

MOHINGA MATTERS



Generations of Myanmar Women in Revolution

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Myanmar is home to 55 million people today; women account for more than 50 percent of the population. When the Myanmar military staged a coup d'état on February 1, 2021, about 60 percent of the frontline protestors against the military rule were women who continued to actively participate in the resistance against the junta three years afterward. The nature of revolution usually means to achieve a tectonic shift, whether it be a political change, social change, and/or economic change. For the women of Myanmar, the Spring Revolution is more than overthrowing the military junta ruled by Min Aung Hlaing and creating waves of changes on societal and cultural levels. The recent revolution is not the first resistance in which women have actively participated alongside men.

Mohinga Matters spoke to nine women from all walks of life, including a renowned author, a video journalist, a frontline defender, a lawyer, a defector, a CDMer, a labor activist, and individuals who have been supporting the revolution, refugees, and displaced persons with their capacity.

I. Myanmar Women in History

No Short of Courage

The role of Myanmar women in society has been a well-debated discussion among scholars and academics for centuries, especially on the topic of Myanmar women attaining a higher status in society. Myanmar women are often acknowledged for having freedom and independence compared to other women in neighboring countries. Some colonial records observed that a Myanmar woman was free to venture out alone and lead a business in the marketplace, or a Myanmar woman was not expected to abandon her maiden name when she married or was forced to give up the ownership of her properties or herself after marriage. Myanmar women were granted the right to vote in 1935, the earliest among the Asian nations.

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Feminist scholars argued that the so-called concept of 'Myanmar women holding a traditional higher status' is nothing more than a myth in reality. Chie Ikeya, in her paper, 'The Traditional High Status of Women in Burma,' stated that although women in Burma had for a long time an influential presence in the economic sphere, as in other pre-modern Southeast Asian societies, the active role of women as economic agents – the very attribute that gave women their autonomy and power – subordinated them to men religiously, politically, ritualistically, and ceremonially.

The first-ever women's organization, the Burmese Women's Association (BWA), was founded in 1919 by elites, educated women, and wives of the officials. This organization spearheaded the movement to fight for women's right to vote and to be elected as public officials. BWA inspired other associations and organizations fighting for women's rights to emerge.

Ma Thida (San Chaung), a renowned writer, shared that Myanmar women do hold a lot of influence in society.

“[Myanmar] women are the heads of households. They are not even the queens; they are the kings of households and manage and oversee everything from finances to income and household management. We even had a saying that said if you worship your wife, your life will be so smooth that you won't experience any turmoil.”

She continued, “Myanmar wives' impact is something we need to talk about. The soft power that the wives of the [junta senior officials] held is influential. Women's power in public would probably be undermined. Still, behind the scenes, they held much power in the household—their motives and influences on their husbands, who were senior administrative council members.”

“It has often been said that the women do most of the hard work of the country. But this is not because they are the slaves of their husbands, as among savage warlike races. On the contrary, they occupy a position of independence and responsibility, and it is precisely this sense of responsibility added to maternal love for their offspring that makes them work hard when the husband fails to do his share. (Brown 1911:216)”

Both during the pre-and post-colonial times, women have stood at the forefront of the resistance movement, whether against colonialism or dictatorship. A Burmese writer and social scientist, Mi Mi Khaing, shared in her book, ‘The World of Burmese Women,’ that historically, Myanmar women have a history of taking legal and administrative roles despite having no feminist movement as such in the Western world. From holding the leadership position of a ‘queen’ to warrior status, historical records have shown that women across Myanmar have maintained and fought for their independence. Writer Khaing has referenced Major JJ Snodgrass’ records of witnessing three Shan women donning warlike costumes while riding among the troops, exuding courage in the battle of Wettiga; J.S Furnivall’s accounts of the duties of headwomen who administered villages in 1767—needing to be familiar with lands, crops, and taxes, as well as responsible for the lists of people; the 19th century’s woman guerilla, Pin Khin Khin in central Myanmar, and the women from Kachin and Chin hilly regions, fighting fiercely for many years for their way of life.

A woman in her late 50s based in Mae Sot who has been supporting the refugees and displaced persons from Myanmar shared, “Historically speaking, from women workers from the oil field to university students and Tha-Khin-Ma, women took part in Myanmar’s independence from British rule. During the Japanese Occupation, women like Kyaukse Daw Mya Yee traveled to India on foot to request the British’s aid for the anti-fascist revolution. There were also women police who picked up arms to fight against the Japanese Occupation. If we look at our history, Myanmar women have always been active and engaged in several political and social movements, revolutions, and also in the independence movement.”

Despite the historical leadership positions that the women in Myanmar held, women have been under-represented in the political domain—their representation and participation were relatively low in the parliament between 1948 and 1958, and there were only 21 women who participated in significant roles in the political sphere. Women were further excluded from governmental positions after the military took over in 1962. But it didn’t stop the women from participating in the revolution against the military rule.

Flames of Resistance

Since the first military coup in 1962, Myanmar has struggled through various military junta rules, which has caused the country to deteriorate further. The resistance against the military dictatorship erupted in 1988. Led by the students, the 8888 Uprising brought thousands of Myanmar nationals together in country-wide demonstrations. Women, alongside their male counterparts, took to the streets to fight for democratic reforms. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) estimated that more than 500 women were imprisoned for their involvement. Regardless of the results, the flames of resistance among the women of Myanmar didn’t die as it was witnessed during the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and once again in the Spring Revolution in 2021.

“Women’s role in revolution is not new. I have always been satisfied with our participation in the revolution since the 8888 Uprising,” said Ma Thida (San Chaung). Ma Thida was sentenced to 20 years in prison for participating in the resistance movement in 1993. She was imprisoned for almost six years.

Ma Hla Hla Win, 38, a former video journalist with Democratic Voice of Burma, told Mohinga Matters that she decided to enter the political sphere in 2007 after the Saffron Revolution.

“I was one of the youth members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party. I decided to go down this path after witnessing the deaths of my friends and the brutal crackdown on the youths by the authorities. The [Saffron] Revolution inspired me to do whatever I can,” said Ma Hla Hla Win, who has been actively supporting multiple local media outlets and training citizen journalists after the military coup in 2021.

Ma Hla Hla Win, 23 then, joined the Democratic Voice of Burma in 2008 as a video journalist when she discovered her passion for reporting and telling stories. A year later, she was covering the anniversary of the Saffron Revolution when the military government arrested Hla Hla Win and sentenced her to 27 years in prison. She was one of the very few female journalists who received the longest sentencing in 2009.

Myanmar underwent political reforms that saw the quasi-civilian government led by former president U Thein Sein in 2010. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was the beacon of hope for democratic Myanmar during the 8888 Uprising, was also released from house arrest in November 2010.

Ma Hla Hla Win was also pardoned from her lengthy sentence after serving nearly four years in prison and released in January 2012.

A Decade of Bright Days

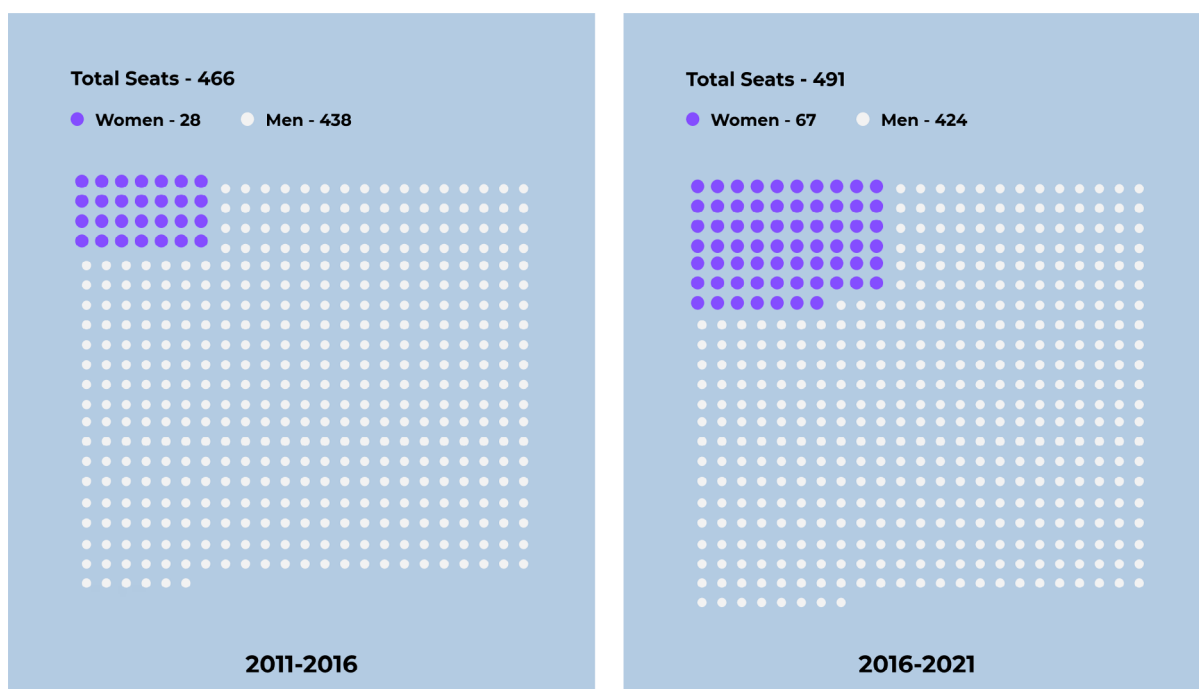
In 2012, Myanmar saw a glimpse of a better future in its history. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won a seat in the Parliament in April 2012. Three months later, she announced that she would run for the presidency in the upcoming 2015 General Elections.

Although the 2008 Constitution barred Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming the president of Myanmar, her party, the National League for Democracy, won the election in a landslide, making her the nation's de facto leader. Then-president U Htin Kyaw appointed her as the State Counsellor, a head-of-state position created specifically for her.

Regardless of Myanmar being led by a woman, there remained many barriers for general Myanmar women to break the glass ceiling. The Asia Foundation researched women parliamentarians' experiences between 2011 and 2016. Published in April 2017, the report revealed that among the first elected parliamentarians of 2011-2016, only 6 percent of the Union parliament were made up of women, with four holding seats in the upper house, 24 in the lower house, and two women were represented in the national parliament. Myanmar has more than 90 political parties, but only a handful have policies advocating women's rights or making spaces for women candidates. Some 90 percent of the central executive committee remains dominantly male.

However, the Asia Foundation report said that the 2015 General Elections saw an increase in women's participation in "representational governance." The report stated, "The number of women parliamentarians increased significantly to 151 elected seats across national and state/region levels. In the Union Parliament, 23 female parliamentarians entered the upper house, and 44 entered the lower house. As such, the number of female representatives in the Union Parliament more than doubled from 6.0% to 13.6% of all elected MPs."

Participation of Women in the Union Parliament



In the civil society sector, more and more women-led organizations emerged, advocating for the inclusion of women in the political dialogue, peace process, and law reforms to protect them from gender-based violence and access to remedies.

Ma Lu Lu, 36, a lawyer who represented the anti-coup protesters after the coup, echoed the same sentiment. “The political reforms during the quasi-civilian government and after 2015 under the NLD reign, allowed many women’s organizations to do so much for their rights and representation in transitional Myanmar. Women’s CSOs and NGOs were able to help open the eyes of many women,” Ma Lu Lu said.

Organizations such as the Gender Equality Network, the Women’s Organizations Network, the Women’s League of Burma, and other civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based groups have been the key players in advocating for women’s participation in the political sphere and putting a spotlight on their rights and voices.

Even today, three years after the recent military coup, local women-led and women’s rights organizations remain at the frontline to offer critical support and services to the affected communities in a war-torn Myanmar, UN Women reported in August 2023.



II. Women in the Spring Revolution

Leading the Movement

Five days after the coup on 1st February 2021, young women activists Esther Ze Naw Bamvo and Ei Thinzar Maung led the first anti-coup protests in Yangon. Labor unions, garment workers, and young activists took to the streets on February 6, sparking waves and waves of anti-coup demonstrations among people across the nation to take a further stand by joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a strike movement to bring down the military administration.

“Since the coup, our Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM) members from the ground joined the anti-coup activities with the public along with the Confederation of Trade Unions,” said Ma San San, who is working as a mobilizer with IWFM.

From garment workers, teachers, doctors, nurses, and lawyers to students, women have stepped up to resist the coup and the military rule. The Gender Equality Network estimated that women make up 60 percent of frontline protest leaders and roughly 70 to 80 percent of leaders of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the early months of the revolution.

The junta responded by violently cracking down on the anti-coup peaceful protests. On February 10, a 21-year-old protester, Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, was shot in her head during a protest in Naypyitaw. But it didn't faze more women to join the public protests and against the junta rule.

Lawyer Ma Lu Lu, praised the women protestors at the frontline for their innovative efforts in challenging the norms and fighting against the patriarchy of the military dictatorship.

“In this Spring Revolution, women’s organizations continued their efforts not only to bring down the military rule in Myanmar but to revolutionize discriminatory ideology against them. For example, the concept of men losing ‘Hpone,’ an abstract masculine power, if they happen to walk underneath a woman’s Longyi clothing line. Women protestors at the frontline use this misogynistic concept to our advantage innovatively during this revolution,” Ma Lu Lu shared.

In honor of International Women’s Day in March 2021, protestors across Myanmar started putting longyi as flags on the frontline of protests with ropes and across the roads as a way to challenge the patriarchal military’s security forces. The campaign slogan was “Our Htamein, Our Flag, Our Victory.” The Sarong Revolution saw women taking back their power and using the very piece of clothing that society had been using to limit women as one of the symbols of the revolution.

Diversity? Inclusivity?

On the political front, exiled administrative bodies such as the National Unity Government (NUG) and National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) became more inclusive in terms of ethnicity compared to the NLD civilian government era. However, the inclusivity is not evident when it comes to age or gender. The NUG does have several women ministers but most of the highest decision-making positions are still occupied by men.

Out of 17 ministries under the NUG, there are only three women in leadership positions—Daw Khin Ma Ma Myo, the Minister of Commerce, Daw Zin Mar Aung, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe, the Minister of Women, Youths, and Children Affairs. Among 36 ministers and deputy ministers, excluding the executive member of the government, there are only six women ministers and deputy ministers, accounting for 16.6 percent of the whole government.

Journalist Ma Hla Hla Win commented on the men-to-women ratio in the NUG and emphasized that more women should be considered for leadership roles.

“There are more men [in the NUG, CSOs, and the forces]. I am not saying that we need to have more women. Let’s say there are six men and one woman. If this woman is at the decision-making level and others are willing to trust and follow her judgment, I think this is much more impactful than having an equal ratio,” said Ma Hla Hla Win.

Ma Hla Hla Win added that the NUG’s Ministry of Defense is currently dominated by men, and some of them in leadership positions did not come from defense backgrounds either.

“If individuals are given these roles because they have immense experience with defense, I would not be saying this. They have experience as MPs and with administration, just like some of the women in the revolution, but why were those women not considered? Many brilliant women in the revolution deserve to be in important roles so they can do real work.”

On the resistance front, Mohinga Matters spoke with Ma Zue Padonmar, a joint secretary at the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State (IEC). She is one of the six members who formed the interim governing council to carry out the region’s administrative duties and offer public services during this transitional period.

“The governing council was formed with the objectives of a united front, inclusivity, and the aim to develop a federal country. When we formed the departments or the cabinet members, we ensured that members represented diverse aspects of our society by including women and individuals who brought different perspectives,” said Ma Zue Padonmar.

Resistance Continued

In a span of a year after the coup, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported that the military junta imprisoned thousands of women and continued to kill many more. According to its documentation, at least 104 women were killed between February 2021 and January 20, 2022.

Ma Khin Pa Pa Tun, 45, a CDM military nurse, was in service for 19 years when she decided to join the Civil



Disobedience Movement a year after the coup.

“I have never liked the tyranny of the military, oppression of women in the military, and its authoritarian rule. I have two daughters and a binding contract, so I stuck around a bit after the coup. The military continued to shoot innocent civilians even after a year, and that’s when I decided that I shouldn’t stick around for any reason and to stand with the people,” said Ma Khin Pa Pa Tun.

Not just those in service, women from all walks of life actively participated and contributed to the resistance movement, even at the risk of their safety and security.

Ma Kyi Pyar, in her mid 30s, was outside the country and pregnant with her first child when she discovered that her KBZ Pay account was frozen by the military in August 2022. She helped in the revolution with donations, fundraising, and doing whatever she could to help those in need.

“I initially thought about going back to Myanmar and then appealing to reopen my KBZ Pay account, but there were one too many transactions that I could not give convincing explanations. I thought only the accounts of organizers were targeted because I was only listed as a donor,” said Ma Kyi Pyar.

Ma Kyi Pyar had to make a difficult decision to remain where she was at that time and gave birth to her first child away from her family and friends. She believed the scrutiny from the junta wouldn’t last long, and she could eventually go back and stay as close to the ground as possible.

“I genuinely thought I could stay away for about six months, and then I could go back home and continue my support to the revolution just like everyone else did. My family alerted me that the military came and looked for me at our house three to five times and told me not to come back at all... all of the plans I made have to be changed, I could no longer plan my life,” Ma Kyi Pyar shared with Mohinga Matters.

Similar to Ma Kyi Pyar, many mothers have given up many things, including their lives and motherhood, and lost their children in this revolution to ensure the next generation can grow up in a better Myanmar.

One activist mother, Wai Wai Myint, also known fondly by her loved ones as Apple, jumped to her death on August 10, 2021, during a junta raid in Yangon. She was survived by her husband and a young daughter. Some mothers were targeted for having children who actively participated in the revolution. The mother of twin brothers, Ko Ko and Nyi Nyi Aung Htet Naing—the latter was shot dead by the military security forces during a protest on February 28, 2021, was taken hostage on September 1 when the security forces couldn’t locate her other son.

There were stories from the prison in which a mother was killed while sending a parcel to her imprisoned son, a mother who had to witness her two-year-old daughter die while being detained together in prison, a detained protester surviving the prison conditions while being five months pregnant, and an activist mother who gave birth to her stillborn son due to failure of the prison to give her immediate medical attention on time. These reports are a testament to the bravery and resilience of these women no matter what the junta threw their way, they were willing to stand on the right side of history.

Ma San San, who was working as a mobilizer with IWFM, shared that in the post-coup period, many women had to suffer and struggle, with many women having to leave their jobs, families, and siblings to join the revolution in an effort to eradicate the military dictatorship. In the garment sector, IWFM received about 350 cases after the coup in which women workers' rights and their personal boundaries were violated, especially with the employers threatening to report them to the junta.

"Women workers have to face all sorts of violations from having their labor rights violated, verbal and physical abuses, and sexual exploitation," said Ma San San.

Despite the consequences, Ma San San said that women didn't step back from participating in the revolution; whether protesting in the streets or in guerrilla movements, women were still so visible.

"In this revolution, women are able to show that we are brave, bright, sharp, and capable when in need," Ma San San added.

Ma Zue Padonmar shared the same sentiment and said, "If we look at Operation 1111 [Karenni armed groups' military operation against the Myanmar regime to take back territory control of their land which was launched on November 11, 2023], there are women comrades on the battlefield at the frontline. Yes, the number of women might be small, but they are there. Female medics also have to stay close to the frontline. We have many women in the logistical support operations as well as communications. I am only mentioning the women involved in the frontline's resistance operations. There are many more behind-the-scenes too."

Speaking of behind-the-scenes, journalist Ma Hla Hla Win admitted that there are fewer women journalists reporting from the frontline and maybe few journalists working in the field, but women journalists haven't stepped back from participating in the revolution regardless of the junta's harassment towards them.

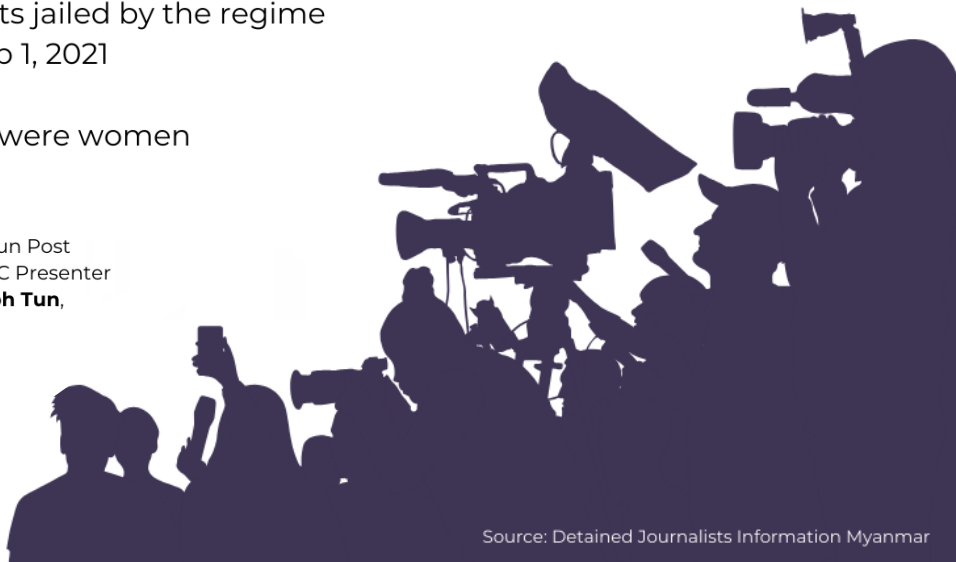
"In my surroundings, I can confidently say that women's participation or women in journalism has not lessened. Even those in Myanmar continue to report and work as journalists. But in terms of numbers, maybe there is slightly less. Before the coup, the ratio of men and women in the newsroom would be 20 men to ten women. It's the same ratio, but it's ten men to five women now," said Ma Hla Hla Win.

Since the coup, the military junta has arrested 156 journalists, with around 50 remaining in prison, among them, 13 were reported to be women. As of December 2022, Myanmar is the world's third-worst jailer of journalists, according to a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

49 journalists jailed by the regime since Feb 1, 2021

6 of them were women

Ma Htet Htet Aung, Thingangyun Post
Ma Htet Htet Khine, former BBC Presenter
Ma Mhu Yadanar Khet Moh Moh Tun,
Myanmar Pressphoto Agency



Source: Detained Journalists Information Myanmar

Women in post-coup Myanmar



Source: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, Burmese Women's Union

2441
detained

664
killed

706
sentenced

III. Women's Roles in the Post-Coup Era

Women in Revolution: A New Development?

Women have always been involved in politics and resistance movements historically. All nine women Mominga Matters spoke to recognized the previous generations' hard work, and the participation is more visible due to media exposure and coverage.

"Women were always involved in politics, even if it was not on the frontline; women always participated behind the scenes. I think this has everything to do with the media coverage. Today, there are more discourses/discussions on the inclusivity of women," said Ma Thida (San Chaung).

Ma Thida reminisced that back in the day, people didn't really support women participating in the revolution. "Women visiting the tea shop in the past... There was harsh criticism against women for visiting tea shops where conversations happened. For a woman to visit the tea shop was unthinkable and unseen. So, women intentionally chose to be behind the scenes."

Lawyer Ma Lu Lu emphasized that women have been at the frontline of many revolutions for ages to dismantle the authoritative ruling. She said, "Whether you take it look at the 8888 Uprising and any revolutions after, the women have participated at the highest level. However, due to a lack of widespread media coverage, awareness, or ignorance towards women, women's participation was not widely acknowledged, nor were they given recognition for their efforts."

Ma Zue Padonmar, joint secretary of IEC, attributed the foundation that the women in previous revolutions had laid down for the current generation to stand on. "We can't say that women are actively participating in the revolution only after the 2021 coup. Women of our previous generations have cemented the concept of women in revolution for ages, and we are bearing the fruits of their labors."

Societal View on Women in Revolution

Women's involvement in the Spring Revolution has been celebrated immensely, and society has also begun to recognize their participation in the revolution publicly. However, the question remains, 'Has Myanmar society changed its views on women?'

Ma San San believed that society's perception of women had definitely changed, and the prejudice against them was gone. "There used to be prejudice before where people say women can't do certain things or women can't make decisions. But this prejudice is gone now. We can see women in decision-making roles."

For some, they believed that the change would gradually come after the victory of the revolution. Ma Kyi Pyar explained that there are some shifts, but it depends on which generation the question is being directed at.

"As a society at large, I don't think the perception of women has changed because this is only the beginning. But we can also see a glimpse of hope. When I say this, I should divide it into two age groups. The younger generation is more open to accepting this shift of gender roles in our society. When we organized the Sarong Revolution, you will see that the most positive responses were from the younger crowd. Those who opposed this protest were traditionally conservative," said Ma Kyi Pyar.

After speaking to female soldiers on the frontline and seeing how they lived, Ma Hla Hla Win hoped that the mindset towards women would continue to shift more and more.

"[Female soldiers on the frontline] live, eat, and take responsibility just as their male counterparts. If men didn't shower for three days due to a shortage of water, the female soldiers did the same. Even among the forces, they have started to recognize that women can hold things down just as equally as men," said Ma Hla Hla Win.

She added, "Society is starting to realize that the women in the revolution take full responsibility and are ready to serve their duties in whichever positions/roles they are in. Because of this, I would say that societal views on women have gradually started to change."

For Ma Thida (San Chaung), she believed that the societal opinion on women is so deeply rooted in the culture of Myanmar and that it should be acknowledged that women, on a daily basis, are still trying to find equal footing with men.

"After three years of revolution, I don't see a massive perspective change towards women and the roles of women, especially on the frontline and within PDFs. This is a cultural belief, and it will need more time to change society's opinion on women. We are still struggling on the societal level. But the good thing is there is much more exposure to women's roles in the revolution now," said Ma Thida.

An Inclusive Future

The dark side of the 2021 military coup is well-documented, and the people of Myanmar, both inside and outside of the country, are still going through the ripple effects of a handful of military men's egotistical political and economic ambitions. If a silver lining is to be found, it should be recognized that the Spring Revolution after the military coup has awakened the entire country to strive to build a much more progressive nation, dismantling not just the military dictatorship but also dismantling outdated gender norms and promoting inclusivity for all race, ethnicity, and age.

"It is crucial that we do everything we can right now during this pre-transitioning period to ensure that it is a fair and equal environment for all," said Ma Lu Lu, a lawyer. "As a woman in the revolution, we are not just revolting against military rule. We are also trying to revolutionize ideology, on top of trying to dismantle the military junta rule."

Ma Zue Padonmar also echoed that the revolution was not just to bring Min Aung Hlaing down. "The goal of our revolution is to ensure an equal, fair, and peaceful society for everyone. The process will take longer because we are trying to dismantle many things, including patriarchal values," said Ma Zue Padonmar.

Ma Thida (San Chaung) stressed that women's role is essential for transitioning Myanmar, and that gen-

the motherly nature of women can be the remedy to violence that the Myanmar society has experienced since the coup.

“My concern with the revolution is that people will be just fixated on the extremely rebellious and brutal nature of it. For a transitioning period, maybe it’s vital that we bring back so-called feminine instincts such as compassion, empathy, and protective nature, and women are needed to instill these values back into our society to combat the normalization of violence for the past three years,” said Ma Thida.

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