed herself to communicate openly with her readers as a woman, she could be accused of not embracing modesty, a trait that Burmese women should maintain. Since Daw San was clearly building her role in a male-dominated profession, she probably thought that it made sense to restrain her revolutionary spirit. In other words, she had to know the cultural bounds and submit to the cultural expectations embedded in Burmese society. She needed to be realistic if she was to succeed. She censored herself and closely followed the practice, common in Burma's journalism at the time, of attaching gender tags to topics. Politics and correspondence with readers fell under 'male', and Independent Daw San adopted a male pseudonym to write on these topics.

The view that women were good only at attracting crowds – a view pushed not only by male writers such as Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung[30] but also a female writer, Daw Khin Myo Chit[31] – undoubtedly increased the insecurity of those women who sought to succeed. That 'men were better than women' was accepted in the Burma of that time, and while male writers were adopting female pseudonyms to write literature of 'low' value, female writers were adopting male pseudonyms to write smart opinion pieces, including pieces on politics.

It is hard to explain exactly why these women editors appeared to feel insecure. And it would be dangerous to suggest that they were uncomfortable with their gender. Perhaps they were simply very clever: they knew when to exploit their gender and when to hide it. They did not fully disclose themselves in public: when communicating with her readers, when writing on politics, Daw San decided to withhold herself. She had invested everything in her newspaper and knew her trade well: serious journalism was male journalism and she conformed to that prejudice.

The *Independent* newspaper was commercially successful towards the end of the 1920s, and it became a family business when Daw San's two sisters joined her and began to write regularly for the newspaper. A woman editing a newspaper was formidable but three sisters running a newspaper was something else. Daw San remained the dominant figure among the three.

Women who rose to prominent positions in journalism were not seen as extraordinary women, but as women who had adopted male behaviour. Writing about editor and later owner of the *Independent* newspaper, Daw San, a *Myanmar Alin* newspaper columnist used the signifier 'despite being a woman' and reported: 'she wrote courageous headlines like other nationalist [male] journalists'.[32] Another writer, Tinkha, explaining why Daw San's *Independent* newspaper eventually failed, argued that 'her newspaper did not advance as it should [have], because the newspaper was managed by a woman, and she could not

manage her trade efficiently'.[33] In fact the newspaper was destroyed by race riots, but Tinkha blamed Daw San, as if she had failed to secure the protection of men or she herself had failed to be a man.

Being a woman was seen as an attribute to failure, and being successful as a woman was seen as out of the ordinary, a woman behaving as a man. But after Daw Phwa Shin, Daw Hta Hta and Daw San, more women edited newspapers. Between 1931 and 1936, Thakinma Khin Khin edited *Down* (or *The Peacock*) newspaper.[34] In 1940 Daw Ma Ma Khin, the first Burmese woman to achieve a Master of Science from an American university, published a weekly journal for young people, *Do Kyaung Thar* (*We Students*). Between 1946 and 1959, she published and edited *The Peoples' Voice*, *The Burma Tribune Weekly* and *The Rangoon Post Daily.*

In 1946, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay became the editor and publisher of a journal, *Journal Kyaw*, and a newspaper, *Hit Taing*, when founder and editor U Chit Maung died. U Chit Maung was Ma Ma Lay's husband, whom she credited with helping her become a writer. In 1947, Daw Khin Myo Chit became one of the editors of *Oway* newspaper, and in 1948 she joined the editorial board of the women's magazine *Taing Yin Thu*. In 1945 and 1946, Daw Ama became the editor of the *Ludu* journal and newspaper, published in Mandalay.

In 1961, Dagon Khin Khin Lay, arguably the architect of the post-independence women's literary world, since she nurtured many aspiring young women writers in her *Yuwadi* magazine and in the Pen Club she founded in 1946, published the *Yuwadi* women's newspaper. She founded and edited *Yuwadi*, which began as the *Yuwadi* journal in October 1945, with an almost entirely female workforce. From print setters to marketing managers, almost all the staff was female.[35] Daw Khin Khin Lay proved the talent and worth of women.

But she confessed in her autobiography that a woman's magazine run mostly by women and for the benefit of women readers was not received well. Her magazine was ridiculed by some politicians as being of a low standard.[36] Even though she helped more women secure access to women's literature by publishing her journal as a supplement of the *Bamakhit* newspaper, distributed free of charge from 1949 to 1961, her role as a champion of the public education of women was undermined by some politicians.

Such an attitude on the part of politicians perhaps explains why women in journalism, such as Independent Daw San, would sometimes hesitate to reveal their gender. It would also explain why women journalists, unlike the men, were reluctant to move into politics. The ease with which men moved from newspapers into political positions was not possible for women.

The mid-1940s saw a marked increase in the number of Burmese women journalists and editors. Three women's publications – *Yuwadi* journal, *Modern Women* magazine and *Taing Yin Thu* journal – were founded in 1945 and 1946. All three were edited by women, although *Taing Yin Thu* also had male editors.[37] One women's newspaper, *Yuwadi*, and six women's magazines followed, and by 1962 a total of nine women's magazines and journals and one women's newspaper existed,[38] most published and edited by women, often using their own money

as capital. An explanation of why the number of women editors and women's magazines leapt after the Second World War requires an analysis of the relationships between women writers and their readers, women writers and their male counterparts and women writers and the political, social and economic conditions of the country.

In a piece produced for the inaugural issue of *May* magazine in 1958, Tint Teh, a male writer, observed that the Japanese Occupation and the Asia Youth League, founded in 1943, were the major factors that changed the landscape for Burmese women after the war. More women had to work outside their homes during the Occupation, and the Asia Youth League freed women through its physical and intellectual training programmes.[39] With their own income and the freedom they enjoyed outside the home, these young women bought and read women's magazines, which in turn nurtured their reading and writing.[40] Moreover, Tint Teh argued, employment outside the home freed women from the control of their parents, and many took the opportunity to enter formal education – which, in turn, increased the female reading and writing population.

Leading woman editor and writer Daw Khin Myo Chit agreed with Tint Teh in her comparison of the world of Burmese women in two different eras, before and after the war. She argued that the woman's world had been changed dramatically by the war, as both men and women were now urgently needed to rebuild the new nation,[41] and more and more families were having to rely on women's wages simply to secure financial survival. The lines that divided the work and world of men from the work and world of women began to blur after the war, and the view that office jobs and writing were male preserves began to crumble. Indeed, office jobs were increasingly seen as women's work, since they allowed women to juggle employment and domestic responsibilities.[42]

Education and modernity became important themes in women's magazines in this period. Until 1950, when *Taing Yin May* magazine was published, women's magazines were mainly educational. Physical education, lessons and tips for pregnant women and mothers and lessons in knitting filled their pages.[43] But when *Taing Yin May* was introduced to women readers in 1950, the editors boldly claimed that their magazine was different from earlier women's magazines. They declared that they did not aim to serve elite women, as earlier women's journals had, but workers and farmers. They would advocate better pay for women workers and fight against the prejudices they faced.[44]

From *Modern Women* magazine, published in 1946, to *Taing Yin May*, published in 1950, there was a shift in purpose and ambition, from producing good mothers and great home-makers to training women to be assertive citizens: the magazines became campaign platforms for women's rights. New women editors put gender at the centre, reflecting the changing social landscape of women after the war.

Taing Yin May sought to advance the women's movement when it was first published in 1950. The magazine was not satisfied that more women were simply working and enjoying literature after the war, as Tint Teh argued. Instead, it wanted to bring women into the political sphere and it encouraged them to

demand their rights. *Taing Yin May* was politically progressive. It was the first magazine to represent ethnic minorities within Burma. Some issues of the magazine were printed in the Kachin, Chin and Karen languages as supplements, targeting readers outside Rangoon, Mandalay, Toungoo and Moulmein.[45]

But the period of *Taing Yin Min* was also the heyday of *Bamakhit* newspaper, a government mouthpiece. The newspaper often published articles attacking women, especially women entering male-dominated fields such as politics and sport. *Bamakhit* articles often urged women to know their place, and reminded them that they were too weak to change the politics of Burma.[46] This was a common theme. In 1950, the President of the Burma Independence Group of Rangoon Division, a woman, asked Burmese women to focus on women-related activities rather than spending their time on politics. She argued that politics was complicated and corrupt.[47]

Against this backdrop, to anticipate greater visibility for women in Burma's political and social landscape might have been unrealistic for the modern women editors of Burma. But Burmese women editors had fought since 1922 – when Daw Hta Hta first published a women's newspaper, *Kumari* – for treatment equal to that of men, and job opportunities were certainly opening up for Burmese women after the war. It was just that the political space remained closed.

Tint Teh also pointed out the gap between the vision of *Taing Yin May* and the reality of women's lives: '[Women's] magazines were focusing on recipes, health tips, and astrology'.[48] Recipes and beauty tips were commercially appropriate for women's magazines, because they reflected the reality of the world of Burmese women. In other words, what women readers wanted to read and what *Taing Yin May* wanted to publish did not match. The magazine wanted to change the discourse of women by encouraging them to participate in debates – for example: 'Monogamy should be practised'; 'Mother's role is more important than father's'.[49] But such debates took place only in the pages of the magazine; they did not take place in public, let alone in parliament. Women's issues were discussed by women only on the pages of women's magazines, not in a wider arena that included men, and therefore these discussions had little chance of actually advancing women's rights.

Women journalists and editors did not venture into party politics. When Saw Monyin, niece of Dagon Khin Khin Lay, the founder of *Bamakhit* newspaper and *Yuwadi* magazine and often seen as the mother of women journalists, was asked why her aunt had not given her public support to a political party or even run for office, despite the fact that she was well known and respected across the country, the niece replied that her aunt believed that politics was a man's world and that women journalists were satisfied with what they had achieved in journalism, which had previously also been regarded as a man's world.[50] Victory in that male-dominated field had been hard-won and it would be a struggle to maintain that victory, let alone seek to secure prominence in politics.

That said, more and more women became vocal about the lack of political opportunities for women in the early years of Burma's independence. One such

woman was a female editor who had a column in *Htun Daily* newspaper in the late 1950s under the pseudonym မအယ်ဒီတာ, or 'female editor'. She attacked Burmese men for reinforcing the cultural barriers against women. In one article in 1958, she accused Burmese men of feeling ashamed of working together with women or under the supervision of a woman. She argued that men were uncomfortable with women entering the workforce and that male employers did not want to see women being paid the same wages as men.[51] She also challenged women to take more interest in politics.[52]

Even though women editors, through magazines and newspapers such as *Taing Yin May* and *Htun Daily*, would advocate for women's rights, they did not see themselves as politicians and did not strive to build a political career using their pens, as their male counterparts did. There was no patron–client relationship between monks and women editors, and the women did not see their newspapers as providing a transition to the political stage. In fact, women such as Independent Daw San did not even feel completely comfortable as women in the world of newspapers. They often had to use male pseudonyms to relay their thoughts to their readers. Women editors saw their editorial work as an end in itself and not as a powerful means of achieving political ambitions.

Women writers

Women entered the media world and even the military, which will be the subject of Chapters 4 and 5, but they never demanded equal treatment with men. A Burmese writer and Indian Civil Servant – Tin Tut, the highest government position for a Burmese under the colonial government – observed the subservient role of women:

> . . . [Burmese women's] greatest quality is modesty. The Burmese woman strikes the mean between the freedom of the West and the seclusion of the East. The Burmese woman, the product of centuries of our old culture is friendly without immodesty. She will hold her own in conversation with the best of us men and is at her ease in any kind of society. But there is just that reserve of modesty which is her characteristic charm; she welcomes friendship but repels liberty.[53]

Talk of modesty and the rejection of liberty are euphemisms for Burmese women embracing reality – they lived in a male-dominated society. Society generally accepted that men were more capable than women. The views of a highly educated Burman male, Tin Tut, contradicted western travellers' accounts, which expressed surprise that Burmese women had freedom outside their houses.

Ledi Pandita U Maung Kyi, a famous male writer who was once a monk, took female pen names, such as Khin Tote, when he wrote short stories, since short stories were generally regarded as insignificant. They were seen as making no contribution to the secular or religious lives of readers, and the reputation of a male writer, especially a monk, would suffer from his writing 'essence-less'

stories. The general public believed, and were led to believe by male writers, that only women would write love stories or stories about everyday lives.

On the other hand, using his original pen name, U Maung Gyi translated stories from the Jataka tales in the 1930s to demonstrate how women disciples, or *Htay-yi*, achieved the highest honour through Dhamma and meditation during the time of the Buddha. And one of the most well-known women writers and editors, Daw Khin Myo Chit, who wrote over 500 stories and news articles in both English and Burmese,[54] once reported that her writing career had been inspired by U Maung Gyi's short stories about the women disciples of the Buddha. His stories encouraged her to rise up from her oppression as a woman. She said that 'with her wisdom and intellect, a woman could achieve a firm standing in the society', but she also acknowledged that there were boundaries for both sexes.[55] Again, one can see a woman editor and writer being acutely self-aware of her gender. Any sentence setting out a positive image of a woman would be followed by another contradicting it or undermining such positivity.

Women, she argued, were often reminded of old proverbs stating that 'women were capable of destroying the nation', 'women were not as valuable as dogs' and 'a daughter makes the whole household slaves'.[56] She challenged society to reject such proverbs and fiction. She concluded that the public seemed to have accepted that women had a subordinate position and consumed *en masse* stories attacking women. She gave as an example a book in which a leading female character confessed that the life of a woman was not as valuable as that of an animal: it sold over 10,000 copies in its first edition and was reprinted four times due to its popularity.[57]

Daw Khin Myo Chit also argued that when leading male writers, such as Kodaw Hmaing and Ledi Pendita U Maung Gyi, took on female pseudonyms to write stories in their own newspapers, they were reinforcing the popular belief that only men could produce serious literature, while women wrote kitchen-sink stuff. But such a tactic helped women to test their talents.[58] As more readers came to enjoy the kitchen-sink output, often to the chagrin of monks such as Monyin Sayadw, who condemned such work, women writers became more visible. It was an unplanned outcome of male chauvinism that advantaged women and changed the course of Burma's print media.

But women were to define and defend their space in the literary sphere mostly by themselves. They had to prove to their readers that they too could write pieces with 'meaningful' messages. But Khin Myo Chit, who was also inspired by U Maung Gyi's stories, felt that even when female writers proved their talent in writing non-fiction, some readers thought that they were being pompous, showing off a talent that they should not display. Khin Myo Chit commented that '[Readers] did not judge women by their behaviour, morality or education but by [their traditional notions of] what women should be'.[59] She argued that it was hard for readers to challenge the long-held belief that women were inferior and not intellectual.[60] The frustration and anger of woman writers could be seen in her words.

Khin Myo Chit also attacked a piece by U Lun, who came to be known as Kodaw Hmaing after the character Hmaing, arguing that his story *Roselle Leaf*

Seller Mg Hmaing portrayed women as gullible creatures. Mg Hmaing was a womanizer, and by adding the honorific title Thakin to his name, U Lun ridiculed the practice of the British civil servants who used the title. Though Mg Hmaing had a bad character, his name became a symbol of protest, and after publishing this novel, U Lun was known as Thakin Kodaw Hmaing. The fact was that although the character Hmaing was a womanizer and polygamist, tricking women into falling in love with him only to abandon them later, U Lun became the much revered Kodaw Hmaing. Readers did not see that his character Mg Hmaing could tarnish the good U Lun, and he did not reject the title given to him by his readers.

Other novels with similar themes to *Roselle Leaf Seller Mg Hmaing*, such as *Khin Myint Gyi* by Ledi Pandida U Maung Gyi, were widely accepted by readers. Khin Myo Chit concluded that '[p]eople seemed to accept that women were servants of men, and the highest ambition women had was to become a responsible wife, and men regarded women as their toys'.[61] Khin Myo Chit criticized Burmese society for reinforcing the view that women should aspire to nothing more than being a good homemaker and wife. Daughters were treated as servants who would be able to serve their husbands well one day, and would serve their parents and siblings before marriage. Such practices sustained the two classes of men and women, master and servant.[62] Against this polarization of gender, women writers were not expected to produce anything better than kitchen-sink pieces.

U Maung Gyi believed that women should be treated equally to men, and he wrote inspiring stories for women based on the popular Jataka tales. Khin Myo Chit was clearly impressed by these stories. But U Maung Gyi did not challenge the mainstream media in its view that respectable male writers should not devote their talent and energy to writing material that would not enrich their readers spiritually or have practical value, such as self-help books. Prominent male writers, although convinced that women should have equal opportunities and attempting to encourage women with inspirational stories such as the biographies of *Htay-yi* at the time of Buddha,[63] did not challenge traditional beliefs publicly. Indeed, they reinforced them by choosing to write entertainment literature under female pseudonyms.

Male writers such as U Maung Gyi submitted to the popular belief that men shunned entertainment literature. The fact that they were themselves writing entertainment literature but using female pseudonyms demonstrated that they did not intend to challenge the discriminations against female writers and short stories. And the female writers themselves accepted that there were clear boundaries between men and women; although they believed that through education women could attain an equal status, they were uncomfortable with the prospect of seeking to eradicate those boundaries themselves, as evidenced in the words of Khin Myo Chit.[64] The course towards a more equal society would be found without government intervention, or indeed without intervention by women writers themselves. Meanwhile, individual women writers, editors and journalists bravely joined the world of newspapers and writing. No collective and organized movement towards a more equal society emerged in this period.

But at the same time, women writers defied the traditional view that women could not write serious material. In her *World of Burmese Women*, Tekkatho Kyi Mar wrote that 'Dagon Khin Khin Lay bravely entered the literary world as a women novelist, challenging all the notions that women were not compatible to the world of letters',[65] and indeed Dagon Khin Khin Lay wrote more than thirty novels and 500 short stories, as well as published a women's newspaper, *Yuwadi*, in 1961.

Like Dagon Khin Khin Lay and Daw Khin Myo Chit, who between them wrote over a thousand short stories and articles, other women writers were also highly productive during and after the war. Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, Daw Khin Hnin Yu and Kyi Aye produced a large volume of short stories and novels. In a 1998 paper, 'Post-Colonial Society and Culture: Reflections on Myanmar Novels of the Last 50 Years', U Than Htut and U Thaw Kaung listed five common themes in these post-colonial novels:

> 1) social problems faced by Myanmar people because of the violent civil war waged with the communists and some ethnic minorities soon after independence, 2) lives of the defence forces trying to bring peace and stability to the country, 3) the preservation of Myanmar traditional culture against the onslaught of western and other foreign influences, 4) nation-building activities and the creation of a national identity, and 5) social change as a result of modernization.[66]

Not only novels but also newspaper articles, cartoons and even advertisements reflected the themes of modernization, establishing national identity and the defence of culture and tradition. Independence caused a seismic shift in the discourse of Burmese literature and women writers played their part in shaping these national themes or goals for post-independence literature, in particular to preserve Burmese culture and to contribute towards nation-building and the creation of a national identity.

Popular women writers identified themselves with these goals. Some leading novelists, such as Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, Daw Khin Myo Chit, Dagon Khin Khin Lay and Daw Khin Hnin Yu, were born into educated families and had access to both English and Burmese newspapers, journals, magazines and books. Thus these women had access to both the traditional and the modern world through their upbringing and education, and they therefore wrote with authority on the themes of preserving Burmese culture and embracing modernity. They lived in both the traditional and the modern worlds, and their stories and novels reflected their dual identity and the conflict they often experienced when, for example, their belief in their religion – Buddhism – clashed with their modern ideology or literary imagination.

Dagon Khin Khin Lay, who was of royal blood, described in her autobiography, *60 Years*, how her childhood had been spent between two worlds – the Burmese and English. Her mother wanted to bring her up in the Burmese tradition, going to vernacular school, reading Jataka tales and watching traditional

theatre or *pwes*, but her father took her hunting, had her listen to English records and allowed her to order toys from catalogues imported from Britain. Her father even funded her first novel, which she wrote under a male pseudonym, Ko Ko Lay. It was a book about ghosts and witchcraft, and she admitted that she wrote a book that would sell well to Burmese readers.[67]

Dagon Khin Khin Lay explained that she took a male pseudonym to convince her readers that a student of a witchcraft master had written the book, and that the master would allow only male disciples to succeed him. She did not believe in witchcraft or astrology;[68] she wrote the book simply to win readers. The choice of a male pseudonym and the theme of her first book reflected her business acumen.

Her astuteness won her a place in the literary world and she later wrote many novels, including *Enemy of the World* or ကမ္ဘာ့ရန်သူ, before the Second World War. In this she encouraged the Burmese to rely on themselves instead of finding a foreign master to lead them to independence.[69] Such political writing by a woman writer was rare, but her book sold over 100,000 copies. She was pragmatic in accepting the prevailing belief that men could tell better stories. She used that prejudice to her advantage. But after her male pseudonym won a strong following, she revealed her real identity and continued to prove her talent under her real name. She played a clever trick by challenging her readers to seek content instead of first checking the identity, and indeed gender, of the author.

Dagon Khin Khin Lay established not only a successful literary career but also an influential business empire during the Japanese Occupation. Her press, တိုင်းပြုပြည်ပြု, or 'To Serve the Country', became one of the few presses to print propaganda for the Japanese administration. She also engaged in trade, buying furniture, jewellery and other goods from brokers, increasing her capital from 5,000 to 500,000 kyats.[70]

Of all the women writers, Dagon Khin Khin Lay remains the most controversial. She wrote patriotic literature and named her press 'To Serve the Country'; yet she collaborated with the Japanese and printed propaganda for them. But there was little criticism of her 'unpatriotic' character. Perhaps her talent and leadership demanded respect. She was regarded as one of the most successful writers in Burma at that time.

Like Dagon Khin Khin Lay, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay wrote politically inspiring pieces. One was about her husband, U Chit Maung, and has the title *Thu-lo-lu* or *Man Like Him*. In it, Ma Ma Lay paid tribute to her husband for starting her writing career. U Chit Maung, a visionary and nationalist, had written to Ma Ma Lay, a daughter of the manager of Dawson's Bank in Pyapon, asking her to write articles for the newspaper he edited, *Myanmar Alin*, because he wanted to publish articles written by women for women. This was in 1936, when nationalist feeling was on the rise.[71] U Chit Maung encouraged Ma Ma Lay in the belief that Burma's independence movement could reach its goal only if women were involved.

That view was rare. Perhaps as a professional in an overwhelmingly male-dominated trade, he understood the serious absence of women in the escalating independence struggle. But his belief that independence could be achieved only

with the contribution of women did not mean that U Chit Maung fully trusted women's capabilities, for in his letter to Ma Ma Lay he explained that women could contribute towards independence, but only indirectly. Women could promote the cause indirectly: 'I admit honestly and without . . . shame that men committed longer and strived harder only when women supported them'.[72] His confession reflected the wider society's attitude towards women – as campaigners or moral boosters rather than at the forefront. It was a view that rejected the romantic notions of those western scholars who portrayed Burmese women as liberated and as enjoying equal status to men.

U Chit Maung's view of Burmese women explains why popular women such as Dagon Khin Khin Lay and Daw Khin Myo Chit did not aspire to become politicians or lend their names to any political party. Women, as U Chit Maung pointed out, were seen as mere crowd-pullers, and they were not expected to contribute to drafting policies or dictating the course of a political movement. No woman writer had ever joined the government. Achieving literary fame had itself proven to be a difficult task, and women writers such as Dagon Khin Khin Lay had had to make plans to circumvent society's negative attitudes to women to achieve that position. Finding a space in politics was not worth the fight after they had struggled to achieve hard-won literary recognition.

U Chit Maung wanted a wider presence for women in supporting men and with this in mind he invited his would-be wife, Ma Ma Lay, to write articles that would inspire women readers to be politically aware and active. He told Ma Ma Lay that the existing women writers did not write about nationalism and that a woman like her, with a western education and patriotic feeling, could engage women in the nationalist struggle.[73]

Putting women at the centre of the nationalist movement was a distant reality even for visionary men such as U Chit Maung, and like Ledi Pandida U Maung Gyi, who wrote stories defending women, U Chit Maung attempted not to challenge tradition but to circumvent it by drawing in more women like Ma Ma Lay. Neither man attempted to impose a paradigm shift – to remove the barriers against women – but simply encouraged women to take up their pens. Perhaps they believed simply in liberating individuals and not the society as a whole.

But the main characters created by the female writer Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, whether they were educated or not, spent their time doing household chores. They were far from liberated, as U Chit Maung wanted his wife to be. Ma Ma Lay's characters keep their houses spotless, excel at cooking and uphold traditional and religious beliefs and practices. Typical Ma Ma Lay stories carry an unequivocal message: Burmese women should be good home-makers and should not marry foreigners, especially *Kala* or black foreigners (Indians). But more importantly, the teachings of Buddha should be closely followed so that the person will become a *good* Burmese woman. In the prologue to *Yinhnit Aung Mhwe*, created to provide an example to Burmese women as to how to become a good woman, Ma Ma Lay produced a set of guidelines or standards.

Of all the guidelines, believing in the three jewels of Buddhism, respecting one's parents and doing merit on a regular basis were given priority over being

educated and clever, which came in at number nine out of the eleven basic guidelines.[74] In her *Yinnint Aung Mhwe* novel, Maw, the protagonist, who has all the traits and characteristics a Burmese woman should have – she is a devout Buddhist, respects her parents and runs the house very well – out-competes A Soe, a girl who adores western fashion and dancing, and wins the love of Ko Myint Htoo, a PhD-holder and an obedient son.

Ma Ma Lay repeatedly asked Burmese women to follow traditional and religious teachings closely. She did not write novels for the sake of art but to reinforce society, and her characters are therefore prototypes of 'good Burmese women' whose footsteps her readers should follow in. An educated woman – and a modern woman who bought foreign goods and enjoyed playing badminton, despite public criticism – her writings nevertheless sought to preserve culture and tradition. Her life as a modern woman was not reflected in her writings.

U Than Htut and U Thaw Kaung listed 'the preservation of Myanmar traditional culture against the onslaught of western and other foreign influences' as a common theme in post-colonial novels. But the underlying themes in Ma Ma Lay's novels are not that black and white, for she did not discard or blame modernization. She embraced modernization but at the same time held dear her traditional, cultural and religious beliefs. She was born to Burmese parents, but as her father was the manager of a branch of Dawson's Bank in the Irrawaddy Division, she was able to afford clothes and furniture from department stores. She enjoyed western cosmetics, sent her children to a boarding school in Darjeeling, managed a publishing house and published journals and newspapers after her husband died. And she did not see modernity as attacking or destroying traditional culture, even though she later expressed regret for relying too much on western medicine: after undergoing a minor operation on her foot, her daughter could not walk properly for the rest of her life. In her stories she advocated traditional medicines and techniques. In one of her most famous novels, *Not Out of Hate*, the main character, Wai Wai – who was much impressed with her Burmese neighbour, who lived like a British civil servant – died of a broken heart after being forced to adopt a western lifestyle, which separated her from her tradition-following family and nationalist brother.

Ma Ma Lay's attitude toward foreigners might be termed racist according to today's standards but perhaps needs to be understood in terms of the Burmese society of the time. To Ma Ma Lay, it was more noble to starve than to marry a *Kala* or Indian. The character in *ဘဝးမကျေပါဧရှင်*, or *I Don't Envy You*, was ridiculed by other women for marrying a *Kala* gardener, even though he created a comfortable life for her.[75] The message was that it was better to starve than marry a *Kala* who could look after you well.

In another story, a girl committed suicide after being raped by a gang of *Kala*. Suicide to a Buddhist is the greatest of all evils – *akutho*, in Burmese – since it involves killing, which goes against the very first of the five precepts a Buddhist must keep to. But Ma Ma Lay, whose pre-eminent guideline for being a good Burmese woman was believing the three jewels of Buddhism, allows her character to commit suicide, thus breaking that most important

precept. Ma Ma Lay normally advocated close following of Buddha's teachings, but this is an exception, rejecting the teachings altogether. Ma Ma Lay, a devout Buddhist, killed a character after she was raped by Indians. Ma Ma Lay seemed to have difficulty in reconciling her literary imagination with her Buddhist beliefs. Her creativity was constrained by her determination, albeit subconscious, to reflect her Buddhist belief in her writings. Given such personal conflicts, the messages from women writers like Ma Ma Lay were often mixed. She shared with readers her perception of Buddhism as a moral guide yet created characters who turned their back on Buddhist teachings.

Another woman writer, Khin Hnin Yu, also used modernity as an underlying theme in her novels. Her interpretation of modernity was the advancement of women's lives. In a collection of thirty-two short stories,[76] sixteen are about women trying to rebuild their lives after being raped, being left by their husbands or becoming widows. During a period in which women faced fewer barriers to entering the workforce and were more visible in society, Khin Hnin Yu seemed to be empowering women to rely on themselves, with or without their husbands. But she did not stereotype gender: men did not always abuse or leave women, and women are equally bad in some of her stories. In စိန်ကြည်နေဝင်စိန်ကြည်, or *Sein Kyi, Sein Kyi*, she wrote about a woman who enjoyed sleeping with male writers. But through such a character, she wanted to draw a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in Burmese society. Ma Ma Lay and Khin Hnin Yu, both of whom were working women, used the pen to extend the boundaries for traditional Burmese women. But they also depicted the lives of women as they actually were.

The issue of women having extra-marital or pre-marital affairs was a common theme, as was women having abortions. Since private clinics abounded in the early 1950s, when the Ministry of Health did not even exist, women took abortion into their own hands. In one of her short stories, Kyi Aye wrote about a very bright medical student who came first in the nationwide matriculation exams, had multiple abortions during her college years, but did not let her studies or ranking slip. Kyi Aye challenged all the norms – her character outwitted every male in the exams and freely expressed her sexuality. Kyi Aye refused to share her personal beliefs with, or force her moral teaching on, her readers. Instead she invited her readers to understand the life of a girl who aborted her baby. She did not solicit condemnation or sympathy, and in this way she asked her readers to abandon their prejudices. Kyi Aye's stories were therefore another milestone for women writers, since she demonstrated not only that women could write stories reflecting real life, but also that the stories did not need to carry a moral message or advance moral positions acceptable to readers.

Khin Hnin Yu did not agree that abortion was a solution for women. In *Sacrifice*, a character – despite having ten children and a husband with no interest in seeking another job after being sacked – decides not to abort a further baby. Khin Hnin Yu implied that a husband and wife ought to practise abstinence if they were unable to afford another baby. To be able to abstain from sex, she argued, was to keep the eight precepts of *sila*. Taking refuge in religion helped

the practice of abstinence. Religion and culture were intertwined in the stories of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay and Khin Hnin Yu – both writers turned to religion to find solutions to such issues as abortion.

But women writers, despite personal struggles between modernity and religion, often felt compelled to create in their writings strong women with unequivocal attitudes towards religion. Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay's characters often lectured readers about the central position of Buddhism in everyday life. Khin Hnin Yu's characters argued against abortion and for abstinence. Yet the writers themselves were often caught in a conflict between modernity and religion.

Layers of ambiguity obscured the relationship between these writers and their characters. The characters they created often did not reflect their own personalities. Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay admitted in her writing that she had rejected traditional medicine and embraced modern treatments and western medication, although she refused to be treated with western medicine when she was dying. Kyi Aye's characters were symbols of freedom who did not allow social norms to influence their decisions. Yet Kyi Aye eventually left Burma and her literary career, although she never publicly explained why.

The stories of Kyi Aye, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay and Khin Hnin Yu embraced different interpretations and practices of sexuality. From Dagon Khin Khin Lay, who wrote her first novel under a male pseudonym, to Kyi Aye, who was the first woman to write extensively on 'modern' themes such as abortion, women writers challenged not only the two main influences of Buddhism and colonialism but also the popular notion that only men could write serious literature. Yet although these women writers portrayed modernity in different ways – from abortions to giving birth in a modern hospital – they often used Buddhism as the ultimate arbiter in life's affairs. Their reliance on Buddhism for either inspiration or spiritual guidance to create an 'acceptable' literature for a Burmese setting is understandable given the great popularity of religious literature in post-independence Burma, especially during the period of Nu's AFPFL government.

Entertainment literature, which had previously been regarded as of low value, contributing little to the cultivation of the mind or to providing spiritual guidance, accounted for 40 per cent of books, journals, and magazines after the war, while religious texts accounted for 30 per cent, according to a survey undertaken by Rangoon University in 1951.[77] Political literature accounted for 20 per cent and the remaining 10 per cent for history, science, agriculture and industrial development.

The popularity of entertainment literature – often described as the literature of those who wear make-up and lipstick[78] – and of religious writings suggests the ambivalence of Burma's press and readers towards modernity and religion. Most books published in Burma during the twentieth century were of a religious nature, one of the bestsellers being သခ်ၤါဂၢာဒနီ, a book on religious concepts. The surge in the popularity of religious literature in the 1950s can partly be explained by the determination of U Nu's administration to safeguard traditional culture and customs against imported literature. But it is also explained

by the government's portrayal of the communists as enemies of Buddhism. Between 1956, the year in which the Psychological War Department of the army first published *Myawaddy* magazine, and 1959, the print-run of a book entitled *ဓမ္မရဿ Enemy of Dhamma* exceeded one million copies. This booklet, describing how the communists had destroyed pagodas and how their ideologies posed a threat to Buddhism, was published by the government, but with funds donated by individuals. In 1959, there were enough donors to publish another 100,000 copies.[79]

Even though the style and themes of published writing had changed greatly from the early 1910s, and political literature had become popular after *Thuriya* was founded by Ba Pe and Hla Aung, religious literature remained immensely popular. Even practical books on such matters as how to raise livestock were often seen as 'sinful', and it took the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper to encourage people to embrace even that modernity.[80]

Religion became the point of reference to judge the worth of any book printed in Burma. Inevitably, therefore, religion and politics often clashed. When Thein Pe wrote a book, *Modern Monk*, in which he described how some monks had adopted lay lifestyles and were therefore no longer worthy of respect, he was forced to apologize for bringing disgrace to Buddhism, even though his observations were well founded.[81] When P. Monin, author of many self-help books and a prolific story writer, criticized Magadaewa Sayadaw, a monk, for arguing that women were morally corrupt and should not be treated in the same way as men, he was attacked by other writers and some readers. Monin was a Christian. Attacking monks, let alone Buddhism, was a sin Burmese writers must not commit. Religion was valued above equality. The defence of women should not involve criticism of monks.[82]

But how women became writers, or what inspired women to write, seemed to have changed during the second half of the twentieth century. Realism, or ဘဝသရုပ်ဖော် in Burmese, seemed to become a major theme in famous female writers' work in the late BSPP period. Women having to balance work and family life and the ways in which economic hardship affected women were featured in many of the women writers' work. A popular female writer in the 1970s and 1980s, Ma Sandar, entered the literary world with short stories including characters centring around the Rangoon University Institution of Technology, a university that she herself attended. Like her contemporaries such as Moe Moe (Inya), she narrated the lives of urban working girls, who often struggled to make ends meet and who often had to betray themselves and give in to everyday demands. Her stories reflected high living costs in Rangoon, societal pressure on young women to marry a rich man, the trapped lives of women whose husbands committed adultery and single girls in their early thirties who worried about not being able to find a suitable man.[83]

In one of the stories, a woman loses weight after finding out that her husband has married another woman who has become pregnant. The protagonist has had a miscarriage which has left her unable to bear children, and her husband marrying a woman who can bear children reflects that the worth of a wife is measured

by whether or not she can produce children – and, if possible, sons – for her husband.[84] Though she was highly educated, with an engineering degree from a male-dominated university, Ma Sandar's female characters are often powerless, with low self-esteem. In other words, her characters reflect more the general condition of the women she saw – disempowered and helpless – rather than she herself, as a high-achieving woman engineer.

In BSPP and post-BSPP Burma, where government, government policies and government institutions were not to be criticized, feminist literature promoting women's rights was not passed by the censor board and the real picture of women's world could only be sifted through the information and narratives presented in stories and poems. Writers such as Ma Sandar depicted the worlds of women struggling to meet the expectations placed on them, striving to become model wives and mothers.

Another acclaimed female writer, Moe Moe (Inya)[85] – who won many literary awards – also created characters who were lost in cities such as Rangoon. She herself moved to Rangoon from a small town, Daik-U, to go to university and settled in Rangoon after marrying a publisher. Her contemporaries suggested that some of the characters reflected her real life as she went through a difficult marriage with a husband who committed adultery. With or without the projection of her own personal life, her stories epitomized the struggles which girls from the rural areas faced when they moved to the city for education and then, later on, tried to find work at government offices instead of going back to the countryside and helping their families with their traditional work.

In Moe Moe (Inya)'s award-winning novel *Getting Lost*[86] the protagonist is a young girl who comes to Rangoon from Bago, a town fifty miles north of Rangoon, to attend university. She marries a city boy and instead of moving into his family house, where the family all live together, tries to rent a house with the money her mother has sent. She also tries to secure an office job despite having given birth to a baby girl. Since both the couple's salaries cannot cover the cost of the family and neither can look after their baby, the latter is sent to her grandmother, who looks after her.

With soaring prices in the city, the couple cannot make ends meet, and when the landlord wants to sell the house, they cannot afford to buy it. The protagonist does not want to move in with her husband's family and finally decides to move back to her mother's house in Bago (Pegu), leaving her husband behind. This tragic story reflected the lives of many young girls and women from the countryside who moved to Rangoon, hoping they could build careers and homes, yet having to abandon their dreams when the reality became too much to bear.

Moe Moe (Inya) was one of the leading writers of the realism movement, capturing the realities of common people: unhappy marriages in which husbands commit adultery, the broken dreams of the country girls and the suffocated lives of the city-dwellers living in high-rise buildings. Such stories are important in capturing the real social landscape of Burmese women, as they serve as a counter-narrative to the popular image of powerful Burmese women often depicted

and reaffirmed by the few powerful women who exist, as discussed in the opening chapter. In Moe Moe (Inya)'s stories, women feel powerless and often run away from their families, as in the novel *Getting Lost*, as they often have no help from society and have to bear the brunt of soaring commodity prices and housing problems. Moe Moe (Inya)'s protagonists are mirrors of the difficult years of the late and post-BSPP eras, during which women had to often single-handedly solve marital and family problems. Shattered women, rather than satisfied and secure women, fill the social scenes in her stories.

In another novel by Moe Moe (Inya), *Ma Sudhammasari*,[87] a woman becomes a Buddhist nun after going through many struggles in life, including being cheated on by her husband. Cheating husbands are not uncommon characters in Moe Moe (Inya)'s stories, which reflect the suffering of wives caused by their cheating husbands, despite the official media's the general public to believe that Burmese husbands are faithful to their wives because of the teachings of Buddhism.

In *Ma Thudhammasari*, Moe Moe (Inya) narrates the accounts of women from two generations. *Ngwe Hmon* moves to Rangoon to help run her husband's dried fish business, but her husband's sister disapproves of their marriage and they have a difficult married life. When her husband dies in a car accident, she marries another businessman, but later finds out that she is in fact just one of his mistresses. He too suffers an untimely death, and Ngwe Hmon marries his cousin. In Burmese society, a woman who has married three times is socially unacceptable and Moe Moe (Inya) paints Ngwe Hmon as someone who is ostracized by society. Her daughter, Thein Myint, also bears the burden and shame of her mother, and becomes rebellious. The daughter's own educated husband from the city cheats on her, and she is left for another woman. The daughter decides to become a nun at the end of the book.

Moe Moe (Inya)'s characters share a common fate – surrender to the demands of the city, the end of an innocent life, finding refuge in Buddhism and not fighting against the prevailing social norms imposed upon women. Her characters often abandon their dreams of climbing the city's social ladder and building happy families; they either have to go back to their parents' home or enter the life of the ascetic as a *yogi* or nun when they finally submit to social norms and give into the family difficulties and economic hardship.

Moe Moe (Inya)'s protagonists often abandon their ambitions to build a family and career in the city; her stories rarely have happy endings. Despite the prevailing arguments that Burmese women enjoy equal rights and have high status in society, Moe Moe (Inya)'s characters provide a counter-narrative of this romantic picture of Burmese women. They are often failed both by their families and societies, and they cannot enjoy happy marriages with the men they trust and love. The men they love and marry often betray them, marrying another woman no matter whether or not they can bear children.

Moe Moe (Inya) often discussed in her stories the meaning of the phrase 'lesser wife', or *ma ya paying*. She pointed out the word 'lesser wife' is often glamorized to promote wider acceptance of mistresses at the expense of the first

wife. At a time when many men are not faithful to their wives, the 'lesser wife' becomes more acceptable, and families and relatives of the lesser wife prefer that term to 'mistress'. The author seems to have challenged the social norms that condone an unfaithful husband marrying another woman on the ground of his first wife being infertile. In a place where feminist voices were silenced, Moe Moe (Inya) could be seen as one of the pioneers of Burmese feminism. She herself had a difficult marriage but unlike other women, she painted the lives of wives such as herself accurately, thereby uncovering a world of gross inequality between husbands and wives.

In a short story entitled *ထောင်ပြေး*, or *Escapee from a Prison*, Moe Moe (Inya) wrote about a mother of three children trying to run away from a house. She wanders around but finally, without her realizing, her feet take her back to her house. She feels trapped with her three children, her university degree is useless; and she has had to become a full-time housewife, and although she finally decides to leave her family in the small hours, she feels unsafe wandering around alone. She also reminds herself of what her late mother told her about not putting herself first and feels ambivalent about leaving her family. She compares herself as a housewife to a prisoner: Moe Moe (Inya)'s female protagonists reflect the 'trapped lives' of housewives, who could not change their situation.

In another story, *ငိုရင်ပုလဲ ရယ်ရင်ရွှဲ* (*Pearls When Crying, Glass Gems When Laughing*), she shares her lonely life as a writer who gets no love or attention from her husband. She misses the old days, when her would-be husband cared for her, and compares her life at the time of writing to her earlier life, lamenting the loss of love in her marriage.[88] In *တစ်ယောက်တည်းနေလည်း ဖြစ်ပါတယ်* (*It's Possible to Live Alone*), Moe Moe (Inya) writes about a young teacher who divorces her husband, who committed adultery, and brings up her child alone. This is a rare character in Moe Moe (Inya)'s stories, as she succeeds in life, becoming a lawyer, and has the courage to divorce her husband who has betrayed her. These stories were often published in women's magazines such as *Sabei Phyu* and *Lone Ma Lay*, and Moe Moe (Inya) broke the mould of stable marriages, often advocating running away from trapped marriages and divorcing adulterous husbands.[89] Her stories send a rather strong message that despite the romantic depiction of Burmese women as powerful and having equal status to men, they are often left alone to struggle, and only those who can face the frowns and criticisms of society can break away from unhappy married life.

Moe Moe (Inya)'s stories give a different message from other mainstream stories about women. Repeated messages about what a good woman/wife constitutes are set out in stories and novels, and many writers tend to remind women to become good wives according to the standards prescribed in the *Theingalawwada* suttra.[90] Instead of committing to the prescribed notions of good women, Moe Moe (Inya) paints pictures of women who are more concerned with their careers and families than with portraying themselves as good wives and mothers. Her characters are not afraid to leave their families behind, and they even dare to be initiated into nunhood when they have exhausted all other options in secular life. Her characters seek refuge in religion when all the social welfare

mechanisms, including their families, fail them. A scared world, rather than a simply secure world, is an answer for Moe Moe (Inya)'s characters. They cannot find equality in their marriage, let alone in wider society.

The social expectations placed on women were often so high that women felt suffocated when they could not meet the demands imposed on them. But they were not encouraged to talk about their failures publicly, and the archetypal picture of Burmese women is of one who makes a perfect home and family. Moe Moe (Inya) herself suffered in her marriage, became a nun temporarily and suffered an untimely death from a heart attack. Her stories reveal glimpses of her sad marriage and a silenced public and private life – a life with no escape.

Women in the post-1988 or post-BSPP literary landscape

In the era of tight censorship from 1988 to the present, the demarcation between fiction and non-fiction is often blurred. What cannot be reported as real events in newspapers and magazines often appears in magazines as fiction, and fiction therefore becomes an important source material for Burmese historiography for the period between 1962 and the present. How much freedom the press can enjoy in contemporary Burma is still difficult to assess and until press censorship is fully lifted, fiction will remain an important source of information to chart the social landscape of Burma, including the position of women.

The 1990s were considered a period of tight financial security, especially after earlier experiments with the 'market economy' failed. During this time, poems by Maung Khine Mar with the standard beginning *Shin Ma Ye*, a common address to a wife from a husband, were very popular. They were printed monthly in *Myanma Dana* magazine and the poet shared with his wife, via his poems, his experiences travelling around the country, his feelings and details of world events. With his repetitive use of *Shin Ma Ye* ('My Dear Wife'), he depicts an image of his wife as someone who he feels comfortable sharing his thoughts with and feels close to, something which Burmese males – especially public figures such as poets – have learned not to do, especially in public. Though the poet challenged the norms and made his wife, a good homemaker, visible to general readers, his vision of wives as masters of the kitchen confirms the long-held perception of the kitchen as the ultimate destiny for women. Indeed, the cover of the anthology of his work is a picture of his wife cooking in a kitchen,[91] and some of his poems confirm his attitude towards women.

In *Zingala and Shin Ma*, he says: 'explaining economics to you is like playing harp to a buffalo'.[92] Though the poet feels comfortable publicizing his intimacy with his wife, he does not seem uncomfortable portraying his wife as someone who does not acquire worldly knowledge. Perhaps he was caught in the trap of his own affectionate term for his wife, *Shin Ma*, which is also associated with *Ein Shin Ma*, or 'housewife'. By using such a term, he is bound to describe his wife as a loyal partner as well as dutiful homemaker. Words become double-edged swords in that way, and the poet, although perhaps with good intentions, cannot escape the cultural limitations prescribed by these words. Although he brings

her out to the readers, he feels compelled to depict her as a simple housewife with no worldly knowledge. He gives into social expectations and joins with other male and female writers to continue to describe women as inferior to men.

In the contemporary literary landscape, there are, however, a few examples of female writers beginning to challenge the boundaries set by the state, religion, men and often elite women. Some have begun to write stories about domestic violence.[93] In one of the short stories that appeared in the February 2012 issue of Shweamhutay, one of the leading literary magazines published in Rangoon, the writer portrays a successful businesswoman running away from her abusive husband. Marriage is considered a sacred institution and the Burma Censor Board rarely allows stories with the theme of broken marriages or families. One can write about unhappy marriages, but the story should end with the parties trying to fix them to protect the sanctimony of marriage, rather than parties leaving each other and children behind. In this context, Monzoo's story *One World* breaks the mould. In the story, a widow marries an old friend but despite the couple's prosperity, she cannot enjoy married life, as her second husband has fallen in love with a younger girl. The younger girl, after realizing her mistake, stays away from her husband, but he blames the wife for his mistress' disappearance. He attacks her with words and her endurance breaks down when he accuses her of failing him as a wife by not being able to bear any children for him. She eventually leaves him, saying she hopes that she will 'become a good wife for him in another life'.[94]

Although this story seems to carry the message for female readers that they can determine the fate of their marriages and staying together should not always be the only option, the story also affirms norms about marriage and what constitutes a good wife. The worth of a wife is still measured by whether or not she can bear any children for her husband, and in the story, the wife's final message to her husband is astounding – that she wished she could become a good wife; that is, one able to bear children for him. The story reflects some of the themes previous female writers touched on – infidelity, the insecurity of infertile wives and abusive relationships in childless families. But unlike Moe Moe (Inya)'s stories, the wife in *One World* does not find refuge in religion. She remains in the secular world, a seemingly braver decision as she will have to overcome the challenges to a divorced woman.

Women writers also attempted to balance religion – Buddhism – and modernity, but this was frequently a great struggle, as Ma Ma Lay and Moe Moe (Inya)'s stories suggested. Change was often challenged by a determination to protect Buddhism and tradition, and women writers, though highly educated, struggled to reconcile these two powerful forces. Ma Ma Lay wanted to disseminate Buddhist teachings in her stories, yet one of her characters broke the fundamental Buddhist precept. Khin Myo Chit was inspired to become a writer by the religious writings of Ledi Pandida U Maung Gyi. Khin Myo Chit and Dagon Khin Khin Lay both listed Mahawthada, a story of a wise man who later became Buddha, and religious texts by Ledi Monk as their favourite Burmese books.[95] Moe Moe (Inya)'s characters often seek refuge in religion but, as one of the more

recent stories suggests, female writers seem to have found the courage to break the taboo of divorce and are attempting to send the message that the answer is often not religion, but daring to ask for a divorce. The short story recently published in *Shwemahutay* also seems to suggest it is more likely that women writers will begin to speak more freely about divorce and not offer religion as a refuge, but rather portray ending abusive and troublesome marriages as a pathway to women's liberation and happiness.

Notes

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8 Myint Swe, op. cit., p. 23.
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10 U San Mya, *ဘကြီးဘဖေ၏အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ* [*Biography of Bagyi Ba Pe*]. n.d
11 Min Hla Gon Yaung, ရှေးခေတ်သတင်းစာများသမိုင်း၊ သတင်းစာအရေးအသား [*History of Old Newspapers and Writing Styles*], *Myanma Alin*, 7 September 1962, p. 4.
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13 Even though they still used English in their own advertisements, perhaps to attract foreign businesses for advertising.
14 U. P. I. U Ba Than, op. cit., pp. 50–51.
15 U San Mya, op. cit.
16 Ibid.
17 He was once arrested for his 'Go back Craddock' speech, protesting against Sir Reginald Craddock, Lieutenant-Governor of Burma from 1918 to 1922.
18 U Saw bought *Thuriya* in 1937, after his return from Japan, and many believed that he took funds from the Japanese government for this purchase.
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27 Ibid.
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43 Ibid.
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46 For more articles in *Bamakhit* on women, see chapters 3 and 4.
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88 Moe Moe (Inya), ဝိုရင်ပုလဲရယ်ရင်ခွဲ, in *Moe Moe (Inya)'s Collection of Short Stories* (3), 2nd edition, Sarpaylawka: Rangoon, 1993, pp. 23–38. First appeared in *Sabei Phyu* magazine, January 1986.
89 Moe Moe (Inya), တစ်ယောက်တည်းနေလည်း ဖြစ်ပါတယ် in Moe Moe (Inya)'s Collection of Short Stories (3), 2nd edition, pp. 23–38, Sarpaylawka: Rangoon, 1993. First appeared in *Lone Ma Lay* magazine, January 1986.
90 A religious text on codes of social conducts.
91 Maung Khine Mar, *ရှင်မရေ* [*Shinma Yay*], Rangoon: Tetlan Sarpay, 1997.
92 Ibid., p. 194.
93 Monzoo, 'One World', *Shweamhutay*, February 2012.
94 Ibid.
95 *Ngwetayi* magazine, 63, 1965.

3 Women's education

Mi Mi Khaing argued that even towards the end of the nineteenth century, women were not encouraged to work outside the home. The modern education system was inadvertently designed to help young boys excel in trade, law, politics and other disciplines,[1] to benefit the colonial administration, while emphasis was put on women becoming good home-makers. Domestic duties often kept a woman busy, and until the mid-1880s, when educational institutions were established for women, they had to be taught to read and write by learned relatives and neighbours, who were usually male. A similar observation was made by J. S. Furnivall, who claimed that students in Burma benefited little from organized education.[2] But Chie Ikeya has recently argued that the British education system was 'crucial to the growth of Burmese women intermediaries', and that 'modern education in colonial Burma triggered the most radical transformation in the history of female education and professional specialization in Burma.'[3] This challenges the long-held view that the modern British education system in Burma was merely intended to sustain its bureaucratic machine. Aung San once called the colonial education system 'slave' education.

The implication here, *pace* Chie Ikeya, is that the educational opportunities provided to Burmese girls from the beginning of the twentieth century did not, with few exceptions, liberate Burmese women to enter the modern world. The famous writer Khin Myo Chit argued that when her first and only son was born, she felt that her writing must come second, and made domestic duties and caring for her son her priority.[4] In one of her novels, the protagonist was portrayed as someone who pursued education just for show.[5] Juggling work and homemaking was not for women, who had simply one concern – to create a home and bring up children. The British education system might have triggered a transformation in female education, as Chie Ikeya has argued. But in essence the transformation may simply have been a matter of learning in an institution, from teachers, rather than at home, from relatives. Burmese women, again with few exceptions, were not then empowered to make their independent way in the world.

Between 1885 and 1936, the number of girls who were educated to primary and secondary level rose: yet it took girls fifty years to match the number of school-attending boys.[6] Before the government and missionary schools were established, monasteries were the important agents teaching boys worldly as well as spiritual

knowledge, and when their influence declined during the colonial period, schools substituted for monasteries in training young men but girls were left on their own to learn 'world' knowledge.[7] Even though many more girls entered organized schooling from the beginning of the twentieth century, education was yet to become an agent for the advancement of women. Society's need for female labour was almost insignificant and women's aspirations to serve society were close to non-existent. Even a popular female writer like Khin Myo Chit found the task of raising a child more rewarding than writing, in the eyes of society.[8]

Women from rich and educated families were likely to face tighter family restrictions, since how they behaved, who they married and what jobs they undertook would shape the status and image of their family. The higher these stakes, the more restrictions were placed upon young women, since parents did not want their daughters 'to go off the rails', forfeiting their own future as well as the family's. In other words, young women shouldered the responsibility of maintaining or bringing honour to the family by living in appropriate ways, marrying the right person and taking a proper job – that is, a job that was acceptable to their parents and to the wider society.

The highly educated woman Daw Khin Khin Gyi, who founded the All Burma Women Federation League, the Creche child care centre, the Burma Logistics Company and the Rangoon Rope Factory and became a government figure during the caretaker government of 1958–60, accepted a marriage proposal from an Indian Civil Servant (ICS) official, U Shwe Baw,[9] who was a divorcee. If a man were in her position, he would have been discouraged from marrying a divorced woman. Double standards were common, and it was often the man, rather than the woman, who had a choice in marriage. Even though arranged marriages and dowries were not Burmese tradition, women from rich families were expected to marry a rich and/or educated man, and the parents of young girls usually sought out young, bright boy: the parents of the girl would educate the boy and upon graduation, he would marry the girl in return.

Education would not make a woman a suitable bride, but her wealth would. One ICS official, U Ba Htay, spelled out the criteria he employed in choosing his wife: '(1) a girl of average beauty belonging to a rich family; (2) an educated girl, at least a graduate BA or maybe a BSc (honours); (3) a girl of intelligence; (4) must be kind-hearted; (5) a girl possessing patience.'[10] But he did not explain why a rich background was the most important consideration for him. The woman's education, here to degree level, was also an important factor, probably because her status as an educated woman would complement his role in social contexts. Ultimately, family honour rested on who the daughter married and not on what the daughter had become in her own right, and thus a careful mechanism was put in place to sustain that custom. Of the ten most prominent Kumari women who were active in the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) and the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), staging boycotts against the colonial government, two accepted arranged marriages.[11] These politically active but not politically ambitious women, who were leading thousands of women in an organized movement against the colonial government, submitted

to their parents' wishes over marriage. Modern education and politics were too weak to break tradition.

Schools founded by missionaries also focused, besides education, on the trades and skills which girls should hone. In her letter to a sister, the then Mrs. Boardman – who later became Mrs. Judson, married to the first lexicographer and missionary Adoniram Judson, said:

> I have a Sabbath-School of Little Burman girls, who are learning their catechism and their prayers. We have no hymns in the Burmese, nor I should [sic] teach them hymns also. We have, beside this, a school during the week. . . . in which the tawny little girls learn to read and sew. They are also learning the multiplication table; and they are just beginning the first part of the same arithmetic which you study, translated into the language.[12]

Daw Ni Ni Myint argued that few girls attended such schools because of 'traditional beliefs'.[13] She did not elaborate whether she meant traditional beliefs based on Buddhism and/or animism, or traditional beliefs that girls should not go to school. Burmese women writers such as Daw Ama were also critical of the missionary schools. In her book entitled *When We Were Young*, Daw Ama narrated how, as young girls, she and her classmates were taught how to crochet, knit and sew by often spinster Catholic teachers. She emphasized that one of the missions of the school was to train them to become womanly women – that is, women who know how to behave as expected by society – and in places like her American Baptist Mission (ABM) school, it is possible that she meant expectations both in Burmese and the western society in which their teachers grew up.

Daw Ama and another writer, Daw Kyi Oo, who attended missionary schools in Moulmein, resented the strict discipline and having to follow certain rituals, such as singing 'God Save the King' during assemblies. Daw Ama later moved to a National School in which her nationalism found a safe medium. Though her National School, governed by U Razak, who later became the National School minister and was assassinated alongside Aung San, ran sports programmes for boys, there was no such programme for girls. And when Daw Ama and her friends demanded a similar programme for girls, the headmaster merely said they should play traditional games such as *Htoke Si Toe*, for which no sporting facility was needed.

The state of contemporary women's education through surveys

According to a survey conducted by a local NGO, of 200 drop-out students in a village tract in Dedaye, Irrawaddy Division (students who could not go back to school in the new academic year), 39 per cent or seventy-eight students were male, whereas the remaining 61 per cent or 122 were female. Of these 122 students, 43 per cent or fifty were primary students, including seven who left after kindergarten; forty-nine were middle school students and twenty-three were high school

students. These numbers correspond with the trend observed by Seema Agarwal in her report published in 1986. Quoting a study conducted by the Burma Education Research Bureau in 1975, she concluded that 'only about 27 per cent of children enrolled reached the final year of primary school', though the incidence of drop-out was higher among girls than boys.[14] She also reported that women comprised 80 per cent of those enrolled for the mass literacy campaign by the Burma Socialist Programme Party launched in 1981,[15] though the ratio of women illiterates to men might not be as high as 80 per cent. Perhaps women were more receptive to the idea of literacy campaign and had more incentives to join it than men.

Even though the government has made access to primary education a universal right of children, based on the survey results, 5.7 out of each 100 girls only finished kindergarten. More girls than boys are taken out of school, as their help around the house is vital. The average family size of this population is rather small, at four, and this provides the vital information that the girls' education does not often correlate with family size or having to look after younger siblings. Most of the families of these drop-out girls engaged in casual work, working on the farms during the rice season and as fishers during the post-harvest season. Though the government promises free education, parents still have to pay for books and school maintenance fees, and when parents have to choose between sons or daughters for education, they often choose to take girls out of schools. A more valid argument for why more girls than boys are taken out of school should be not that girls have to babysit their younger siblings or help their parents with household chores, but that economic returns for boys will be greater than those for girls if they stay longer in school. The employment data discussed in later sections tend to support this argument.

The following chart shows the percentage of females and males who did not reach beyond the first standard in primary education in 2007 in nine different regions across Burma.[16] Effectively, this table is a drop-out indicator. Between two age groups – those born before 1943 and those born between 1993 and 1997 – the percentage of female drop-outs is cut from 31.3 per cent to 5.6 per cent. The percentage for males is also cut, but not as drastically. Among all age cohorts more females than males leave school at or after the first standard, but the gap between males and females is narrowing.

Equally important are the data on the number of students attending monastic schools, since these provide an alternative form of education if parents are unable to send their children to government schools, generally because they cannot pay the fees.[17]

Unlike students at the government schools, students studying under monastic education often come from the poorest families in society, and the difference between male and female students is alarming: at primary level, the number of male students exceeded that of female students by 135.7 per cent to 27 per cent from 1994 to 2005, whereas the difference was as little as 4 per cent between males and females from the same cohort attending government schools.[18] This highlights the importance of using non-traditional data to unearth the otherwise hidden gender gap in primary education. Traditional data sets such as the number

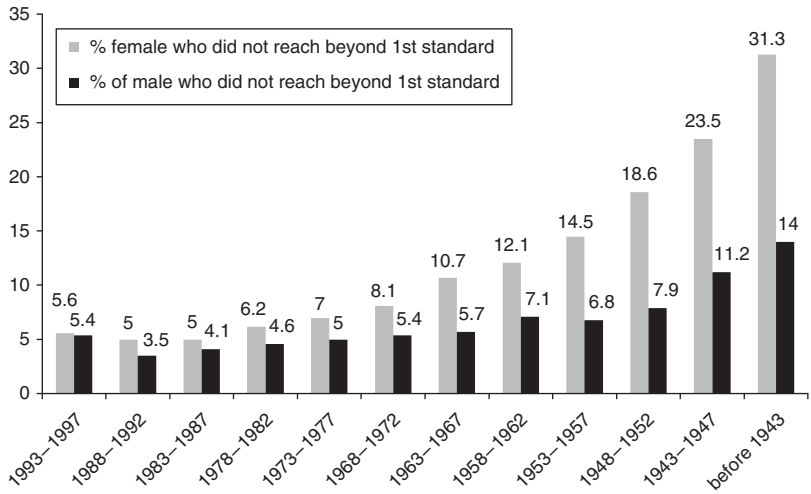

Chart 3.1 Percentage of females and males (born before 1943 to born between 1993 and 1997) who did not reach beyond 1st standard in primary level education in nine different regions across Burma in 2007.

Source: UNFPA, *Family And Youth Survey*, 2009, p. 25.

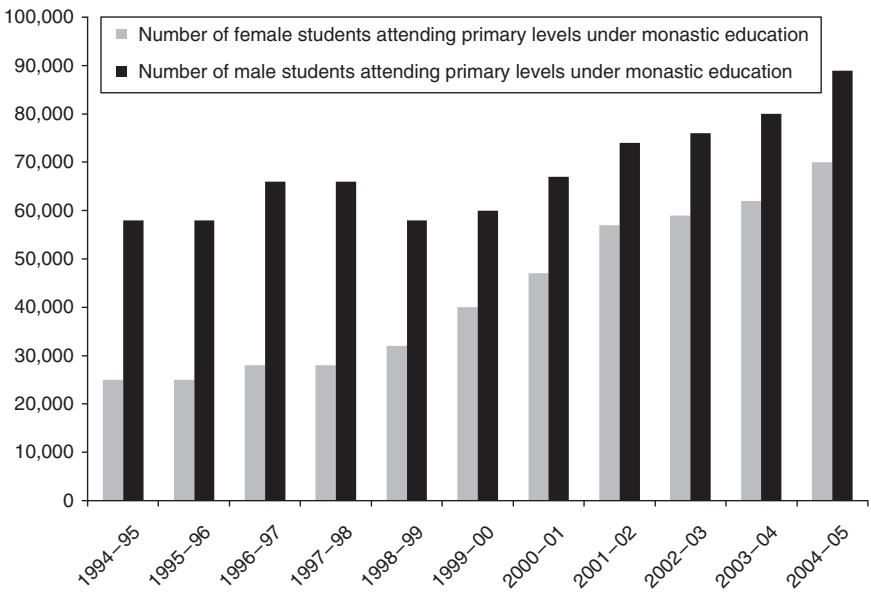

Chart 3.2 Percentage of females and males attending primary levels at monastic schools from 1994 to 2005.

Source: *Handbook on Human Resources Development Indicators 2006*, Union of Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Department of Labour & UNFPA.

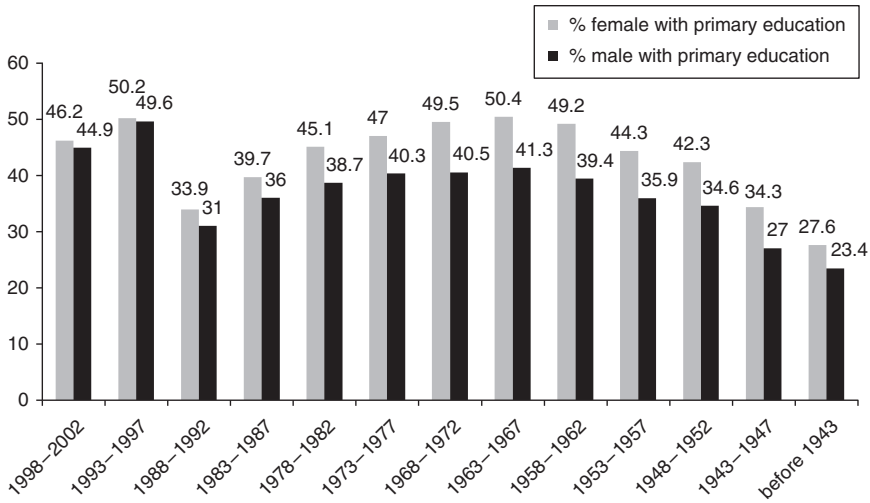

Chart 3.3 Education attainment between males and females (from those born before 1943 to those born between 1998 and 2002) at primary level.

Source: UNFPA, *Family And Youth Survey*, 2009, p. 25.

of students enrolled at government schools tell us little about the gender gap; in fact, the data suggest that there is little or no gender difference in terms of educational attainment, suggesting that girls have equal opportunities to boys in gaining an education. But for the poorest strata of the society, the reverse of this observation is true. Girls face more discrimination than boys, and families tend to send boys to monastic education rather than girls.

According to Chart 3.4, the difference between male and female students at the middle levels, i.e. from the fifth to the eighth standard, is smaller than that at primary level, from kindergarten to the fourth standard. But just as at primary level, the number of female students was exceeded by that of male students consistently from the 1998–99 academic year to 2004–05. The difference is smaller, however: the number of male students exceeds that of females by 66.7 per cent to 28.6 per cent. For both sexes, there are more primary-school students than middle-school students, and primary-school students in monastic education outnumber middle-school students by eight to seventeen times, indicating that only 5–10 per cent of primary school graduates go on to middle school under monastic education – assuming that these students remain in the same system and do not switch to the government school system, which often involves costs and has less flexible school hours than those under the monastic education system.

These data on drop-out students and students under the monastic education system reveal the real social landscape for disadvantaged women, the status of which could not be captured by using only positive statistics or the numbers of children attending formal (or government) schools. Charts 3.5 and 3.6 will paint

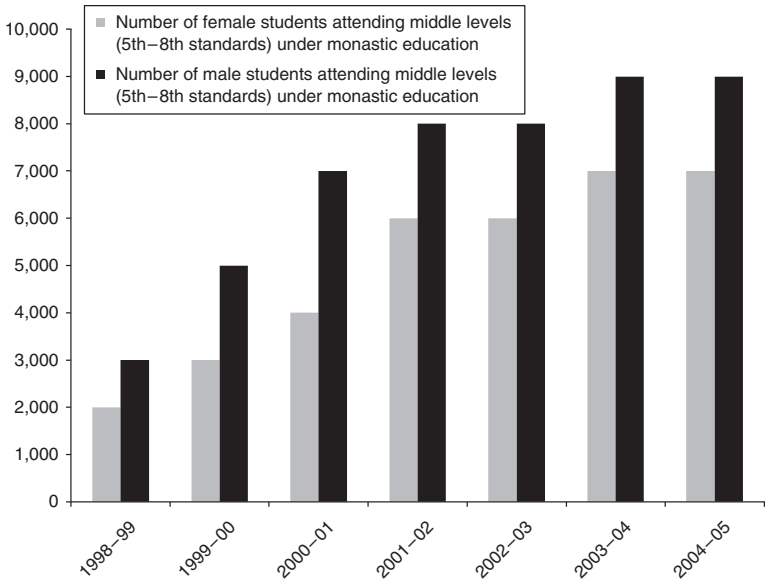

Chart 3.4 Percentage of females and males attending middle levels at monastic schools from 1998 to 2005.

Source: *Handbook on Human Resources Development Indicators 2006*, Union of Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Department of Labour & UNFPA.

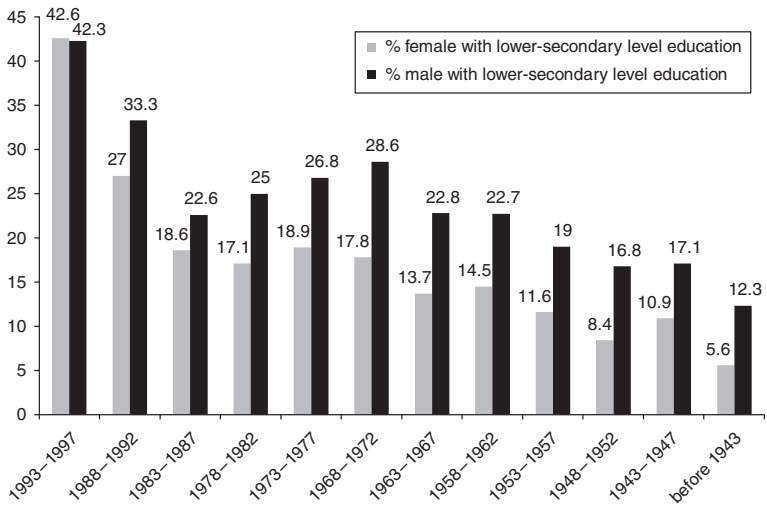

Chart 3.5 Education attainment between males and females (from those born before 1943 to those born between 1993 and 1997) at lower secondary level (5th to 8th standards).

Source: UNFPA, *Family And Youth Survey*, 2009, p. 25.

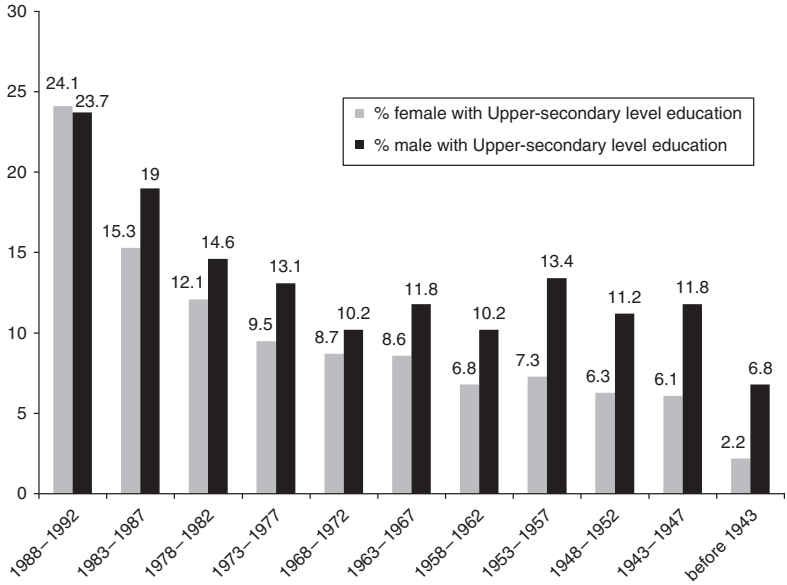

Chart 3.6 Education attainment between males and females (from those born before 1943 to those born between 1988 and 1992) at upper secondary Level (9th and 10th standards).

Source: UNFPA, *Family And Youth Survey*, 2009, p. 25.

the story of female education less negatively, as the difference between male and female attendance is not as pronounced as it is under monastic education.

The author of *The Status of Myanmar Women*, Daw Ni Ni Myint, provided a prevailing narrative of girls' empowerment and the equity-loving society looking after them. She says:

> . . . there are girls who cannot continue with their education as they are forced to work to earn extra income for their families. Girls from well-to-do families can however pursue their studies. Nonetheless, Myanmar women are provided with an unfettered and secure environment in which they may get an education. From observations made in 'Women in Asia and the Pacific 1985–1993', it will be seen that Myanmar women face less restrictions and enjoy a more secure environment in obtaining an education compared with those in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan.[19]

The overwhelming 'yes, but' rhetoric places Daw Ni Ni Myint in a defensive position regarding the high status of women. She implies that although more girls than boys have to leave school early, Burma is still doing better than her neighbours. She goes on to say that '. . . Myanmar women do not have to overcome strict restrictive norms that are a feature of some societies and are not subject to

artificial obstacles placed in their way by society'.[20] She seems to suggest that it is not structural discrimination or the failure of society to promote girls' education, but the bad luck of individual families, that means girls are taken out of education. In this tendency to uphold the notion of women's high status in society, the historian fails to properly understand what her data suggest and provides irrelevant information to reinforce the long-held views of women having equality with men. Perhaps she was protecting women; more likely she was protecting the male-dominated, militarily governed state that was monitoring her writing. The fact it was in her own interest to continue to promote the image of powerful Burmese women and her submission to the official historical framework perhaps guide her research astray.

Independence could be said to be a turning point for women in terms of the pursuit of higher education; the education gap was narrowed after 1953 and for those born between 1953 and 1957, there is a gap of only 0.3 per cent between the numbers of men and women attending university. From 1967, the number of women attending university overtakes that of men, and after 1973 there were more women at university than men. But this chart obscured the real educational attainments of women, since women were outnumbered by men in upper and lower-secondary education – that is, between the fifth and tenth standards – as well as at primary level, from kindergarten to the fourth standard. Chart 3.7 shows the percentages of females and males with university-level education.

Charts 3.8a and 3.8b compare male and female educational attainment in 2007 in nine different regions across Burma.[21] According to Charts 3.8a and 3.8b, the least educated females live in Kachin, Kayah and Shan states (where 27.1 per cent

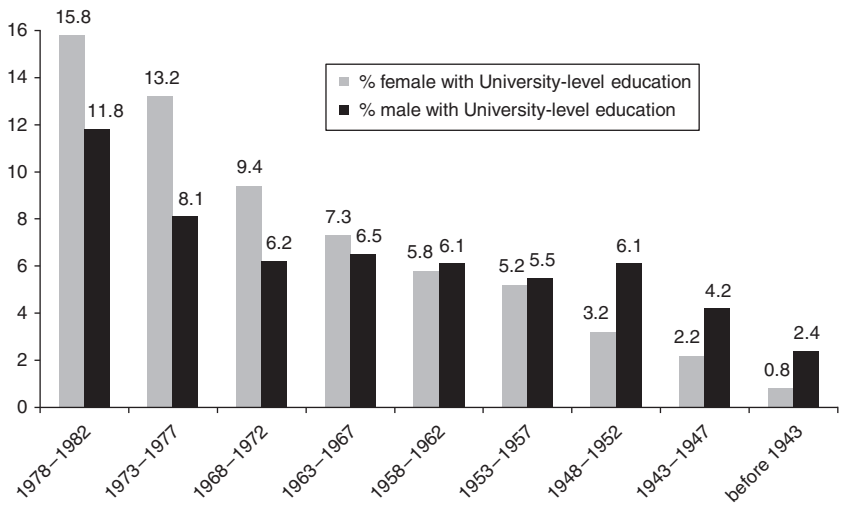

Chart 3.7 Education attainment between males and females (from those born before 1943 to those born between 1978 and 1982) at university level.

Source: UNFPA, *Family And Youth Survey*, 2009, p. 25.

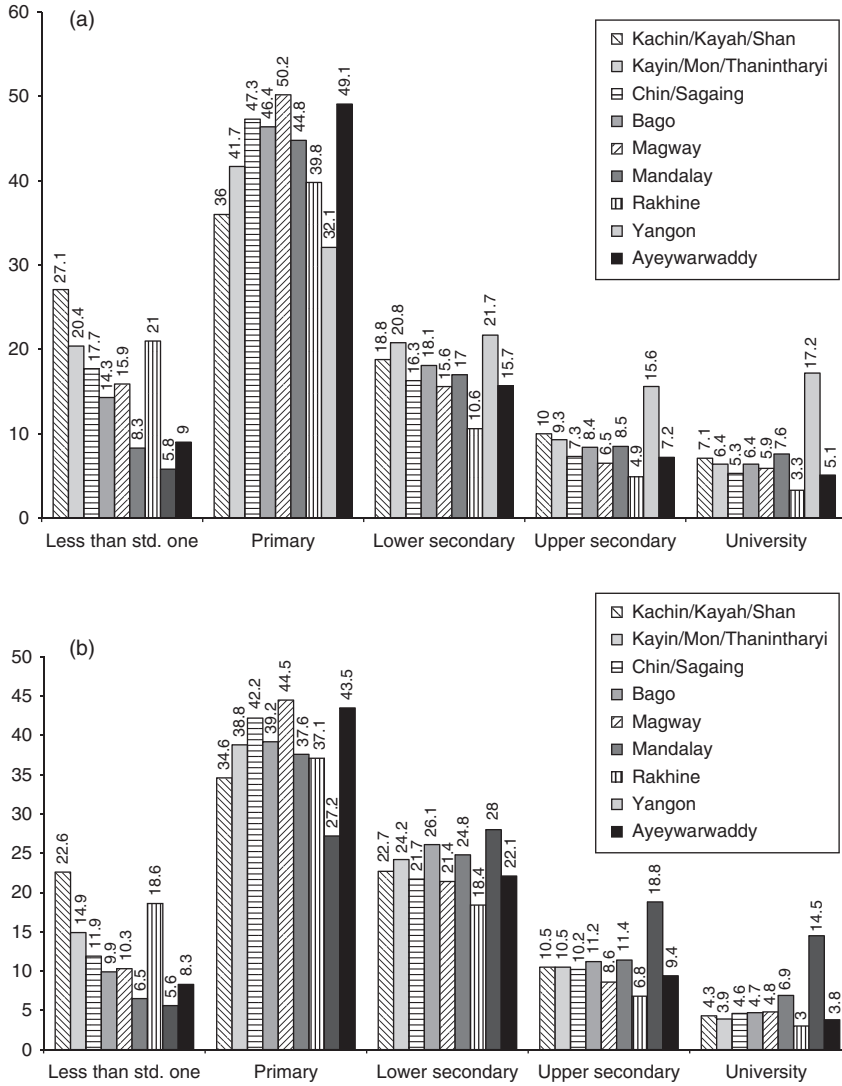

Chart 3.8 (*a*) Female education attainment in nine different regions across Burma in 2007. (*b*) Male education attainment in nine different regions across Burma in 2007.

Source: UNFPA, *Family And Youth Survey*, 2009, p. 25.

of the respondents have less than first standard-level education). Yangon houses the most educated females (20.4 per cent with university-level education). Kachin, Kayah and Shan states also have a very small number of women with university education (at 1.1 per cent).[22]

The highest number of women with less than one standard education level live in Rakhine State (14.9 per cent) compared to 4.8 per cent in Ayeyarwady. A girl

born in Rakhine is three times more likely to be illiterate. Kayin, Mon and Tanintharyi have the smallest number of females with university-level education (12.9 per cent). In Yangon 21.5 per cent of women have university-level education.[23] In terms of mothers aged between fifteen and forty-nine, Rakhine State also has the highest number of illiterate mothers (36.2 per cent); in Yangon 4.8 per cent of mothers are illiterate. Mothers from Rakhine State are seven times more likely to be illiterate than those from Yangon. In terms of university-level education, mothers from Yangon outscore the rest by almost three times, at 17.9 per cent, whereas other areas house 4.8–6 per cent of university level-educated mothers.[24] One can conclude from the above charts that the fourth standard, or highest level in primary school, and the tenth standard in upper secondary are the deciding levels for a girl's education. Until the early 1990s, more girls than boys stopped education at primary level.

Women and employment

Women, and their role in nation-building, became more visible after independence. In 1956, women became able to enlist voluntarily in the army – acceptance that women were as responsible as men for protecting the country and guarding the country's independence. As early as 1954, *Myawadi* magazine had advocated the conscription of single women into the army.[25] Both single and married women later joined the army, and some were sent abroad for training.[26] Women pilots were heroes of the day, and *Myawadi* featured women soldiers on its covers.

But the thinking behind enlisting women into the army in the 1950s differed from the thinking behind the establishment of the first Women's Army in 1945.[27] Then, women were recruited to mobilize villagers towards the resistance movement, and were sent to the battlefield simply for mobilization work. But in the 1950s, the fact that women soldiers became regular cover-girls for the government's *Myawadi*, published by the Psychological War Department of the army, suggests that women, though still recruited to mobilize the public, were now achieving this openly through public media. The year 1956 saw the beginning of the split in the AFPFL, and each faction needed to win female votes. *Myawadi* magazine's use of women soldiers on its covers suggests that the government wanted to portray itself as a champion of women, promoting women's roles in society.

Also, women were trained, although in smaller numbers, in medicine, engineering and law. One cartoon at the time depicted a man on his knees begging his soldier girlfriend to give him her army rum ration; another showed a girl telling her boyfriend that she had decided not to run away with him since she had already applied to join the army.[28] Typing and accountancy schools ran women-only sessions. English training schools and matriculation tutors also had special classes for women alone. From 1948 to 1962, Burmese society saw not only women soldiers, doctors, barristers and engineers, but also women communist leaders and dacoits. The AFPFL government put a 20,000-kyat bounty on a communist woman, Daw Rakhine, aka Daw Hla, in 1960.[29] Tiger Khin Sein and three

women accomplices kidnapped people outside Rangoon and the news attracted the nation's attention.

But it must be questioned whether the emphasis on liberated women – whether soldiers, doctors, lawyers, communists or dacoits, each had taken an independent path – did not in fact still leave Burmese women, as a whole, closely tied to their domestic chores. First, women's traditional duties were repeatedly emphasized in public discussion, and the point endlessly repeated that homemaking skills were essential to make a woman a good housewife and mother. Lessons on crochet and knitting aimed to teach women how to use their spare time efficiently. Women and their work – either paid or unpaid – became more visible in both the physical and the literary landscape. Women as housewives and as breadwinners became common representations in modern Burma. Figure 3.1, a cartoon by Bagalay, depicts a modern woman struggling to juggle many tasks. But the artist's attitude towards this modern woman was cynical rather than complimentary. His message could be interpreted as men feeling that they were threatened by women.

In relation to the contemporary landscape of women's employment, no longitudinal study exists on the relation between education attainment and ability to secure jobs, and I combined two sets of data to find a correlation between education and jobs. Let's take the cohort born between 1978 and 1982. There are more females with university education than males (15.8 per cent vs 11.8 per cent), but there are more males than females with upper and lower secondary education. However, the labour force for this cohort includes only 59.9 per cent of females, against 87.6 per cent of males.

In the context of Burma's economy, where there are few skill-based industries, manual labour that requires a low level of education is easier to find than

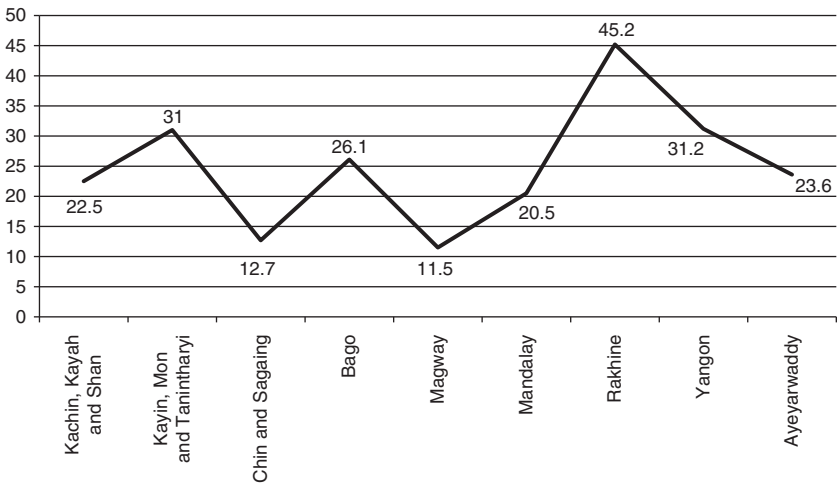

Chart 3.9 Percentage difference between male and female labour participation in nine different regions in 2007

Source: Labour and participation rate, Table 2.16, UNFPA, 2009, p. 39.

Figure 3.1 'Women are marching towards male territory, as an officer clerk, a major, a footballer, and we now have to think [whether we should change the popular saying to] "danger lies in child labour for men and manning a raft for women"'.

Source: *Bamakhit*, 26 July 1955, p. 4.

professions that demand university education. Women with university degrees were not able to compete against men with lower and upper secondary-level education in terms of job attainment. As Charts 3.3, 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7 suggest, in terms of educational attainment, there is a wider gap between women than between men. These charts suggest that females are more likely to leave school after primary-level education, whereas males are more likely to complete upper secondary. Also, there are more females than males, suggesting that there is a bigger gap in education among females than males. In other words, compared to their male cohorts, women are either highly educated or highly illiterate. These

tables suggest that the few elite women have been able to silence the majority of disadvantaged women and the views of highly educated women regarding their contemporaries in Burma would be less likely to be challenged by their female counterparts, since there is greater educational disparity among women than among men.

Comprehensive socio-economic surveys covering many villages and towns to compare the differences between men's and women's wages and salaries are a rare entity in post-1962 Burma. Perhaps the only such survey available to compare men and women's wages is the one conducted by Burmese social scientists in 1953. Data were collected in 252 towns to measure the differences between men's and women's salaries in different work sectors (see Table 3.1).

The findings from this survey are staggering. Men were consistently paid higher than women across all sectors except in soap factories, including female-dominated sectors such as cheroots factories and ginning and spinning mills. Men were paid 27.9 per cent to 53.2 per cent higher than women, and these figures alone gravely challenged the notion of women enjoying equal status as men in Burmese society. Table 3.2 shows the percentage of women working in different sectors between 1988 and 1996.

Table 3.2 could be compared against the following Chart 3.10, which describes the pattern of female and male employment in different sectors in both rural and

Table 3.1 Percentage difference between men's and women's wages.

Industries	*Monthly salary (in Kyats)*		*% difference*
	Men	*Women*	
Rice mills	93.97	67.76	27.9
Wheat mills	115.03	57.03	50.4
Cheroots factories	119	58.07	51.2
Oil presses	107.18	58.60	45.3
Ginning and spinning mills	106.67	54	49.4
Hosiery factories	127.29	79.32	37.7
Timber mills	92.51	46.41	49.8
Soap factories	50.13	64.30	(28.3)

Table 3.2 Proportion of female employment by type of ownership (1988–96).

Ownership	*1988*	*1990*	*1992*	*1994*	*1996*
State	28.74	31.78	31.76	31.76	38.04
Co-operative	30.61	31.66	33.29	27.93	39.85
Joint venture	–	24.33	55.35	23.88	18.74
Private	31.81	29.11	26.57	27.86	27.64
Self-employed and casual	32.06	33.26	33.43	34.48	36.76

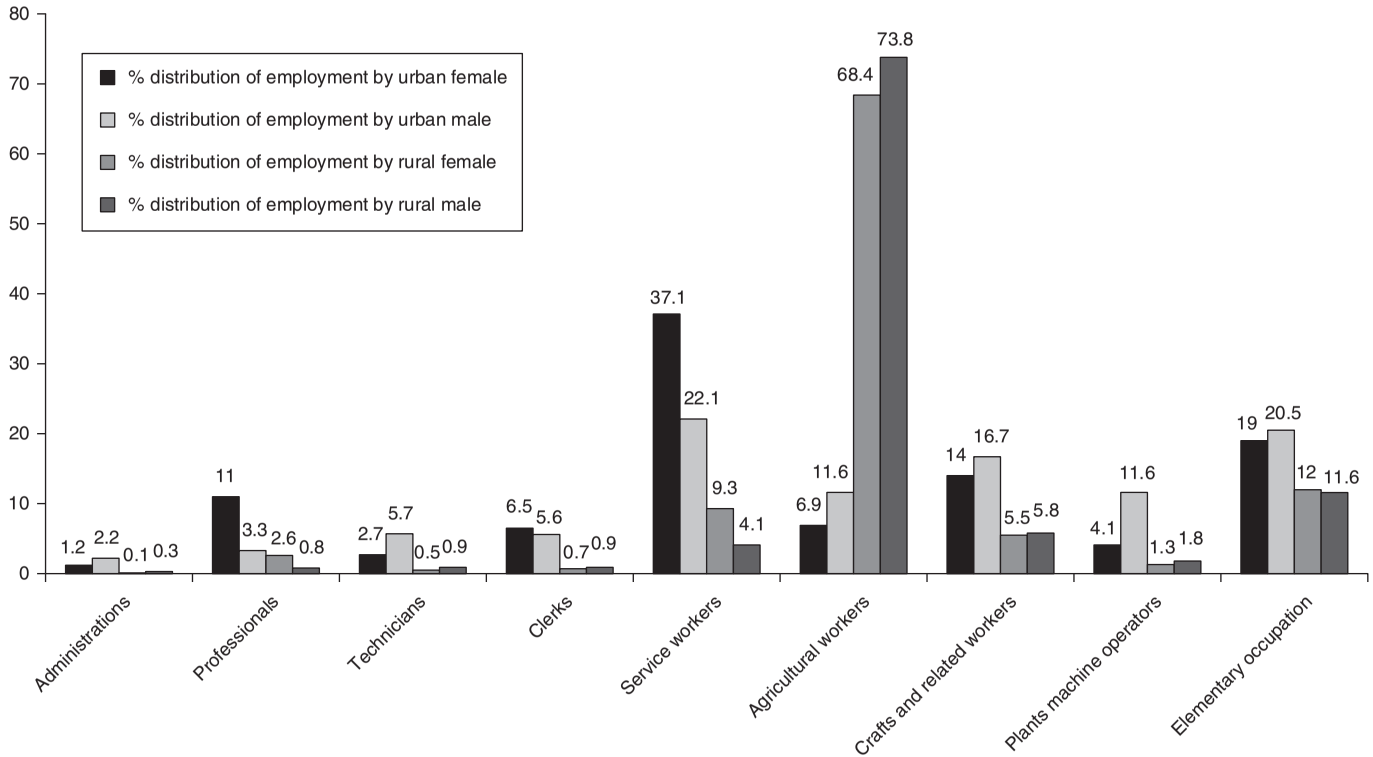

Chart 3.10 Female and male employment pattern in different sectors in 2007.

Source: UNFPA, 2009. The original table includes employment in 'unclassified sector'. For ease of comparison, this category has been omitted.

urban areas. From Chart 3.10, one can conclude that the agricultural sector provides the largest number of employment for rural males and females, whereas the service sector provides most jobs for urban females. There are not many jobs outside the agricultural sector other than in the service sector and in elementary occupation, i.e. unclassified manual work. The number of female professionals is higher than that of males, and this reflects the rising number of females with university-level education (as shown in Chart 3.7). Except in the professionals, clerk and service worker roles, males exceed females across all sectors. This data set is supported by another data source from the Ministry of Labour and UNFPA (Table 3.3) showing the difference between men's and women's labour for two age groups: those between 15 and 19 and those between 20 and 24.

Of the six South East Asian countries, Myanmar (Burma) has the highest percentage of youth aged between 15 and 19 in the labour force. For youth aged between 20 and 24, Burmese females have the second lowest labour force participation. Although there is only 1.8 per cent difference between male and female labour force participation among Burmese youth aged between 15 and 19, the difference is much higher, at 27.7 per cent, among the 20–24 age group. These numbers indicate that younger girls' opportunities in the workforce are more equal to those of younger boys, whereas the older girls are more discriminated against than boys in the labour force. The unemployment numbers and wage discrimination in different sectors (see Table 3.1) confirm that it has been easier for men to find jobs than for women – especially men over 20. But in terms of the labour force participation rate for the entire population, the difference between male and female participation rates is about 30 per cent. Chart 3.11 traces the change in the rate of labour force participation between men and women from 1990–91 to 2004–05.

This chart indicates that during the recent past, between 1990 and 2005, females have been outnumbered by males in labour force participation. Travellers' conclusions that Burmese women were powerful since they were seen out and about trading are challenged by these data sets on employment, and a factually correct conclusion should be that women do not fare as well as men in seeking and securing jobs in contemporary Burma.

Table 3.3 Percentage distribution of youth in labour force for neighbouring countries.

Country	*Age (15–19)*			*Age (20–24)*		
	Male	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Malaysia	30.1	20.7	25.5	85.7	62.9	74.6
Myanmar	54.4	52.6	53.5	87.6	59.9	73.8
Philippines	46.9	28	37.6	80.8	57.2	69.2
Singapore	14.8	15.4	15.1	72.8	77.9	75.3
Thailand	33.5	19.8	26.7	77.5	64.4	71
Vietnam	46.4	59.3	52.8	91.2	84.4	87.8

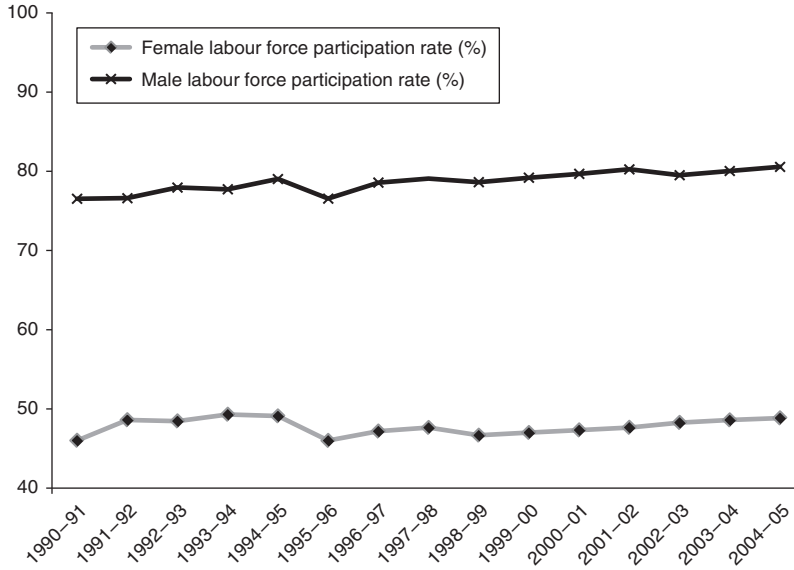

Chart 3.11 Percentage of male and female labour force participation in Burma from 1990 to 2005.

Source: Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Labour, Department of Labour & UNFPA, *Handbook on Human Resources Development Indicators*, 2006, p.23.

General statistics on the educational levels of girls, however, do not reflect the geographical differences. Girls from the urban centres are more likely to be enrolled in higher-level education, whereas those from the suburban and countryside are likely to leave school after middle or, sometimes, primary level. One of the reports on girls' access to education and health in poor areas such as Dawbon, located on the outskirts of Rangoon, said: 'in times of economic difficulties in Dawpon it is the girl children who are removed from school either to take care of siblings or to hope their mothers in the workplace'.[30]

Where did all the women go?

Women dominate the health-care and teaching sectors, at 68.13 per cent in the health sector and 65.25 per cent in the education sector according to 1996–97 data.[31] Daw Saw Sa was the first Burmese woman doctor to get an FRCS from London in 1912,[32] Daw Mya Sein was the first Burmese woman to get a Diploma in Education from Oxford University,[33] and Daw Pwa Hmee passed the Barrister at Law examination in England in 1825.[34] Table 3.4 summarises the percentages of female workers in the health-care sector.

There are no male midwives in Burma and only 2 per cent of nurses are male. In the 1990s, there was a ratio of almost 1:1 between male and female doctors,

Table 3.4 Percentage of female professionals in health-care sector in the 1990s.

Category of health worker	*Total*	*Female*	
		Number	*%*
Midwives	8,145	8,145	100
Nurses	5,442	5,342	98
Lady health visitors	1,509	1,509	100
Health assistants	1,224	117	9.6
Dental surgeons	279	64	23
Doctors	4,421	2,200	49.8
Medical technologist	194	111	57
Pharmacists	134	70	52
Physiotherapists	121	48	40
Radiographers	104	40	38.5

Source: Department of Health, 1994, as cited in Ni NiMyint, p. 30.

and the medical profession seems to be the most gender-equal. But these numbers could be misleading, since until 2012, more men than women were admitted to medical colleges. The ratio was reported as 3:2, and only in 2012 did it reach 1:1. If all graduates from the medical school enter the workforce, the ratio of working doctors should be three men to two women; the 1:1 ratio reported suggests that more male doctors seek jobs outside the medical profession, in the government sector, and yet the government continues to reward men by admitting more of them to medical college. Female high-school graduates had to score higher than males to compete for fewer spots at medical colleges. Only in 2012 was this serious discrepancy rectified.[35]

Another sector where women dominate, but only below headteacher level, is education. Table 3.5 summarizes numbers of female teachers at primary, middle and high levels, and in headteacher positions.

Men do not aspire to become teachers or work in other low-paid jobs, leaving them to women. Therefore the reason why women dominate in the teaching sector is precisely because women are unable to compete against men in well-paid jobs, but have to pick up what is left behind by men. According to Table 3.5, even though female teachers have made up more than 70 per cent of teachers at all three levels after 1990, they make up less than 50 per cent of those in headmaster positions. This clearly shows that even in female-dominated sectors such as education, women are not allowed to rise higher than men, and continue to serve under men.

Until August 2012, the only female minister had been Mrs. Ba Maung Chain, Minister for the Karen State in the 1950s. The new government appointed Dr. Myat Myat Ohn Khin, who became the first female minister with a ministry to run – the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.[36] A medical doctor by training, she represents the most powerful and highly educated elite group – women health-care workers, especially doctors, with women

Table 3.5 Percentage of female students and teachers by level of education (1981–1997).

Academic year	*Primary*		*Middle*		*High*	
	Female teacher %	*Female headteacher %*	*Female teacher %*	*Female headteacher %*	*Female teacher %*	*Female headteacher %*
1981–82	54.46	n/a	57.8	n/a	68.84	n/a
1982–83	56.05	n/a	58.23	n/a	68.86	n/a
1983–84	57.43	28.9	60.82	37.6	70.07	30.3
1984–85	57.94	30.2	64.65	37.8	71.29	33.5
1985–86	60.38	33.7	65.33	37.4	69.55	32.9
1986–87	61.75	36.3	67.25	37.6	69.41	35.2
1987–88	63.95	37.1	68.21	38	69.3	36.8
1988–89	64.74	37.7	68.97	37.4	69.59	36.2
1989–90	63.75	37.6	69.37	38.2	69.33	36.1
1990–91	64.52	38.9	69.1	37.9	69.94	38.4
1991–92	65.58	40	70.83	38.3	71.4	39
1992–93	66.46	41.1	71.42	38.1	70.39	40.6
1993–94	67.82	42.9	72.78	38.5	71.53	41.1
1994–95	68.71	44.7	73.32	40.9	71.92	41.9
1995–96	70.08	44.5	74.57	41.7	71.73	48.7
1996–97	72.05	48.1	74.67	42.1	71.74	46.1

Source: Consolidated data using statistics by the Department of Basic Education as quoted in Ni Ni Myint, pp. 18–21.

representing 49.8 per cent of all doctors in the 1990s. Even though Burma now has one woman minister and eight women deputy ministers, women in senior management do not make up even 1 per cent. The percentage of women deputy directors is 0.53 and of directors 0.14 per cent.[37] And women are promoted within what is traditionally seen as women's territory – that is, care and social welfare. Daw Ni Ni Myint's explanation of the discrimination women faced in the employment sector was:

> Myanmar women had never been denied the right to work either by society, tradition, faith or law, nor deterred from entering any kind of workplace except those considered dangerous such as combat service in the armed forces and working in mines. On the other hand, women have carved considerable niches for themselves in education and health while dominating trade and commerce to a large extent.[38]

She suggested that women are inclined to work in the health and education sectors and there is no gender discrimination against women in all other sectors. She again denies the facts and implies that women, by their own choice, do not seek jobs in sectors other than health and education; she even ignores the long practised tradition of admitting more men to medical colleges. This denial of the facts and the obvious norm that women are not encouraged to work in

some professional sectors is symptomatic of Burmese history writing on the status of women. The next chapter discusses why, amidst many social and institutional barriers, Burma witnessed a rise in women warriors during the Second World War.

Notes

1 Khin Myo Chit, *Dagon Magazine*, 20, 1940, pp. 100–102.
2 J. S. Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, Rangoon: Burma Book Club, 1931, p. xv.
3 J. S. Furnivall, 'An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma', 1931, p. xv, quoted in Chie Ikeya, 'Gender, History and Modernity: Representing Women in Twentieth Century Colonial Burma', Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University, January 2006, p. 63.
4 Khin Myo Chit, *Dagon Magazine*, 20(239), 1940.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 103.
7 Ibid.
8 Khin Myo Chit, *Taing Yin Thu*, 1(13), 1947, pp. 23–24.
9 Saw Monyin, *ဗမာအမျိုးသမီး* [*Burmese Women*], Rangoon: Padauk Hlaing, 1976, pp. 204–207.
10 U Ba Htay, *Autobiography of U Ba Htay: Memoirs of a Myanmar I.C.S*, Rangoon: Today, 2002, p. 84.
11 Kumari were members of GCBA-affiliated organizations such as the Burmese Women Association (မြန်မာမိန်းမများအသင်း) founded in 1919. Some of the association's activities included work in support of the GCBA, campaigns in support of locally produced materials and campaigns to encourage Burmese women to marry Buddhist Burmese. Saw Monyin noted that there were nine Kumari associations in Rangoon alone in the early 1920s but they disappeared towards the end of the 1930s, as the popularity of GCBA waned. Saw Monyin, op. cit., pp. 16–68.
12 Fanny Forester, *Memoir of Sarah B. Judson (of the American Mission to Burma)*, London, Paternoster Row; 1851, pp. 58–59.
13 Ni Ni Myint, *The Status of Myanmar Women*, Myanmar: Universities Historical Research Centre, 2002, p. 9
14 BERB cited in 'Children and Women in Burma—A Situation Analysis Report' by UNICEF, Rangoon, cited in Seema Agarwal, *The Participation And Training of Burmese Women in Aid-funded Programmes in Burma*, Rangoon: Agency for International Development, 1986, p. 20.
15 Ibid.
16 The Family and Youth Survey (FAYS) was conducted by UNFPA in 2004, covering 15,560 households and 78,839 persons, and the findings were published in 2009. The findings from this survey provides a glimpse into migration patterns, marriage and family, media, labour force participation and reproductive health in 14 regions of the country, generally known as seven states and seven divisions, including Kachin, Sagaing, Chin, Rakhine, Ayeywarwady, Yangon, Mon, Tanintharyi, Kayin, Kayah, Shan, Bago, Magway and Mandalay. In the context of Burma, where few surveys are available regarding the political and/or socio-economic status of the population, findings from the FAYS survey help scholars or researchers gain insights into the most recent patterns and changes in many important social issues, from choice of information to migration.
17 Even though the school fees are minimal, parents have to buy textbooks and exercise books and contribute towards the maintenance of schools. In 2010, the average cost

for a primary student for one year was approximately 20,000 kyats, equivalent to about US$20.

18 See Chart 3.2 for more information. Those born between 1988 and 1992 were taken to compare their same cohort attending monastic schools in 1994. The average age of primary school entry is five in urban areas and six in suburban and rural areas generally.

19 Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 25.

20 Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 26.

21 Table 2.5, UNFPA, 2009, p. 25.

22 UNFPA, 2009.

23 UNFPA, 2009, p. 26.

24 UNFPA, 2009, p. 28.

25 Editorial, *Myawadi*, July 1954, pp. 2–3.

26 'Future Women Heroes', *Myawadi*, October 1956.

27 For details, see chapter 4.

28 *Myawadi*, January 1958.

29 *Hanthawaddy*, 4 March 1960.

30 McConville, Frances, *Final Report, a Rapid Participations Assessment of the Health Needs of Women and their Children in an Urban Poor Area of Myanmar*, 1995, p. 14 as quoted in Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 14.

31 Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 53.

32 Kyi Mar, 1975, p. 91; Mi Mi Khaing, 1984, p. 154, as quoted in Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 12.

33 Kyi Mar, 1975, p. 87; Mi Mi Khaing, 1984, pp. 154–156, as quoted in Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 12.

34 Kyi Mar, 1975, p. 75; Mi Mi Khaing, 1984, p. 155, as quoted in Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 12.

35 'ဆေးတက္ကသိုလ် တက်ရောက်ခွင့်အတွက် ယခင်က ကျောင်းသားဦးရေ အချိုးကို ပိုမိုခေါ်ယူခဲ့ရာမှ ယခုနှစ်တွင် ကျောင်းသားနှင့်ကျောင်းသူ အချိုးတန်းတူခေါ်ယူမည်'. 'In the past more males were admitted to Medical University; this year, there will be equal number of males and females.' *Weekly Eleven Media*, 29 July 2012, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14774:2012-07-29-08-49-57&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112. Accessed on 22 October 2012.

36 Nyein Nyein, '11 Minister Sworn In', *The Irrawaddy*, 7 September 2012, http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/13513. Accessed on 22 October 2012.

37 Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 49.

38 Ni Ni Myint, op. cit., p. 53.

4 The creation of the Burma Women's Army

Despite a measure of economic prosperity in Burma from the 1920s, which enabled some middle-class girls to access modern education, women still encountered many of the same impediments as their mothers and grandmothers. The literacy rate was high among Burmese women compared to their regional counterparts,[1] but social reformers such as Khin Myo Chit still wanted the provision of education that would serve women rather than their husbands.[2] Against this background, and against a cultural landscape that expected Burmese women to be obedient, feminine and subservient to their husband and family, the emergence of women soldiers stands out.

Two factors seemed to be involved in converting traditional women into combat fighters. The momentous events of the war and resistance against the Japanese drew women out of the cultural shadows, but at the same time, cultural changes had been taking place that lifted, if only partially, social controls on women, ultimately allowing women to enter a man's world. But the juxtaposition of women soldiers next to obedient daughters – one role whose paramount concern was the nation's independence and the other whose concerns revolved around marriage and motherhood – within the same economic and social structures is intriguing. There was a continuous struggle between the traditional conceptions of the woman's place and modern social and political agents that converted Burmese women into radical soldiers. This chapter argues that it was the events surrounding the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation, rather than social and cultural agents such as modern education and modernity, that changed the course of the women's movement in Burma, making possible the emergence of women soldiers against all cultural odds. The evidence suggests that those women who became soldiers were dragged outside their traditional territory by men, and that they merely acted in roles created by the male leaders of the independence movement. Women soldiers worked under the instructions given by male leaders and not on their own initiative. It was often males who dictated the course of the women's movement, and therefore women inevitably failed to assume key roles in the national independence movement.

The dawn of the woman fighters

The East Asia Youth League, Burma branch, the first organization to mobilize Burmese youth socially and politically, was founded on 28 June 1942 to

train Burmese youth to support Japan and achieve a Japanese victory in East Asia. Being the only official youth group in the country during the Occupation, the League was attractive to many young people, who had found themselves without education and employment. The League also emerged during a power vacuum, created when the older generation of politicians disappeared with the retreating British, many moving with the government in exile to Simla.[3] The new generation of leaders, such as Aung San, came centre stage, and this further inspired the young. With a patron as the head of the army and ministers in the cabinet, the East Asia Youth League could work underground with a considerable measure of protection from Japanese harassment. A communist leader, Soe, was a further link between the underground movement and the Japanese-linked Burmese leadership. With the support of Aung San, Than Tun and Soe, the East Asia Youth League became the recruitment centre for the resistance movement by instilling political ideologies and providing military training.

The League promised to provide intellectual, moral, social and business training to young Burmese so that they would become a major force in the country and support Japan.[4] For young women who belonged to the League, patriotic spirit took precedence over feminist values. For them, making beautiful homes became less important than sharing national duties alongside men. They tended to victims after air raids, organized fund-raising activities and travelled the country for the Burma Army, encouraging men to join.[5] At the end of 1944, the League had more than 70,000 recorded members, about half of whom were women.[6] It was an extraordinary achievement to recruit such a large number during this period, which was marked by chaos and lawlessness. This youth league, even though it was not founded as a resistance organization, became the backbone of the resistance movement.

The mobilization of youth against Japan through the East Asia League was led by Soe, who advocated an alliance of Burma, Britain and America to fight against the Japanese.[7] Even though his vision was pushed aside when Aung San and Mya at first backed Japan, his views regained prominence when Burma's leaders realized that Japan had failed to deliver on its promises. Under the banner of the Communist Party of Burma, Soe continued his resistance work against Japan, recruiting new members and providing ideological training to local youth. The unsuspecting Japanese did not know that Soe was also targeting the East Asia Youth League members and conducting training sessions in the houses of members. Since the Communist Party was banned by the Japanese, Soe had to be on the move constantly, and he used the delta as the hub of his activities. Many young women were taught how to carry out clandestine operations to avoid being caught by the military police. Young women from the League exchanged books and pamphlets distributed by Communist Party members.[8] The League became a safe meeting place for young members who, under the disguise of volunteer activities, underwent a political transformation, studying Leninist–Marxist literature from underground communist members and from Thakins.

Frictions from within

In her *Three Years Under the Japs*, Khin Myo Chit wrote that the wives of civil servants, who were part of the Dobama Sinyetha Group (or We Poor Burman Group) led by the wife of the president, Ba Maw, during the Occupation, disapproved of women belonging to the East Asia Youth League,[9] possibly because they feared that social work or public service would become a stepping stone for young women to enter wider politics. Women in the Dobama Sinyetha Group were more concerned with their looks and this prompted Daw Khin Myo Chit to write: 'Every time I felt so stifled by the stinking atmosphere of painted faces, waved heads and gaudy plumage that I yearned to jump out the nearest window'.[10] She called herself 'a social misfit' since she failed to get on with other group members. Eventually she quit Dobama Sinyetha and joined the East Asia Youth League.

But established social controls continued to act as a brake on the advancement of women, which might explain why, even though women joined the resistance movement in their tens of thousands under the leadership of the East Asia Youth League, women failed to emerge as a significant element in the Burma Army. There was friction between writers and the older generation of women, such as those from Dobama Sinyetha Asiayone. While the former wanted to push young women away from the protection of their parents and families, the latter wanted to bind them to traditional roles and customs. The latter were concerned for the safety of young women, since they saw them being raped and murdered by the Japanese as well as Kuomintang soldiers.[11] In some cases, parents married their daughters to relatives or close friends in the hope that their marital status would protect them. While writers and Thakins attempted to draw women away from social controls, some girls were left powerless as they were robbed of their freedom.

Some women from the generation of Khin Myo Chit decided to defy those social restrictions, and did so under the banner of the East Asia Youth League. Khin Myo Chit commented that 'the East Asiatic Youth league has in fact turned many a drawing-room favourite into an ardent social worker'.[12] Hatred towards Japan and patriotic literature converted many well-behaved women into socially and politically aware citizens, who were ready to take risks and step into more masculine roles. Powdered faces were ready to be sunburnt and femininity was of little importance when sacrifices needed to be made for Burma's future.

The Japanese years also produced social change through economic necessity. Many young people were forced to become breadwinners when their fathers suddenly found themselves unemployed. During what was commonly known as *Khit Pyat* ခေတ်ပျက် or 'the devastated era', making a livelihood became difficult for many. One author wrote in the *Deedok* journal that 'young women, who were educated at missionary schools, [and] did not work but lived on their parents' earnings, found themselves destitute during the Occupation.'[13] The women themselves, as well as their parents, were forced to accept that women could be breadwinners or leaders in the community, and thereby find new

identities outside the confines of their homes. The East Asia Youth League welcomed these girls.

But the women failed to emerge as strong stakeholders at the end of the resistance. The Women's Army failed to promote female social and political mobility. In explaining the inequality between men and women during revolutions, Mary Ann Tetreault has argued:

> When [..] men make revolutions they may mobilize women as auxiliaries, but such women do not have a distinct political identity in their own right and thus hold little claim on the new order for status, power or justice.[14]

Her comment explains why the very first women's army of Burma collapsed right after the Second World War and why women soldiers did not have ambitions to claim and sustain their newly found roles in the army. Nor did they demand political roles in the parties they re-joined, such as the Communist Party. Lack of 'a distinct political identity in their own right' was key to understanding why women did not lead political movements or rise in the political parties despite being willing to sacrifice their lives and careers for the political cause. Men did not entrust them with crucial political responsibilities in the parties; nor did women carve out their political identities independent of men. They abided by the official (and male) narrative that women were not traditionally part of politics, and politics was indeed dangerous for women. They could show their patriotism by partaking in *Naing Gan a Yay* နိုင်ငံ့အရေး or causes for the country, generally understood in the Burmese context as social services, be they in health, welfare or education, rather than participating in politics. Such an attitude was supported by claims from women such as Daw Khin Hla, president of the Women's Association, who urged women to stay away from politics.[15]

The president of the East Asia Youth League, U Ba Gyan, appointed just one woman among the eleven executive members. At the same time, women were recruited for underground work, and the volunteer group set up by Daw Khin Ma Ma Maw – wife of Dr. Ba Maw – which was founded on 12 January 1943 mobilized young women to work in towns and cities, from cleaning streets to caring for patients in hospital. Rangoon found itself deserted, dirty and dangerous when many of its resident Indians fled to India.[16] A set of guidelines, for example 'to clear the rubbish, to dig hideouts, to protect citizens from bandits and dacoits, to rescue the injured in bombings, to signal when to come out from hideouts, to repair wells and ponds', was included in the official song for men in Khin Ma Ma Maw's volunteer group. But for women the guidelines were changed: 'to exercise everyday, to go to bed early and rise early, to shower early, and to practise personal hygiene to be able to live long'.[17] Just as events unfolded to draw women towards freedom outside the home, writers were not prepared to see women neglecting their traditional duty – preserving their beauty. Instead, they reminded women of the importance of keeping fit and beautiful. The concept of

women as powerful elements in the nation's struggle failed to capture the imagination of most Burmese writers and influential elites.

While male members of the Volunteer Group were entrusted with important duties in rebuilding the city and helping residents to resettle, woman members were reminded to take care of their health and beauty. When the Burma Independence Army marched into the country from Thailand in late 1941, many young men volunteered to join. But young women, especially if they were rich and beautiful, found themselves being married to older men either from their extended family or from among their family's acquaintances for fear that they might be raped by the advancing Japanese troops. The need to promote women's roles during this period was undermined by the responsibility of families and society to protect women, a legitimate concern shared by traditionalists and many parents. Amid these paradoxes, some Burmese women became soldiers, and after the army they joined was disbanded, some remained to fight under the banner of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB).

The resistance movement was led by communist leaders, some of whom accepted ministerial positions in the Japanese government headed by Dr. Ba Maw, while others worked underground. Though nationalist leaders attempted to mobilize young men into the resistance movement without raising suspicion from the Japanese, there were difficulties when the Japanese military police, or *Kempeitei*, placed greater restrictions on the movements of the Thakins. Well-known leaders from different towns were watched carefully, and some were interrogated and tortured by the *Kempeitei*.[18] Skirmishes broke out between Japanese and Burmese soldiers, making the Japanese more suspicious of the Burmese. Distrust towards the Burmese increased when the allies broadcast news and propaganda through *Le Nat Thar*, or Gospel of Wind, pamphlets and radio from India in early 1944.[19] Japan accused active Thakins of instigating unrest among the general population. According to the *History of Dobama Asiayone*, the number of Thakins arrested reached a peak in 1944: indeed, 185 were killed.[20]

The arrest, torture and killing of Thakins and resistance leaders by the Japanese drove the movement into a cul-de-sac, and leaders had to find means to sustain the movement's momentum. One of those means was to recruit women into the movement, using them as messengers and recruiting officers. Early 1944 saw women Youth League members taking on male jobs and responsibilities in the underground movement. But when the Japanese became suspicious of the Youth League, which had been providing a safe haven for underground activities for nearly three years, the resistance leaders had to explore other avenues which could use women. They decided to establish a women's division in the Burma Army.

In October 1944, one of the female leaders in the Youth League, Ma Saw Mya, carried a letter in a cheroot from the underground communist leader Thakin Soe, who was hiding in Pyapon in the delta, to the then army commander-in-chief Aung San in Rangoon. In that historic letter, Soe asked Aung San to establish a Women's Army, to provide greater protection for women in the resistance movement than was being provided by the Youth League.[21] Thus Burma's first

Women's Army was formed for pragmatic reasons. The development was not ideological, and that decided its fate. The formation of the Women's Army was driven principally by hatred and patriotism, and pushed through for pragmatic reasons. It was not built on an ideological conviction that women too should build the nation.

The beginning of the Women's Army

The Historical Commission appointed by the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in the early 1970s argued that the leaders of the Burma Army had decided to establish a women's wing in the closing stages of the Japanese Occupation.[22] Burmese resistance towards the Japanese, involving the communists led by Soe, members of the *Dobama Asiayone* (or We Burman Association), *Sinyethar* (or the Poor Man Party) led by Ba Maw and the Burma Army as an above-ground legal force, was moving towards open revolt. On 27 February 1945, the communists issued a pamphlet entitled 'It Is Time to Revolt', which was distributed among party members and soldiers. It outlined the rationale behind what the leaders termed 'people's war', but also acknowledged that there was a difficult tactical issue – whether to start the resistance simultaneously throughout the country or in pockets. The communists argued that with the help of other parties, the army and the masses, a guerrilla war would incite the people to revolt against Japan.[23]

This pamphlet also argued that the revolution was to be organized around popular parties that enjoyed wide membership around the country, including remote villages. One popular writer, Maung Htin, remembered his fear for the safety of his relatives: 'My uncles, my younger brother and my cousins were very much involved in the political movements of the local Dobama Asiayone and the East Asiatic Youth League surrounded by forces acting counter to the national causes.'[24] But the biggest fear of the Burma Army leaders was that if the Japanese came to learn of their plans to turn against them, the Japanese would strike first and crush the planned uprising.[25] As a consequence, the co-operation between the Burmese resistance leaders and the Allied forces would be thrown into disarray, and there would also be dire retribution on the part of the Japanese.

In early March 1945, while the army apparently acted to prevent an advance by Allied forces on Mandalay, civilian leaders such as Ba Maw and Nu, together with their families, retreated with the Japanese administration staff in order to convince the Japanese that they were not part of the resistance movement.[26] Than Htut and Thaw Kaung, two Burmese historians, wrote:

> When the army leaders made a final speech about resistance minutes before they left Rangoon in a ceremonial fashion, people lined up along the streets to give flowers and *Thebay* leaves, symbols of victory, and wished them luck. But did the public know that they were setting out to fight the Japanese, which Aung San referred to as 'the nearest enemy', not the British, as most might think[?][27]

Underground communist leaders also disappeared in secret, some going to rescue their colleagues imprisoned in different parts of Burma, some trying to escape retaliation by Japanese soldiers.[28] In that way, all senior leaders, communists, members of Dobama Sinyethar Asiayone – a merger between Dobama Asiayone and Ba Maw's Sinyethar or Poor Man party – and members of the People's Freedom Bloc, consisting of seven parties including Karen and Rakhine associations, disappeared discreetly from the suspicious eyes of the Japanese. This created a vacuum in mobilizing work. While the male leaders and propaganda agents might have recruited into the resistance movement from as early as 1942 and were now planning to rely on members in parties such as Dobama Asiayone, there were still areas, especially remote villages, where forces were going to be stationed but where many people were unaware of the resistance. In these areas, people who were less politically aware might support the Japanese troops. After all, villagers in some areas in upper Burma had cried when the British administration withdrew in 1942, moaning 'the government is gone'.[29]

While a new people's war was to be led by young leaders such as Aung San, old Thakins and members of the General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA) led by monks and the older generation were also to participate in the resistance. An extensive social and political network gradually built up by members of the GCBA and Dobama Asiayone since the 1920s was to be tapped by the new leaders of the resistance movement to win the people's war. The year 1945 therefore saw the creation of a united front formed by different parties to resist Japan. According to Thakin Tin Mya's book *Resistance Headquarters and 10 [Military] Divisions*, a total of 8,519 Burmese soldiers were thrown against more than 36,000 Japanese soldiers.[30] To fight against an enemy at least four times stronger than itself, the Burma Army needed support from all parts of the population, including women. After the resistance, Aung San wrote: 'we must also thank all sections of the people for all the help and co-operation they gave us in the execution of our patriotic tasks'.[31] But he also expressed his frustration that the resistance could have begun earlier if the army had not had to concern itself with the burdens it would place on ordinary people:

> [The situation for the masses] had been a very unenviable lot always exposed to the retaliation of the brutal Japs upon them for our sake, and it was this in fact which strayed our hand for so long, and without which factor in our consideration we would have taken the Japs to task long ago for their heinous crimes against humanity, against our nation.[32]

The army and resistance leaders however had to win the co-operation of ordinary individuals in remote areas of the country, who for the best part of their lives had had no interest in national politics. Leaders feared that a guerrilla war against Japan based upon the co-operation of villagers for logistical support and information as to the whereabouts of Japanese troops would fail in the absence of that co-operation. There were other strategically important considerations. Burma's

army must prove to the Allied troops that they were organized and had the capacity to win against Japan. Only then would they be respected by the Allies, especially the returning colonialist British. More importantly, they would then have an equal place at the negotiating table with the British.

Also, the army leaders were aware that they had to repair the tarnished image of the army, for members of the Burma Independence Army, or BIA, had robbed farmers and assaulted and mugged Indians and Chinese when they had entered Burma from Thailand in early 1942.[33] The army's reputation had also suffered when dacoits had disguised themselves as soldiers and robbed villages. Even though the Burma Army was often liked and trusted, as shown when thousands of people attended their sending-off, its influence was yet to reach the remote corners of the country, the places where the battles against the Japanese were likely to be fought. To stage a guerrilla war against Japan, the army must repair its image and secure the co-operation of villagers.[34]

The success of a people's war and the transition for the returning British, during which Burma's young leaders saw themselves as stakeholders in the new government, depended above all on the extent to which the army could win over these villagers. The army not only needed the villagers' moral support, it also needed their logistical support, and to achieve this, villagers needed to identify with the revolution. In other words, it was important for villagers to understand that they had a stake in the movement. This could be difficult in remote areas, where the outside world and the changes it had engendered had until then been little felt.

It appears that the communists were the most effective in bringing villagers into the resistance movement, since the communist leaders were known to be ideologically very strong and good public speakers. A popular local anecdote of that time was that even a Buddha statue would nod approval if a communist convinced it of something. After attending political training and reading inspiring Marxist–Leninist literature, communist-trained members of the resistance movement could stretch the villagers' imagination and promise that the resistance would bring about a golden age for the farmers and workers, a classic Burma Communist Party message repeated since its inception in early 1930. But many prominent communist leaders had disappeared, some travelling with the troops as political advisors,[35] and new propaganda agents were urgently required.

Aung San and other senior army leaders such as Bo Letya saw the potential for women to help win their war. Aung San and others believed that women could naturally pacify the potentially hostile villagers. These leaders believed that the contributions of women could be vital in securing the co-operation of the villagers, and they started making plans to enlist women into the army, although only two months before the resistance started. Subsequently, a women's army was established and seven women were deployed with the troops, mainly to mobilize villagers. However, it is not clear whether the army leaders saw women as the most effective agents to mobilize the villages, or whether the women were simply substitutes for men now engaged elsewhere. In other words, was the establishment of a Women's Army merely an impromptu arrangement?

Whatever the motivation of the male army leaders, the establishment of a women's army reflected the political awakening of young Burmese women throughout the nation. It also highlighted their shared experiences with their male counterparts in the independence cause, first in the Asia Youth League, and then in the Communist Party. One of these women told me: 'When the resistance movement began, we were ready to give everything, including our lives',[36] establishing that her commitment was on a par with that of her male colleagues. But even though the Women's Army reflected the political advances and sacrifices the women were prepared to make for their country, it remained an isolated event, disconnected from the rest of society. The Women's Army was in no way the result of deeper changes taking place within the Burmese social and cultural landscape, since attitudes towards women, and especially those who wanted to step outside traditional female roles, remained essentially unchanged, as discussed extensively in the previous chapter. This suggests, indeed, that the Women's Army was merely an impromptu arrangement in peculiar circumstances.

Burma Women's Army: a new career pathway or misadventure?

Like the Huks and the Viet Minh, both political and military organizations that included and actively recruited women,[37] Burma's communist leaders realized the importance of women to the success of the resistance movement. The idea to incorporate women into the national army was first conceived by Soe, who listed *Red Army and I*, a translation of an account given by a Chinese communist woman, as a must-read book for all members of the resistance movement.[38] Though never having travelled abroad, Soe, an avid reader, stayed abreast of the international revolutionary literature and closely followed the revolutionary models of Russia and China. In 1943 he attempted to travel to India, from where he intended to plan the resistance movement against Japan, in the same way as Lenin had planned the revolution from outside Russia.[39] But he failed to reach India because of the Japanese security measures: in addition, Thein Pe and other Thakins told Soe that it was necessary for him, with his fierce anti-fascist views, to stay behind inside Burma.[40]

Soe later had to escape to Deadaye, where the relatives of his former wife lived,[41] in order to evade the Japanese military police or *Kempeitei*. He had the 'luxury' of free time to think while evading the ruthless Japanese in the tributaries of the delta, and his political plans for the future of Burma seemed to have been hatched in the waterways of one of the most politically active regions of the country. He and his wife pretended to be a fishing couple who often went to Rangoon to sell their fish sauce and dried shrimps.[42] But he had an abundant supply of cash provided by Burma Independence Army officer Bo Yan Naing, who had robbed a bank in Sittwe for funds.[43] Soe seems to have used his share of the money, 50,000 kyats, for his underground activities, converting many young men and women into ardent supporters of the resistance movement.

Soe penned many highly charged revolutionary articles, many of which were translations of Chinese and Soviet Union Communist Party pamphlets and books. These were circulated among underground communist members and the Asia Youth League. As a political advisor to the resistance movement, he initiated such ideas as having members of the Asia Youth League and soldiers read a declaration of independence series, written in vernacular languages, which outlined the rationale for and future plans of the movement. He also conducted many political training sessions which future political and army leaders attended. One of his contemporaries, Thein Pe, remarked on the visionary: 'Soe, who indulged himself in books and ideologies[,] calculated the fall of Fascist countries and naively thought that things Lenin prophesied would become true immediately'.[44] Soe seems to have drawn up one blueprint after another for a future Burma. The establishment of a Women's Army was his brainchild. Soe was the ideological engine behind the movement, but his strategic plans did not always mesh with the political understandings and knowledge of most resistance leaders, probably because they did not fit into the political and cultural setting of Burma. Establishing a Women's Army was a clear example of this failing. Such a plan tested the tolerance of society towards the modern woman, and put a strain on social norms concerning women. In other words, Soe's plan to establish a Women's Army was premature for Burmese society, which was still not ready to embrace 'trousered women', even after three years of the Asia League's nurturing women to shoulder the same responsibilities as men, the increasingly common sight of women travelling unaccompanied by their siblings or parents and women learning martial arts and attending political training. The image of a beautiful young woman, with a modern hair-do, applying lipstick and wearing shorts failed to capture the imagination of many Burmese. The image was a prototype of a popular fashion often seen at beauty pageants from 1947 to 1958, fashion thought to be inspired by woman members of the Asia League.[45] Women in the Asia League started wearing uniforms, and the western-style short-sleeved blouse and long trousers enabled them to partake in sports and other activities normally only involving men. Small towns soon saw Asia League female members on bicycles and practising martial arts. Their fashion was so popular that beauty pageants after the Second World War and independence modified the Asia League uniform into a dress to be worn during the beauty contest, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. The Asia Youth League incorporated their modern education and exposure to the western world into their members' uniforms, in much the same way as they incorporated western ideologies and revolutionary training.

Even though many Burmese who grew up during the Japanese Occupation remembered the Youth League's uniforms, few thought of it as the dawn of a new women's movement. Similarly, Soe's noble plan for establishing a Women's Army was not appreciated by all: the uniform was perhaps seen as an attempt by the Youth League to encourage young women to feel at ease in male-dominated traditions such as politics and martial arts, but this was merely a cosmetic make-over to challenge the mind-set of traditional Burmese society, and it failed: after

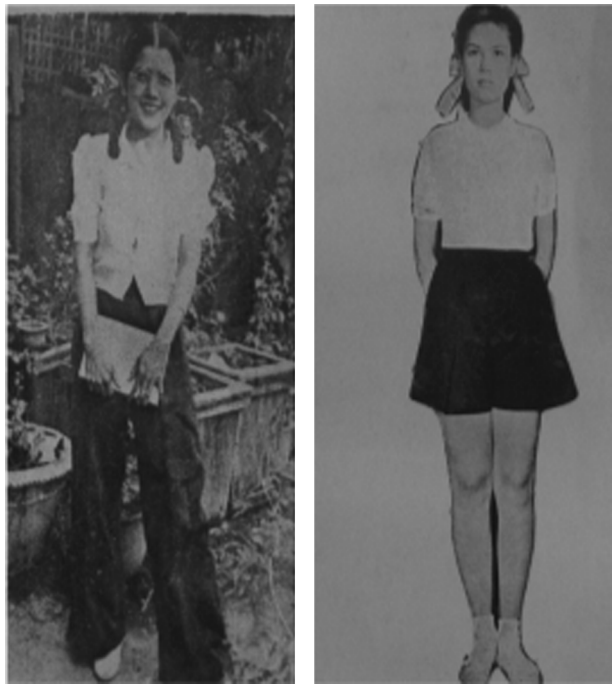

Figure 4.1 A female member of Asia Youth League and a beauty pageant contestant wearing a modified version of Asia Youth League's uniform.

Source: Shwe Kaing Thar, ဆင်ယင်ထုံးဖွဲ့မှု [Burmese Clothing and Dress], pp. 94–96

three years, the general public still did not accept women soldiers in uniform. Not only the women soldiers but also the Asia Youth League uniform disappeared, an important indication that politics and culture could not accommodate women in trousers. It was not until 1957 that women were again recruited into the army, but strictly in administrative roles.

The plan to establish the Women's Army was eagerly endorsed by Aung San, who then ordered Bo Letya, his second in command, to implement it. Another leader, Than Tun, was known to look to India and China for party models and ideologies: important here was the fact that in the Indochinese Communist Party, educated communist women had to prove that their commitment to the cause was no weaker than that of the less educated working-class women.[46] When Burma's Communist Party later split into red and white flag factions, some educated women joined Than Tun's white flags and committed themselves to guerrilla warfare, as will be discussed in the next chapter. But for the Burmese Women's Army, there does not seem to have been one single model which the leaders wished to emulate. Rather, a combination of pragmatic thinking and ideological inspiration from both neighbouring countries and the Soviet Union laid the

foundations for the first Women's Army of Burma. For example, Daw Saw Mya, a would-be lieutenant in the Women's Army, was asked to visit the female troops that formed part of the Indian National Army (INA) recruited among Indians in British Burma.[47]

Larger society, as well as the army itself, was not yet ready to welcome these women soldiers. When the seven women soldiers were stationed among male soldiers, they were ridiculed for the way in which they dressed. A woman wearing trousers became the subject of humiliation.[48] These women soldiers also faced verbal abuse even from the most senior officers.[49] The military uniforms worn by women soldiers accentuated the deep-seated but open opposition towards the enlistment of women into the army, and long trousers invited humiliation. But the original seven women soldiers, and a few others who followed them, kept this to themselves, never complaining to their superiors or to the wider public.[50] Burmese women soldiers shared the same fate as Filipino women warriors:

> Incorporating women into the military and political struggle waged by the Huks did not come easily to the male-dominated leadership of the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* (PKP) or the Communist Party of the Philippines. While the Party was formally committed to sexual equality, sexist and patriarchal attitudes often prevented women from assuming a larger role in the rebellion.[51]

The importance of the delta for women soldiers

Maung Htin, a popular writer, tells of a briefing session he attended during the Occupation, at which the liaison officer of the Japanese Military Propaganda Section 'stressed the importance of Burmese co-operation in the defence of their own country and put forward the military view that out in the districts co-operation was not at all that might be desired'.[52] This highlights the importance of the mobilizing work that women soldiers could undertake in rural Burma to ensure co-operation with the resistance.

More than one hundred young, single women, many of whom were members of the Asia Youth League, came to Rangoon from the delta and from upper Burma when the advertisement for the Women's Army appeared in newspapers in early 1945. Since 1943, the Asia Youth League had mobilized 70,000 young people and provided them with physical training in Burmese martial arts, or သိုင်း Thaing, as well as ideological training, and the Women's Army seemed a natural step for the active young women who made up more than half the members.[53] But only a seven-member platoon emerged. Two more women, who were travelling around the country with senior communists on propaganda missions, later joined the platoon, bringing the total to nine.

Of the nine, seven came from the delta and two from upper Burma. There seemed to be a major difference in nationalist awareness and knowledge about the resistance movement between those from Rangoon and the delta and those

from the small villages in upper Burma. On the eve of the armed resistance, youths in Rangoon and from the delta were eager to take matters into their own hands if their leaders did not declare war on Japan. Maung Htin recounted his experience: '. . . [his friend] suddenly burst upon me with the suggestion that if only "big people" in Rangoon gave the signal, the whole delta would rise up against all persecutors. He angrily demanded me to tell him what the dickens Bogyoke Aung San was doing'.[54] Aung San, by deploying women soldiers with the forces in upper Burma, not only prepared them for open war but also channelled the nationalist fervour of Rangoon and the delta into that more remote region to secure a nationwide political awakening.

When asked why no women from Rangoon were included in the final nine, Daw Khin Ohn Yin, one of the nine, replied that girls from Rangoon were more interested in fashion, and that combat fighting did not attract them.[55] Another possible reason was that the Rangoon middle class discouraged their daughters from joining the army, where there were no career prospects. In contrast, in the rural areas, especially in the delta, patriotism triumphed over career prospects. And fathers who were civil servants showed their patriotic spirit by encouraging their daughters to take part in the resistance movement.[56]

The anti-Japanese campaign carried out by Thakins and the communists was more effective in the delta, not least because avoiding Japanese repression was easier in the delta's vast spaces. Moreover, memories of the harsh conditions of the 1930s were much more vivid in the rural delta than in Rangoon, and this too encouraged resistance. And finally, education in the delta was in the vernacular, as opposed to the practice in the missionary schools that dominated education in Rangoon and Mandalay: in vernacular schools, students were more likely to be taught by nationalist teachers.[57]

Education as the route into the Women's Army

As the only Burmese institution that could threaten the Japanese, and then the returning British, the army had the capacity to transform these women from local, political activists into national leaders, as of course it did for many young men. The army could also transform them not simply into political figures but also into professional soldiers.[58]

During the five months following the announcement of the establishment of the Women's Army in February 1945, fewer than ten women underwent political and military training.[59] One of the first women soldiers, Ma Saw Mya, reported that preparations for the establishment of the Women's Army were made as early as November 1944, when a mini-platoon was formed. This comprised Ma Saw Mya as a lieutenant, with a second lieutenant and four administrative staff.[60] All were highly educated compared to their contemporaries, with one a college student and the rest high-school graduates and trainees at teacher training school. According to the Historical Commission of the BSPP, priority was given to those who had attended ideological training conducted by Thakin Soe and other communist leaders.[61] But although the Historical Commission and indeed interviews

with the still living women soldiers placed great emphasis on the importance of political training and commitment to the resistance, it is still clear that educational attainment was also important in their recruitment.[62]

But the fact that education was important in recruitment into the first Women's Army was not made explicit, possibly because Soe, who advanced the idea, was a communist leader whose ideology emphasized equality. While promoting social equality and claiming that the party supported landless farmers and the workers, to favour middle-class, educated women would open Soe and the party to the charge of hypocrisy. Pragmatism would have triumphed over ideology. This could also cause a rift among women in the resistance. The first women soldiers and the underground communist women in Burma did not share a common social background, as did the communist women in Vietnam and the Philippines, where most of the woman recruits came from 'peasant families, poorly educated and generally perceived as traditional and passive, [who] studied the tenets of Marxism, trained as soldiers and spies, and learned to use weapons'.[63] Unlike their contemporaries from Vietnam and the Philippines, the first women soldiers in Burma came from the most educated class of women, from middle-class families; their fathers worked as lawyers, teachers and traders. Of the first seven women soldiers, five came from the delta, a revolutionary hotspot and a region that had enjoyed great prosperity during the decades of the rice boom.[64] Daughters of white-collar fathers left their protected families and comfortable lifestyles to join the army, perhaps with the vision of serving the country alongside the much-loved male leaders of Burma.[65] Perhaps for the first time in the country's history, educated women – those who applied to join the army and those who remained to work underground in their home towns under the leadership of the Communist Party and Dobama Asiayone – found institutions that could represent their worldview and intellectual level.

Even though thousands of men, regardless of their background, were allowed to join the Burma Independence Army when it marched into Burma with the Japanese in 1942, only highly educated women were allowed a place in the army, reflecting the discriminatory attitude of Burmese leaders towards women and the double standards that the army applied against women. Images of female oil-field workers picketing the oil installations in 1938 and female paddy farmers addressing mass protests in the same year were replaced by schoolgirls and college women ready to march to the battlefield and fight alongside men. The resistance movement ushered in the first wave of women combat fighters, to be followed by guerrilla fighters in the post-independence era. The protests of the 1910s and 1920s under the leadership of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), involving boycotts of foreign-made goods and refusing to pay taxes, was substituted by direct confrontation and combat fighting, and just as women of strength and endurance were needed to withstand the hardship of battle and the difficult life of a solider, the educated woman, rather than farm girls and those from modest backgrounds, became the face of the movement. An institutional discriminatory policy was informally adopted to favour educated over less educated women. But the role of the less educated

women in the political movement was still important, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

The BSPP Historical Commission argued that recruitment into the Women's Army was determined by ideological maturity rather than educational achievement.[66] One can argue, however, that the women who attended political training in their home towns were carefully screened – they were women who had a modern education. They shared a similar cultural background. All the women soldiers I interviewed grew up reading the same novels, came from middle-class families and had parents who were secret or open supporters of Dobama Asiayone.[67] Even though both the BSPP records and the women soldiers I interviewed downplayed the importance of education, it is clear that only women with a good education were allowed to join the platoon formed in February 1945, essentially because the roles they would be required to play demanded it. This also suggests that the young, educated male leaders of the resistance movement led by Aung San sought similarly educated women to join the army, rather than opening recruitment of women to all classes. Making education a ticket into the male-dominated army later backfired, since most of these educated women later left to rejoin society and establish careers through their education, or to join the communists operating underground.

The life of a woman soldier

After the platoon of seven women was formed, Aung San issued an order formally recognizing the establishment of the Women's Army. In addition to being asked to undertake administrative duties at the army headquarters in Rangoon, these women were given firearms training.[68] The intention appeared to be that more women from the original pool of applicants would be added to the platoon when buildings to accommodate them had been found and uniforms provided for them. But such arrangements do not seem to have been a priority for the army, since no buildings were identified and no uniforms produced. Two weeks before the launch of the resistance, on 27 March,[69] only seven female soldiers were sent out with the troops. The remainder of the recruits were asked to return to their homes, and many resumed their underground resistance work.[70]

Joining the army could be seen as the highest ambition for a woman who wished to make a sacrifice for her country, since this was the ambition for men. Some parents wanted their daughters to marry army soldiers, as some parents had sought ICS officials for their daughters during colonial days.[71] But joining the army cost women fighters their personal freedom. Not only did they have to abandon their families and belongings to join, but they were also required to take another name: their given names were changed to common names, often chosen by their male leaders, and sometimes a female soldier could have up to three or four different names depending on the number of regions to which she was assigned. One woman soldier recounted that when her father came to meet her and her older sister, who were undergoing political and practical training in Rangoon, she had to avoid telling him that they were going away with the troops.[72]

One can conclude that the reward women soldiers took from joining the army was personal, and even their families were not allowed to share their experience until much later. In my interviews, former women soldiers explained that their experience in the army was kept secret to help protect them and the army from the Japanese. But there was another reason. According to the woman who could not tell her father that they would be sent into battle, the issue of women in the army was regarded as sensitive. She and another woman were sent from Rangoon to Pegu. The Commander of the Division, Colonel Kyaw Zaw, took them in his jeep but they had to wait in a small shop for darkness to fall before they could go into the army camp, for fear that they might be mistaken for prostitutes.[73] The reason why women soldiers did not receive a warm welcome from the army rank and file was probably because they were seen as troublemakers rather than a valuable addition to the resistance movement. Some army leaders might have felt that looking after these women might cost them time and extra work, and therefore did not appreciate their presence. Despite such negative attitudes, women soldiers still prepared themselves to face a tough life in the army. They even practised eating ကန်စွန်းရွက် (*kazun-ywat* or morning glory), a green vegetable commonly found in the fields, while undergoing training so that they could withstand any shortage of food.

These women were expected to be discreet about their educational background, and even when others learned of it, it did not earn them respect. The policy of the Communist Party and the army was that educated women were not to be favoured over their less educated sisters. Instead they should expect to undertake menial jobs such as cooking and collecting firewood and should perform theatrical dances and sing as part of recruiting campaigns, as did the rest of the female members.[74] The educated recruits were required to sympathize with and share the common experience of their working-class sisters. Reality often proved otherwise. The highly educated women were spared from doing menial tasks.

Ma Saw Mya argued that Aung San assigned two specific duties to women – combat fighting and winning over the masses. But second lieutenant Khin Kyi Kyi recalled that they were never asked to fight on the frontline, even though they were given firearms training in Rangoon before they were deployed.[75] Rather, they were asked to travel to villages near the army camps to explain why the army was fighting against the Japanese, and how important it was for the army to be able to receive support from the villages in terms of shelter and food and spying on the Japanese troops.[76] It might have been the vision of the most senior officers in the army, including Aung San, to assign women to the same duties as men, but not every officer shared this vision.

The seven women soldiers were deployed to three different army bases, and for three months they helped with administrative duties and publicity. All of them eventually returned to their normal lives after the army, although a few joined the communists for a few more years, until the mid-1950s. Perhaps the gender-specific tasks assigned to them killed their revolutionary spirit. But unlike the Vietnamese and Filipino women combat fighters, who were forced to

fill traditional roles such as cooking, washing and housekeeping,[77] the Burmese women deployed to the battlefield were restricted to administrative tasks, such as translating and disseminating news to the troops and mobilizing villagers.

This group of women, consisting of one college student, some who had matriculated and some trainee teachers, surprised villagers with their education and youth. Perhaps some villagers were persuaded to commit themselves to the resistance by these young, educated women from the cities rather than by the ideology. One woman soldier expressed that it was extremely difficult to convince the villagers to join the movement, since most of them had not seen the Japanese and did not know who they were. Also the literacy rate was very low in these villages – less than 5 per cent.[78]

Some of the women reached areas where no one had heard of the Japanese, let alone understood why the army had to rise against them. One of the women soldiers, Khin Kyi Kyi, tells how she and other women soldiers had to spend hours every day convincing the villagers that the uprising was necessary and that their support for the army was crucial for success, using language they could understand.[79] Elsewhere the women soldiers helped to repair the rural people's perception of soldiers, which had been damaged by their brutal treatment at the hands of the Japanese soldiers who had marched into Burma with the Burma Independence Army. The Burma Army wanted to repair its public image. Moreover, the Burma Army was now fighting against Japan, and was seeking assistance from the British. Thus it was important for the army and its allies to be accepted in rural areas, especially when they needed to hide combat equipment, such as wirelesses dropped by the Allied troops, or to provide food for the troops and intelligence on the enemy. Co-operation from the villagers was of paramount importance to the success of the resistance movement, and women soldiers played a significant role in securing it.

One woman soldier, Daw Khin Ohn Yin – together with historian Ba Shin, who later became a colonel – had to travel from village to village, briefing the inhabitants on the army's activities and on the Japanese threat. They gave lectures to villagers on the resistance movement, the duration of which depended upon the proximity of the troops. They also had to prepare food for the troops. Daw Khin Ohn recalled that they sought to help the villagers understand the nature of the war against Japan but reminded them of the need to continue the fight against the British if it turned out to be necessary.[80]

For villagers in remote parts of Burma, the concept of fighting against the Japanese, with whom their leaders had once been allied, required lengthy explanation; to talk about fighting against the returning British was even more difficult, since the villagers could not grasp what the old colonialists could do to Burma. This propaganda work required an unflinching belief in the resistance movement and its leaders and was entrusted to the women soldiers – and, more importantly, educated women soldiers who understood the movement and appreciated the leaders' determination to achieve independence. Only these woman soldiers and the educated historian Ba Shin were given this responsibility.

The decision of Aung San and Soe to assign intelligence and propaganda work to women suggests that the traditional role of women as messengers of news was appreciated. Even though male soldiers ridiculed women in trousers, the rural masses not only accepted the women soldiers as propaganda agents but were also won over by their speeches. But their ephemeral existence in the army reflected institutional discrimination and the wider political limitations imposed upon women. Even though the culture had made space for the acceptance of women soldiers, albeit in the role of messengers, these women did not enjoy political space. Moreover, the short duration of their existence as part of the army raises the question of whether they were merely substitutes for more senior male propaganda agents, who had gone into hiding for fear of the Japanese. In fact women were seen by the Japanese as being less capable than men and thus less of a threat, according to one of the women soldiers, Daw Saw Mya.[81] They could therefore be used effectively by the army for propaganda work.

In some areas, words were not enough to secure rations for the troops, and here women soldiers had to use jewellery seized from Japanese troops to trade commodities such as rice and meat with the villagers.[82] And besides mobilizing villagers into the resistance movement and helping with the administrative work of the battalion, women soldiers were also asked to boost the morale of the troops. Khin Kyi Kyi, a college student who turned soldier, was asked to translate the text 'What is Guerrilla Warfare' into Burmese, which was then circulated among the troops. She also translated other foreign revolutionary literature for the troops, and had to translate telegrams and wire messages.[83] In places where the communists and Dobama Asiayone leaders had little access or influence, the women soldiers proved to be of great importance in the army's propaganda war, and these women excelled at their jobs. These women soldiers were in fact repeating the traditional role assigned to their mothers and grandmothers during the boycott movement, during which they had pressed family members and the general public to renounce foreign-made goods and avoid paying taxes.[84]

Yet their achievements were not recognized within the army, in much the same way that the achievements of the earlier generation went unacknowledged. In 1931, leading women groups such as *Kumari*, *Myanma Hita Mein Ma A Thin* (or Women's Welfare Group) had put pressure on the Governor to allow a Burmese woman to attend a London conference. They argued that women's role in politics should be recognized and that there were many women just as competent as men who could attend. They also pointed out that the government should recognize and promote the rights of women rather than focusing on issues relating to ethnicity.[85] These leading women highlighted the obvious ignorance of the political elite towards the political potential of women.

From the beginning of the independence movement in the early twentieth century, led by the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), to the resistance uprising in 1945, women were not seen as a catalyst for political change but merely as a reserve group, whose commitment and contribution could simply assist success. The traditional role of women was to disseminate propaganda

and win over the masses, and this overshadowed their political advance: therefore women never reached the political elite. Politically active women were seen as good followers, not leaders. The personal secretary of U Nu, who was Prime Minister from 1948 to 1962,[86] left her job, complaining that male politicians made it difficult for her to carry out her duties.[87] The political elite was unhappy with the idea of a woman aide to the highest position in the state. These attitudes might also explain why the first Women's Army of Burma was so short-lived.

The Historical Commission of the BSPP reported that the women later dismissed from the army continued their revolutionary duties as 'unofficial' members.[88] These unofficial revolutionary members continued to work for the resistance, recruiting more young men for the army.[89] They also continued to show their loyalty to their mother organization, the Asia League, and in some areas in the delta and a few towns in upper Burma such as Katha, Sagaing, Mandalay and Monywa, they continued as communist cadres. They were each recruited by the Burma Communist Party and given training in anti-fascist and communist ideologies. These cadres then spread these beliefs to others, in a resistance strategy to instil anti-fascist sentiment through the population. They became champions of the grassroots, turning ordinary girls and women into patriotic citizens, ready to sacrifice their lives for the country.

The BSPP Historical Commission commented: 'once one was recruited [through the female cadres] and committed to the cause of the resistance, one did not hesitate to sacrifice one's life and adopted the life of a revolutionary'.[90] The commission attempted to emphasize the importance and success of the female cadres' work, and their conclusion remains the only official recognition of this movement. The commission also argued that the newly formed Women's Army was of more political than military importance,[91] without explaining whether this meant that these female soldiers regarded serving in the army as a form of political participation rather than the start of a military career. The BSPP's claim could also be interpreted as saying that the women did not have as strong an ambition to fight as men – symptomatic of a chauvinism that saw the army as the central, male, institution in Burma's future. Such a claim reflected the nationalist historians' ideological standpoint.

By claiming that these women soldiers were political, the commission shifted the explanation for the early disbanding of the platoon onto the women. They did not aspire to be fighting warriors and hence the disbandment of the Women's Army just three months after its inception was a foreseeable outcome. Two crucial factors – the failure of the leaders to maintain and promote the platoon in the army, and the latent hostility towards these women by both civilians and the male soldiers[92] – were ignored by the BSPP. The personal interviews indicate that the Women's Army was established to win the support of the masses, with the result that by the time the Japanese in Burma were defeated, in May 1945, the significance of the women soldiers had seriously diminished. These women had done their 'jobs' and were no longer required.

These women saw the army and the larger political space as hostile to them, and most of them came to understand, after the war, that they must leave politics

altogether.[93] This could explain why the Asia League was the last organization in modern Burma to involve the mass participation of women. Neither the women soldiers nor the political leaders saw the army as a place where women could carve out careers and be promoted alongside men.

The vision of the first Women's Army crumbled, partly because the army had to launch an earlier-than-expected attack on the Japanese but mainly because the concept was supported by only a few top leaders, while the rank and file thought it unimportant or unnecessary. The failure to convince the male-dominated army to accept the participation of women led to a division between what the BSPP saw as 'official' and 'unofficial' members of the resistance, and a strengthening of the gender discrimination within Burma's politics. Some unofficial revolutionary members later joined the underground guerrillas, a step that led them to become almost social outcasts. Questions of who remained fighting a guerrilla war, and why, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Notes

1 In one comparison, Burmese women clearly out-performed their Bengali sisters in literacy, by five times. For more details, see Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women*, 2nd edition, London: Zed Books, 1984, p. 115.
2 Khin Myo Chit, *Dagon Magazine*, 20, 1940, p. 211.
3 Win Tint Tun, *အမှောင်ကြားကဗမာပြည်၊ အနီးခေတ်မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံရေးသမိုင်း ၁၉၄၈ – ၂၀၀၀* [*Burma in Darkness: A Short History of Contemporary Burmese Politics* (1948–2000)], Thailand: DPNS, 2006, p. 21.
4 Burma Socialist Programme Party *မြန်မာအမျိုးသမီးနိုင်ငံရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု*, [*Burmese Women Political Movement*], Rangoon, 1975, p. 139.
5 Ibid., p. 143.
6 Bagan U Bajan. 'Asia Youth League', in *Resistance Movement Silver Anniversary Journal*, Rangoon: Thirimingala Publishing House, 1970, p. 7, as quoted in Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 144.
7 Ibid., p. 23.
8 Interviews with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, July 2007, Rangoon.
9 Thin Kha, *ကွန်မြူနစ်မ*, [*Miss Communist*], Rangoon: Lat Yone, 1948.
10 Khin Myo Chit, op. cit.
11 Khin Swe Oo, စစ်ကိုင်းသမီးဒိုင်ယာရီ, [*Diary of Sagaing's Daughter*], Rangoon: Cho Tay Tan, 2003.
12 Ibid.
13 Mya Yin Sein, *Deedok*, 30 June 1947.
14 Mary Ann Tétreault, 'Women and Revolution: A Framework for Analysis', in Mary Ann Tétreault (ed)., *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994, pp. 1–30.
15 For more about Daw Khin Hla, see p. 190.
16 It was estimated that about 140,000 Indians fled from Burma to India in 1942, 40,000 of whom died of 'exhaustion, cholera, official neglect and racial discrimination'. Rangoon collapsed without Indian workers, resulting in a dirty city, plagued with disease. For more, see Christopher Bayly, *Rangoon (Yangon) 1939-49: The Death of a Colonial Metropolis*, Cambridge, Centre of South Asian Studies, Occasional Paper 3, 2003.
17 Kyi Oo, ကျွန်မ၏ဆရာများ, [My teachers], *Lonmalay*, 22(252), 2006, pp. 107–112.
18 Commission of Dobama Asiayone History, *History of Dobama Asiayone*, 2nd edition, Rangoon: Sapay Bateman, 1976, p. 570.

19 Ibid., p. 571.
20 Ibid., pp. 571–573. One of them was a woman called Thakin Ma Daw Htwe from Moulemein.
21 Ma Saw Mya, ဖက်ဆစ်တော်လှန်ရေးနှင့်အမျိုးသမီးများ [Women and Resistance Movement], *Myawadi*, 1971, pp. 78–79.
22 Burma Socialist Programme Party, *မြန်မာအမျိုးသမီးနိုင်ငံရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှု* [Burmese Women Political Movement], Rangoon, 1975, p. 154.
23 Thakin Tin Mya, *ဖက်ဆစ်တော်လှန်ရေးဌာနချုပ်နှင့် တိုင်းဆယ်တိုင်း* [*Resistance Headquarters and Ten [Military] Divisions*], 3rd ed., Rangoon: Maha Nanda, 1976, pp. 52–63.
24 Maung Htin, 'As It Happened', *The Guardian*, XIX(5), 1972, p. 26.
25 Thakin Tin Mya, op. cit., 1976, p. 74. Also see Nu, *ငါးနှစ်ရာသီ - ဗမာပြည် ၁၉၄၁-၁၉၄၅* [*Burma Between 1941–1945*], Rangoon: Myanmarpyi, 1946, pp. 258–282.
26 Nu, *ငါးနှစ်ရာသီ - ဗမာပြည် ၁၉၄၁-၁၉၄၅* [*Burma Between 1941–1945*], Rangoon: Myanmarpyi, 1946, pp. 258–324.
27 U Than Htut and U Thaw Kaung, 'Post-Colonial Society and Culture: Reflections in Myanmar Novels of the Last 50 Years', part 1, *Proceedings of the Conference on Myanmar and Southeast Asian Studies*. 16–18 December 1998, Rangoon: Universities Historical Research Centre, 1999.
28 Nu, op. cit.
29 Thein Pe Myint, *စစ်အတွင်းခရီးသည်* [Traveller During the War], Rangoon: Pagan, 1968, p. 44. English translation and commentary Robert Taylor, *Wartime Traveler*.
30 Thakin Tin Mya, op. cit., 1976, pp. 200–360. The ten divisions included Division 1 to 7, Rangoon Division under the Japanese, Rangoon Division under the British, and Upper Burma Division. The number of both Burmese and Japanese was calculated from lists compiled by each division at the end of the resistance. The number of Burmese soldiers was, however, estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000 in the report of Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia. Hugh Tinker, *Burma, The Struggle for Independence 1944-1948*, as quoted in Military Museum and Army Records Office, *တပ်မတော်သမိုင်း ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၄၈* [*History of Army: 1945–1948*], Rangoon, 1998, pp. 34–35. The actual number of Japanese soldiers could vary, since in some cases, more than one division was thought to have fought against the same Japanese troops.
31 ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်းမိန့်ခွန်းများ (၁၉၄၅-၄၇) [*Speeches of Aung San: 1945–1947*], 2nd edition, 1971, p. 20.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 101.
34 U Than Htut and U Thaw Kaung, op. cit., pp. 47–55.
35 There were altogether eight battalions deployed for the resistance, each led by an army commander and a political adviser. Of eight advisers, seven were from the Burma Communist Party. For details, see Thakin Tin Mya, op. cit.
36 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
37 Vina A. Lanzona, 'Sex, Love and Revolution', *IIAS*, 48, 2008, p. 1.
38 Ibid., p. 71.
39 Thakin Tin Mya, *ဘုံဘဝမှာဖြင့်* [*In This Very Life*], 2nd edition, Rangoon: Ta That Ta, 1974, p. 386.
40 Thein Pe Myint, op. cit., 1968, p. 75.
41 Interview with Daw Khin Si, 2 July 2007, Rangoon.
42 Ibid.
43 Thein Pe Myint, op. cit., 1968, p. 108.
44 Thein Pe Myint, *တော်လှန်ရေးကာလ နိုင်ငံရေးအတွေ့အကြုံများ* [*Experiences During the Resistance Movement*], 3rd ed., Rangoon: Yamona, 1976, p. 47.
45 Shwe Kaing Thar, *ဆင်ယင်ထုံးဖွဲ့မှု* [*Burmese Clothing and Dress*], Mandalay: Kyi Pwa Yay, 1951, p. 96.
46 Sophie Quinn-Judge, 'Women in the Early Vietnamese Communist Movement: Sex, Lies and Liberation', *South East Asia Research*, 9(3), 2001, p. 247.

47 For more about these Indian woman soldiers, see Tobias Rettig, 'Warrior Queens: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment', *IIAS*, 48, 2001, pp. 8–9.
48 Thakin Tin Mya, *ဘုံဘဝမှာဖြင့် ထပ်ကြပ်မကွာ၊ ကျွန်မအကြောင်း၊ ဓောင့်အကြောင်း၊ နိုင်ငံရေးရာနှင့် နိုင်ငံရေးခေါင်းဆောင်အချို့အကြောင်း* [*Shadow of This Very Life, About Me, About My Darling, Politics and About Some Political Leaders*], Rangoon: Thiha Yadana, 2007, p. 63.
49 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
50 Ibid.
51 Vina A. Lanzona, op. cit.
52 Maung Htin, 'As It Happened', *The Guardian*, XIX, 5 (1972), p. 26.
53 Bagan U Bajan, 'Asia Youth League', *Resistance Movement Silver Anniversary Journal*, Rangoon: Thirimingala Publishing House, 1970. p. 7, as quoted in Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 144.
54 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 27.
55 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 16 July 2007, Rangoon.
59 Five women camped at the headquarters of the Freedom Bloc; two more joined them when they were deployed with the troops. A few Asia League members did not go back to their families but stayed in Rangoon and helped with both aboveground and underground resistance work. Ma Saw Mya, ဖက်ဆစ်တော်လှန်ရေးနှင့် အမျိုးသမီးများ [Women and Resistance Movement], *Myawadi*, 1971, p. 81.
60 Ma Saw Mya, op. cit.
61 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 156.
62 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 13 July 2007, Rangoon, Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
63 Lanzona, op. cit.
64 For trade, prosperity and literacy in the delta and Rangoon after the First World War, see Zawgyi, *ရသစာပေအဖွင့်နိဒါန်း* [*Introduction to Literature*], 2nd edition, Rangoon: Hnin Oo Lwin, 2004, pp. 113–146.
65 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
66 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 156.
67 Ibid.
68 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 13 July 2007, Rangoon.
69 Division Four, led by Colonel Ba Htoo, started early, on 8 March 1945.
70 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 163.
71 Thein Pe Myint, op. cit., 1976, p. 106.
72 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
73 Ibid.
74 Interview with Daw Khin Si, 2 July 2007, Rangoon.
75 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 16 July 2007, Rangoon.
76 Ibid.
77 Lanzona, op. cit.
78 Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, *အမှတ်တရနေ့များ* [*Memorable Days*], *Ywat Nu Wai*, 2004, pp. 37–44.
79 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
80 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
81 Ma Saw Mya, op. cit., p. 81.
82 Ibid.
83 Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, op. cit., pp. 37–44.
84 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., pp. 53–137.
85 Ibid., p. 17.
86 His premiership was disrupted twice, the first time in 1956 when he handed his premiership to Kyaw Nyein, and the second time in 1958 when he 'handed over' the state's administration to Ne Win, who then handed it back eighteen months later.

87 Khin Hnin Yu, လာခြင်းကောင်းသောလူကလေး, Rangoon, 1969, pp. 152–157.
88 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 153.
89 Ibid., p. 143.
90 Ibid., p. 150.
91 Ibid., p. 154.
92 Details in previous chapter.
93 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.

5 Disbanding the army and communist women

Victory over Japan with the help of Allied troops brought the independence movement above ground, and army leaders such as Aung San left their military positions to assume civilian-politician roles in the post-resistance government. As the AFPFL, an amalgamation of the People's Freedom Bloc, the Burma Communist Party and the Burma Independence Army, came to fill the major political position it had begun to build during the absence of the British, those who had contributed to the success of the resistance movement became core players in post-war politics. This included the women soldiers, Asia Youth League members and communists.

After the war, the political parties, especially both factions of the Communist Party, attempted to demolish gender barriers in politics and recruited young women en masse to disseminate their political ideologies. The AFPFL followed suit.

'When democratic forces get stronger, imperialists will be defeated, and British will one day have to grant us independence'.[1] These are the words of Hta May, a protagonist in Thein Pe's novel, *A Solution is Now Found*. Miss Hta May is a socialist and her lover a communist; amidst escalating animosity and tension, the two lovers struggle to find common ground for themselves and for the two parties to which they belonged. Hta May says: 'Our main mission is rehabilitation and mobilization. For these, we do not need arms'.[2] Some young girls from the rural areas were won over by such highly charged words from a woman activist, and they attempted to follow in her footsteps. In Thein Pe's novel, Hta May was entrusted by the AFPFL to proselytize to the rural masses.

The AFPFL, after the expulsion of the communists in late 1946, was in direct competition with the Communist Party. The socialists who later dominated the AFPFL were arch-rivals of the communists, both before and after the Communist Party split into the Soe-led Burma Communist Party (BCP), or Red Flag, and the Than Tun-led Communist Party of Burma (CPB), or White Flag. And the AFPFL tried to project their political agenda through young women like Hta May, possibly to appeal to farm girls and female wage labourers. Thein Pe, who was suspended from the Communist Party in July 1946, the period in which the novel was set, projected an image of a communist woman – possibly the woman who came to be his wife, who was the only female elected to the executive committee

of the Communist Party in July 1946 – onto Hta May, who was a socialist in the novel. Thein Pe manipulated the image of a socialist woman, who did not appear on the political scene until January 1947. It was only after the September 1946 protests that the Socialist Party seems to have realized that it also needed to recruit more women.[3]

Communist women were those who mobilized rural women towards the September 1946 protests. But Thein Pe, having been rejected by the Communist Party, dressed his heroic figure in a socialist uniform, a covert protest against his own Communist Party.[4] His own political agenda aside, Thein Pe's novel recorded the activities of politically active women. The women's political movement was at a crossroads after the Second World War. The Asia Youth League, which had mobilized about 70,000 members, more than half of them women, disappeared from the political scene, along with the League's five pillars for youth – physique, intellect, friendship, entrepreneurship and morality. A powerful political machine, which mobilized thousands of women in the building of social capital for Burmese youth so that they could contribute towards the expansion of the Japanese empire, it left a political vacuum when it disappeared. There was an urgent need to fill this void and to sustain the momentum of the independence struggle. As many as 35,000 women had been active under the Asia Youth League, and after the League disappeared, the patriotism and energy of these thousands of young women had to be channelled towards a worthy cause. Many women's organizations were established in the post-war period to respond to this need. As many as seven organizations appeared on Burma's political scene, and six were founded after the war.[5]

Soon the five pillars of the League were replaced by slogans such as equal pay, land for every farmer, eradication of prostitution and maternity leave.[6] These slogans reflected some of the objectives of women's organizations founded between 1945 and 1948. The year 1945 heralded a dawn for the women's movement, not only for independence but also for justice for women, farmers and workers. Women's groups had started to identify their rights in the context of the freedom of the nation. This ambition, that women would secure a better life for themselves in independent Burma, was a characteristic of the period between 1945 and 1948, during which demands for women's rights were strongest. Hundreds of women appeared to have turned their backs on domestic duties and sought a political role.

That women were ready to commit to politics could be ascribed to another factor. The independence momentum was at its strongest after the Second World War. After sixty years of colonial rule which crushed protest and restricted political activity, the Burmese seized the moment after the war to express their political identity and participate in organized movements, opportunities previously denied them. When young leaders led by Aung San emerged to negotiate independence with the returning British, they had widespread support. The reward for political participation could be caught in such slogans as 'land for every farmer' and 'equal pay'. Popular colonial catchphrases such as 'Six-month jail term for a novice Thakin', or 'သခင်ပေါက်စ ထောင်ခြောက်လ', were quickly forgotten.

Women and politics

Hugh Tinker described the period of 1945–47 as the protest era. The AFPFL rallied the masses to pressurize the returned British administration into granting independence.[7] The AFPFL had to prove to the British that it had public support. Women were recruited into the army, though the number was insignificant, principally to project the leaders' attitude towards women. These seven women soldiers had proved during the resistance that their role was effective, as they helped the army to win the hearts and minds of the masses. Women activists were therefore seen as an expendable force; or, rather, they could be viewed as a silent force, who would not complain when they were ordered to go home. Even though mobilizing work had started to carry a gender tag during the resistance movement and this task was also entrusted to women during the post-war period, women did not continue in the army after the war.

The BSPP Historical Commission argued that women political parties worked together under the leadership of the AFPFL when socialists and communists were united under the League's umbrella. But when the communists and socialists split, and after the communists were evicted from the AFPFL, the women parties also fragmented, with each faction identifying with a different political party. The political split also divided the women's groups. After the split, two main women's groups emerged: one sought to focus on social welfare and women's issues only, issues that commonly fall under နိုင်ငံ့အရေး or the nation's causes; the other, involving what the BSPP Historical Commission called 'progressive women', believed that women and politics were inseparable.[8] This second group was largely made up of socialists and communists, but the former enjoyed a larger membership and greater geographical coverage. Communist women naturally threw their support behind the Communist Party, but when the party split into two factions in February 1946, they too divided.

Women played an important role in the communist factions. Communist women not only actively participated in the movement but also wrote articles such as 'Freedom of life and protection of women's rights' in the party's mouthpiece, *Pyithu Journal*,[9] as part of the propaganda war against the socialists and in order to mobilize the urban elite for the Communist Party. A regular columnist for *Pyithu Journal*, Pegu Ma Khin Lay, commented that the 'struggle for liberty and [the] rights of women should not be launched aloof, two struggles should be coupled, and women's rights and nation's freedom should be fought concomitantly'.[10] Independence could set both a nation and its women free.

Women were recruited to mobilize both the rural and urban masses through the Burma Communist Party, instead of the AFPFL, and this decided their political careers. As with other communist parties, such as the Indochinese Communist Party and the Malayan Communist Party, Burmese women were drawn into the resistance movement mainly by underground communist leaders to instil anti-capitalist sentiment in the rural masses. The Communist Party was the first political organization that realized the contribution women could make towards the independence cause. It remained the main organization mobilizing women

towards politics until the Socialist Party recruited women in large numbers after the party split into two factions in 1958.

But the call for women to participate in politics was hampered by many groups. The *Hanthwaddy* newspaper, which was founded by a senior politician during the Nu-led AFPFL period and later turned against Nu, defined politics for women as protecting one's own race and religion.[11] According to this columnist, there were clear roles for men and women in politics. Women's concern should be on procreating with a focus on 'pure' blood, untainted by *Kala* or foreign blood, and making the decision to marry one's own kind – that is, Burman women were safeguarding the nation's religion and politics. He further argued that establishing women's organizations threatened that main task of defence and protection.[12]

But the communist parties, both red and white flag factions, defied these conventions, which were prevalent in the newspapers and in parliamentary debates. These parties recruited women for various roles, from cooking to fighting, and from their platforms, *Ludu Arna* [People's Power] and *Pyithu Journal* [People's Journal], the communists – especially the white flag faction led by Than Tun – called for more representation of women in organized groups.[13] While the government and newspapers supporting them attempted to deter women from participating in organized movements, the opposition called for an increased contribution from women to bring about 'a system change', arguing that only women could bring an end to women's sufferings.

The de-politicization and political indoctrination of women took place simultaneously. Those in power tended to see politics as a two-tier system, with clearly defined goals for men and women. While there existed no limitation on men's participation in politics and their freedom to adopt a political identity as part of their personality, women were often reminded that politics was not conducive to their nature. Columnists conveyed the idea that politics was chauvinistic, that women would inevitably become subject to discrimination and that they could occupy only subordinate roles. Columnists also pointed to the fluid, insecure nature of politics, over which women would have no control. Women, therefore, should divert their attention from politics to things over which they would have control, in other words procreation and bringing up pure Burmese citizens. In short, women had biological and national duties.[14]

The message being projected to educated Burmese women was that the political atmosphere was hostile to them. Deterring women from entering politics also reflected the insecurity of the young independent nation. As late as the mid-1950s, a decade after independence, Burma was still struggling to assert its economic freedom from the Chinese and Indian interests that had dominated Burma's economy since the late nineteenth century. Economic nationalism prompted journalists, especially those close to the ruling AFPFL, to defend not only Burma's economy from foreign interests but also its religion, it being argued that foreign economic power would in turn undermine Burma's religion, culture and, finally, politics.[15] To defend the nation's physical boundaries was the duty of men and to defend its cultural and religious territory was the duty of women. Here was an important further argument against women's participation in politics.

Thus Burma's male political leadership, of all colours, wanted women to keep their distance from the political arena but not turn their backs on politics altogether. Such an attitude was shown during the mid-1940s when the communists actively recruited women to organize protests and mobilize the rural masses, but failed to keep faith with them when the movement began to be weakened by government forces in late 1949 and early 1950. Communist women did not enjoy senior positions in the party: it was almost as if women did not expect to reach such positions.[16]

From battleground to the jungle

A few Burmese women tested social conventions and strict gender codes by joining male combat fighters and serving alongside them in Burma's army. But their experience did not last long. Just three months after Commander in Chief Aung San announced the establishment of the Women's Army, in February 1945, the seven women soldiers, together with a few others who had joined the women's platoon, were dismissed from the army. There was no formal announcement of this disbandment. Rather, five were put into a passenger bus and asked to return home, and two women who were stationed at Division 4 near Pegu were sent to Rangoon by the commander himself. Just as their deployment had been handled in a clandestine manner, so was their rejection.

Although the woman had been stationed in three different divisions, most gathered at Division 7 in Thayetmyo during the last days of the resistance. When they heard on the radio that Hitler had committed suicide, two days after the actual event, their duties in the army were unofficially over.[17] They were given some Japanese money and simply told to go home. One of the women later recalled that they found the Japanese currency was useless only when they attempted to buy food at a roadside shop. Their roles as propaganda agents and administrative officers in the army abruptly, and in many ways disgracefully, ended and they found themselves on their way back to their 'normal' lives. They had little money and no homes in Rangoon.[18] They decided to lodge with relatives when they arrived at Rangoon.[19]

This abrupt dismissal strongly suggests that the women had been brought into the army simply to secure recruitment into the resistance movement, rather than as part of a strategy to place women at the centre of the independence struggle or to advance their place in Burma's social landscape. It was only in December 1945 that the disbandment of the Burma National Army (BNA) was complete. The BNA was reduced from nearly 10,000 to some 4,700 in the new Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF).[20] Those not included in the PBF were allowed to join the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), a private army controlled by Aung San.[21] It took the BNA nearly six months from the victory parade in Rangoon in June 1945 to transform itself into the smaller Patriotic Burmese Forces, involving lengthy negotiations between the Supreme Commander, South East Asia Command, Admiral Mountbatten, and Aung San. But the Women's Army was disbanded as soon as the fighting ended and before the victory parade. And women soldiers

were not offered an opportunity to remain in the army, even on a voluntary basis. While the PVO remained an important organization after independence, the Women's Army simply disappeared from Burma's political landscape as well as from popular memory. When a woman writer, Saw Monyin, compiled a book in 1976 entitled *Burmese Woman*, which traced 116 prominent Burmese women – from *Kumaris* to medical doctors – in the twentieth century, she did not include a single woman soldier from the first Women's Army, even though almost all of them were still alive at that time.[22]

Once their contribution as recruiting agents was no longer needed, the army told them to go home. The women soldiers, however, returned to the headquarters of the Communist Party of Burma in Rangoon, even though just hours previously they had planned to stay with relatives.[23] The fact that these women chose the party headquarters as their home reflected their determination to continue fighting for independence, this time under the Communist Party. Other women followed them into the party, going underground or taking refuge in the jungle when the Communist Party later went underground.

The fact that these women regarded the Communist Party as their 'home' was an important indication of an explicit pledge of loyalty. These women were never official members of the party, since there was no ritual to undergo or papers to sign, as there were for some of the male members. Their membership was marked only by their trust and loyalty towards the party, but this union was rarely acknowledged by the latter. There was only one occasion, during the second conference of the Communist Party of Burma, on which a woman – Khin Kyi Kyi – was elected to the executive committee, and most women members remained in the rank and file. Even when the general public called them ကွန်မြူနစ်မ or 'Miss Communist', communist women were taken for granted by the male leaders. It was a one-sided love affair. The women might have thought that their entry into the party could not have been possible without the help of the party's leaders. But the women soldiers had simply explored new avenues to express their political identity, and they had chosen the Communist Party to guide them to independence.

The Burma Army reached Rangoon on 30 April 1945, beating the British and Allied troops by three days. Even though there was still fighting against the Japanese along the east bank of the Sittaung river and in the forests of the Pegu mountains, all the important political leaders had returned to Rangoon by the end of May 1945. The British administration established the Civil Affairs Service Burma (CAS-B) in every town they reoccupied, desperately trying to reassert their authority in the country from which they had fled just three years earlier. While fighting continued across southern Burma, a political battle was underway in the capital.

The Communist Party led by Soe and Than Tun towered over the other parties, since it was the communists who had first opposed Japan. Party members had been the first to contact Allied troops in India, and they had provided ideological training throughout the country and fought alongside the Allied forces during the resistance movement. The party attempted to capitalize on its high standing by

seizing a Chinese pawnshop in Bargayar in Rangoon and erecting a party signboard in front of the shop on 3 May 1945. The party's clandestine, underground status came to an end nearly six years after its inception, and it emerged as a powerful force on Burma's political stage.[24]

But the Communist Party found itself competing against its arch-rivals, the socialists, and 1945 marked the beginning of a long battle between these two parties. In what seemed a male power tussle, during which party leaders competed against each other to expand their power base, women were again used to win over new members and sustain old ones. However, the Socialist Party did not recruit any women until after September 1946, and all the women soldiers and women resistance members initially came into the Communist Party. Women with political interests found their home, ideologically and sometimes literally, in the headquarters of the Communist Party.

But they were living in the shadows of the male leaders, and they still could not find their own political space.[25] They held subordinate positions, having to take orders from male leaders rather than dictating the course of the independence movement alongside them. Occupying subordinate positions, they had limited opportunities to express their political identity and to take political action. In most cases, they simply followed the ideological or political officer who had been attached to each battalion during the resistance movement, and continued in that role. When the political advisors returned to Rangoon to prepare for the next stage of the battle, this time around the negotiation table, the women soldiers followed. They returned to the birthplace of their revolutionary ideology, in other words the Communist Party, even though they never formally joined. They returned 'home' after the resistance movement had run its course.

One of the women soldiers, Daw Khin Ohn Yin, said that they knew that the revolution was not over and they prepared themselves to continue fighting, this time against the Allied troops. Before they came back to Rangoon, they, together with the troops, hid their weapons and the jewellery they had seized from the Japanese troops in the hope that in the near future, they would be returning to fight a different enemy.[26] This soldier's rationale reflected an article written to Thakin Than Tun by one of the communists, Thein Pe, who went to India in 1942 to seek help from the Allies. He asked Than Tun to alert all the communist cells and troops not to surrender their weapons to the Allied troops after the resistance. But Than Tun failed to capture the importance and urgency of this message sent from India, and did not convey it to those in the resistance.

The more ideologically sophisticated political attachés however advised their forces to hide their weapons ready for the future revolution, which they saw was imminent.[27] The women soldiers I interviewed thought so highly of these political advisors that they were fully committed to the continued independence struggle and resistance, even though this was still to be confirmed by the AFPFL and its military leaders.[28] These women put their unwavering faith in the party.

As Paula Schwartz has argued with respect to French resistance fighters, Burmese women soldiers – having survived in combat, which is 'the most highly regarded form of resistance'[29] –won the trust of the Communist Party leadership.

Their mobilizing skills during the resistance had shown the leaders that they could be a valuable asset for the party and the independence cause, in stark contrast to the previous attitude of some military leaders, who had seen them as a burden and responsibility since they posed problems of safety and security.[30] They had shared tasks and responsibilities alongside men in combat. But these women now had to prove their worth in male-dominated political circles, and learn to play the political–administrative game.

The roles the Communist Party assigned to its female members again confirmed the gender tag now attached to mobilizing work. Even though some senior communist members such as Saya Chit were involved in propaganda work, it was women who were mainly entrusted with winning the hearts and minds of the masses. Almost certainly this reflected their above-average educational status. Thus some highly educated members, such as the university student Khin Kyi Kyi, had responsibility for translating articles and decoding wire messages – but women were never involved in policy making, even though Khin Kyi Kyi herself was elected to the executive committee in July 1946. That promotion was acknowledgment of the individual's achievement rather than recognition that women could play a critical role in building a major political force.

Although post-war Burma saw the emergence of a number of women's organizations, it was never clear whether they wished to focus on political issues or on social welfare, a sector which traditionally had a feminine tag. One of the most popular, with the highest profile, was the All Burma Woman Independence Group, led by prominent businesswoman Daw Khin Khin Gyi. The wives of Aung San and Ba Hein, a communist, were vice-presidents, and one of the seven women soldiers – who later married writer Thein Pe Myint – was the general secretary.[31]

'All Burma Woman Independence Group' was a misnomer, since the party's first priorities were welfare, rehabilitation and health.[32] This group copied the model of the Mother and Child Welfare Organization, created during the colonial period and frequented by wives of civil servants. The All Burma Woman Independence Group also welcomed ministers' wives and prominent women, including communist women. But the latter did not want to restrict their participation to visiting brothels to rescue fallen women, running cookery courses for the disadvantaged, fighting for rights for 'lesser women' or mistresses and organizing fanfares for women.[33] Instead, they wanted to engage in direct action and to represent women farmers and workers by organizing unions and staging protests against the returning British. Improving the lives of street girls was not considered as attractive as mobilizing the rural population to support the AFPFL and leading communist protests against the colonial administration.

Frustration led to an exodus of communist women from the All Burma Woman Independence Group. Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, general secretary of the group, who later left the party, told how most communist women did not feel that the party represented them. Even though the leaders they respected, such as Aung San, asked them to work within the party's framework, they saw many members as

conceited and uninterested in solving the root problems of the rural masses.[34] This opinion was echoed by Pegu Ma Khin Lay, a columnist of the Communist Party's *People's Journal*, who argued that capitalism and the exploitation of the proletariat was the basic cause of women's oppression: only when these root causes were tackled would womens' conditions improve.[35] Ideological differences split the group into those who focused on welfare activities and those, many of whom belonged to the Communist Party, who sought political action. The split reflected a wider division in Burma's social landscape, between those who saw women stepping up to play a political role and those who saw women, traditionally, as involved in caring and nurturing. Thus leading newspapers such as *Bamakhit* saw the role of women purely in terms of welfare and social services. Others, mostly communists and communist sympathizers, argued that women should have an equal footing with men in the nation's political space. After their war-time experiences, communist women came to realize that the All Burma Women Independence Group was not an effective channel for their ambitions.

An interesting conflict of views emerged when communist women exerted pressure on the All Burma Women Independence Group to protest on behalf of women in Rakhine who had been harassed by British soldiers and the police. While the executive committee felt obliged to protest on behalf of the women, they also had an interest in safeguarding the reputation of the government to which their husbands belonged. The communist women gave the committee an ultimatum that if it did not act on the Rakhine issue, they would leave.[36] The committee did not act and the communists, seeing that the group was too weak to stand up to the government on important social issues, left.

Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, the party's secretary, recounts that the communist women were considered 'bucolic' by the wives of ministers, while the wives were criticized by the communists as ostentatious.[37] The All Burma Women Independence Group did not survive for long after the communist members left. Rather, a Burma Women Congress led by communist women emerged in July 1946, with the aim of incorporating women into the independence and class struggles. This group could be regarded as the female wing of the Burma Communist Party: it was led by Aung San's wife, Khin Kyi, and one of the women soldiers, Khin Kyi Kyi, became general secretary.[38] The party's headquarters was located in the house of Ba Hein, a prominent communist leader. Many executive members and members from Rangoon were sent to the villages to mobilize the rural population. The group also pledged to unite the different women's organizations into a united front.[39]

The objectives of the Burma Women Congress reflected the policies of the Communist Party. It can be regarded as the first feminist organization in Burma, paving a feminist route towards equality. It sought to bring into the open the injustice and inequality Burmese women faced, to challenge the deeply embedded view of the high standing, the 'equality', of Burma's women. The congress was involved in distributing free clothing to those who could not afford clothes, supporting women who took part in sport, eradicating prostitution and punishing

men who took mistresses: it pressed for equal job opportunities for the married and single, and for maternity leave.[40] It challenged social norms.

Period of protest

The newly signposted Communist Party Headquarters became a political hub, attracting many young men and women from different parts of Burma to Rangoon. About ten women members worked at the party headquarters on tasks assigned by the party. They were then joined by a dozen others, and their number grew to several hundred in the months leading up to July 1946, when the Burma Woman Congress was formed.

The party headquarters was their home, and the party rations sustained them. They ate mostly beans, a product of upper Burma possibly supplied by members and sympathizers from the Myin Gyan area, which was a communist stronghold. Every day, women members wandered the streets of Rangoon, selling the party's newspaper, ပြည်သူ့အာဏာ (*People's Power*) for 25 pyas a copy.[41] The newspaper was issued almost daily, and with the help of the party's women members, it spread the party's Marxist–Leninist messages. May 1945 to July 1946 saw a building of political strength but then, after July 1946, there was an intense power struggle between the British and the AFPLF. The latter used protest, demonstrations and strikes to undermine the authority of the colonial regime. The pre-war unions were revived. There were increasingly strident strikes and protests in support of increases in pay to match the increases in the cost of living.[42]

The Burma Communist Party was behind these protests, with its members organizing farmers and workers to rally against the government. In July 1946, the women communist members decided to form women's unions to escalate the protest movement. The newly established Burma Women Congress included women soldiers and active members in its executive committee. It attempted to create a branch in every town, targeting women vendors, cheroot-rollers and farmers and industrial workers from towns and villages alike. Its members were most active in the delta, Pyinamana, the birthplace of Thakin Than Tun, a place where the new capital is now located, Naunglaybin, Pegu, Toungoo, Daik-U, Phyu and Waw, the big rice-growing areas. The congress's first objective was to embrace half the nation's population, women, into the independence cause, using local issues such as land rights for farmers and social welfare provision for workers.[43] They staged protests and demonstrations, defying the government's orders and thus inviting arrest and imprisonment. Executive members travelled from village to village, recruiting and organizing women and men into the protest movement.

After the departure of the British, a power struggle between the incumbent AFPFL government and underground factions of the Communist Party dominated the post-independence period from 1948 to 1962. While the former enjoyed the power of office, the latter also commanded formidable support from the masses, especially farmers and general workers in rural areas and some of the major cities, including Rangoon, Myin Gyan in upper Burma and towns in

the delta. The policies and strategies adopted by both camps had a significant impact on the social landscape of Burmese women. Their perceptions and attitudes towards women can be seen in the two newspapers regarded as their mouthpieces. *Bamakhit* [*New Burma*], founded by U Ohn Khin – a close ally of Premier Nu – projected the AFPFL's policies and the government's attitude towards women, whereas *Phyithu Arnar* [*People's Power*], issued by the Communist Party of Burma, reflected the Communist Party's policies and attitudes.

There was a particularly powerful image that caught the imagination of the people during the near-independence period and post-independence years. It was of a woman who, much inspired by the AFPFL leaders, took pieces of jewellery and donated them to the AFPFL. Figure 5.1 shows a young woman donating a pair of golden bangles to Aung San, and this illustration was used on the cover of Thein Pe Myint' *လမ်းပေါ်မှီ* (*A Solution is Now Found*),[44] a novel dealing with rival socialists and communists during the months leading up to independence.

Women's roles as generous donors to and supporters of the AFPFL were much applauded by the media, and the BSPP official record also noted that women donated land and jewellery during AFPFL public meetings and rallies.[45] A businesswoman, Daw Khin Khin Gyi, was remembered as the person who provided Aung San, in London to negotiate with Attlee in 1947, with suits and coats.[46] Their role as financiers of popular politicians and parties ensured that these women could portray themselves as activists. The media's tendency to encourage women to occupy the back of the political stage rather than push themselves centre stage is well caught in the illustration on the cover of *A Solution is Now*

Figure 5.1 A woman donating her golden bangles to Aung San.

Source: Cover picture of Thein Pe Myint, *လမ်းပေါ်မှီ* [*A Solution Is Now Found*], Rangoon: Myanma Alin, 1953.

Found. The artist preferred to use an image of a woman supporting AFPFL financially rather than an image of Hta May, a socialist who mobilized farmers and villagers for the AFPFL.

During the protest period, women communists worked very hard to rally the rural and urban masses for the party. But although the Communist Party made heavy demands on its women members, it failed to deliver on the promises it had made to them when they were recruited. One female member wrote in her autobiography that during a Communist Party public gathering after the Second World War, she was won over by the claim that the Communist Party was the only party that regarded women as equals of men.[47] She decided to follow the leadership of the party when she realized that 'one needs to invest for one's benefits. If women want liberation, women have to fight [for] themselves',[48] believing that the party would secure their liberation. But the same woman – Yebaw Ngwe, or Comrade Ngwe, who served the Communist Party for decades, and indeed still embraces communist ideologies while living in exile in China – later learned that women's liberation was seen as part of working-class liberation, and that the party did not endorse female freedom outside the class struggle.[49] Women's liberation, at best, was a by-product of the revolution. The party did not regard it as necessary to promote women's rights and freedom on their own merits, perhaps influenced by the long-held view that Burmese women already enjoyed equal status to men. Instead the party saw the problems of women as inherently the problems of the working class, and women's plight was always seen in terms of the class struggle.

Comrade Ngwe recounted how she had witnessed, probably in the late colonial period, a neighbour's girl being taken as a mistress by a landlord after her father had failed to pay off an escalating debt. The Communist Party, seeking to reach down to the people at the bottom of society, linked the neighbour's plight to the national struggle against the oppressor, hence personalizing the struggle. In this way, communists portrayed joining the party as the only plausible way out of misery. After the war, the Communist Party continued to portray itself as the champion of the masses, all the more so after Aung San evicted it from the APFPL in 1946. The communists saw the masses, not the political concessions and talks behind closed doors with the British that the AFPFL employed, as their only platform. The party understood that it could use the masses in its struggle against the AFPFL and the British. Its recruiting campaigns in the delta focused on the challenges faced daily by the rural poor.

Before the party was evicted from the AFPFL, the party's leader, Than Tun, enjoyed immense popularity nationwide and newspapers hailed post-war Burma as the 'San and Than Era', acknowledging the charisma of two towering figures, Aung San and Than Tun. Burma's working class felt that the Communist Party understood its plight, that the passage of the Communist Party was synonymous with the passage to liberation, and therefore threw itself behind the party's class struggle. However to evolve from political novices into full-time activists, as was the case of Comrade Ngwe, required not only uplifting speeches, ideological training and charismatic leaders but also practical assistance, to enable the indi-

vidual to come to terms with separation from family and a party ticket as an incentive to escape poverty.

But reports in the party's *People's Power* publication rarely mentioned the latter, possibly because the party did not want to undermine the commitment of its members. Perhaps the party also did not want to be seen as exploiting poor women's labour by luring them towards political activity with the promise of just two meals a day, rather than liberation.[50] Those women who stayed with the party in the 1950s were mostly from poor families. They remained in the party as an escape from poverty and insecurity, not because the party was offering to secure female liberation.

Comrade Ngwe had left her poor, rural family to join the party alone. Her story contrasted with that of early Vietnamese communist women. They were often from revolutionary circles,[51] with close relatives who had been imprisoned by the French.[52] Ngwe was not part of the middle-class educated elite, or indeed from the urban working class – groups who had earlier been mobilized, for example by the GCBA, against the British. Ngwe was outside these movements, possibly because her parents were so poor and illiterate that they had no resources for such middle-class luxuries as newspapers, political talks and rallies. While women belonging to the GCBA and *Dobama Asiayone* could participate in political activities while discharging their domestic responsibilities regarding their families and husbands, a social and political outcast such as Ngwe could not combine those traditional duties with the revolution's calls. She joined the party without telling her parents. In fact, she had to leave her family to be able to do so. She could not enjoy the privilege of becoming a revolutionary figure in the confines of her domestic world.

But leaving one's family and home for more food and security was not always a rational choice. Risks often outweighed benefits, and joining the party did not always provide security for women. The fact remains, however, that women who were poor and knew they could not rely on their families for support tended to stay permanently, whereas more educated and wealthier women with strong family backgrounds were more likely to have an open relationship with the party – that is, they could go back to their families when conditions in the jungle were bad, and rejoin again when conditions improved.[53]

The poor lacked that choice, that flexibility. They did not have families who would look after children born in the jungle to communist daughters.[54] These women might have believed that once they joined the party, better lives would await them, but stories of rape and harassment showed that life within the party could be as disruptive as their previous lives. Sexual exploitation was a well-kept secret of underground life. One erstwhile communist recounted that some women were raped and no action was taken against the attackers.[55] Other bitter experiences included women losing their babies to curable illnesses such as diarrhoea and a pregnant woman having a miscarriage while travelling on an elephant.[56] Even though these women were risking everything, living and fighting alongside men for the cause in which they believed, they often appear to have been oppressed and fearful.

It is difficult to determine whether it was the ideologically more committed and more patriotic women or the economically more devastated who joined and stayed with the party the longer. Material poverty certainly undermined the commitment and sacrifice of many poor women. There are stories of communist women from the cities, who had previously worked in government offices, going back to their homes in the mid-1950s when government forces were forcing back the communists. These women, urban, educated and from middle-class backgrounds, had a way of escaping from the revolutionary, underground life, but for less privileged women such as Comrade Ngwe, there existed few options for them to return to their 'normal' life. The Communist Party strived to demolish class barriers, but it failed to abolish the class barriers within its own membership.

Political landscape of women's groups during the AFPFL period

The Nu-Tin/Swe-Nyein split in the late 1950s spilled over to women's groups. Daw Khin Kyi, the wife of Aung San, left her position as Director General of Social Welfare to become President of the AFPFL Women Central Council,[57] charged with mobilizing women for the Nu-Tin faction. The Swe-Nyein Stable AFPFL also sought to mobilize women groups, and there soon emerged two rival factions: the Htabi-Wah, or Yellow sarongs, and the Htabi-Ni, or Red sarongs, marked by the colours of the *longyis* worn while campaigning. But U Nu's tactic in recruiting women to his campaign was insecurely founded, for at this time the editorials in his mouthpiece newspaper, *Bamakhi*, were condemning attempts to bring women into politics.[58] The editor, U Ohn Khin, was reminding women to know their place and stay out of politics.

However, Daw Khin Kyi provided powerful support for Nu's election campaign, as she reinforced Nu's Aung San legacy. She was the living connection between Nu and Aung San, and when touring the country with Nu and his ministers, she portrayed Nu and his Clean AFPFL as the heirs to Aung San. Through her, he won the support of those who still held to Aung San's vision: but in that context, it is possible to suggest that the crowds associated Daw Khin Kyi more with Aung San than with any role as a promoter of women's rights. Daw Khin Kyi praised Nu's achievement in saving the country during the period of civil war, assuring the crowds that Nu and his Clean AFPFL, rather than Kyaw Nyein and his Stable AFPFL, would bring Burma closer to Aung San's vision. The crowds did not seem to be interested in knowing which party would improve the status of Burmese women.

In 1958, just as prominent women were being used as mobilizing agents for the Clean and Stable factions, newspapers again began to question the role of women organizations. In 1958, the *Htun Daily* newspaper argued that the prominent women who supported the various political parties in the campaign were merely puppets, and suggested that they were having little effect on the voters. And yet it was reported elsewhere that as many as 60,000 women from thirty-nine

districts were involved in some way in Daw Khin Kyi's campaign on behalf of Nu.[59] Nu won the 1960 election: that same year, Daw Khin Kyi was appointed Burma's ambassador to India.

During the two decades between 1942 and 1962, Burma sided with and then rose in revolt against the Japanese, forced out the British, and then saw almost unremitting internal conflict. This was a period of immense political, social and economic instability. Burmese women, of course, were fully part of this volatile, changing landscape. Their political mobilization had begun in 1943, in the East Asia Youth League, and continued through the final struggle to end British rule and into the first decade and more of independence. And yet, despite that mobilization – despite, also, an increasingly public discussion of what might crudely be termed 'women's issues' – Burma's women failed to emerge as major stakeholders in Burma's politics.

Throughout history, there have been two levels of Burmese women's involvement in Burma politics. Those close to the government, especially the wives and daughters of senior civil servants, strove to represent women in the legislative council and other government councils. This group was closer to policy makers and the British civil servants than local political organizations such as the Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) and the We Burman Association or Dobama Asiayone. The second group on the other hand is closer to local politics, and they often seek the patronage of political monks such as U Ottama. Leaders of the second group are often drawn from the wives and families of the nationalist leaders and Thakins from Dobama Asiayone. These women themselves became Thakinmas or female Thakins. In the mid-1990s, new women-led organizations were revived. One such organization is the Maternal and Children Welfare Association, which has a historical connection between the roles of the bureaucrats' wives in colonial times and those of the ruling generals in the 1990s. Like the wives of the colonial civil servants, the wives of the generals were at the forefront of the charity services patronized and sponsored by the government.

Though these two groups – one of elite women and one representing the grassroots – came together via social functions such as fund raising and Pansy Day events, there emerged factions based on ideological differences. While the former chose engagement tactics, co-operation with the government or fighting within the system, the latter often took more confrontational and direct action, such as staging boycotts and strikes. The women picketing in front of the gates of oil factories in the oil strikers' movement in 1938 captured the spirit of the latter group. While women in the former group are more concerned with if and how their own actions could affect their husbands' careers, those in the latter often risk their lives to support their husbands' political ambitions.

As to which group influences the writing of history on women – and especially on the supposedly powerful status of women – it is quite clear that the first group contributes to constructing and sustaining the image of powerful Burmese women. Not only the writings by the first group, which consists mostly of highly

educated women, but also their achievement in the government services within the country and other services abroad helped sustain the powerful Burmese woman image. The 'national' history on the status of Myanmar women cites Daw Mya Sein as one of the earliest icons of modern Burmese women, after Shin Saw Pu and Phwa Saw. Author Daw Ni Ni Myint highlighted the attempts of the National Council of Women of Burma (NCWB), a body representative of the first group, to allow women delegates to attend the London Round Table Conference. Mrs. Ba Maung Chain is another frequently cited example. Her Karen ethnic origin and her role as a cabinet minister in the Karen State reinforced the claim of Burmese women being powerful.

Those who have demanded women's rights in the government framework, such as Daw Mya Sein, who has attended conventions and debates to represent Burmese women, are 'allowed' a space in Burmese history and are portrayed as beacons of Burmese equity and the tradition of high regard for Burmese women. But the history of Burmese women is as much about those who were considered to be worthy of record by the state as it is about those who were denied historical documentation. From 1962 to the present day, women who fought alongside men in the war, women who went underground with the communists, women who joined the students' army after the 1988 student-led demonstrations, women who are now leading armed groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU) – their histories are deemed irrelevant to the state historical commission and they are therefore denied their place in the making of Burmese history.

Here, the tragedy of Burmese women denied a place in history is worse than that of those who were allowed a limited space in history. When the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) came to power in 1962, communists found themselves on the wrong side of history and Burma history from 1962 onwards was largely about the BSPP's attempts and achievements in nation-making, peace-building and participating in the non-alignment movement which most South East Asian countries also joined. The roles of male communists, and also of men who fought outside the system, are well documented. Male participation in the independence movement was well-recorded.

In *The Status of Myanmar Women*, the history of the Women's Army is left out. There is a historical gap between 1936, during which female university students took part in the second university boycott, and 1945, after which many women entered government service. Questions can be raised about why Ni Ni Myint did not include the events surrounding the founding of the first Women's Army and their experiences during the war. Did she deem their roles insignificant or did she not want to attract attention to 'militarized women'?

Political or 'militarized' women therefore faced a situation of double jeopardy. They were denied a space in history not just because they found themselves on the wrong side of history, but also because they were on the wrong side of the tradition that women are to be a pace behind men – to be the vanguard of tradition and religion by reproducing Buddhist Burmese, as opposed to fighting alongside men in the war. The roles of women as supporters of male politicians and financiers of nationalists were highlighted, yet the roles of women as Second

World War-era soldiers and guerrilla fighters were omitted, possibly on the basis that they stepped beyond their traditional boundaries and therefore tarnished the image of Burmese women. The next chapter discusses Burmese women's urban social landscape.

Notes

1 Thein Pe Myint, *လမ်းစပေါ်ပြီ* [*A Solution is Now Found*], Myanma Alin: Rangoon, 1953, p. 7.
2 Ibid., p. 40.
3 Thein Pe Myint was suspended by the Communist Party on the ground that he advocated an armed revolution, thinking that peaceful negotiations with the British would be futile in the end. His proposal to hide weapons from the British and to form a national government was rejected, 'hiding weapons' being a diversion from the leftist path. Thein Pe Myint, op. cit., 1953, p. 66.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., pp. 168–212.
6 They were part of the action plan of the Burma Woman Congress Party founded in July 1946: most members were communists. Burma Socialist Programme Party, *မြန်မာအမျိုးသမီးနိုင်ငံရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု*, [*Burmese Women Political Movement*], Rangoon, 1975, pp. 191–192.
7 Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence*, 3rd edition, London: OUP, 1961, pp. 71–73.
8 Ibid., pp. 171–172.
9 *Pyithu Journal*, 15 April 1956, p. 15.
10 Ibid.
11 *Hanthawaddy*, 12 July 1957, p. 4.
12 Ibid.
13 *Pyithu Journal*, 15 April 1956, p. 15.
14 *Hanthawaddy*, 12 July 1957, p. 4.
15 Ibid.
16 In one interview, a family member of a woman communist reflected that when her mother joined the party, she would only think of how she could serve the party and the people, and was happy to undertake any work, be it kitchen work or combat fighting.
17 According to Ma Saw Mya, one of seven woman soldiers, the official disbandment was in July 1945, after the military leaders came back from Kandy, Sri Lanka. When the whole army was cut back and renamed, the women's wing was also shut down. But other than her account, there is no evidence to confirm this.
18 All seven members and the additional woman supporters were from cities and towns outside Rangoon; none from Rangoon joined the army.
19 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
20 Hugh Tinker, op. cit., pp. 16–17.
21 Ibid.
22 Saw Monyin, *ဗမာအမျိုးသမီး* [*Burmese Women*], Rangoon: Padauk Hlaing, 1976.
23 They changed their plan when they found out, upon arriving in Rangoon, that the Communist Party now had a headquarters in Rangoon. Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
24 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
25 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 13 July 2007, Rangoon.
26 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 10 July 2007, Rangoon.
27 Each military division was accompanied by military and political attachés who travelled with the troops. Historian Ba Shin was a political attaché.

28 Ibid.
29 Paula Schwartz, 'Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France', *French Historical Studies*, 16(1), 1989, p. 129.
30 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 10 July 2007, Rangoon.
31 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 173.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 174.
34 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 13 July 2007, Rangoon.
35 *Pyithu Journal*, 15 April 1956, p. 15.
36 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 173.
37 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
38 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., pp. 194–195.
39 Ibid., p. 190.
40 Ibid., p. 192.
41 Interview with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, 13 July 2007, Rangoon.
42 Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 106.
43 Ibid., p. 194.
44 Thein Pe Myint, op. cit.
45 Burma Socialist Programme Party, op. cit., p. 170.
46 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 13 July 2007, Rangoon.
47 Ma Kyi Lay (Yebaw Ngwe), အခါတော်ပေးတာက နတ်ရေးငယ်ရွေစာ [Cupid], *Thitsar*, 14, 2007, pp. 76–79.
48 Ibid., p. 78.
49 Yebaw Ngwe, အမျိုးသမီးဘဝလွတ်မြောက်ရေးအတွက် တိုက်ပွဲခွင့်ရှိကြ [Persevere for the Freedom of Women's Movement], *Thitsar*, 13 (2007), pp. 128–134.
50 Interview with a communist woman, name withheld, 2008.
51 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 88–89, as quoted in Sophie Quinn-Judge, 'Women in the Early Vietnamese Communist Movement: Sex, Lies and Liberation', *South East Asia Research*, 9(3), 2001, p. 246.
52 RC, 495, 154, 594, letter of 22 July 1926 from 'Nilvosky', Rosta News Agency, Canton, China, as quoted in Sophie Quinn-Judge, op. cit., p. 249.
53 Interviews with Daw Hla Khin and Daw Khin Ohn Yin, July 2007, Rangoon.
54 Ibid.
55 Interview with Daw Khin Kyi Kyi, 12 July 2007, Rangoon.
56 Comrade Ngwe, အရဏ်ဦးခရီးသည်, [Dawn Traveller], *Hnin Si Lwin Pyin*, 2007, p. 129; interview with Daw Khin Mar Aye, July 2007, Rangoon.
57 *Myanma Alin*, 24 May 1958, U San Nyein and Daw Myint Kyi, *Burma Politics: 1958–1962*, 1st vol., Rangoon: Universities Publishing House, 1991, p. 184.
58 *Bamakhit*, 19 May 1958.
59 Ibid.

6 Women and modernity

Women and national identity

The new Burma, like many other newly independent countries, struggled to defend and define its nationhood and identity. Not only did the state reclaim its political independence from the British but the new government, with the help of the media, also attempted to assert control over western cultural influence, so that the new nation would become not only politically independent but also culturally superior.[1] Zawgyi has argued that during colonialism, some Burmese regarded their culture as the only identity that the British could not steal, and therefore a determination to defend and promote Burma's cultural distinctiveness inspired nationalist literature.[2]

The coming of independence did not diminish that spirit, and in fact, the movement to uphold Burmese culture appears to have become still stronger during the immediate post-independence period. This movement was led by the media, which saw it as urgent to 'rescue' a culture that, it argued, had become less robust during and after the Second World War.[3] Many nationalists under the Nu-led government appear to have felt that now the British were gone and resistance against imperialism was no longer necessary, only the battle against ideologies that threatened the Burmese way of life could unite the different political groups and the people in general. Indeed, public reformers voiced their concern that since the physical enemy – the colonial government – was gone, the people would relax and could be taken by surprise by the moral enemy – that is, modernity.[4] The physical challenge that had dominated the struggle against the diminishing British presence in the period 1945–48 was now substituted by an ideological struggle against western moral influence.

Zawgyi claimed in his *Introduction to Literature* that colonial literature published in the vernacular in the late colonial period, especially after the first mobilization of the YMBA, shared a common theme of resistance against occupation and a desire to conserve what remained within – that is, culture.[5] Similarly, post-independence literature used anti-modernity as a common platform to help readers collectively construct a new self-consciousness. Calls to rediscover Burmese identity so as to reclaim it, with the possibility of helping the individual express his or her identity as a 'free' citizen as well as uniting all in this shared

identity – as Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities*[6] – became a recurrent theme in magazine articles, newspaper columns and novels. Writings on what constituted Burmese identity, as well as the impact of decades of British rule on that identity, dominated the print media in this period. The mass media played a pivotal role in constructing or reclaiming this identity.

This new literary movement, which called for a uniquely identified culture free from foreign dominance, reflected Premier Nu's oft-repeated call for the building of a clean and prosperous country based on the teachings of Buddha. The political aspirations and strategic schemes of Premier Nu were profoundly shaped by Buddhism. He repeatedly attempted to convince his fellow citizens that Buddhism was the cultural heritage of Burma,[7] and that the identity of a citizen of Burma should be synonymous with being a Buddhist. This view was promoted in the *Bamakhit* newspaper, a mouthpiece of the Nu government,[8] which used the phrase 'Buddhist Burmese' when referring to Burmese. With the endorsement of the state, the media urged the establishment of 'proper' codes of conduct for Burmese and a search for a new national consciousness that embodied all the characteristics of a Burman.

The *Bamakhit* newspaper argued that the building of a new nation must be based upon customs, religion and traditions that were indigenous.[9] The new Burma must be built upon the foundations of Buddhism and cultures unique to the country. Indeed, Burma needed not only to recover its own customs but also to distinguish, with the aim of discarding, cultures that were foreign to the country. With this determination to reclaim a unique identity, Burmese women became the centre of much media attention, as they were seen as pivotal in defining and defending the nation. As the saying goes, မိန်းမဖျက်ပြည်ဖျက် – 'Women are capable of destroying the nation': the implication here was that women were dangerous to the nation and that if the Burman race was to be sustained, it was essential that women become responsible citizens – responsible to their race and culture.

In this context it is important to note that the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper once published an article urging women to strive for the unity of a Buddhist nation and avoid marrying foreigners.[10] Women were in effect cultural ministers, charged with safeguarding and protecting culture. Their behaviour was closely scrutinized by the evangelists of Burmese culture – the print media – so that they did not misrepresent or undermine the country.

The lifestyles women chose were regarded by the media as determining the fate of the country, and women were held accountable for disseminating a 'proper' image of the nation. Many public figures held the view that women must prove to the world that Burma could break free not only of foreign political dominance but also of foreign cultural influence. *Bamakhit* newspaper argued that Burmese women must show the 'true' spirit of Burman-ness, and women's behaviour should emanate from the basic principle of free Burma – that is, the right to decide one's future.[11] This multi-layered message suggested that women should free themselves from colonial traditions and culture and strive to embrace Burma's own culture. Burmese women were seen by the media as essential to the

state's efforts to defend the country's culture and religion. The failure or success of the state's programmes to protect and promote the nation's culture was seen through how Burmese women dressed, how they decided on marriage and what consumer products they used. In other words, women became the yardstick for measuring the government's various nation-building or culture-defending programmes.

The media portrayed colonial culture as synonymous with modernity, and the status of women and hence of the country, to many writers and public leaders, depended not only upon the extent to which Burmese women could embrace their own culture, but also on the extent to which they could denounce foreign cultures, which were believed to be infiltrating and destroying Burma's culture. This chapter will analyse what the Burmese media in this period regarded as the avatars of modernism, how many Burmese women participated in modernism and how the media portrayed these women in the tension between modernity and national self-consciousness.

At this point it would perhaps be helpful to define 'modernity' in this Burmese context, and in particular to explain the duality of the term as it was used in Burma at that time. The word for 'modern' in current Burmese is ခေတ်မီ, and it carries the meaning of being abreast of an era or of time – but, critically, the era or time which provides the point of reference is not a Burmese era or Burmese time, but an external era or external time. In other words, to be modern in Burma is to be abreast of the outside world, to be aligned with an external progress. The first Burmese–English dictionary, compiled by Adoniram Judson in 1883, included the word ခေတ်, defined as 'a field of labour, state, world; a collection of sekya systems of worlds, time'.[12] This was clearly not 'modern' in its current sense, as it makes reference to Burmese or Buddhist eras. In contrast, the Burmese equivalent of the English word 'modern', meaning aligned to the 'modern' external world, appeared for the first time in G. Appleton's *Beginner's English–Burmese Dictionary* in 1944.[13] In brief, the Burmese word for 'modern' in this contemporary sense is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, the term became widely used only when မုတ္တမ (the Mattaben Company) used it in an advertising campaign in the mid-1950s to promote eating sea fish: this was promoted as 'modern' behaviour since, in the words of the campaign, 'Every modern person eats sea fish'.[14] Later, when discussing whether Burmese women should wear swimsuits, a *Bamakhit* columnist used the term 'ခေတ်နဲ့ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုအသစ်ကို အမှီလိုက်ရမယ်', meaning to stay up-to-date with the times and with the new culture,[15] and a cigarette company advertised its cigarettes as being produced in 'modern' factories.[16] The terms 'modern' and 'modernity' therefore were positioned with reference to the outside world and to a new global culture. Here, modernity implied a perspective and values that were to be sought out. Burmese were thus urged to emulate the modern external world, which implied a discarding of the local and traditional.

But later, much nationalist thinking, including the *Bamakhit* newspaper, began to see 'modernity' as the 'penetration of western ideas': 'all attempts to change customs and life-styles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and

thereby [to be] regarded with suspicion', as Partha Chatterjee argues in the context of India.[17] He reported the Indian nationalist sentiment: 'imitation of western culture was not necessary, since in [the] spiritual realm, East was superior to the West'.[18] This was a perspective common among Burmese nationalists and in the media, led by *Bamakhit. Mandaing* newspaper argued that colonialism and modernity had inflicted moral damage on the Burmese.[19] As Barbara Andaya has argued, modernity implied 'the weakening of beliefs and practices associated with traditional culture.'[20] Debates on modernity and the position of women in Burma's modernity took the colonial experience and the west as the key reference points. *Bamakhit* claimed that women faithful to their religion and to religious duties would be safe from the cultural destruction threatened by the external, modern, world:[21] it encouraged women to hold to the culture within rather than succumb to the culture without, or modernity. In the words of Chatterjee:

> The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. . . . . in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence.[22]

But beyond that, the challenge posed by modernity was seen by many Burmese in this period as an instrument for rediscovering the values of Burmese culture and of Buddhism. 'Modernity' therefore had dual but mutually contradictory roles. Seen as a threat, it provoked a strong defence of Burmese traditional values, but to others, it provided a model of values to be emulated. Burmese women in this period between the outbreak of the war and the coup of 1962 frequently found themselves caught between the duality of modernity, between the emulation of the external modern and the defence of the local.

The end of plural society

J. S. Furnivall's classic 'plural society' concept saw colonial Burma as a mosaic of different cultures in which racially different groups lived 'side by side but separately within the same political unit'.[23] With the very limited social and cultural contact between the Burmese and the ruling British and between the Burmese and other immigrant minorities such as Bengalis, Chinese and Madrasis, apart from some inter-racial marriage in commercial cities such as Rangoon,[24] it could be argued that Burmese culture and the Burmese way of life changed little. Europeans viewed Burmese culture as exotic, very different from the practices and experiences to which they were accustomed at home. Penny Edwards gave an example of Burmese theatre or *pwes* being seen as incomprehensible by Europeans, not because of the language used but because of the lack of 'temporal or spatial discipline or predictability of repertoire', going on to argue

that '. . . Europeans [perceived]. . . Burma and "the Burmese" as sign[s] of immutable national and racial characteristics'.[25]

While Europeans deemed Burmese culture as beyond their reach and therefore beyond the influence of European culture, the Burmese media argued otherwise. As early as the 1930s, as middle-class Burmans prospered, especially in the delta, the *Deedok* journal warned that unless Burmese women cherished traditionally woven cotton clothing, the weaving industry and its art could die out.[26] In the 1930s the media, noting a changing trend from traditional to modern-style clothing among women, saw in this a British attempt to dominate, or destroy, native tradition and industry.

Although Europeans tended to dismiss Burma and the Burmese as 'immutable', they still attempted to introduce into Burma their own culture through carnivals and Durbars, as practised in other colonies.[27] Not only British culture but also the British monarch later found a loyal following in Burma among the Burmese elites. The Prince of Wales' visit to Burma in 1930 created great confusion in the media. A popular writer, U Pu Galay, was arrested by the police when he poked fun at Burmese women who welcomed and greeted the prince. He wrote that the women, who were heartbroken when the prince left, should prepare a talisman to attract him back to Burma.[28] His piece was deemed defamatory by the colonial administration, and he was fined. In the writer's eyes, Burmese women's pining for the return of a foreigner, whether prince or commoner, disgraced the traditional custom, which expected women to conceal their feelings and act modestly. But the colonial administration saw the disgrace situated in poking fun at royal supporters. The cartoonist's satire was also interpreted by the administration as humiliating to Burmese women. The incident revealed an uneasy relationship between the print media and the ruling elite regarding the latter's adoration and high regard for British imperialism. The Rangoon cosmopolitan elite's expression of its changing identity – admiration for what is not Burmese and engagement with modernity – often clashed with public voices, here a cartoonist.

Independence reignited hostility towards foreign culture. It also heralded the reconstruction of racial and class barriers. 'No Burmans' signs were binned at the social clubs, but British civilians were encouraged to leave despite the serious lack of local skills in the administration, and Chinese and Indian businessmen were branded opportunists and exploiters. A vision was promoted of a society that was economically self-sufficient, with natives enjoying the fruits of their hard work. It was also a vision of a country that was culturally independent, promoted especially by nationalist writers who strove to inculcate the same vision in their readers.[29] To such writers, western culture was not needed to 'modernize' Burma, since the country had its own ways to participate in modernity. A new nationalist movement was embodied in the process of 'Burmanization' undertaken by the state.

While ordinary rural Burmans worried about the safety of their lives and property as Burma edged towards civil war in the first months of independence, urban elites sought to reclaim the social prestige that had been denied them during colonial days and to rebuild their social capital in a now independent nation.

A Rangoon Burman could now become a member of the popular Pegu club, play snooker and drink chilled soda, activities that were exclusively enjoyed by Europeans during the British administration. The new Burman would not let his skin colour block his access to luxuries that had recently been exclusively for the white man.

And as the Burmese economist Mya Maung argued, the free Burman's vision and aspirations, which were 'based upon the nationalist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist sentiments that accompanied the liquidation of colonial rule', were high.[30] 'Anti-capitalist' was almost synonymous with 'anti-foreigner', since foreigners, especially the British and the capitalist Indians and Chinese, were seen as importers of modernity into Burma, and were those who monopolized the country's business.

The new government was pressed to nationalize foreign businesses and industries. The government had to respond by making socialism the basis for national economic planning: as Mya Maung continued, the 'choice of socialism was made under the influence of these forces and the assumption that socialism [was] not only a desirable form of socio-economic organization but also the quickest road to economic development'.[31] The young nation's ambitions were high, but those ambitions soon turned to despair, hatred and anger when people realized it was unlikely that they would quickly secure an equal footing in the economy, however hard the government tried to reform. The embedding of Indian and Chinese business limited the government's ability to promote native capitalists.

The Constitution, which was drafted in 1947 and came into force upon independence in 1948, allowed the government to nationalize 'any single branch of Burma's economy or single enterprise', and foreigners could not own more than 40 per cent of the capital in any existing enterprise.[32] While the government could not yet plan to reallocate wealth from the landed and propertied classes to the landless proletariat, it appeared to be sending out the message that the state planned to protect the interests of Burmese citizens against foreigners. The government in fact feared that making concessions to foreign enterprises would increase the popularity of the communists and offend public opinion.[33] The public increasingly saw foreigners, especially the Chinese and Indian businessmen who had stayed behind, as opportunists.

In such circumstances, not only the government but also modern women became targets for public anger and frustration, fuelled by economic nationalism. Modern women who embraced consumerism or married foreigners were seen as betraying their fellow citizens, especially those who were exploited by foreign businessmen. During the high tide of the nationalist movement, modern women bore the brunt of such sentiment. Modern women, to a certain extent, embodied the nation's problems, and they often became scapegoats for failed government programmes. The public often found it easier to blame women for their 'unpatriotic' behaviour than to pressurize the government to take action.

The state often used women as a medium to send out its message. The state's actions against foreigners and attempts to help local businesses were marked by government measures against the 'exploitation' of Burmese women by

foreigners. Putting in place measures to protect Burmese women reflected the political determination of the government to tackle important issues, such as securing businesses against foreign competition or being taken over by foreigners. And the success of government planning to help native industries could be presented as success in supporting the interests of women.

The mid-1950s saw many vernacular newspapers discussing whether or not Burmese women should marry foreigners, and how the government should protect the Burmese. In fact the government did little to promote the welfare of women, but debate in the print media, especially newspapers such as *Bamakhit*, a government mouthpiece, promoted the image of a government that took great interest in women's issues.

Public discussion of women's interests therefore became tied to government programmes concerning foreigners. This diverted public attention and anger away from issues the government did not seem to be able to solve, notably the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. But it also made women accountable, to a degree, for the success of government programmes, for their co-operation with government objectives was expected. If the government was under pressure to support local businessmen, women were equally under pressure to cooperate with the government's schemes. There was much historical precedence for such co-operation.

During the *Wunthanu* movement in the 1920s and 1930s, a song entitled 'Don't Smoke *Polo* Cigarettes, Fellow Burmans' was created to discourage people from using foreign goods.[34] Women under the leadership of the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) led a movement to destroy combs made of turtleshell, since the Burmese for 'turtle' is the same as the shortened form of Burmese for 'English'.[35] A collective challenge to what Ludu Daw Ama termed 'capitalist culture'[36] helped construct a collective nationalism, and organizations such as the GCBA exploited public sentiment against modernity to their advantage. The cartoon in Figure 6.1 captured public opinion during the economic depression of the 1930s. Cartoonist Bagalay entitled his cartoon 'Burma's Agony'.[37]

It is important to note that a woman represents Burma, suggesting, perhaps, that women's problems were regarded as the country's problems. How women dressed and behaved was taken seriously, most notably by cartoonists.

But in much the same way, Burmese women in high heels and with foreign hairstyles were used in cigarette advertisements, where they were hailed as icons of modernity and readers were encouraged to copy them. But they then became scapegoats when foreign goods and foreigners were seen as a threat to the national economy and culture. It was during the early independent period that Burmese women married to foreigners were most severely criticized. The issue of marriage was greatly politicized, and women marrying foreigners began to be seen as a focus of feminine vice and as betraying their race, their religion and the state. But others saw them as victims of exploitation by opportunist foreigners.

The independent Burmese government could not implement economic programmes to satisfy the oppressed native businessmen and traders, so instead it diverted public attention to the marriage laws. By amending the existing law so

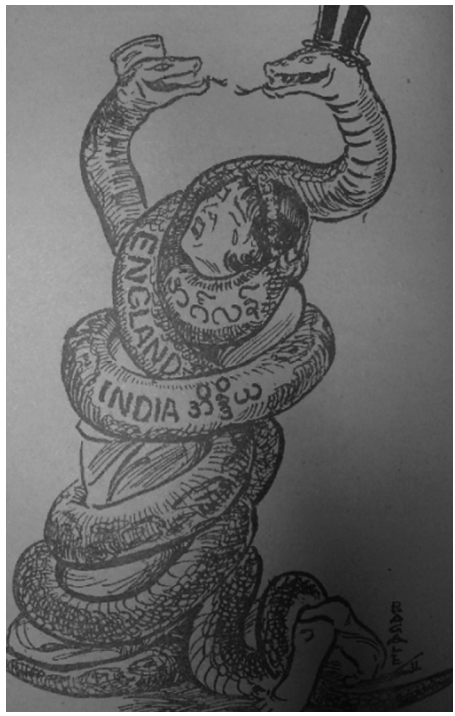

Figure 6.1 'Burma's Agony'.

Source: *Myanma Alin*, 19 December 1931.

that Burmese Buddhist women married to foreigners would have greater protection, the government indicated that it, unlike the previous British and Japanese administrations, placed its citizens first. On the other hand, Burmese, unable to compete against foreigners in the economic arena, chose race and religion as the terms on which to attack them. Burmese women married to foreigners were not spared. They were seen as accomplices who brought shame and disgrace to the Burman race and Buddhism. In the escalating economic nationalism of the immediate post-independence years, women married to foreigners bore the brunt of criticism for Burma's poor economic performance against Indian and Chinese interests.

The following cartoons reflect public attitudes toward foreigners – especially Indians and Chinese – at the beginning of the 1950s. They were seen as outsiders destroying Burmese culture, exploiting Burma's wealth and enticing Burmese women to turn against their own race. Figure 6.2 portrays a Chinese man getting a local man drunk: in the background is a Chinese pawnshop, liquor house, hotel and opium house where people could buy and use the drug. These businesses were largely owned by the Chinese, and the theme of the cartoonist was that foreigners – here the Chinese – were corrupting the Burmese. Figure 6.3 portrays

Figure 6.2 Chinese businessman getting a Burmese drunk.

Source: *Hanthwaddy*, 11 December 1951.

an Indian businessman and a Burmese politician signing a contract that is to the clear advantage of the Indian. In these cartoons foreigners were portrayed as corrupt and economically unfair.

Figure 6.4 highlights the morally 'objectionable' native actress, who confides in an Indian man that she prefers him to Burmese men. This cartoon reflects not only the attitude of the cartoonist towards Burmese women who befriended foreigners but also, presumably, the attitude of the magazine's readers, showing contempt towards such women.

But business had a different attitude towards foreigners. Figure 6.5 shows an advertisement in which a Burman is seen carrying a Muslim and a Chinese man on his bike. Near the front wheel of the bike is written 'to *Pyidawtha*', meaning 'Welfare State' or 'the New Burma', a term coined during the Nu era to encapsulate the goal of state rebuilding. From the fact that the Burman is riding the bike it can be concluded that Burmans are shown as in control of the process of building a new state. It can also be interpreted as showing Chinese and Indians getting an easy ride, however; although the cartoon does not fully convey the animosity towards Muslims and Chinese often prevalent in newspaper pages.

In another advertisement (Figure 6.6), a Muslim, who appears to have recently won the lottery, is being chased by three women: two are Burmese women with

Figure 6.3 Poor Burman looking on as government man signs an agreement with an Indian businessman.

Source: *Hanthawaddy*, 5 October 1951.

sheer blouses and western hairstyles, and one is possibly a Chinese woman, wearing a traditional front-buttoned blouse. This is a further reflection of the hostile attitude towards Indians shown by popular writers such as Journal Gyaw Ma Ma Lay in newspapers.[38] The advertisement's full intention is not clear – we cannot be certain whether or not it intended to demonize women – but the underlying message reinforced the negative attitude of the public towards foreigners, especially Indians. The advertisement's message was that if you bought a lottery ticket from a 'King Kot' shop and won, you would be popular with women even if you were a Muslim. The advertisement used the most unpopular figure – a Muslim man, here with a beard and turban – to contrast the popular brand. The 'King Kot' brand was a bridge between obscurity and popularity, especially for a minority that would otherwise not stand a chance to enjoy fame. 'King Kot' could turn even a negative attitude into a positive one.

But such a portrayal – of women chasing a Muslim – was in fact demonizing, especially in a cultural context where Burmese women were being encouraged to marry 'one of their own' rather than a man from outside their race and religion. Contrary to Figure 6.4, which makes fun of a Burmese actress because of her

Figure 6.4 Burmese actress with an Indian. '*Bai, when I signed contract to make movies with Burmese actors, I put a condition that they mustn't touch me*'.

Source: *Myawadi*, May 1959.

choice of an Indian man, this cartoon endorsed the view that some Burmese women were corrupting the nation by their unpatriotic behaviour.[39] In both cartoons, women were portrayed as immoral, lacking principles. The 'King Kot' advertisement also seems to have been targeting male consumers, encouraging them to get rich by playing the lottery.

If Figures 6.5 and 6.6 depicted a degree of harmony between the different races, why, it might be asked, was there a difference between advertisement cartoons and opinion cartoons, as in the following (Figure 6.7)? This cartoon depicts a Chinese man hugging a frightened Burmese girl and an Indian and a Chinese man, possibly businessmen, having a conversation: in addition, a picture of what seems to be a Burmese king's consultant or minister hangs on the wall. The husband tells his wife, who has warned him that insurgents are invading the town, that the insurgents are less dangerous than foreigners who pretend to be natives but who are in fact exploiting the country's resources and local women. He states that it is more important to drive out the latter than the former.

The fact that the cartoonist viewed opportunist foreigners as more dangerous than the insurgents stands in contrast to business cartoons which depicted the different races in harmony, and foreigners as being sought after by Burmese women. One possible answer is that many businesses, including the 'King Kot' lottery agent and the Eastern Trading Syndicate, were owned by foreigners, and

Figure 6.5 Advertisement for Humber, Raleigh and Hercules bicycles.

Source: *Bamakhit*, 1 January 1953, p.14.

Figure 6.6 Advertisement for lottery agent. The men are asking 'Adu Nabi, could you share your "women loving" charm with us?' Adu Nabi replies, 'if you want a lucky charm like mine, just go to King Cot lottery agent'.

Source: *Rangoon Daily*, 4 September 1953, p. 11.

Figure 6.7 Foreigners invading the country. Woman says: 'Ko Tha Wa, I heard from the northern side of the town that insurgents were coming to town'. Ko Tha Wa: 'Oh, at this time, insurgents are not important. It is more important to drive away the foreigner insurgents who pretend to be natives and right now in our house and who are taking our properties by force and harass our daughters'.

Source: *Myanma Alin*, 13 May 1957, pp. 16–17.

the cartoonists they commissioned had to project the image these businesses wanted to disseminate – that foreigners were well-received and that it was not taboo for a Muslim to be popular with Burmese women. In contrast, the opinion cartoonist captured the popular Burmese sentiment – but the cartoonist's opinion that foreigners were more dangerous to the society than insurgents was extraordinary, despite suggesting that certain insurgents, especially the communists, enjoyed support among the general public. As fighters and resistance members during the independence struggle, many insurgent groups, especially the People's Patriotic Force and the communist parties, still commanded support, albeit covertly.

Post-*Sein Kyis* and Lady Jeeps: attitudes towards inter-racial marriage

Khin Myo Chit compared the reality for Burmese women with the observations made by foreigners who visited Burma. 'However much [foreigners] said that

Burmese women were liberated and had equal opportunities, ideologies and opinions that degraded women could be seen everywhere.'[40] Coming from a woman who also said that she knew the boundaries between men and women and would not attempt to cross them, this was a bold attack on her own society.

Women who dated British and American soldiers after the Pacific War were called မျိုးဖျက်မ ('one who destroys her own race').[41] Highly charged words were used to condemn such women, and these words have outlived the events that gave rise to them. Women married to Japanese during the Occupation were called *Sein Kyi*, and a song about them is still sung by Burmese children. The popularity of such forms inevitably creates a negative, often derogatory image of women, who are portrayed as gullible at best, and as traitors to the country at worst. At the time, newspapers often claimed that Burma's standing as a religious nation with highly moral citizens rested on the behaviour of its women, who were expected to uphold tradition and to strive to be morally pure.[42]

Burmese women who were seen together with foreigners were called 'Miss Joker', as the Joker from a deck of cards can be paired with any suit.[43] As noted above, မျိုးဖျက်မ was another commonly used word for Burmese citizens who went out with foreigners and meant 'one who destroyed one's race', according to Bandoola U Sein, founder of the *Bandoola* newspaper. The terms 'Sein Kyi' and 'Lady Jeep' denoted women traitors against their own race, and the terms have outlived the era and society that produced them. After independence, women married to foreigners, especially Indians, became not only targets of public criticism but also scapegoats for the government's economic failure and mismanagement.

Before independence, ire regarding Burmese economic nationalism was targeted principally at the British. Indian and Chinese business was seen as being protected by the British colonial administration, and therefore difficult to challenge. Indeed, Indian *Chettiars* and wage labourers were allowed into Burma by the British without restriction. Hostility against foreigners, especially the *Chettiar* money-lenders, started in the 1930s, and the *Chettiars*' dispossession of cultivators fuelled the 'anti-Indian mood'.[44] Ian Brown argues that

> the dispossession of the Burmese agriculturist also contributed to the much wider hostility towards foreign–not only Indian–participation in the economy that was such an important feature of the political economy of independent Burma, notably after the military came to power in 1962.[45]

But by the post-war years, Burmese anger against exploitation by Chinese and Indian economic interests had come to the surface, and that anger was also directed towards those Burmese who associated themselves with the foreigners, notably the Burmese wives of foreigners. The issue of inter-racial marriage became politicized when the new government led by U Nu failed to implement programmes to promote native industry and business. Instead, Burmese customary laws were amended or new laws drafted to protect the rights of Buddhist wives married to foreigners or any man professing a different faith.

Even though there are no figures to suggest that more women were marrying foreigners, especially non-Buddhists, there was clearly heightened interest in the issue. Even in the early 1930s, those arguing for the separation of Burma from British India had used the slogan 'save our Burmese women from Indians'. It was argued that on average, fifty-two Burmese women married Indian men each day. Even though *Thuriya* newspaper condemned the slogan as irresponsible, the campaign won a considerable number of supporters.[46] And after independence, inter-racial marriage continued to be a popular issue for the print media. It was generally believed by male journalists that the Second World War had destroyed Burmese culture: the war was responsible, it was said, for the rising number of inter-racial marriages,[47] for families had disintegrated when fathers, husbands and brothers had been killed and many women had struggled to secure sufficient food and other basic commodities.

Even though the author of *A Selection of Leading Cases in Buddhist Law*, U May Oung – among other public leaders and writers – commented in 1954 that it was usually poor women who married Indians and Chinese,[48] these women were still accused of betraying their nation and race, using marriage merely to acquire status and comfort.[49] They were accused of neglecting their duty to protect the religion. A number of writers – mostly men – argued that sustaining the Buddhist Union depended on women. If Burmese women kept marrying foreigners, the country could fall into the hands of people of a different faith.

Women should not marry foreigners, it was said, but they should also protect their fellow women from foreigners. The children of a woman married to an Indian or Chinese man could not become involved in nationalist or Buddhist causes, for then politics, economics and education would be programmed for the benefit of foreigners rather than to meet the needs of the Burmese. Burmese Buddhist women had a responsibility not only to protect their religion and race, but also to save the economy from foreigners.[50] Figure 6.8 illustrates the disparity between urban and rural women in this respect.

The *Bamakhit* editor urged that women should, now more than ever, protect their race and origins and should abstain from imitating foreign cultures and marrying foreigners, for this would undermine the 'Burman' bloodline.[51] Members of women's associations were encouraged to inspire *wunthanu*, or the 'loving one's own race' spirit, in their fellow members. An article in the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper stated that women were the first to blame when religion, economics and the Burman race were in danger. *Hanthawaddy* further argued that it was the moral duty of the newspaper to remind Burmese women to respect their own race and religion, especially as more women were marrying foreigners. Some foreigners – especially Indians, it was said – married Burmese women and bought, sold or transferred property under their wife's name, in order to evade the law that prevented foreigners from transferring their wealth back to their country of origin. *Hanthawaddy* suggested that Burmese women should be provided with education to discourage inter-racial marriage.[52]

While Burmese women who married foreigners were criticized by both women and men, the foreigners themselves were criticized for exploiting local women

Figure 6.8 Fates of a country girl. 'If a woman from the city is beautiful, she is likely to become Miss Burma or an actress. But if a woman from the countryside is beautiful, she is likely to become a lesser wife of a rich Chinese man or a rich Indian man'.

Source: *Myanma Alin*, 13 May 1957, pp. 16–17.

for either sexual gain or economic benefit. Such attacks not only reflected feelings of economic nationalism but also highlighted the failure of the state to protect local business against foreign intrusion – and the failure of traditional social networks to protect the welfare of women when their lives were disrupted by war. The government, instead of implementing better welfare systems for women, simply amended the marriage laws to better protect Burmese women married to foreigners.

Hanthawaddy gave its readers an analysis of the different circumstances of foreign marriages between the pre- and post-war periods. During the colonial period, women married to foreigners felt 'haunted', and society frowned upon them. But there was no such shame after the war: the *wunthanu* spirit was abandoned, and rising numbers of women were marrying foreigners. But foreigners married Burmese women just to secure equal opportunities to those of Burmans and not because they loved Burma and the Burmans, the newspaper columnist argued.[53] Both parties in an inter-racial marriage shared the blame and were the subject of hatred. In July 1957, readers were asked to participate in a debate in *The Mirror* arguing for and against the punishment of men who courted women

only for sexual pleasure, not with the intention of marrying them. While one woman reader suggested capital punishment for such men, a male reader suggested the same punishment for women who married foreigners.[54] Such a suggestion reflected the hostile attitude of some Burmese men who not only demonized but also wanted to criminalize Burmese women who married foreigners.

The 1954 Special Act

That said, in order to protect the interests of Buddhist women who were married to foreigners, the marriage laws were amended. In colonial days, the courts in Burma allowed 'the personal laws of the male foreigner to override the personal laws of [a] Buddhist woman' in a contract of marriage. Seeing this as an unjust practice for local women, legislation was drawn up in 1940 to protect Buddhist women's rights. But due to war and military occupation, the legislation was not brought forward, and it was only in 1954 that the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act was drafted and passed by parliament.[55] According to this Act:

> if a non-Buddhist man and a Buddhist woman live together in such manners as would raise the *presumption* that they are man and wife by Burmese custom – had they both been Buddhists – the new Act establishes the presumption that they are lawfully married from the time they started to live together. . . . A marriage performed under the Act or *presumed* by it, is governed by Burmese customary law.[56]

Presumptions were made to establish whether a marriage fell under the 1954 Special Act, and in the case of divorce, marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men were usually decided by Burmese customary law, presuming the marriage was legitimate according to the Act. The term 'Buddhist' was also loosely used, as any woman whose parents were Buddhist or who professed the Buddhist faith could be defined as a 'Buddhist'.[57] Even if a woman converted to her husband's religion but still practised Buddhist ritual, not necessarily herself but through her relatives – such as asking them to offer food to monks on her behalf – that woman was still regarded as a Buddhist, and secured advantages as a Buddhist wife if her husband pre-deceased or divorced her.[58]

The objective of this amendment to the law was to free Burmese Buddhist women from exploitation by foreigners: lawyer and writer U May Oung argued that women now enjoyed more privilege and rights in the case of marriage to foreigners. He also argued that independence in 1948 had made the 1954 act possible. According to the 1954 Special Marriage and Inheritance Act for Buddhist Women, Burmese women wishing to marry foreigners had to follow a certain set of procedures: for example, the marriage could take place only in front of appointed officials in order that they would be protected by Burmese customary law in the event of divorce or separation. If the marriage was legitimate in the eyes of Buddhist law, the women would have the full right to observe her own

religion, full access to her share in the marriage and custody of the children and alimony if the marriage broke down.[59]

Marriages before the 1954 Act were deemed legitimate, and a Burmese Buddhist wife would be regarded as the wife entitled to her husband's wealth and eligible for all or half of his assets if she was: a) given equal opportunities to the first wife; b) regarded as equal to the first wife by her neighbours; c) had the right and power to manage her husband's possessions; and d) was treated by the husband in the same manner as the first wife.[60] According to this set of guidelines, a Burmese Buddhist woman, even though she had not signed a contract of marriage or followed the legal procedures to claim official wife status, could still enjoy the benefits of a wife if the above four requirements were met.

If the husband died or wanted a divorce, Burmese customary laws allowed the Burmese wife access to all or half of his wealth. Protecting the rights of a Burmese woman was the critical objective in the amendments to the legislation, since marriage to a foreigner was not seen as a contract between two independent citizens but as an arrangement designed simply to secure advantages and benefits for the outsider. 'First they took gold, then money, then people' was a popular maxim echoed by the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper in 1957. That maxim reflected the foreigners' attitude towards Burma, it was alleged.[61]

Daw Myint Kyi, in her 1967 *Study on Morality in Burma Social Studies*, agreed with U May Oung that a 'foreigner's marriage to a Burmese woman equals exploitation'. She further argued that lack of education encouraged such marriages.[62] Not only Burmese scholars but also the general public viewed marriage between a Burmese woman and a foreigner as exploitation of the former by the latter, with the foreigner taking advantage of the woman's unprivileged background. Such marriages were almost never seen as a union based on love between people of two different religions and races. Even though between 1945 and 1964 – before the nationalization of foreign industries and businesses – the economy was run largely by Chinese and Indian traders and businessmen, it was on the grounds of marriage and not economics that they were most vehemently attacked. Burmese women marrying foreigners symbolized not only the innocent being tricked by the evil, but local religion and custom being threatened by the enemy without.

One Member of Parliament from northern Mandalay proposed that the government ban marriage between Burmese women and foreigners of a different faith. But since the *Buddhist Dhammathat* did not ban such marriages, the government would not draft this legislation.[63] Foreigners following Buddhism were shown social and legal favour, but when the foreigners' customs conflicted with local customs, the latter took precedence. Every measure was taken to ensure that Burmese Buddhist women would secure their full rights and benefits from marriage to a foreigner.

The government amended the Marriage Act to protect Burmese women who married foreigners, but the government also sent out a crucial message, through the print media, that women could and must protect themselves and their culture and religion. Burmese women began, in this period, to make their domestic

affairs public and to take revenge on errant husbands. For example, one woman wrote about her runaway husband who had taken with him her valuables and possessions: she demanded that he come back and apologize to her before their neighbours; if not, she would divorce him. In another announcement, a woman listed three reasons for disowning her husband, the first being that her husband had sold their joint property without telling her.[64]

Such women who made their divorces public, at a time when divorce was not yet widely accepted, could be seen as participants in modernity, much to the chagrin of nationalist newspapers such as *Bamakhit*, which consistently argued that women should attend to their 'natural' duty, procreation, and let men worry about putting food on the table. As more and more women worked outside the home, *Bamakhit* saw the foundations of traditional marriage, in which women were the home-makers and men were the breadwinners, being shaken, and encouraged women to stay at home and devote themselves to their biological and traditional responsibilities.[65]

But it appeared that women's territory seemed to be expanding on Burma's social landscape. Women authors such as Daw Yi Kyein had radio programmes aimed at women: she broadcast her lectures from 1947 through to the early 1960s and her topics ranged from criticizing pin-up magazine pictures to how to choose a good husband.[66] Her theme was embracing modernity, but within the scope of Burmese tradition. In other words, she supported women working outside the home and saving money to buy modern kitchen sets, but argued against wearing western-style clothes. She advocated the selective adoption of western culture but claimed that her broadcasts were intended to strengthen the moral determination of women and to preserve Burmese culture.[67] Her lectures were, in fact, in line with the Nu government's position that rebuilding the state using foreign models rather than local customs and traditions conducive to Burma's circumstances would reflect the moral inferiority of Burma.[68] But her advice on investing in modern kitchen equipment suggests that she was speaking only to urban, educated women and not to the rural population. With the help of such women champions, the Nu-led AFPFL government was able to portray itself as a promoter of not only women's rights but also Burmese tradition.

Women's organizations were also active in protecting women's rights. If a man married a second time without divorcing his first wife, his second marriage ceremony would be boycotted or met with demonstrations by women groups. When the AFPFL split into Stable and Clean factions, women organizations also split – into the Htabi-Ni (Red Sarong) and Htabi-Wah (Yellow Sarong) factions – to campaign for the respective AFPFL. But more generally the accepted role of a woman – to attend to her husband and children – did not diminish. *Kruschen* salt used the slogan: 'after taking *Kruschen* salt, this housewife who could not fulfil her duties around the house before and was told off by her husband [for neglecting her duties] regained her strength and [became] able to manage the house properly'.[69]

As more women entered the workforce, the manufacturers of contraceptive 'stop-the-child' tablets and tonics began to target career women. 'Freepoor birth

control medicine' produced in Toungoo stated that married teachers, doctors and nurses used the product, so encouraging women to use the medicine their doctors used. Also targeted were women who had many children, who hated children, who were afraid of losing their virginal beauty after marriage and who wanted to save money.[70] The brand's name suggested the modern thinking of its owner – 'free the poor'. More interestingly, all the reasons given above for using 'Freepoor', except the first, emphasized the freedom and beauty of women. Only the first recognized value in motherhood.

The 'Liberty' brand also guaranteed freedom and joy for women. An advertisement for a woman's tonic, 'Wondio', guaranteed complete satisfaction in *lawkithukha*, 'pleasure on earth', or sex.[71] Not only local brands but also imported brands were advertised. Breast enlargement cream was another popular item, and was widely advertised in magazines. Corsets and herbal slimming pills were also well marketed. 'Miss Burma' advertised her book on body building in magazines[72] and a male body builder had a column in *Hanthawaddy*, providing physical exercises for both men and women. In 1950s Burma, self-image was important and means to improve it were widely promoted.

An unprecedented number of girls and young women entered beauty pageants. Beauty pageants became an important mechanism for fund raising, and pictures of beauty pageants appeared on newspaper front pages. Burma attempted to enter the 1960 Miss Universe held in Long Beach, California. But Miss Burma, chosen by the Burmese committee, was rejected by the Long Beach committee since she did not qualify as a 'spinster'. The committee in Burma had allowed her to go forward knowing that she had been forced to marry a soldier at the age of sixteen, but arguing that as she did not give her consent, she had not been legally married. Long Beach disagreed, so making Burma look more liberal than California in terms of its attitude towards women. That news made headlines in *Hanthawaddy* for about a week.

While advertisements for contraceptive pills and women's tonics covered magazines' back pages, models wearing mini-skirts and shorts appeared on the covers. Society's reaction to these images was mixed. Magazines and newspapers obviously welcomed them, since they helped to boost circulation. Some Burmese medicines used advertisements such as 'Want to become a Miss Burma? Then take this medicine'. Others, however, scorned beauty pageants. The cartoonist Maung Sein drew a picture of a woman in a bikini entering a contest sponsored by a cigarette company: addressing the woman, a *Kala*, or Indian who buys and sells scrap metal, says, 'Come to me if they do not use you. I'll use you'. To suggest that an attractive Burmese woman, rejected at a beauty contest, would then find herself involved with an Indian scrap metal dealer was, of course, deeply offensive on many levels. A member of parliament called for a ban on tonics and contraceptive pills since, it was said, they corrupted public morals and Burmese culture.[73]

In terms of beauty ideals, Burmese women seemed to be strongly attracted to the fashions and styles of foreign actresses. Increasing numbers of Burmese women used western cosmetics. They could afford to do so because they were

taking up jobs outside the house, and domestic as well as foreign cosmetics were abundant in the shops. *Lux* soap was advertised with the slogan: 'It is the duty of every woman to look beautiful and charming. Beautify yourself as the world famous Pier Angeli. She uses *Lux* soap always'.[74] *Pond's* cosmetics used a picture of a western girl dressed in a flowing dress; *Snow White* lotion, produced in Burma, used a picture of a Burmese woman dressed as Snow White. Only *Hazeline Snow* used Burmese women in Burmese traditional dress.

Nylon fabric was the most sought-after item of the time. In newspaper pages, anxious parents pleaded with their runaway daughters to return home, promising them fashionable nylon. As women started wearing skin- and body-revealing nylon, their need for skin-improving cosmetics increased: the two markets reinforced each other, and boomed. Nylon even managed to feature in an advertisement for sea fish.

Bo Letya, who created these advertisements, clearly associated nylon with modernity, as eating sea fish was also seen as modern. In his advertisements, women wore nylon, had non-traditional hairstyles, wore high heels and sunglasses and carried handbags, all representations of modernity. Bo Letya's perception of modernity, however, also took in politics. He wanted to project the

Figure 6.9 Miss and an Indian.

Source: *Myawadi*, April 1962.

Figure 6.10 If you consider yourself modern, eat sea fish!

Source: *Shumawa*, February 1955; *Myawadi*, August 1955.

image of a Burma in which its citizens could enjoy cheap commodities and would not be exploited by merchants and middlemen. In one of his advertisements, he guaranteed the residents of Rangoon an abundant supply of sea fish.[75] Fishmongers were frowned upon by traditional Buddhists since their living involved killing on a day-to-day basis, but Bo Letya justified killing fish as it would enable the public to buy fish at a lower price: modernity would secure the public good. He renounced perhaps part – if not all – of his belief in Buddhism in his attempt to embrace this aspect of modernity.

Purchase and possession of foreign goods was the critical measure of wealth and standing. Regular shopping trips to department stores were essential for those among the urban elite who sought to keep abreast of the latest fashion. Items from American nylon to film cameras could be purchased in Burma's department stores in this period. And not only residents of Rangoon or Mandalay had access to such items; those from the rural areas, with sufficient wealth of course, came into the stores on their regular visits to the main cities, and the re-establishment of an effective postal service in the 1950s ensured that even when they did not shop themselves, they could easily order the latest products.

Cigarettes and nylon were the most popular items, as they were symbols of modernity. The cigarette industry targeted women, and in their advertisements used pictures of women smoking cigarettes and men giving their wives cigarette packs as gifts. A picture showing a woman blowing cigarette smoke at a man, who seems to appreciate the smell, was used to promote a brand called 'Hi-Fi'.[76]

In Burmese culture, women are expected to respect men in the household and such behaviour would be deemed socially unacceptable.

In another advertisement, a man is seen introducing a cigarette to a woman, asking, 'Now, you know the taste of *Kapitan*, don't you?' Cigarette companies were targeting both men and women, implying that there were no boundaries in terms of their participation in modernity. The underlying message was that there was nothing women could not do. But why was the man introducing the woman to cigarettes? Was he helping the woman break boundaries between the genders? Did the *Kapitan* advertisement portray independent Burma as an equal society and, if so, was this equality of gender a new characteristic? *The Guardian* newspaper used women in their advertisements. In one, a family of three – father, son, and daughter – were seen reading *The Guardian* newspaper and magazine. But the fact that the mother was not included indicates that older women were not

Figure 6.11 Man guessing the brand of cigarette.

Source: *Myawadi*, January 1961.

part of the English-reading audience, perhaps because few of that generation had received a western education.

Women not only smoked cigarettes but also enjoyed horse-racing and placing bets. In Rangoon, as many as 6,000 people went horse-racing every Sunday in the mid-1950s. Newspapers in Rangoon and Mandalay published racing tips from Tuesday to Sunday. Race-goers gambled on average 800,000 kyats each day with the state gambling agency. Women fully participated in the crowd: they bet, they cheered, they smoked and they drank.[77]

They were not always praised for adopting such modern behaviour. They were often the targets of severe criticism, and some writers held them responsible for the decline in foreign-exchange reserves because of their high spending on foreign cosmetics and clothing. One writer even linked luxury purchases to unruly sexual behaviour such as polygamy and the acquisition of mistresses, and

Figure 6.12 Kapitan cigarette advertisement.

Source: *Myawadi*, January 1958.

advocated a return to basics – that is, a return to cheap, affordable and feel-good local products.[78]

Buying foreign goods and being impressed with foreign beauty was seen by some critics as a severe threat to traditional culture. University teachers asked the student union to control the use of hula hoops and the organization of rock-and-roll dances, saying the university should be free of foreign culture.[79] As indicated earlier, cartoons made fun of the hypocrisy of a Burmese actress who kept her distance from Burmese actors but had an affair with an Indian.

Women having affairs or abortions, or sleeping with foreigners, were popular characters in post-independent popular literature. In a story by a male writer, Mg Si Thu, both husband and wife are polygamist, and they look down on monogamists as living an outdated lifestyle.[80] This story, published in a popular magazine, not only suggested the unconventional practices of some but also highlighted the absence of strict censorship. In 1953 there were 79,600 unmarried men and 45,954 unmarried women in Rangoon: statistically speaking, women could have multiple partners. Tradition insisted that women must regard their marriages as pagodas, which cannot be destroyed once built. But according to writers such as Khin Hnin Yu and Mg Si Thu, women had affairs and challenged Burmese tradition.

But men also betrayed their wives by having mistresses. There is some indication that extra-marital affairs were becoming more common and acceptable. Not only the elites, but also men from lower social classes had, or wished to have, mistresses. In a newspaper section in *Hanthwaddy* titled 'what prompted you to play the lottery?', some winners answered 'to get a second wife' or 'to keep mistresses'.

Extra-marital or pre-marital affairs, but also abortions, featured more prominently in newspapers and novels. Private clinics were common in the early 1950s. In the absence of government measures, women took the issue into their own hands. Figure 6.13 indicates the substantial presence of abortion in post-colonial Burma, though a lack of statistical data makes it difficult to substantiate the point. It is clear, however, that the perceived greater availability of abortion was often interpreted as further evidence of moral decline as a consequence of modernity.

Post-independent Burma was clearly divided over modernity. While many women demanded cigarettes, nylon fabric and contraceptive pills, and business employed images of modern women in newspaper and magazine advertisements, others saw modernity as a threat to nation-building and to the purity of the 'Burman' race and Buddhism. The state played on these divisions. It portrayed itself as a promoter of women's rights by using modern women on the covers of state magazines such as *Myawadi*, but it also organized the Dhamma pageant in which young women reciting Buddhist teachings received awards.

The female writer and radio broadcaster Daw Yi Kyein argued that Burmese women should not simply copy western culture.[81] Independence had brought cultural freedom to Burma and the public had welcomed imported culture, not least American films. But while the public embraced the new experience of

Figure 6.13 Abortion cartoon.

modernity, encouraged by business, there were those – in government and in the public arena more broadly – who sought a measure of protection against foreign influences. Newspaper columns urged women to recognize that Burmese tradition and religion brought feminine beauty, pride and grace. Indeed it was argued, not least by government, that only women who embraced Burmese culture and led their lives according to Buddhist values could be called worthy.[82] *Bamakhit* claimed that women who were faithful to their religion and religious duties would be safe from cultural destruction.[83] The division across Burma's social landscape between those who urged women to embrace modernity and those who saw women as the bulwark against the corruption of Burmese identity in the face of foreign cultural influence was an outstanding feature of the AFPFL years.

Notes

1 *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p. 3.
2 Zawgyi, ရသစာပေအဖွင့်နိဒါန်း [*Introduction to Literature*], 2nd edition, Rangoon: Hnin Oo Lwin, 2004.
3 *Myanma Alin*, 20 March 1956, p. 3.

4 *Bamakhit*, 13 August 1956, p. 3.
5 Zawgyi, op. cit., 2004, pp. 113–146.
6 Benedict Imagined Communities.
7 Nu, *ကြည်ဆောင်စုနီတိ* [*Ethics of the Nation*], Rangoon: Thant Shin AFPFL, 1960.
8 U Ohn Khin, founder of *Bamakhit* newspaper, once claimed that he and *Bamakhit* played a crucial role in securing Nu's victory in the 1960 campaign. Dagon Khin Khin Lay, *နှစ်ပေါင်း ဖြဝ* [*60 Years*], 1961.
9 *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p. 3.
10 *Hanthawaddy*, 12 September 1957, pp. 1, 4.
11 *Bamakhit*, 29 November 1954, p. 3.
12 A. Judson, *Dictionary: Burmese and English*, Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1883. The complete definition is (Pali ခေတ္တ, လယ်, field), n. a field of labour, state, world; a collection of sekya systems or worlds, time, ကာလ။ သုံးပါး။ n. the three kinds of collections or groups of sekya systems or worlds, namely, ဧာတိခေတ်, consisting of ten thousand systems, which are destroyed and reproduced simultaneously; တသောင်းသော လောကဓာတ်တို့သည် ဧာတိခေတ်မည်၏။, consisting of a trillion systems, through which the authority of a Buddh[sic] or deity extends; (အကုဋ္ဌေတသိန်းသော စကြာဝဠာတိုက်သည်ကား အာဏာခေတ်မည်၏။), ဝိသယခေတ်, consisting of the whole infinity of systems which can be reached only by a deity's thought; အတိုင်းအရှည်မရှိသော စကြာဝဠာတိုက်သည်ကား ဝိသယခေတ်မည်၏။ Sekya, the spelling Judson used, is usually referred to as Cakya or Cakka in Pali, meaning Universe. Buddha in the religious texts is often referred to as Cakkavatti, meaning the universal monarch in which hundreds of thousands of worlds could exist.
13 His definition of modern is 'ခေတ်သစ်၊ ခေတ်မှီ၊ နောက်ဆုံးပေါ်'. Literal meanings of these words are 'new time, keeping abreast with the time and the latest'. G. Appleton, *Beginner's English-Burmese Dictionary*, Rangoon: C.L.S Press, 1944, p. 74.
14 Sea fish was regarded as inferior to freshwater fish, and Mattaben company, in their campaign to promote the image and habit of eating sea fish, associated the word 'modernity' with sea fish. For more, see page 240–241.
15 *Bamakhit*, 29 November 1952, p. 2.
16 Standard Number One cigarettes. *Myanma Alin*, 28 December 1955, p. 14.
17 Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 1990, pp. 233–253.
18 Ibid., p. 237.
19 မဏ္ဍိုင်, 7 September 1952, p. 7.
20 Barbara Watson Andaya, 'Historicising "Modernity" in Southeast Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 40(4), 1997, pp. 391–409.
21 *Bamakhit*, 28 September 1953.
22 Ibid., p. 239.
23 J. S. Furnivall, 'Colonial Southeast Asia Instruction or Education', *Pacific Affairs*, 15(1), 1942, pp. 77–89.
24 Anthony Reid, 'Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22(3), 1988, p. 633.
25 Penny Edwards, 'Half-Cast: Staging Race in British Burma', *Postcolonial Studies*, 5(3), 2002, pp. 279–295.
26 *Deedok Journal*, XV(3), 1930.
27 Penny Edwards, op. cit., pp. 282–283.
28 U Khin Maung Tun, *မြန်မာဂျာနယ်သမိုင်း (၁၉၁၉-၁၉၄၁)* [*History of Burmese Journals (1919–1941)*], Rangoon: Hna Lone Hla, 1974, p. 75.
29 A columnist in *Bamakhit* argued that every Buddhist Burmese woman should scrutinize her lifestyle closely, and by doing so, pay respect to their own religion, custom and traditions. *Bamakhit*, 10 October 1955, p. 3.
30 Mya Maung, 'Socialism and Economic Development of Burma', *Asian Survey*, 4(12), 1964, p. 1182.

31 Ibid.
32 *The Pyidawtha Conference, Resolution and Speeches, August 4–17, 1952*, Rangoon, 1952, pp. 44–55, as cited in Frank N. Trager, *Building a Welfare State in Burma 1948–1956*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1958, p. 89.
33 J. S. Furnivall, 'Twilight in Burma: Independence and After', *Pacific Affairs*, 22(2), 1947, p. 159.
34 Ngwe U Down, *စာဝင်္ကပါ* [*Labyrinth of Literature*], Rangoon: Pyinya Alinpya, 1963, p. 137.
35 Burmese for English is အင်္ဂလိပ်, but it is often shortened to လိပ်.
36 Ludu Daw Ama, *ရွှေရိုးဘကလေး* [*Shwe Yoe Bagalay*], 2nd vol, Mandalay: Kyi Pwa Yay, 1969, p. 366.
37 *Myanma Alin*, 19 December 1931, as cited in Ludu Daw Ama, *ရွှေရိုးဘကလေး* [*Shwe Yoe Bagalay*], 2nd vol, Mandalay: Kyi Pwa Yay, 1969, p. 292.
38 For details, see Chapter 2.
39 *Rangoon Daily*, 15 January 1954, p. 1; *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p. 3.
40 Khin Myo Chit, [*Women*], Rangoon: Zun Pwint, 2006, p. 115.
41 Bandoola U Sein, *ကျွန်ပ်တို့အတွင်းရေး* [*Our Secrets*], Rangoon: Yanponkwin, 1946, p. 10.
42 *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p. 3.
43 Bandoola U Sein, op. cit., p. 10.
44 Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s*, Routledge Curzon: London, 2005, p. 49.
45 Ibid.
46 *Deedok Journal*, VIII(34), 1932.
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48 May Ong, *A Selection of Leading Cases in Buddhist Law*, Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1954, quoted in Mya Sein, *Burmese Custom Laws*, 7th ed, Rangoon: Myittamoe, 1978, p. 53. The book was first published in 1926.
49 *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p. 3.
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55 Maung Maung, *Law and Custom in Burma and the Burmese Family*, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963, pp. 70–71.
56 Ibid., p. 71, emphasis added by the author.
57 Ibid., p. 72.
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59 Ibid., p. 60, pp. 384–394.
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61 *Hanthawaddy*, 14 November 1957.
62 Myint Kyi, မြန်မာနိုင်ငံလူမှုရေးကဏ္ဍမှ စာရိတ္တပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာလေ့လာချက်, [Study on Morality in Burma Social Studies], *Tekkatho Pyinnya Padata Journal*, 13(3), 1967.
63 *Hanthawaddy*, 15 December 1960, p. 6.
64 *Hanthawaddy*, 22 July 1950.
65 *Bamakhit*, 10 October 1955, p. 3.
66 Daw Yi Kyain, ပြောပါရစေရှင် [*Let Me Talk*], 1963.
67 Ibid., p. 164.
68 *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p. 3.
69 *Hanthawaddy*, 2 July 1951.
70 *Myawadi*, March 1956.
71 *Myawadi*, September 1956.
72 *Shumawa*, 7(79), 1953.

73 *Rangoon Daily*, 15 September 1954, p. 1.
74 *Myawadi*, March 1962.
75 *Myawadi*, June 1954.
76 Hi-Fi advertisement, *Myawadi*, January 1961.
77 *Shumawa*, 8(89), 1954.
78 Mg Si Thu, 'We Are!' *Shumawa*, 8(91), 1954, pp. 64–67.
79 *Hanthawaddy*, 12 March 1959.
80 Mg Si Thu, 'Endless Things To Praise', *Shumaya*, 8(92), 1955, p. 178.
81 Daw Yi Kyain, op. cit., p. 164.
82 *Bamakhit*, 23 October 1954.
83 *Bamakhit*, 28 September 1953.

7 Marginalized women in the making of the 'Burman' nation*

> Since we have to start from zero, if other countries hit one stride, i.e. if other independent countries hit one stride, we have to try four, five or ten strides. Only then will [we] be equal. I want you all [to] understand very clearly that unless [every country] is equal, this country, albeit free, will have to please everyone and [consequently] become a prostitute country.
>
> General Aung San, 13 July 1947, Rangoon[1]

Burma's independence leader, Aung San, incited his fellow citizens by comparing the nation to those following an 'occupation' any Burmese public speaker would generally avoid – a prostitute.[2] When attempting to encourage his followers, who had gathered to listen to what would turn out to be his final public speech, to have extra determination in rebuilding the country, Aung San deliberately chose the crude word 'prostitute', so that his followers would always remember his message.[3]

His goal was achieved. Many years later, his message was still remembered. Indeed the word 'prostitute' became politically charged, used as a reference to any government's shortcomings. Critics of the post-independent AFPFL government led by Prime Minister U Nu referred to a Burma with few employment prospects and crippling social, economic and political problems, as a 'prostitute' country.[4] His cultural instincts told Aung San that prostitutes were the most reviled individuals in Burma, and he cleverly pitched the word against laziness and unaccountability, traits he deemed would impede progress in nation-building. Moreover, Aung San also sought to encourage his followers to tackle prostitution. Prostitution was an embodiment of all social ills.

A decade later, Prime Minister U Nu followed suit. He highlighted the decline in morality in the country by drawing attention to the rampant prostitution, and called for support for his campaign to make Buddhism a state religion as a way of eradicating social problems.[5] Nu, who defined politics as a holy endeavour which only noble men could undertake, had a tendency to polarize political opinion by

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mixing religion with the secular world. He firmly believed that religion was a silver bullet to remove social ills. In his *Ethics for the Federal State*, in which he laid out codes of conduct for citizens, he defined government as a naturally arising entity to solve conflicts within societies. Government was a spontaneous phenomenon that counteracted the conflicts that arose from human greed. If everyone lived in harmony with Dhamma, government was no longer necessary.[6]

His worldview and political ideology reflected his understanding of Buddhist teaching and his desire, as head of state, to orient government towards sacred rituals. This underpins the central argument of this chapter that prostitution was regarded as a problem whose roots lay in moral corruption, not in socio-economic deprivation: consequently the prescription for this 'moral' problem could be found in the sacred texts of Buddhism, rather than in public handbooks and government blueprints. The attitude of the Nu government towards prostitution arose from the premise that prostitution is a corruption of morality and mind, resulting from a failure to control greed and lust.

Prostitution was a double-edged sword for Burma's political culture. On the one hand, it could tarnish the government's reputation, but on the other it could act as a powerful force for a religiously inclined government such as Nu's to attract support from those concerned with public morality. The Nu government tied prostitution to moral corruption and emphasized that it was not indigenous to Burma but foreign, imported into Burma through colonialism and modernism.[7] Such tactics of refusing to own or institutionalize the problem spared the government the trouble of providing welfare for prostitutes and drafting laws to control prostitution. Also, it gave the government and its media mouthpieces, such as *Bamakhit*, grounds for arguing that the solution lay in embracing one's own native culture and religion and shunning foreign ideologies and practices.

However, the government did invite a commission from the United Nations, possibly in 1958 or 1959, to assess and improve Burma's welfare provision. The commission stayed for nine months and drafted plans. It was perhaps extraordinary that the government had invited a mission from the United Nations, since there were ten local volunteer organizations working on the protection of women and children, the oldest having been founded in 1911. But the government apparently did not deem it necessary to learn from them. The government's own organization, its 'Women Protection Group', looked after 'fallen' women, but only prostitutes working in Rangoon.

A volunteer organization called the 'Burma Women Group' was the only organization besides the government's organization for 'fallen' women, since the remaining welfare organizations did not accept 'corrupt' women.[8] The Burma Women Group was funded by the Rangoon Horse Racing Club and the group's own co-operative.[9] To invite the United Nations mission while ignoring the existing local provision suggests that the government was primarily engaged in a publicity exercise. The presence of a foreign mission gave out a stronger message than merely seeking advice from local bodies. Something big was being done.

The government's print media, including the *Bamakhit* newspaper and *Myawadi* magazine, advocated the spread of Buddhist ideologies to help Burmans become civilized and moral.[10] In the then cultural and political settings of

Burma, prostitution was not seen as a national plight in which women fell victim to poverty, as argued mostly by communists and some women groups, but as a prominent feature of the social landscape that could be manipulated by political leaders to promote Buddhism or to instil nationalism in the economically disadvantaged, as the journal *Deedok* had argued as early as 1930.[11] On the Burmese political stage in the late 1950s, prostitution was a campaign tool used, most notably by U Nu, to highlight the danger of foreign ideologies, to promote Buddhism and to outbid less religious political rivals in the race to power.

Prostitutes as the state's jewel

Though commonly portrayed as vile, corrupt and dirty in the context of Burmese high culture and religion,[12] prostitutes were in fact accepted as essential in the day-to-day functioning of the state according to popular Jakata tales – sources for Buddhist teaching and morality and the Burmese child's equivalent of the One Thousand and One Nights stories. The most common Burmese term for a prostitute is ပြည်သူ့တန်ဆာ, meaning 'decoration' or 'jewel of the country'. Such an autonym suggests that prostitution, contrary to the views expressed in the post-independent print media, was socially accepted and officially endorsed. Prostitutes were important social buffers, diplomatic tools or reliable social agents. There were some Jataka stories in which wives of wealthy men and princes hired prostitutes to comfort their husbands when they, the wives, wanted to conduct meritorious deeds on holy days, during which sexual intimacy was prohibited. Here prostitutes were a temporary substitute for wives, easing marital tensions when conflicts might arise between conjugal and religious responsibilities. Prostitution served a functional requirement in keeping families or social networks intact. Such a role was appreciated by high-status women, since prostitutes secured their responsibilities as good housewives and devout Buddhists. Hence prostitutes were 'jewels'.

The July 1958 cover of *Ludu Pyinya*, a journal published by the government, comprised a drawing of a prostitute and a man, illustrating a Jataka tale. During a drought in ကာလိင်္ဂ (*Karlainga*), the king's astrologers asked the king to bless them with his purity achieved by keeping the five basic precepts of Buddhism,[13] so that they could pray for rain. The king doubted his purity, and recommended his queen to the astrologers. But the queen recommended other members of the family, and the astrologers finally had to ask a prostitute who had been kept waiting by a man who paid her money for sex but did not appear. This prostitute appeared to be regarded as morally pure, since she could have served other men but did not, feeling obliged to wait for the man who had bought her services. The story highlighted the loyalty and purity of the prostitute, who did not solicit other men but continued to wait for the man who had paid her.[14] This prostitute, the most morally pure person in this context, blessed the country with her purity of conduct or *sila*, thereby ending the drought.

Next to the story in the journal was Prime Minister U Nu's message urging citizens not to lead easy and corrupt lives but to keep *sila*, possibly like the prostitute, though she was not mentioned explicitly in his message. The govern-

ment's *Ludu Pyinya* journal did not think it inappropriate to use the example of a prostitute – indeed, it was willing to do so whenever the message suited the political climate. A message repeatedly sent out by the Nu government in the 1950s was that only a religiously strong government could tackle moral corruption such as prostitution.[15] Another underlying message was that the head of state should be a person able to interpret, understand and draw lessons from the Jataka tales and from sacred texts.

Prostitution during the colonial period

When power was transferred from the British to the AFPFL in 1948, the focus of measures against prostitution shifted from being health-oriented to morality-concerned. During the colonial period, prostitution was monitored and prostitutes scrutinized for venereal diseases. There was little discussion about the effect of prostitution on Burmese society; rather the fear was the threat to the welfare of British soldiers. The colonial administration was most concerned about the health and vigour of its troops and the possible contamination of the 'superior' race by disease in general.[16] These were medical rather than moral issues. One further reason why the colonial administration paid little attention to the impact on Burmese society is that there were relatively few Burmese prostitutes. Most prostitutes, certainly those who threatened British troops, were from Bengal and Madras. Moreover, it was largely felt that the administration had prostitution under control through the use of asylums and hospitals.

Prostitution was seen by many Burmese as a problem for other races, especially of Indians, who occupied most of the lowest positions in the economy and society.[17] As a result of rejecting prostitution as a social problem – moreover, considering it a social problem only of others – and seeing it simply as a medical concern, Burmese society was ill-prepared to confront the problem after 1948. During the colonial period, the main concern of government had been to register prostitutes and subject them to periodic examination. Prostitutes were seen as vectors of disease rather than individuals failed by social and economic institutions.

Such an approach was entirely reversed after 1948. Lock hospitals were abolished and prostitutes were not required to register: the government no longer kept annual statistics on the prostitution trade. It was no longer possible to determine progress or regression from the figures on syphilis, gonorrhoea and other venereal diseases. Primary attitudes were also reversed. Prostitution now threatened the nation's morality instead of the health of British soldiers.[18] It was a moral, not a medical, issue.

Prostitution during the Japanese Occupation

Many terms for 'prostitute' had sprung up during the Japanese Occupation, reflecting the fact that during these years prostitution had become rife, particularly in the main urban centres. Those terms included 'ဇိမ်မယ်' 'ဖာ' 'ပခြုပ်သယ်' 'နတ်သမီး' and 'ညဥ့်ငှက်', respectively meaning 'comfort woman', 'traditional

basket', 'traditional basket maker', 'angel', and 'night bird'. These terms were not as glamorous as the old term, 'jewel of the state'. The term 'angel' appears to have reflected not the kind heart of male myth-making but a commercial connection. 'Angel' was a brand of matches, and prostitutes were regarded as fuel for lust. 'Basket' and 'basket maker' were terms thought to have originated from travelling women traders who sold baskets and boxes made of bamboo and palm leaves. These migrant traders might have taken 'easy' jobs while travelling from one village to another, since anonymity protected their identity and kept their occupation secret from parents and families.

Women moving to Rangoon to escape war and then civil war in the countryside, but then becoming prostitutes, was a common phenomenon during and after the Japanese Occupation. In his popular book *Lady Jeep*[19] Thu Kha, a writer and film-maker, wrote about a girl called Sein Kyi, who was a Burmese woman but dressed like a westerner and enjoyed going about town in American open-top jeeps.[20] Sein Kyi had married the Japanese Yamamoto during the Occupation and had enjoyed a lavish lifestyle with abundant supplies of *Padomma* fabrics, material made of nylon that became extremely popular after the war, and other items such as sugar and cigarettes. When her Japanese master fled the country, Sein Kyi was left pregnant, but she had a miscarriage.

When Allied troops arrived in Rangoon in May 1945, Sein Kyi adopted the name Margaret, polished up her English, and befriended new soldiers by visiting their barracks. Soldiers visited her house as well, bringing with them condensed milk, canned fish, cheese, sausages, butter and jam. 'Opportunist' was probably the most fitting term for Sein Kyi, but she was depicted as a high class prostitute by Thu Kha.[21] Despite the vilification of 'modern' women such as Sein Kyi, she could be seen as a victim. Clearly she brought shame on her culture, religion and race, but she was also a victim of consumerism and modernism, which nationalists saw as products of a colonialism that had brought out the hidden 'corrupt' nature of women.[22] Thu Kha, like many writers, had an ambivalent view towards girls like Sein Kyi. Even though he condemned her choice of 'profession', he acknowledged that men, and not only foreign men, were also responsible for the women's occupation.

However, the common view of women such as Sein Kyi is best caught in the following popular verse:

စိန်ကြည်နော်စိန်ကြည်
လင်ယူပက်စက်သည်။
မာစတာနော် တိုကျိုပြန်
ဗိုက်တလုံးနဲ့ကျန်။[23]

The verse can be translated as: 'Miss Sein Kyi, Sein Kyi, how unconscionable you are in taking up a husband. When the master went back to Japan, [here you are] left with a [rotund] belly'. The verse sought not to emphasize the cruelty of the master who left Sein Kyi with his unborn child, but the ruthlessness and insensibility of Sein Kyi herself.

There exists another verse, not as popular as Sein Kyi's, but still more damaging to the image of such women:

တရုပ်လာလဲ ငါတွဲလိုက်မှာ၊
ကုလားလာစ ငါကကြိုက်တာ၊
ဂျပန်လာတော့ ငါနှော့ချင်ရှာ၊
ယော်ရောရှိ ငွိစိ ငွိစိပါ။

This verse paints a picture of a woman who does not discriminate between men but welcomes foreign men, be they Chinese, Indians, or Japanese.[24] This verse – by another popular male writer, Zawana – and the *Lady Jeep* novel were vilifications of Burmese women, especially urban, upper and middle-class women. The writers' attitude towards poor women from the countryside was rather mild. Poverty seemed to have validated them as victims who were worthy of sympathy, whereas urban prostitutes like Sein Kyi were to be rejected, since they were prompted by greed for a luxurious lifestyle rather than poverty.

Lady Jeep and these popular verses identified prostitution as a moral corruption of native women, especially urban, modern women. They strongly suggested that prostitution was a foreign import. It was estimated that after the Japanese Occupation, as many as 6,000 Burmese women were left either pregnant or with children by the Japanese soldiers.[25] *Lady Jeep* brought to the public eye a lasting image of Sein Kyi playing around with foreign men, a gullible but greedy young woman being exploited by foreigners. Figure 7.1 is a sketch of Sein Kyi with a foreign soldier on a jeep.

Popular attitudes toward prostitution after independence

After independence, prostitution was no longer viewed as a medical issue but a moral flaw inflicted by the enemy without – that is, colonization and modernity.[26] Consequently, measures against prostitution became less concrete and more abstract, since they were targeting beliefs and attitudes rather than physical and measurable threats such as venereal disease. Much time and effort were focused on challenging the modernity and capitalism that was said to be corrupting Burmese culture, and more specifically the foreign men who were exploiting Burmese girls. Figure 7.2, although from an earlier era, is indicative of these attitudes.

Here prostitution was portrayed as an outcome of economic injustice, where the rich exploited the poor. Capitalism was culpable, and foreigners compounded the misery of poor women. The issue of prostitution was used as a propaganda tool in nationalist campaigns, maintained throughout the independence movement and into the Nu era. In 1961, seeking to control prostitution in Rangoon,[27] the *Htun Daily* newspaper suggested the deportation of foreigners who were trafficking Burmese women to India. The *Bamakhit* newspaper in 1955 pointed out that one objectionable aspect of prostitution in Burma was the influence of foreign cultures on Burmese culture. The editor argued that if Burma adhered to

Figure 7.1 The cover picture of Thu Kha's *Lady Jeep*. Here Sein Kyi is seen in sheer blouse, curly hair and hat, i.e. clothing and accessories of western style, trying to put a cigarette into a topless foreign soldier's mouth.

Source: Thu Kha, *Lady Jeep*, Rangoon: Chan Tha, n.d.

Burmese culture, literature and customs, society would not face such a major problem in prostitution. The editor further argued that prostitution was the result of Burma being forced to interact with foreigners – in other words, of colonialism.[28]

Some leftist writers saw the problem of prostitution in terms of class struggle. Daw Ama argued that the rich enjoyed luxury imported goods, and thereby set a bad example for the poor.[29] Not only foreign goods but also foreign ideologies fuelled lavish lifestyles, disrupting traditional social values.[30] There are echoes here of Furnivall's earlier observation that colonial officials '[set] an example of lavish personal expenditure and the import policy encouraged the mass of the people to emulate them'.[31] All this suggested that the blame did not lie within Burma, but had been brought to the country by outsiders. Public attention was directed towards modernity and those individual women who were discontented with their lives, pursuing luxurious lifestyles that were incompatible with Buddhist teachings. In contrast, the Communist Party mouthpiece *Pyithu Arnar* [People's Power] argued that prostitution was a consequence of the government's dysfunctional economic system.[32]

Figure 7.2 Fates of poor girl. 'Wealthy Burmese snared poor women with money. Since the rich left the poor women ruthlessly once they were satisfied, [poor women] got into the hands of Chinese and Indians. Once they were satisfied, they then again kicked these women out maliciously and without any consideration. [Poor women] fell into disgraceful lives'.

Source: *Deedok*, 1 February 1930, p. 2.

High regard for Burmese culture and Buddhism compelled the editor of *Bamakhit* to exclude the view that prostitution could be part of Burmese culture, and indeed had been a social and political tool widely used by Burmese kings.[33] Even though *Ludu Pyinya*, a government propaganda journal during the Nu era, used a tale of a prostitute positively to encourage readers to adopt moral behaviour,[34] it was far more common to argue that prostitution did not have a place in Burmese high culture.

A quite different approach was taken by the *Rangoon Daily*. This newspaper explained the prevalence of prostitution in terms of poverty, the absence of strict control and the influence of foreign culture. The *Rangoon Daily* echoed the concerns of the Burmese Women Association and the Burmese Women Protection Group, which claimed that prostitution mirrored current economic circumstances. The failure of the government to create sufficient jobs was the core cause, although the women's groups believed that middle- and upper-class prostitutes were drawn into the profession by their corrupt morality rather than poverty.[35]

Thein Pe, a politician and writer, argued that during the Japanese Occupation, many women stepped outside their traditional world to seize the opportunities created by the chaos of the time. A woman trader in Rangoon bribed the Japanese station master by agreeing to have sex with him in return for exclusive rights to transport her goods by train, with the consent of her husband. Small traders from other towns made small fortunes by similar methods. If 'normal' practices would not put food on the table, and when all other opportunities were exhausted, perhaps these women and their families had little choice.[36]

Thein Pe Myint wrote a short story called ငွေစိန်လှော်လှော်ရင်းတက်ကျိုးခြင်း, which literally means 'Ngwe Sein broke the oar while rowing', but metaphorically stands for 'Ngwe Sein lost all means of survival while trying very hard to make ends meet'. In the story, Ngwe Sein, who made a living as a street vendor with the help of her husband, lost her shop as well as her husband, who was locked in the police cells for not having a business license. In an attempt to bail her husband out of the cells, Ngwe Sein slept with the policemen.[37] Thein Pe's stories reflected the sacrifices made by women during and after the war: some became prostitutes to prevent their families from starving to death. The views of Thein Pe and the *Rangoon Daily* on prostitution were reflected in a cartoon by Ba Gyan, shown in Figure 7.3.

In Figure 7.3, the cartoonist places prostitutes into four categories: those who became prostitutes after their means of living were destroyed; those who joined the profession because their families became destitute – depicted by a woman with a crying, hungry child in the cartoon; those who were lured into the trade by 'bad' friends; and women who could not restrain their lust and became prostitutes – depicted by the woman behind the bars harassing a policeman. The cartoonist claimed that it was easy to rescue the first three types of woman, but rescuing the fourth type was difficult. Ba Gyan's categories resembled an analysis in the *Rangoon Daily*, in which the editor laid out the attributes of prostitution: the willingness of the woman, poverty and being lured into the trade.[38] Neither Ba Gyan nor the *Rangoon Daily* saw modernity as one of the causes of prostitution, as claimed by *Bamakhit*. Ba Gyan saw lust as a possible reason for prostitution – a rare public comment. Even though lust was often discussed, women's indulgence and lust were considered taboo subjects in Burmese society.

Writer, editor and publisher, Ludu U Hla recorded the lives of prison inmates when he himself was imprisoned by the Nu AFPFL government for libel. According to his *Prison Gate after the War*, a destitute woman whose mother had died from lack of medicine and food left her village for Pegu, a city fifty miles north of Rangoon, in the hope of making a better life. But the house in which she spent one night turned out to be a brothel and she was forced to learn the trade. The fact that a lodging house turned out to be a brothel highlighted the scale of the problem.[39] The *Myama Alin* newspaper also reported that young women from the countryside in southern Burma took refuge from the civil war in Moulmein, but found themselves working as prostitutes to make ends meet.[40] Such reports suggested that the main cause of prostitution was poverty and the failure to provide for the welfare of poor women. The president of the Women's Association,

Figure 7.3 Four different types of prostitute.

Source: *Bamakhit*, 23 January 55, p. 1.

Daw Khin Hla, also argued that the government was neither providing sufficient employment for women nor introducing strict measures to control prostitution. This and the damaging influence of foreign culture explained the continuing presence of prostitution in Burma.[41]

On the other hand, the communist newspaper *Pyithu Journal* [People's Journal] believed that prostitution existed mainly because of rampant poverty. The female writer Pegu Ma Khin Lay argued in the *Phyithu Journal* in 1956 that the government was solely responsible for the rise in the number of prostitutes after independence. The mainstream communist view that the government had failed to create an egalitarian society free of exploitative bourgeoisie and capitalists was reflected in her analysis that women's circumstances had worsened under the

AFPFL government. She also argued that unless the system was changed and women were incorporated into the nation's industrial sector, women would never be free.[42]

But *Myanma Alin* newspaper argued that since only women of good birth were appointed prostitutes by the kings, according to the Jataka tales, it was clear that prostitution in Burma was not always related to poverty. While many newspapers, especially anti-government newspapers, and women's groups agreed that poverty and the civil war were mainly responsible for prostitution, they also held modernity and colonialism responsible. Both rich and poor countries around the world had prostitutes, the editor argued, and thus it was evident that prostitution was not caused by poverty alone.[43]

A government commission on prostitution, led by a senior civil servant and judge U Aung Tha Gyaw, was formed in 1955. The commission was to investigate whether prostitution should be stamped out or institutionalized. The commission asked reporters and the public for their views.[44] Four months later, the commission reported that literacy, morality, modernity, nationalism, the legacy of colonialism and poverty each played a part in explaining why women became prostitutes.[45] But there is no evidence that the commission submitted a final report to the government, or anything other than these preliminary findings.

The proposal that prostitution might be institutionalized angered some newspapers, which saw prostitution as bringing shame on Burmese culture. The fact that poverty was last in the list of causes of prostitution challenged the views consistently reported by women's groups working closely with prostitutes. The commission does not seem to have been able to finish its investigation due to a lack of funding from the government. Perhaps government priorities had shifted to other issues. When this government-sponsored investigation was terminated, the prospect of government action faded. However, newspapers and magazines continued to discuss the problem.

There was a range of views. *Bamakhit* mostly blamed women for their inherently vile nature, leading them to choose to become prostitutes. In other words, *Bamakhit* reinforced the long-held view of male editors and writers that women, the untrustworthy sex, were capable of disgraceful behaviour. At the opposite end was the Burma Communist Party's *Pyithu Journal*, which claimed that inequality and the few opportunities available for women under the AFPFL government were responsible for the destitution of women, and their consequential slide into prostitution. In the middle were *Myanma Alin*, the *Rangoon Daily* and the women's groups which, with varying emphases, offered explanations for prostitution that embraced many factors. *Bamakhit* was mostly concerned with moral reform. Other voices sought improved welfare provision to protect vulnerable, poor women.

Religion: the magic bullet?

One of the most vehement critics of the government's attitude to prostitution was U Htun Pe, founder of the *Htun Daily* newspaper and the Servants of the People Organization (Burma), Minister of the Press from 1948 to 1951 and Minister of

Culture from 1952 to 1953. He left the cabinet in 1953 after challenging the leadership of U Nu.[46] He criticized the government in his *Htun Daily* in August 1961, arguing that it could not pretend that everything was normal and peaceful simply by saying that the sounds of prayer permeated the air. He argued that unless the government tackled economic problems, prostitution could not be controlled.[47] In other words, he was pressing the government to acknowledge that prostitution was a consequence of economic failure, and to recognize that it would be brought under control through economic reform rather than by enforcing religiosity. U Htun Pe, a former cabinet member in the AFPFL government, rejected U Nu's approach that saw religion as a magic bullet for social ills.

Under the Nu government, Buddhism was pushed centre stage. For example, to help curb soaring crime in Rangoon, the *Myoma* or president of the central police force, U Hla, and his chairmen decided that every police station should gather on the waxing and waning days of the moon to recite Buddhist sutras to warn off demons and unforeseen dangers.[48] When drafting an ideological statement on communism and socialism for the armed forces in 1956, former communists and socialists were asked to prepare their draft within the context of a Buddhist society.[49] Also, to inspire Buddhist culture in young women, the committee for promoting religion and morality held *Dhamma* pageants in which the women who scored the highest in reciting sutras were awarded Miss Dhamma, with their pictures published on the front pages of newspapers.[50]

Marriage laws were amended in 1954 to protect Buddhist Burmese women who had married men of a different religion. Buddhist nuns, rather than school teachers, were viewed by public reformers such as Saw Monyin as best able to reach out and shape young women to become model citizens.[51] Newspaper editors, especially the *Bamakhit* editor, encouraged the public to adopt ideologies based only on Buddhism and Burmese culture so as not to feel morally inferior.[52] Attempts by the print media to solve social problems by means of faith were best summed up in Furnivall's observation on post-independent Burma: 'Hampered by the limitations of their education and environment, men had to find a speedy solution for a wide range of problems of which many seemed almost insoluble'.[53]

Of all the impromptu attempts to fix the nation's manifold problems, making Buddhism a state religion was the boldest, and was not without its supporters. Newspapers such as *Bamakhit* helped the government disseminate the important message that only Buddhism had the answer to a moral problem such as prostitution. Prostitution became an area where religion and politics were intertwined, much to the annoyance of anti-government opinion, most notably the *Htun Daily* newspaper, the communists and non-Buddhist groups. To them, *Bamakhit*, on behalf of the government, was misleading the public into believing that prostitutes were the perpetrators of moral crimes rather than victims of incompetent government.

One female writer, Dagon Khin Lay Nwe, supported the view that women were the ones to blame for prostitution.[54] *Bamakhit* newspaper played an important role in helping the government pursue its agenda of purifying the nation by declaring Buddhism the state religion. The newspaper's stance on moral issues

reflected the attitude not only of the editor, U Ohn Khin, but also that of his close friend, Prime Minister U Nu. *Bamakhit*, which was printed on yellow pages – U Nu's campaign colour at the 1960 election – gave substantial space to prostitution issues.

Also, through the issue of prostitution, the government drew the nation's attention to the economy, in which foreigners still held a large stake.[55] *Bamakhit* newspaper stated that since Chinese and Indian businessmen had come to monopolize the nation's economy, Burmans had slipped to become beggars at best and prostitutes at worst, and the country was set to become a 'prostitute' country, as Aung San had predicted.[56] Apart from blaming external factors such as foreigners and modernity, little practical action was taken to tackle prostitution, even though the problem was threatening the health of the people of Rangoon. Prostitutes were clearly visible at the major landmarks of the city. Aung Bala, a writer, noted that visitors coming out of the central railway station could see prostitutes soliciting men on and under the footbridge nearby.[57]

It was reported in the *Rangoon Daily* in the late 1950s that as much as 15 per cent of civil servants screened for venereal disease had tested positive.[58] Among the general population, the figure was 20 per cent.[59] As much as 18 per cent of the Rangoon police force tested positive, which caused police officers to stage a protest against blood tests![60] It was estimated by the *Rangoon Daily* newspaper that immediately after the Second World War, the incidence of venereal diseases had soared, mainly through the presence of foreign troops.[61] Screening centres were set up in various locations in Rangoon as well as in other major cities throughout the country, from Myitkyina in the north to Moulmein in the south. After malaria, venereal diseases posed the greatest challenge to the nation's health. The government estimated that as many as one in four people could contract venereal disease in the cities, whereas in the countryside, the number was one in ten. Even though the government set aside Rs.35 lakhs to fight these diseases in the early 1950s,[62] there are no reports to indicate that the money was actually spent.

There were debates as to whether prostitutes should be confined to separate wards or zones. The seclusion camp argued that prostitutes brought shame and disgrace to ordinary people, and therefore that prostitution should be excluded from residential areas. Also, seclusion would allow for better facilities and easier control. But others argued that establishing a 'red light' area would bring unwelcome attention to the existence of prostitution and could well encourage the trade.[63] At one point the *Rangoon Daily* proposed that sexual frustration could be leading married women into prostitution, in which case the solution would be to provide assistance for these women's sexual difficulties.[64] Harsher punishments for pimps as well as prostitutes were favoured over providing greater welfare support for women.[65] Welfare was rarely seen as part of the solution.

In terms of legal action, only seventy-two prostitutes were imprisoned in 1951, thirty-two in 1952 and twenty-six in 1953. In 1956, the 1949 prostitution act was amended to allow a maximum sentence for prostitution of three years, the sentence being served in a rehabilitation centre instead of prison, the abolition of fines for prostitution and the introduction of a requirement that men

found with a prostitute would be sent for blood tests. The welfare minister argued that these amendments reflected concern for the welfare of the women. But a woman MP, Dr. Daw Mya Si, argued that women were being forced into prostitution not by poverty but by exploitative men. She wanted men found with prostitutes to receive prison terms of between one and three years.[66] The chief judge, Dr. Aye Maung, and others argued that stiffer sentences would not solve the problem.[67]

The question of who should be prosecuted had long been debated in the media. As early as 1935, the *Deedok* journal had published letters from male readers in which it had been suggested that prostitutes should be spared prosecution but their pimps should be severely punished. It was argued that the pimps were responsible for luring poor women into the trade.[68] The *Kyemon* newspaper published a letter by a female reader in which she argued that the failure of women's organizations to tackle prostitution was largely explained by the protection provided to the pimps by corrupt policemen. It was impossible to prosecute pimps because they bailed each other out, on the recommendation of the police, who also tipped off the pimps when raids were to occur.[69]

Figure 7.4 depicts the failures of the system. In this figure, the first policeman says: 'Sir, I arrested these two prostitutes from the hotel'. The second policeman replies: 'You were arrested just the other day and the court fined you Rs.30 each, did it not? Why today again?' To this question, one of the prostitutes replies: 'Brother, we had to pay the fine with the money borrowed from somebody. So to pay that money back, we had to work overtime. If we don't get the money, are you going to pay us out of your own pocket?'

Figure 7.5 offers another cynical view of the failure of measures against prostitution. In the cartoon, a young man is giving a tour to an old man visiting his country. The young man says to the visitor that measures have been put in place to tackle venereal diseases, pointing out the policemen bringing in two arrested

Figure 7.4 Prostitution cartoon: What can you do to help us, Sir?

Source: U Phyauk Sate, 'Overtime', *Bamakhit*, 18 August 1952, p.1.

Figure 7.5. Measures have been taken!

Source: Hanthawaddy, 11 December 1951.

prostitutes, who seem nonchalant even under arrest, and young men who have contracted venereal disease being given shots. But the visitor sees a man handing out receipts and asks his host what they are for. The host replies: 'He is the pimp. He is informing the customers that new prostitutes have arrived and taking advanced payments'. The cartoon makes clear that arrests and medical interventions had failed. This may explain the emphasis on religious campaigns against moral corruption – nothing else had worked.

The view that prostitution was a moral corruption brought on by foreign ideologies and modernity was strongly used by the government in its campaign against prostitution. The government and leading print media such as *Bamakhit* fuelled each other's stands. *Bamakhit* argued that the nation's morality was under threat after long decades of colonialism.[70] The government responded with the view that Buddhism and Burmese culture were the foundations for action to tackle social problems, including prostitution. *Bamakhit* won the support and trust of the government, while the *Rangoon Daily* and *Mirror* were shut down by the government when they published anti-government views.[71] Instead of

investing resources in tackling prostitution, the government emphasized religion as a panacea for social ills. Those who attacked this approach could be branded as traitors. *Myawadi* published articles every month in the late 1950s arguing that communists were a threat to Buddhism, and thus to the nation.

Whereas the colonial government had blamed the local prostitutes for destroying the health and vigour of British soldiers and threatening British racial supremacy and prestige, the Burmese government held modernity or foreignness responsible for this moral corruption. Since the cause was the enemy without and could not be attacked directly, the government sought to uplift Burmese morality by means of religion. While the colonial government had treated prostitutes as impure and tried to cleanse them by means of medical intervention, the independent Burmese government sought to purify their corrupt morality by means of religious intervention. Prostitutes were a threat to the health and racial supremacy of the British, but to the morality of the Burmese. In both cases, rescuing women and rehabilitating them was not the priority. The image of the British Empire and Buddhist Burma took precedence over the welfare of prostitutes.

The emphasis on constructing stronger moral defences against undesirable social ills such as prostitution suggested two things – that Burmese women were seen as central to the problem, rather than institutional contexts such as poverty, and therefore that the solution to the social ill would lie in changing the perspectives and behaviour of women, and that there was little faith in the ability of the AFPFL government to take practical measures to control prostitution. The emphasis on simplistic moral solutions, the belief in the magic bullet of religion, also reflected the paucity of well-informed readers who could debate the issues clearly and rationally.

Newspaper-publishing cities such as Rangoon and Mandalay had regular newspaper readers, but newspaper circulation in 1961 was 55,094, against a total population of 22.78 million. If we multiply the circulation by five – an average family size – the number of newspaper readers was 275,470, or 1.2 per cent of the total population.[72] Only one person in one hundred had direct access to newspapers. The poor transport infrastructure partly explained this weak reader base. For example, it took two days for a town 400 miles from Rangoon to receive newspapers and magazines printed in Rangoon. Mail delivery took five days to a town 130 miles from Rangoon: even by plane it took three or four days.[73] The weak readership base weakened the potential to challenge government information and approaches on this and other issues.

The year 1955 was a turning point in the U Nu administration's view towards prostitution and other pressing issues. A new party emerged in Burma politics. The party was called the Republican Party, and one of its founders was Thakin Ba Thoung, founder of the Dobama Asiayone or the We Burman Association. The party endorsed Buddhism as the state region: there were calls by monks after the Sixth Theravada Buddhist Council for U Nu to make a similar endorsement,[74] but he argued that such an endorsement could jeopardize national unity and invite intervention from foreign countries with different faiths.[75] But then U Nu finally agreed to make Buddhism the state religion. In 1958, the AFPFL split into

the Nu-Tin led Clean Party and the Swe-Nyein led Stable Party. The latter was more socialist-inclined. In the same year, the Buddhist Democratic Party was founded by a number of senior politicians, one of whom was Burma's second premier U Pu. The new party pledged to listen to the leading monks and make Buddhism the state religion. Following this commitment, the Union Head Monks Association demanded the AFPFL explain why there had been no action toward making Buddhism the state religion.[76] U Nu promised six months before the 1960 election that his party would make Buddhism the state religion, if elected.

One event suggests why U Nu finally agreed to establish Buddhism as the state religion. In Mandalay, dissatisfied with the government's inaction on prostitution, monks had caned prostitutes and pimps. This horrified the Buddhist nation.[77] Monks, who were expected to disengage themselves from secular affairs, had acted in an entirely un-Buddhist manner. But prostitution was now brought fully to public attention and the government pledged to act to cleanse the nation. The government could not afford to ignore the cause of the monks' action, while perhaps shocked by the action itself. And by proposing a moral regeneration through Buddhism, the monks would be further placated. U Nu's Clean Party enjoyed a landslide victory in 1960, its Buddhism campaign being vital against Nu's less religious rivals. But the problem of prostitution had been caught between politics and religion, and it had never been tackled in a practical manner. It had become simply an issue to fuel campaigns against foreign influences and modernity and to reconstruct Burmese morality through Buddhism.

The contemporary landscape of prostitution: Modern classifications of sex workers[78]

There are at least eight different types of sex workers: *A Pone* အပုံး meaning married women working as sex workers without the knowledge of their husbands and others, hence the term *a pone* or hidden; *A Pwint*, or အပွင့်, meaning 'opened' or 'flowered' and referring to sex workers once in the closet but now out. Sex workers working in brothels can be generally included in this category; *Ka-ka*, or ကက, which is an acronym of ကြိုက်ကုန်း, referring to women who have sex freely with the men they like;[79] home-based sex workers;[80] KTV, or Karaoke TV-station and massage-parlour-based sex workers;[81] street-based sex workers; 'living-together';[82] and sponsored girls.

The spectrum is rather broad – on one end there are destitute married women who have to prostitute themselves to bring in extra income for their families, and on the other there exists girls with talents who get generous sponsorship from rich businessmen. One model girl boasted of her shopping sprees in foreign countries in a local interview; after that interview, many readers were quick to link her to one of the country's top businessmen and a new euphemism was added to the Burmese language corpus – စပွန်ဆာရှာ, whose literal meaning is 'to look for a sponsor'. 'Sponsor', in this case, is understood as someone who would offer long-term support to a young girl, often with a talent, in exchange for sex.

It is intriguing to note that there exist as many as eight different categories for female prostitution and one has to ask whether these classifications reflect the society's attitude towards sex, especially pre- and extra-marital sex. According to one survey in which an INGO staff member drove around Rangoon one night and counted prostitutes – that is, women found during kerb crawling – there are as many as 2,000 prostitutes on the streets of Rangoon. Sex workers I interviewed also guessed that there has been a rise in the number of sex workers, though these anecdotes are difficult to confirm due to the difficulty in obtaining actual statistical data in this industry. If the number of sex workers is on the rise and if there exist as many as eight categories for different types of sex workers, one may generally conclude that prostitution is rampant, at least in cities such as Rangoon.

There seems, however, to be an immense gap between social norms and the reality. Burmese society still considers prostitution to be a pollution of morality and a disgrace to the society and Buddhism. But prostitution is very broadly defined now. Prostitution in the twenty-first century resembles prostitution in the 1950s, during which the entertainment industry was booming. Stories about hotel waitresses accompanying their guests after their shift were abundant during the 1950s, and these hotel waitresses are synonymous with today's Karaoke girls. The socialist government banned such activity in the 1960s–80s. The beginning of the 'market economy' during the 1990s reintroduced the entertainment industry, a sector in which young women become key players. But it is interesting to note that the attitude towards prostitution remains conservative, and women who have sex with men they like and singers who seek 'sponsors' are regarded as prostitutes.

Twenty first-century prostitution in Burma involves women from very different backgrounds. Married women from poor families have to prostitute themselves without the consent and knowledge of their husbands to bring in more income, but women with a talent seem to have 'prostituted' themselves, either to one or a selected few patrons, perhaps to sustain their lifestyles. The most vulnerable group of all is the street-based sex workers. One of them told me that their work model is ကိုယ်ဖြစ်ကိုယ်ခံ၊ ကိုယ်ရကိုယ်ယူ – 'you are responsible for yourself, and you take your own earnings' – reflecting their independent spirit in not wanting to work with the pimps in the brothels, who could potentially protect them from clients and the police but who would also take the majority of their earnings, sometimes up to 80 per cent.

Street-based workers could work their way up: one sex worker told me that after working for seven or eight years, she now has a small pool of regular clients who call her when they want to 'meet'. She is married but her husband, who is a cycle-taxi driver,[83] can only bring in 3,000 kyats per day – equivalent to approximately US$3 – and sometimes he cannot bring in any money at all. A sex worker working in a brothel is often expected to serve up to twenty clients a day, earning as little as 500 kyats per client, equivalent to 50 cents. Those with regular clients can earn up to 20,000 kyats per 'meeting' and they prefer to work on their own, often sharing clients with each other.

Sex workers with regular clients are known as 'having a choice' – in their terms, ဘိုင်ဆွဲ – and before they are able to reach this status, they have moved in and out of brothels and worked on the streets. They also travel to border towns such as Muse and often stay in Ruili, a border town on the China side, for one or two months. From one visit, which could last up to two months, they could save up to 200,000 kyats or US$2,000. In Muse, pimps take 50 per cent of the earnings, and sex workers make between 1,000 to 2,500 kyats per customer. For an individual session lasting up to three hours, they are expected to make 30,000 kyats per session.

Of the four sex workers I interviewed, one was sold twice to two Chinese men by her own mother, once in Rangoon and once in Ruili. One became a sex worker after her family could not pay the family debt and she decided to help them. The latter said it is easy to blame sex workers for 'loose morality', but people must find out why they became sex workers in the first place and trace the root causes of all the problems – such as poverty and daughters not being valued in the family.

Sex workers' attempts to claim their space in the Burmese social landscape

A newly formed women group entered the social landscape of Burmese women in April 2011. This group is called the SWIM (Sex Workers in Myanmar) network, and is the very first support group for sex workers in Burma.[84] A year after its inception, SWIM could be seen to be gradually transforming itself from a local support group into the main representative body of all sex workers, undertaking various activities from providing alternative livelihood training to seeking legal representation for sex workers.

Under its umbrella, thirty self-help groups (SHGs) have been formed, working across the country and representing sex workers in twelve districts, with approximately 1,000 members. The main activities of the SHGs include educating sex workers on safe sex, providing condoms to sex workers and protecting sex workers from police harassment, but their ultimate aim is to help eradicate prostitution, which is indeed intriguing – why would sex workers want to help eliminate their own profession? However, in September 2012, the president of SWIM told journalists that SWIM would lobby MPs to legalize prostitution.

SWIM seems to be sending out mixed messages: on the one hand, it wants its members' trade legalized; on the other, given the largely negative public reactions towards the women and their trade, it does not believe this is feasible, and some members have spoken about abolishing their trade altogether. Working towards legalizing their trade paints the image of sex workers as powerful and self-confident, having their own voice and being able to project it. But this is true only for the few top leaders of SWIM, and the rest of the sex workers feel that they have little or no voice. The SWIM president also said that only when more people accept them will they be able to lobby for legalization, and they are concerned that their demands would be rejected on the grounds of Burmese culture.

When one of Burma's leading journals, *The Voice Weekly*, published a story about the president of SWIM lobbying for legalization, 341 readers commented on the news on its Facebook page[85] – a place where lively debates often take place – and two camps clearly appeared, arguing for and against legalization. The pro camp uses women's rights, exploitation of labour, HIV/AIDS and sexual diseases as reasons to build their arguments for legalization, whereas the anti camp states that if prostitution is legalized, Burma would become a country like Thailand, bringing disgrace to the culture and Buddhism. A Buddhist country should not have legalized prostitution, some argue. Aung San's analogy of a prostitutes' country is again quoted, this time by the anti-legislation camp, to highlight that legalization will make Burma famous for all the wrong reasons. This camp also argues that prostitutes are morally corrupt and lazy creatures, not wanting to seek 'honest' jobs with low pay. Legalization will only make matters worse and more young boys will be misled, the anti-camp emphasized. They argue that good women will also be corrupted and that Burma should not copy western countries' standards and codes of conduct in demanding legalized prostitution.

Half a century after they first appeared, the debates featured in newspapers such as *Bamakhit* and *Htun Daily* in the 1950s have migrated to Facebook pages, but in essence the arguments remain the same. The pro-legislation camp is concerned with health and, now, the rights of the sex workers, whereas the anti-legislation camp is more concerned with morality, religion and culture. To the latter, legalization will inevitably portray Burmese culture as morally corrupt and Buddhism as a religion that condones the sex trade. Modern debates surrounding prostitution have not departed from the binary of purity and morality. Curiously lacking in these debates, however, is any discussion on if and how males' 'charisma', or accumulated merit, or *hpon* has continued to shape the understanding of women's work as inferior to men's, and hence the female-dominated prostitution trade as unworthy of the nation's attention and rigorous debate.[86] Some readers argue that Burma is facing many other problems at the moment, and emphasis on prostitution and on 'bad women' is grossly misguided.

Amidst these often heated debates, reality reflects that sex workers face the gravest forms of discrimination in Burmese society. The daughter of a sex worker was raped in early 2012 in Mawlamyaing (Moulmein), a town in southern Burma, but police refused to file the case when the mother reported the rape, arguing that both mother and daughter had consented to sex. Members of SWIM's central executive are under pressure from the local SHGs to take action to support the girl in Mawlamyaing. Yet as they are unregistered, and as it is likely that they will never get registered status as an NGO, sex being a taboo subject and prostitution regarded as a moral sin in this Buddhist country, SWIM face a mountain of challenges to bring their plight into the public consciousness and demand equal protection in the eyes of law.

SWIM members listed many obstacles which they face as a network. Though prostitution is rampant, it is hidden, and sex workers are one of the most persecuted public groups. Police forces have certain targets to meet, and arresting

sex workers for soliciting sex seems to be one of the easy targets to tick off their list. It is often street sex workers, who work independently of pimps and brothel owners, who bear the brunt of these arrests, as the latter often tip off the police. A woman found with condoms could be arrested, although condoms could not be presented as evidence of arrest in court. SWIM members, especially those in the ranks, are aware of this legal procedure, but are not yet able to challenge the police tactics.

Police who arrest sex workers often warn them that they will have to confess their 'crime' in court in exchange for a lesser sentence of one year; if they deny the charges, they could be given a maximum of three years. Sex workers therefore almost always have to confess their 'crime', but in some cases their parents and relatives have to bail them out – something that sex workers dread, as most of them keep their work secret from their families. Sex workers therefore tend to do everything in their power to escape during the police raids, which are often planned around the deadlines for 'targeted' cases to be reported. There are incidents of sex workers jumping into wells or jumping off ships during police raids, resulting in some cases in fatality or injury.

SWIM members are aware of the CEDAW (Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) and national laws; they point out that even though Burma acceded to the CEDAW conventions in 1997, the laws are not applicable to protect sex workers, as the national rhetoric is to uphold the unique tradition of Burmese culture that provides equal privilege and status to women and men. The overwhelming message of the MNCWA (Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs) is that Burmese women are not only protected by law and customs but are also treated as having equal status to men. This reference to women, however, includes only 'good' women. 'Bad' women, who bring disgrace to the beautiful nation, are excluded. Burmese reports to CEDAW published in 2007 proudly claim that 'the uniqueness of Burmese women is that they have humility and grace';[87] in this official narrative, humility and grace could be broadly defined as humility in terms of dressing modestly and not revealing one's flesh, and grace in terms of restraining oneself from indulging in bodily pleasures, including sex. Sex workers are the antithesis of the dual uniqueness which Burmese women are claimed to possess, and the rape case in Mawlamyaing highlights the fact that legal practices are being overshadowed by the prevailing prejudice held against the 'fallen' women, women who are seen to have fallen from grace and humility.

The authors of the CEDAW reports refer to tradition to support maintaining the status quo or to justify the view that no action needs to be taken to change the 'equal' status which women enjoy, even despite cases of rape in which the victims have to carry the babies to term, since it is punishable by law to abort the foetus. According to the report,

> Even though Burmese women who were left pregnant from rape sued the rapists under section 376 of the law, they did not tend to abort the babies but took care of the pregnancy and give birth according to the tradition and according to the section 312, which bans abortion if it is not to save life.[88]

The authors felt that tradition is as important as section 312 of the law in deterring women from aborting children, even if they are carrying their rapist's child. The authors emphasized the seemingly kind or forgiving nature of the Burmese to justify their decision that no action is needed to legalize abortion, even for victims of rape, as women traditionally do not want to kill any kind of life. By depicting abortion as something against tradition, the very women who are supposed to protect women uphold practices that restrict women's choices or even criminalize women who want to abort a rapist's child. The CEDAW report also highlights that women who want an abortion are not only carrying out an illegal action but also betraying tradition, as the report repeatedly argues that traditions guarantee protection and equality for women.

Trafficked women

Prostitution and human trafficking are often linked. Chart 7.1 shows the number of trafficked women from each state (or division) between 2006 and 2009.[89]

The total number of all trafficked persons was 458 between 2006 and 2009, according to Government Statistical Office (CSO) data – but according to a report in *Weekly Eleven Journal* (*WEJ*), 2,700 people were rescued between 2006 and 2011.[90] But for the 2009 data alone, the two sets of data – government and *WEJ* – are different by four times: CSO reported that there were 155 trafficked persons, whereas *WEJ* reported 733 persons being trafficked in 2009 alone. A director general at the CSO warned me of the conservative nature of their data, and it is likely that the CSO does not report the full trafficking figures, whereas the *WEJ* can report the data less conservatively.

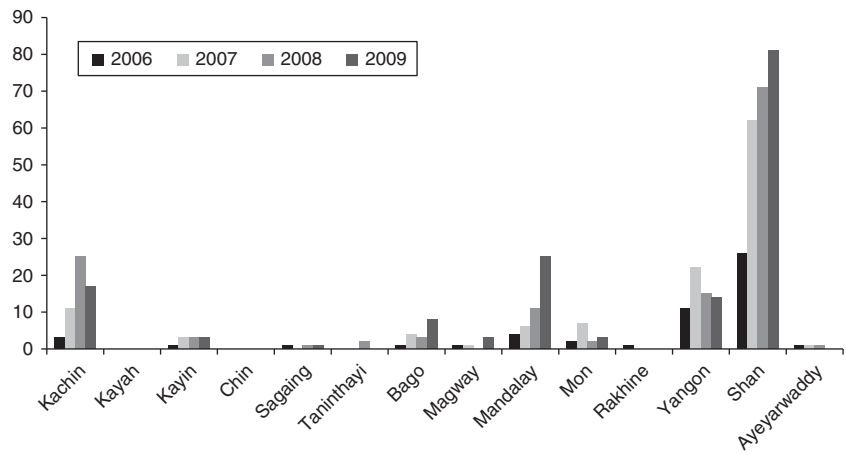

Chart 7.1 Number of trafficked women in Burma between 2006 and 2009.

Source: The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, 2010, Central Statistical Organization, 'Selected crimes by type of offence by State[s] and Division[s] (18.02), Crime'.

According to the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, '73% of officially identified victims repatriated from Thailand and Malaysia are from the Shan States (2005–2006); 36% of victims repatriated from China are from the central dry zone areas and 36% are from the Yangon Division (2005–2006)'.[91] Shan State shares borders with Laos, Thailand and China; of all eight official border gates, the three in Shan State account for 74.3 per cent of all border crossings from Burma into neighbouring countries.[92] As to whether Shan women are the most vulnerable group to trafficking or if Shan State is the final port for trafficking, with therefore the highest number of victims being found there, is not clear. The report in *WEJ* states that Northern Shan State is a hot spot for trafficking[93] because of its close proximity to three neighbouring countries – Laos, China and Thailand – and I have interviewed a woman who was sold to a Chinese man in Ruili, who escaped with the help of a Burmese businessman from Mandalay.[94] The second factor, Shan State's being the meeting point for border-crossers and this being an attribute for trafficking, is supported by a trafficking officer's explanation.[95] He said that potential migrants and migrants working in Thailand who wanted to change jobs came back and gathered in Mon State, and this pool of migrants become a target for traffickers. Potential migrants and migrants who travelled back and forth between Burma and their host country via Shan State seem to be targeted by traffickers, and hence the highest number of trafficking cases is seen there.

Of all 729 trafficking cases in 2010 reported in the *WEJ*,[96] 70 per cent of the victims were trafficked for forced marriages, 11 per cent for forced labour, 10 per cent for prostitution and 7 per cent for begging, and 2 per cent of the victims were children.[97] What is hidden from these data, though, is the fact that victims rescued from forced marriages often went into prostitution when their community did not accept them back. According to another report by *WEJ*, 10 per cent of the victims were high-school graduates: this number is alarming, as it could suggest that women or girls with a high level of education are being trafficked, possibly with the consent of either their parents or relatives. Education therefore is not attributable to vulnerability to trafficking, but a lack of protection from the family and their wilful compliance in trafficking seem to have a big role.[98] Another report by *WEJ* also suggests that some victims of trafficking entered Thailand after being promised legal work.[99]

Trafficking and prostitution are closely linked and trafficked victims often turn to prostitution for two reasons – stigmatization and a lack of opportunity and support in repatriation. Trafficked women are often shunned by society, and when they re-join their family, they face similar circumstances to those which contributed to them being trafficked. Parents and relatives themselves often sell their daughters and female relatives, often many times even after the victims are rescued or rejoin their families after fleeing their captor, and a lack of support outside the family pushes trafficked victims to prostitute themselves in order to support themselves or to support the same people who sold the woman in the first place. More than half of the seventy people arrested at a massage parlour in Muang district in Chanthaburi, Thailand, were under eighteen.[100]

Another report in the *WEJ* states that trafficked victims become traffickers themselves in the absence of opportunities for repatriation.[101] As almost all trafficked victims come from poor families, the government is now targeting women from these families in anti-trafficking campaigns. One of the measures the government has taken is to include awareness training in a training programme organized by Myanmar Garment Factories Organization. The organization is aware that their employees will become easy targets for traffickers if they lose jobs in the factories, and incorporate anti-trafficking awareness into their training.[102] National guidelines for trafficked victims state that women and children rescued from trafficking rings are to be sent to their parents and guardians if they can provide a safe environment, but if the situation there is not safe with them, alternative arrangements have to be made to provide safety and protection. This has proved difficult for the government agencies. The only 'women's rescue centre' in Rangoon is always full, and although parents are often found to have sold their girls to the traffickers, girls are sent back to their parents without any checks being made as to whether they are going to a safe environment.

Despite rules and regulations that prohibit women from seeking cleaning, house-keeping and entertainment jobs abroad, as well as jobs in small or home industries that employ fewer than five people,[103] women still leave the country in their hundreds of thousands; since most of them leave via land, often through unofficial border gates, they are more vulnerable to abuse and harassment by their employers and the traffickers. There is no reliable record of the number of women who have left the country illegally. They leave in secret and do not tell local authorities or relatives their destination, and these two factors provide a perfect environment for traffickers to lure women into forced marriages and prostitution.[104]

Even though there are restrictions on women leaving the country for non-professional jobs, the number of women actively seeking jobs inside the country is also low. This raises questions regarding whether there are actually fewer women than men in local job markets or whether there are many more women planning to leave or leaving the country for jobs in border towns, who are not included in either the government data or the non-governmental labour organizations' lists.[105] If the latter is the case, the number of trafficked women could be much higher. If there are not enough jobs for women inside Burma – a fact that could be reflected by the very low number of women actively seeking jobs within the country – and if many women are joining underground networks to secure jobs in border towns to avoid persecution by the government, the risks to them very high. One woman from suburban Rangoon was quoted in *WEJ* as saying:

> I have made plans with friends to travel to Malaysia via *outlan* [underground channels via land] with friends. The government barred us from seeking jobs abroad and we have found an agent who would charge only 400,000 Kyats per person [equivalent to USD 400]. We have found out that a factory in Malaysia is recruiting.[106]

Chart 7.2 shows the total number of women and men actively seeking employment between 1990 and 2010.

From this chart can see that the number of men seeking employment declined from 2007 to 2010 whereas the number of women seeking employment rose, albeit insignificantly, in the same period. The number of women who entered the job market between 1996 and 2000 rose by more than 200 per cent, possibly because women were able to secure jobs in garment factories established in suburban Rangoon in early 1990s. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of women seeking employment rose from 70,135 to 225,124, but the number went down from 2001 to 2003, and one might be able to conclude that the beginning of the twenty-first century was the beginning of the mass exodus of migrant workers from Burma to Thailand. Between 2004 and 2010, the number of men seeking employment went down consistently, except in 2005–2006. From Charts 7.3 and 7.4, one can conclude that no new jobs were created for men or women in the decade between 2000 and 2010, as reflected by the stagnant growth in the number of job seekers. This decade could therefore be seen as the decade of out-migration.

While the number of women seeking jobs inside Burma did not change much from 2007 to 2010, the number of women seeking jobs in Thailand is likely to rise, since the Thai factories opened recruitment agencies in the border towns inside Burma, such as Kawthaung, in 2011 and recruited Burmese workers directly from Burma. The Thai government has also extended the duration of

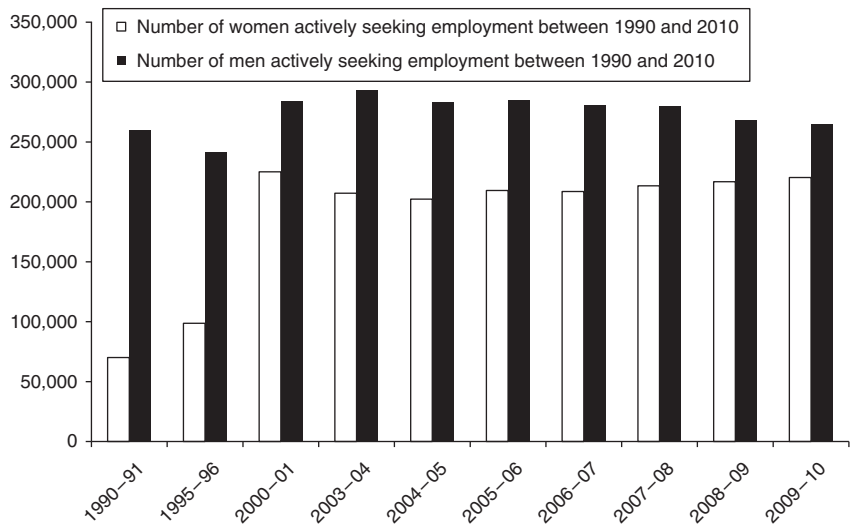

Chart 7.2 Difference in the number of men and women seeking work between 1990 and 2010.

Source: The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Central Statistical Organization, 2010, Employees actively registered with the Social Security Board by State and Division (3.10), Labour and Employment.

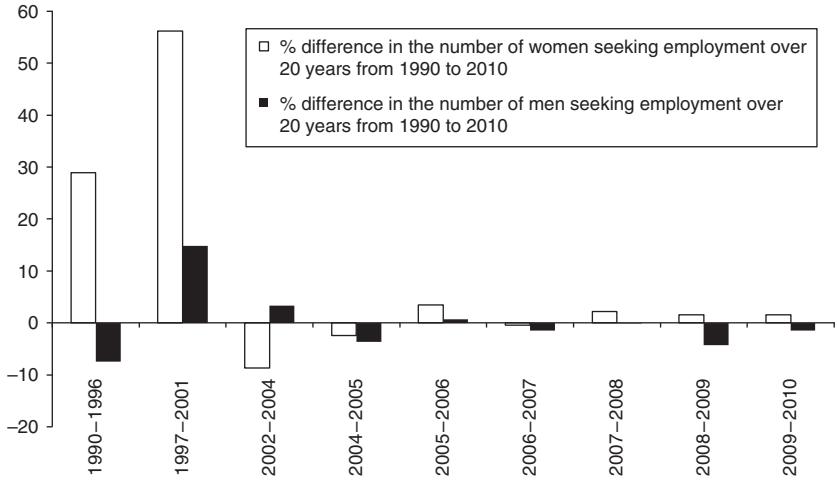

Chart 7.3 Yearly change in the percentage of men and women seeking work from 1990 and 2010.

Source: The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Central Statistical Organization, 2010, Employees actively registered with the Social Security Board by State and Division (3.10), Labour and Employment.

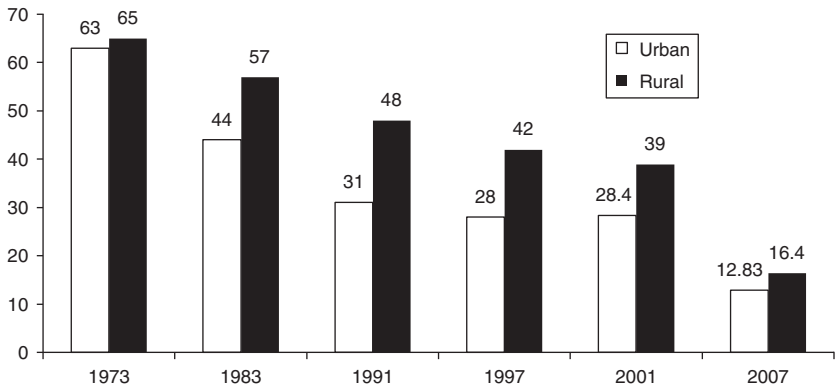

Chart 7.4 Number of children under 5 years in the population per 100 women aged 15–49 years from 1973 to 2007.

Source: Combined data from 1973 and 1983 censuses, 1991 PCFS, 1997 FRHS, 2001 FRHS and 2007 FRHS.

temporary work permits from three years to six, making it easier for both men and women to stay and work in Thailand for a longer period of time without having to fear the police raids.[107] Employment data indicated that the government must initiate reforms after a decade of stagnation. Fewer people are seeking jobs within the country and the number of men and women leaving the country, mostly via underground routes or *outlan*, is on the rise.

Women monitoring their own bodies

Table 7.1 shows the percentage distribution of unmarried youth by preference for first child.

This table shows that both men and women prefer boys to girls and the educational level of the respondents does not influence such a preference. The survey suggests that more women are likely to use family planning methods when they have more than one son. Whether or not the family already has sons is an important factor in helping women (and couples) decide if they want to practise family planning and female sterilization is more prevalent among women who have one or more sons.[108] In a society where boys are more valued than girls, young women are bridging the inequalities and social gaps by attempting to control their own bodies – that is, having fewer children – even though surveys have suggested that they are under social pressure to keep procreating until they have sons. Studies have showed that the number of dependent children women have is decreasing in both urban and rural areas. Chart 7.4 shows the number of women with dependent children from 1993 to 2007.

Chart 7.4 also shows that the number of dependent children that women have is decreasing in both urban and rural areas. Over a period of thirty-four years, women are looking after fewer children, indicating that fertility is decreasing. But the drop between 2001 and 2007 is staggering. When women cannot demand more equal opportunities for them in the society, they try to change their bodies and adjust their biological features to give them more freedom. Over the years, women are having fewer children and the number of dependents they have is on the decline, giving them more freedom to pursue other things, such as education and economic security outside the home.

Table 7.1 Preference for first child among youth

	Preference for first child for female (male) respondents				
	Boy	*Girl*	*Either sex*	*Don't know*	*Number*
Residence					
Urban	44.7 (69.3)	20.3 (6)	30.7 (24.1)	4.3 (0.5)	1468 (1,273)
Rural	52.2 (72.7)	21.4 (5.4)	23 (21)	3.3 (0.9)	4002 (3,633)
Age group					
15–19	50.7 (71.8)	22.5 (6.1)	22.7 (21)	4.1 (1.1)	3392 (3,017)
20–24	49.7 (71.8)	18.8 (4.8)	29 (23)	2.8 (0.4)	2078 (1,889)
Education					
No education	36.7 (69.1)	31.3 (4.8)	25.4 (24.3)	6.6 (1.7)	256 (230)
Primary school	53.9 (72.4)	21.8 (5.4)	20.9 (20.9)	3.4 (1.3)	1954 (1,582)
Middle school	50.5 (72.3)	22.3 (6.7)	23.7 (20.6)	3.4 (0.4)	1219 (1,327)
High school	49.7 (72.9)	19.6 (5)	27.2 (21.5)	3.5 (0.7)	1222 (1,230)
University	46 (66.7)	16.4 (5.4)	34.2 (27.7)	3.4 (0.2)	802 (488)
Others	48.1 (71.9)	22.2 (3.5)	25.9 (22.8)	3.7 (1.8)	17 (49)

Notes

1 Parliament, *ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း မိန့်ခွန်းများ* [*Bo Gyoke Aung San's Speeches*], 2nd edition, Rangoon: Sarpay Bateman, 1971, p. 385.
2 It is expected in Burmese custom that a speaker would say apologetic words beforehand before he or she utters profane words. 'Prostitute' is one such word, and phrases such as နားနဲ့မနာ၊ ဖဝါးနဲ့နာပါ။ meaning 'don't listen with your ears, but with the soles of your feet', would be used to forewarn the listener.
3 Aung Than, *၁၆နှစ် နိုင်ငံရေး အတွေ့အကြုံများ ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၆၁*, [*Political Experiences During Sixteen Years Between 1945 and 1961*], Rangoon: Pyithu, n.d., p. 37.
4 Min New, *ဖာနိုင်ငံ* [*Country of Prostitutes*], Thahaya: Rangoon, 1952.
5 Prime Minister U Nu, during his speech in the Chamber of Deputies in 1957, stated that the reasons for the disintegration of a country were 1) wrongful lust, 2) wrongful greed and 3) wrongful practice, and he highlighted that responsible behaviour by individuals was the key to maintaining law and order. Nu, *Premier reports to the People on Law and Order, National Solidarity, Social Welfare, National Economy, Foreign Affairs: Translation of Speech Delivered by the Honourable Prime Minister U Nu. In the Chamber of Deputies on September 27, 1957*, Rangoon: G.U.B.C.P.O, 1958, p. 3.
6 Nu, *ပြည်ထောင်စုနီတိ* [*Ethics of the Nation*], Rangoon: Thant Shin AFPFL, 1960, pp. 11–19.
7 *မဏ္ဍိုင်*, 7 September 1952, pp. 7, 13.
8 Kyi Pwa Yay U Thine, *အမျိုးသမီးနှင့် ကလေးများ စောင့်ရှောက်ရေးအသင်း*, [*Protection of Women and Children Associations*]1959.
9 Ibid.
10 Nyana, ပြတ်ပြတ်သားသား, [Strict and Straight], *Myawadi*, February 1959, pp. 77–80.
11 *Deedok*, 1 February 1930, p. 2.
12 The *Bamakhit* editor wrote in late 1955 that 'It was very sad for a country like Burma, which was founded upon Buddhist culture and practised asceticism, to see a growing number of prostitutes'. *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p. 3.
13 Not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie and not to consume alcohol.
14 *Ludu Phyinya*, 8(11), 1958, pp. 4–5.
15 U Nu portrayed his government as strong on corruption and pledged to clean out the corruption with the help of Buddhism. *An Asian Speaks: A collection of speeches made by U Nu, Prime Minister of Burma, during a visit to the United States of America. June 29–July 16, 1955*, p. 16.
16 Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Polices and their Critics, 1793–1905*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980.
17 Some of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay's novels exhibited the widespread antipathy that the majority of Burmese felt towards Indians. For details, see Chapter 2.
18 *Annual Report on Hospitals and Dispensaries in Burma: For the year 1934 and Triennial Review For the Years 1932–1934*. Supdt. Govt. Printing and Stationery, Burma, 1935, Colonel C. A. Gill, Inspector-General of Civil Hospitals, Burma.
19 Thu Kha, *Lady Jeep*, Rangoon: Chan Tha, n.d.
20 Ibid., pp. 1–9.
21 Than Htut, စစ်ပြီးစစာပေလှုပ်ရှားမှု [Literary Movement After the War], in Upper Burma Writers' Club, *ကဗျာအကြောင်း စာအကြောင်း* [*On Poems and Literature*], Mandalay: Kyi Pwa Yay, 1969, pp. 445–473.
22 Mg Si Thu, *ကျွပ်တို့တတွေ* [We], *Shumawa*, 8(91), 1954, pp. 64–67; *မဏ္ဍိုင်*, 7 September 1952.
23 Possibly first published in 1945 in Zawana, *မြို့လုံးပတ်လည်*, [*Around the Town*], Rangoon: Tain Pyu Pyi Pyu Publishing House, 1945, p. 3.
24 Than Htut, op. cit, p. 453.
25 Tin Kha, *Oh My God*!, Rangoon: Ma Tin Tin, n.d., p. 28.
26 *မဏ္ဍိုင်*, 7 September 1952, p. 7.
27 *Htun Daily*, 22 August 1961, p. 3.

28 Critiques of the attitudes of the bourgeoisie could be seen in Ludu Daw Amar, *အငြိမ့်* [*Dance Theatre*], 1st vol., Mandalay: Ludu, 1973.
29 Ibid.
30 *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p. 3.
31 J.S. Furnivall, 'Twilight in Burma: Reconquest and Crisis', *Pacific Affairs*, 22(1), 1949, pp. 3–20.
32 *Pyithu Journal*, 15 April 1956, p. 15.
33 *Ludu Phyinya*, 8(11), July 1958, pp. 4–5.
34 Ibid.
35 *Rangoon Daily*, 29 May 1955, p. 2.
36 Thein Pe Myint, *စစ်အတွင်းခရီးသည် ၂။ မဟာမိတ်နှင့် မြန်မာ့တာမန်* [*Traveller During the War, Allies and Burmese Messenger*], 4th edition, Rangoon: Saoat Zay, 2001.
37 Thein Pe Myint, *ငွေစိန်လေလှော်ရင်း တက်ကျိုးခြင်း*, [*Ngwe Sein Broke the Oar While Rowing*], 2nd edition, Rangoon: Sarpay Paung Ku, 1962.
38 *Rangoon Daily*, 31 May 1955, p. 17.
39 Ludu U Hla, *စစ်ဦးစက ထောင်တံခါး* [*Prison Gate After the War*], Mandalay: Kyi Pwa Yay, 1968, pp. 90–91.
40 *Myanma Alin*, 8 April 1957.
41 Ibid., p. 2.
42 *Pyithu Journal*, 15 September 1956, p. 15.
43 *Myanma Alin*, 15 June 1956, p. 3.
44 Ibid.
45 *Mandaing*, 20 January 1955, p. 3.
46 Chitkyiyay Kyi Nyunt, *သတင်းစာဆရာကြီးများ၏ သူတို့ဘဝ သူတို့အတွေ့အကြုံ* [*Journalists, Their Lives and Their Experiences*], Rangoon: Tantaya Sarpay, 1971, pp. 33–39.
47 *Htun Daily*, 22 August 1961, p. 3. U Htun Pe was sent to jail for one and a half months in October 1961 by U Nu's government for allegedly threatening national security. Three months later, he was imprisoned again, this time by the Revolutionary Council led by Ne Win.
48 *Hanthawaddy*, 1 August 1951.
49 M. P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 184.
50 *Hanthawaddy*, 23 July 1951.
51 *Bamakhit*, 21 February 1955, p. 3.
52 *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p. 3.
53 J.S. Furnivall, 'Twilight in Burma: Independence and After', *Pacific Affairs*, 22(2), 1949, p. 163.
54 Tin Kha, op. cit., p. 31.
55 *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p. 3; *Rangoon Daily*, 19 May 1955, p. 1; and Myint Kyi, မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ လူမှုရေးကဏ္ဍမှ စာရိတ္တပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာလေ့လာချက် [Study on Morality in Burma Social Studies], *Tekkatho Pyinnya Padata*, 13(3), 1967, p. 66.
56 *Bamakhit*, 2 October 1953, p. 4.
57 Aung Bala, *မိန်းမပုံပြင်* [*Story of Women*], n.d, p. 25.
58 Ibid.
59 *Hanthawaddy*, 9 June 1960.
60 *Bamakhit*, 11 July 1960, p. 3.
61 *Rangoon Daily*, 23 April 1955, p. 3.
62 *Bamakhit*, 18 August 1952, p. 1.
63 *Rangoon Daily*, 25 April 1955.
64 *Rangoon Daily*, 23 April 1955, p. 3.
65 *Mandaing*, 14 June 1956.
66 Ibid.
67 *Rangoon Daily*, 14 June 1956, p. 19.
68 *Deedok*, XII(10), 1935, p. 12.

69 *Kyemon*, 16 September 1957, p. 8.
70 *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p. 3.
71 Aung Than, *ဘဖြန့်နှိပ်ခံရေး အတွေ့အကြုံများ ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၆၁* [*Political Experiences During Sixteen Years between 1945 and 1961*], Rangoon: Pyithu, n.d., p. 141.
72 Director of Information, *Statistical Yearbook 1961*, p. 15. But the actual newspaper readership could be higher. According to Maung Su Shin et al., *စာနယ်ဇင်းဟူသည်* [*On Newspaper, Journal and Magazine*], the number of newspapers in circulation by 1962 was thirty-four, eight more than the number given in the statistical yearbook.
73 *Shumawa*, 8(93), pp. 166–179.
74 *Htun Daily*, 30 May 1963. U Nu convened this council in the year that marked 2,500 years after the death of Buddha in an attempt to portray himself as the champion of Buddhism: but the official objective was to cleanse Buddhism by reciting and re-evaluating the discourses on Buddhism.
75 *The Nation*, 15 October 1955, in U Kyaw Win (ed.), *Burma Politics: 1958–1962*, 3rd vol., Rangoon, Universities Publishing House, p. 87.
76 Ibid., p. 91.
77 *Bamakhit*, 24 January 1955, p. 3.
78 I asked sex workers I interviewed which term I should use to refer to them, and they said 'sex workers'. But I was aware that they could have given me that answer knowing that I am a researcher based outside their networks, and I was introduced to them via their INGO alliance in which the term 'sex workers' is preferred to other local terms. Only when I asked how their co-workers, clients and larger society addressed them did they give me other terminologies.
79 One has to question why women who have sex freely with any men they like are considered prostitutes. In the context of Burma, where sex is taboo, abstaining or having restraint over lust is considered a virtue and free sex is, according to many, something only sex workers would do. Sex workers themselves categorize these women as 'one of their own'.
80 There is no word to describe sex workers in this category. They are mostly known by their activity, which is locally known as *John Sin deh* ဂျွန်ဆင်းတယ် meaning 'to go and look for a customer' (John, as in the English slang for a customer of a prostitute).
81 In the early 1990s, many restaurants emerged that include entertainment services. Some girls who sang and performed on these stages could also be hired for sex after their shift. Customers could also buy flowers and garlands from the restaurant and give them as gifts to the singers they liked. In one restaurant-cum-beer station called Powerlight in Rangoon, there is a competition among customers once every week to see who can shower the most garlands on the singers that night. One witnessed that each could spend US$2,000–3,000 per night during a game night. One of the most famous singers there is reported to have made over US$100,000 in 2011.
82 As in the third category, women cohabitating with men are considered prostitutes. But these women are likely to cohabitate with any men who can afford to provide housing, food and an allowance.
83 In small towns, cycle-taxis are slowly replacing rickshaws and horse-drawn carts. Those with motorbikes can use their bikes, sometimes with a trawler attached, to ferry passengers. But those without their own bikes can also rent one at a fee from its owner and use it as a taxi.
84 When I was interviewing prostitutes in summer 2012, I asked them which term I should use to refer to them and they said 'sex workers'. Such a choice seems to have reflected their working with international non-governmental organizations for some time. They seem to have adopted more acceptable terms such as 'sex workers'.
85. 'ပြည်သူတန်ဆာလုပ်ငန်းများ တရားဝင်လုပ်ကိုင်ခွင့်ရရန် တောင်းဆိုသွားမည်။' 'We will demand the legalisation of prostitution'. *The Voice* Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/thevoiceweekly?ref=ts&fref=ts. Accessed on 30 September 2012.

86 For Buddhism, prostitution and female migrant workers, see Khin Thitsa, *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand*. London: Change International Reports: Women and Society, 1980; Thomas Kirsch, 'Buddhism, Sex Roles and the Thai Economy,' In *Women of Southeast Asia*, edited by Penny Van Esterik, 16–41, Center for Southeast Asia Studies, Occasional Paper, no. 9, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1982; Charles F. Keyes, 1984, 'Mother, Mistress, but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand', *American Ethnologist*, 11(2), pp. 223–241.

87 Union of Myanmar Relief, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Ministry, MNCWA, CEDAW 2nd and 3rd reports, 2007.

88 On p. 18, the report said မြန်မာမိန်းကလေးတို့အား မြန်မာ့ဧလေ့ထုံးစံအရ ကာကွယ်စောင့်ရှောက်မှု ပေးထားရုံသာမက ဥပဒေအရလည်း အကာအကွယ်ပေးထားပါသည်။

89 Selected crimes by type of offence by State[s] and Division[s] (18.02), Crime, The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Central Statistical Organization.

90 *Weekly Eleven Journal*, 2 August 2011. http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9623:2011-08-03-06-08-27&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112.

91 UNIAP, Myanmar, http://www.no-trafficking.org/myanmar.html. Accessed on 6 July 2012.

92 Ministry of Immigration and Population Department of Population, August 2011.

93 Ibid.

94 Interview with Ma Thi Thi (name changed to protect her identity), 8 June 2012.

95 *Weekly Eleven Journal*, 31 July 2011. http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9602:2011-07-31-18-07-57&catid=45:2009-11-10-07-45-41&Itemid=113.

96 *WEJ*, 2 August 2011, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9623:2011-08-03-06-08-27&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112.

97 *WEJ*, 29 December 2011, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6501:2010-12-30-05-07-56&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112.

98 *WEJ*, 1 September 2010, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4634:2010-09-02-10-12-40&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112#comment-12910

99 Win Naing Tun, '3P to counter Trafficking and Policies for Migrant Workers', *Weekly Eleven Journal*, 05 January 2012.

100 Ibid.

101 *WEJ*, 23 November 2010, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6030:2010-11-24-07-00-25&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112.

102 *WEJ*, 1 June 2011, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8747:2011-06-02-07-04-10&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112. A storty that *WEJ* published on 4 September 2010 also reported that two mothers from Thibaw in Southern Shan State sold their daughters to Chinese men in Bao Shan in Yunnan District. http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4664:2010-09-05-08-04-06&catid=45:2009-11-10-07-45-41&Itemid=113#comment-12927

103 The government regulations do not reflect the realities of the jobs most Burmese women seek abroad, especially in Thailand. In November 2011, an official from the Ministry of Labour said that the ministry will allow women to work in Korea if all the women could stay and work at the same place. Korean factories wanted to employ Burmese women on Employment Permit Systems (EPS), an agreement between Burmese and Korean governments for sending workers from the former to the latter,

but the factories did not seem to be able to fulfil the Ministry's request to put all women in one place and to date, only men have benefited from the EPS. *WEJ*, 13 November 2011.

104 Despite tight regulations preventing women seeking housekeeping jobs, more and more Burmese women are now working abroad as housemaids and nannies. I met a seventeen-year old woman on the plane from Singapore and Rangoon in May 2012, and she told me that she had worked as a nanny, despite being only sixteen at the time of employment. She returned home after her employer did not extend her contract. She said her salaries were paid through an agent in Singapore, and she did not know how much her employer paid her before the deduction.

105 There are organizations such as Young Ni Oo, which documented the number of migrant workers in Thai–Burma border towns such as Mae Sod.

106 *Weekly Eleven Journal*, 26 April 2011, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8169:2011-04-27-10-01-35&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112

107 *Weekly Eleven Journal*, 21 August 2011, http://www.news-eleven.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9851:2011-08-21-07-16-06&catid=42:2009-11-10-07-36-59&Itemid=112

108 Combined data from 1973 and 1983 censuses, 1991 PCFS, 1997 FRHS, 2001 FRHS and 2007 FRHS.

Epilogue

No space in history

'Why do you want to write about us?', asked one of the five remaining women soldiers in 2007.[1] 'We have removed that episode [their time in the first Burma Women's Army] from our memory'. Yet, when I organized a party for six fighters who fought alongside each other during the resistance movement – that is, five women soldiers and one male, who was also one of the founding members of the Burma Army – their time in the army was the central theme of the conversation throughout.

One talked about how she jumped from a hay-sack to escape the advancing Japanese troops and one told how she was the only one left standing, in a literal sense, and had to take care of her fellow soldiers when they fell ill towards the end of the war. For this group of veterans, their time in the army was clearly one of their most vivid memories and proudest moments. They relived March 1945 during the party.

Yet they had gone through difficult experiences during the BSPP period, experiences that taught them to keep their stories close to their heart. They had learned not to share them openly with others, and as a consequence, even their family members were not able to steal a glimpse into their colourful lives as soldiers. Their stories would not find a way into the public memory, let alone national history. Their service to their country was unfairly associated with their being communists – indeed, the women were often called 'Miss Communist'. That name solicited fear from colleagues, discrimination from the institutions for which they worked and frequent visits from military intelligence. As a result, forgetting their past, and especially the time spent in the army – which had led them to join the communists – became a survival tactic, a self-preservation strategy.

Modesty and the learned behaviour of downplaying one's significance in society also contributed to the women's silence. When asked how the Japanese Occupation, especially the Asia Youth League's activities, had shaped her life, a woman doctor accused me of politicizing 'mundane' events. The women considered their role in any 'historical' event as being merely ordinary, and felt deeply uncomfortable at being involved as important players in the making of history. And as I have argued repeatedly throughout this book, they were playing exactly

the role advocated by *Bamakhit* – that of women disinterested in politics. The women I talked to were involved in politics, and were acutely aware of contemporary affairs: yet they acted as though politics played little role in their lives.

In summer 2012, I presented my findings from this manuscript to a group of women leaders, from women MPs to activists, in Rangoon, and we generally agreed that women have been using the same language – that is, the language that our female predecessors and our male counterparts want us to use. We repeat the old message that women are being regarded as equal to men and Burmese women enjoy equal status to men in our society, even though the available data tell us otherwise. This is in the context of the social landscape of women in Burma having been shaped throughout history, or perhaps soured, by politics and religion. The state's (and males') insecurities, fear of foreigners and foreign ideologies, the belief that solutions to social problems lay in religion, undercut these women as they struggled to find an independent space in Burma's political, social and cultural landscapes. We have therefore learned to be self-conscious and accept our place – below and beneath men.

With flickers of hope for reform, it is hoped that the women of Burma will learn to sing a different tune and start advocating for women's rights, binning the old notion that only discontent and insecure women would rise for their rights and that Burmese society is a haven for women's rights. Women protest leaders and female human rights campaigners across the country offer encouraging signs to support the hope that it may be possible to hear this different tune.

Note

1 Daw Khin Kyi died in 2008.

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