

GENDER EQUALITY: IMPROVEMENT OR IMPEDIMENT FOR MYANMAR WOMEN

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Abstract

As Myanmar community regardless of religion and race, is a culture-based one, the role of women participation or significance in economic, political and socio-cultural areas have been still questionable in terms of size and level of women representing to such areas. Much as the literature on transition commonly excludes gender relations from its considerations, many studies of Myanmar political transition also neglect a gender perspective. Myanmar women are facing with many challenges mainly due to traditional perceptions, societal norms and values, and institutional mechanisms. The obstacles or impediment to gender equality have ranged from a lack of equal job opportunities, participation in nation building or political arena. After the democratic transition in Myanmar, policies, practices and legal framework for gender equality have been dramatically initiated. But barriers to Myanmar women for gender equality are still significant to a certain extent. Therefore, the role of women may not participate like men in economic, political and social life. This paper examines gender inequality process before and after the democratic transition. It explores the barriers of women in social (cultural norms), economic and political spheres.

Keywords: gender, equality, women, improvement, impediment

Introduction

Along with the waves of women movements in the western countries, globally accepted norms and implications for women in terms of equality with men, have been implemented by means of international mechanisms such as the United Nations and world forums for women. After the end of the Cold War, democracy has been supported and wide spread to most countries of the world to enjoy equal rights regardless of race and gender in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There are some implications for gender equality and women from many countries still have to fight for their rights against gender discrimination in various institutions. Myanmar becomes one of the earliest countries in Asia because Myanmar women have right to vote in involvement in political life after independence. Although Myanmar women were able to involve in politics has been little limited, the 2010 multi-party general elections paved way for women to return to the trends of Myanmar politics.

For economic development, the role of Myanmar women is generally acknowledged and has contributed to the economic welfare of the country. In the past, mostly Myanmar women worked at home and do not go outside home. Later, women have taken part in government services. Therefore, most women in Myanmar actively participated in not only private but also public sector for Myanmar economic development.

Literature Review

Gender Equality Network (2015), "*Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar*" indicated that cultural norms and related social practices impacts on Myanmar women in socio-economic sphere. Gender in (equality) based on education

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access, and paid and unpaid workers. Myanmar women face barriers to get equal rights as men especially in workplace.

According to Chowdhury, Farah. Deehba (2009), inactive women political participation, sexual violence has been uncovered as obstacles. Women faced many problems to enter in politics that concern for sexual harassment, lack of control over own income, family involvement and support, lack of cooperation of husband, marital status and age. In addition, women candidates are taken little seats by political parties and parties approve outlook of indifference towards women.

Shvedova, N. (2005), “*Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*”, stressed that women challenged obstacles in politics which are lack of party support, lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as trade unions, labor unions and women organizations, lack of educational access, and nature of the electoral system. The facts may or may not be encouraging to women candidates, twofold of public and private tasks and professional obligations. Women have to be victims of discrimination in their own family; they are expected to stay home, men underestimate women to maintain their dominance.

Gender Equality Process before and after the Democratic Transition

Basically, Myanmar has hierarchy and patriarchy practices of social institutions from monarchical rule to independent era. Fortunately, Myanmar women achieved to get the rights to vote, equal rights and did not discriminate against Myanmar citizens on sex according to 1947 and 1974 Constitutions. Historically, gender inequality in Myanmar has not been recognized as a concern issue. The rights of women to participate in public affairs were absent and obstacle or little involvement at that time because the successive governments mostly practiced traditional cultural norms which connect with men in public leadership and women in private roles. The governments prioritized men than women especially in the education and health sectors at leadership level. Similarly, women participation in economic and political spheres was less representatives and they could not show up their decisions in those fields before 2010. But women representation in those sectors have more involved after 2010.

The 2008 Constitution has involved women sector principally as mother and this reinforces gendered stereotype of women as ideal mothers. Outstanding women (ordinary women, outstanding nuns, disable female students and women entrepreneurs) who performed in culture, religious and socio-economic activities were awarded by Myanmar governments every year. Although some Myanmar women were awardees such as Thiha Thudama Theingi, Thri Thudama Theingi, and Thudama Theingi, they do not get less opportunities than men in political sphere. After 2010 multiparty general elections, women and women groups in Myanmar actively participated in peace and democratic process. Since 2013, Myanmar government issued laws, policies and regulations on budget allocations but these are no specifically allocating budget for women. The acknowledgement of the need to improve status and opportunities for Myanmar women is reversed by a commonly held perception that gender gap is not a serious matter. In 2013, U Soe Maung, Minister of the President’s Office, pointed out that

“In Myanmar society, there is traditionally little gender discrimination. It is better than other Asian countries ... women have equal rights with men not only according to the constitution.”

Although the NLD's party platform for 2015 elections committed women and gender equality matters, it has not proposed clear mechanisms on gender equality for women involvement in governance institutions. In keeping with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) calls for more involvement of women in decision making level, NLD-led government has focused on women representation than the USDP government. The government has opposed introducing of gender quotas in Hluttaws because reasons are that women are lack of confidence, less of political knowledge education and so on. However, the government, women organizations and many CSOs have collaborated for empowerment and advancement of women since the time of Myanmar political transition.

Improvement of Legal Framework for Gender Equality in Myanmar

Myanmar has many institutional mechanisms to support implementation of its promises to gender equality and women's empowerment. At national level, the Myanmar National Committee for Women Affairs (MNCWA) was formed to emphasize preservation of women's cultural norms and traditional roles in 1996. It is chaired by the Union Minister of Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR). The Committee is designated "national women's machinery". The Committee and local-level committees promote training, particularly related to the CEDAW and gender awareness. Myanmar Mother and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) and Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation-MWAF (2003) are working together with local and international NGO and local organizations such as Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (1991), Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs' Association- MWEA) (1995) and Myanmar Women and Children Development Foundation- MWCDF (2012) at different levels of supervision, from the Region and/or State to the district and township levels. MWEA operated to develop women role in nation-building task as academic and business women. The organization was able to advance gender consciousness in public and self-confidence among members. MWAF has established to reduce women poverty. It has implemented Micro-Credit Loan system to do business with loans and vocational trainings for urban and rural women. In addition, Self-Reliance Groups- SRGs as a form of community organization for poorest women have established credit procedure with necessary flexibility to encounter the needs of group members like saving funds to increase income generation activities. Due to women organizations, women involvement are increased in nation-building and decision making processes. Women's organizations have been established by ethnic groups such as Karen Women's Organization- KWOs, Chin Women's Organization- CWO, Rakhine Women's Union- RWU, Gender Equality Network, and Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar.

In 2013, MSWRR has drawn the 2013-2022 National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) under President U Thein Sein government. The Plan aims to fulfill its international policy obligations in line with the CEDAW and the 1995 BPfA. It focus on 12 target areas in gender equality including women political participation especially leadership and decision making role in governance at all levels and supports the basis for capacity development, strategy and program development and operation through diverse areas of women's lives along with government divisions and sectors. The Plan supplements the National Framework for Economic and Social Reforms and the National Comprehensive Development Plan (2011-2030) by planning gender equality perceptions. It has important to make sure that women's rights and gender equality are sound protected in the country's reform program.

Although MSWRR is also a main institution to follow up the rights of child and women, allocations for social welfare declined from under 0.2 percent of expenditure in 2011-2012 to 0.1 percent in 2014-2015. There are no gender main points appointed within the ministries to implement the strategic plan, and no specific allocation of budgets to activities to support the advancement of women within ministerial program implementation. Even though there are six Director Generals who are men and served in Department of Social Welfare under MSWRR until 2017, only one woman is appointed as a Director General in Department of Social Welfare since 2017. It can be seen that the government has tried to improve gender quality.

For gender equality, the government has trying to order many law since a series of reform process in 2011. The government enacted Minimum Wage Law in 2012. The law guarantees equality that both women and men should get minimum wages without discrimination on sex in workplace. In addition, the Employment and Skill Development Law was issued in 2013. The law gives for creation of internal job opportunities, development worker skills without discrimination on sex. In order to get equal rights of men and women with regard to land tenure and management rights, the government announced National Land Use Policy in 2016. These laws are improvements of legal framework for gender quality.

Another institution that can empower in Myanmar Parliament(Hluttaw). Hluttaws can match up national laws in accordance with international standards supporting and advancing gender equality, especially in the political field. Legislation for gender equality along the line of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), CEDAW, Million Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were concerned to enhance capacity, and to expand the space for women in national development in all levels. Particularly MDGs Goal 2, 3 and 5 attains universal primary education, maternal health care and global partnership for development. To fulfill MDGs, Myanmar focused on Goal 2 regardless of gender equality by 2015. Therefore, the USDP government initiated compulsory middle school education in June 2015. In addition, the target of SDGs-5 is to ensure women's effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at decision-making roles in economic, political and public sphere. Therefore, women need to be empowered to raise their voice in the institutional mechanisms.

Barriers of Women in Economic, Social (cultural norms) and Political Spheres

Women are facing difficulties in their political and economic participation in the 21st century. In some parts of the world, socio-economic aspects become barriers to the improvement of women. Anyhow the increased global visibility of women's participation at all areas, gender gap and women's rights in Myanmar are main challenges through economic, social and political spheres. In economic spheres, most women work as business workers, entrepreneurs, managers and administrative staff through their unpaid work for households work or communities. After the democratic transition in Myanmar, most Myanmar women get more chances at director, deputy director, assistant director levels and senior level management positions. However, in the 2011-15 Plan, women are illustrated as mothers and as facing economic vulnerabilities, and not as being active in economy. So, Myanmar women have barriers in economic sector.

Over the past decade, there have been some developments in social and economic rank indicators for Myanmar women. Myanmar women have played in agricultural fields in rural areas. Though there are improvements in labor force rate of women, most women are employed in vulnerable informal sector and remain to stand major responsibility for unpaid family workers

in rural and urban areas in Myanmar. Women participation rate in labor market is 51.3 percent compare with 79.9 percent of men. In government sectors, although both men and women get equal salary, they do not get wage which depends on types of employment in rural and urban areas. There are gender disparities linked to economic status, and urban–rural divide which impact on developments in women literacy.

According to the 2014 census data, women and men consist of nearly an equal ratio of population in Myanmar. But percent of working women is less in comparing with percentage of working men. Although women will face barriers in working places, the government has created equal rights and chances for men and women in education, job opportunities, decision-making levels, safer and better working environment. Opportunities for women in workforce require greater support for their capacity building.

Most women face criticism when they travel for election campaign with other men (not husband) away from home. In addition, women also face harassment than men leaders. These cultural norms practice males and females' assurance and goal to effort and become political leaders and the approaches they face from connected party members, competitor politicians, and civil servants. For instance, a traditional Myanmar proverb demonstrates a tradition of opposition two women taking on public leadership roles, *"If a woman wrecks a country it is well and truly wrecked."* and *"The sun does not rise with a hen's crow."* In many countries like Myanmar, cultural norms that relate women with domestic or private works and men with public work contribute to men typically having more ambition and confidence than women to try to become political leaders. Women's participation is involved back by the controlling effects of negative social and cultural norms outlining what are considered appropriate behaviors and characters.

In Myanmar, cultural norms and values are significant for the high level of gender inequality, but it does not aware publicly. Cultural values and norms impact on women and men. Most Myanmar people consider that male/man create well political leaders than female/women. The favor for male leadership impacts not only the number of women in leadership positions but also the quality of their participation. Normally, Myanmar women have less confidence than men to discuss public debate/affairs. The lack of confidence is one of the key challenges limiting the quality of women participation in decision making process. It can be seen that cultural norms relate to leadership and understanding of public affairs with femininity and masculinity. Cultural norms not only affect how males and females are perceived by others but also impact on their own self-perception and ambition.

In society, men and women are allocated outside and inside of the household work. Therefore, the social mobility of women in public affairs is restricted and controlled. It is showed that men have given educational access to compete while women have become more dependent on men because of less of resources and knowledge in the social, economic and political areas. At that time, men become the basis of power like leader of a family. The role of women in economic and social formation and implementation of policies is negligible. So, they do not get less chance to raise their concerns or promote their participation in politics.

Another barrier of gender equality is to travel restriction for women participation in politics. Due to time limitations/constrants, cultural values and norms and the risk of gender-based violence in Myanmar, mobility (travelling to related areas) of women is mostly more limited than men. It seems that mobility of women has improved in recent years, alongside with their opportunities for social relations outside of the home. But considerable gender inequality

remains unchanged. Travel restrictions can be occurred conflict areas which have gender-based violence.

According to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, *“In the differences between sexes, men are considered better and more in nature, while women are underestimated”*. Thus, men dominated in politics in the ancient time. Myanmar women political participation is restricted by men dominated positions in political parties such as a Central executive Committee member and Township Chairman. These positions are important for encouraging women who to select as candidates. Women have to face challenges within political parties because male dominated society as well as are less attention for gender equality within political parties. Moreover, political parties do not even support the political empowerment of women or offer proper seats for women. It can be thought that women are not able to govern and make decisions. Women participation in politics has indirectly negative impact on, for instance, men’s personal and professional groups tend to be male dominated. The impact discourages women from trying to become candidates. Most political parties in Myanmar, women recognize as party members but as MPs. It can be seen that the 2015 multi-party general elections increased the numbers of both women candidates and elected MPs to Hluttaws.

In 2010 multiparty general elections, women representation in Hluttaws involved 28 out of 466 seats (four seats in Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and 24 seats in Pyithu Hluttaw). Therefore, it became six percent of women representation under the USDP government. Two women representatives out of 166 seats from military group were appointed. 2012 by-election, women participated 13 out of 24 contested seats. Representation in Hluttaws is not enough to indicate role of women. The USDP government appointed two women as Union Ministers of the Ministry of Education and MSWRR. It can be said that women representation in Hluttaws has little improved since 1956.

In 2015 multiparty general elections, percentage of elected women had developed 13.7 percent of all elected MPs. Women representation in Hluttaws consisted of 67 out of 466 seats (23 seats in Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and 44 seats in Pyithu Hluttaw). Only two women military representatives as women MPs were appointed in Pyithu Hluttaw. Number of women MPs got 151 seats at national, State and Regional levels (84 women MPs from State and Regional Hluttaws). NLD-led government appointed two women as Chief Minister and one woman as head of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of President’s Office. Seven women as Committees of Chairman and ambassadors are appointed by the government. Therefore, NLD-led government has nearly three-fold times number of women MPs than the USDP government. Although NLD-led government transformed to enhance its pledge a minimum of 30 percent women political participation in each government division, NLD was not supportive of quota system for women because women’s involvement in leadership position should be decided by their qualifications

According to the 2017 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Report, women representation in the world is 23.6 percent. For gender equality, governments are being attempted to increase participation of women like legislative measures or representation in policy making and decision making process. Women’s political participation not only directly supports to surge gender equality but also empowers women to develop in decision making and uphold women-friendly policy improvement. The development of women in economic, political and social status is essential for the attainment of both accountable and transparent government along with the

administration and sustainable development program. As a result, women in politics will more or less get chances for equality of women or girl's health and education.

Challenges for Gender Equality in Myanmar

Gender equality refers to the equal access of women and men not only to social services but also to livelihood opportunities, production opportunities land and markets. The main gender issues of ongoing concern in Myanmar include the high maternal mortality proportion and inadequate access to reproductive and basic health services, low levels of women participation in decision-making for public affairs and the labor force. Policies like the NSPARD and the NSPAW have been developed through advocating processes. Additional initiatives will be required to develop a strategic approach for rural employment opportunities. On the other hand, there has been no definite program for the implementation of the NSPAW in the rural livelihoods area. The plan does not appear to be well known throughout the government. However, gender is being addressed by groups working on smallholders' development initiatives.

With regard to legal equality, the Myanmar Constitution clearly states equality before the law of all citizens irrespective of race, religion, culture, class or sex. Since 2011, it has placed great importance on enhancing political participation of women. Like men, women have equal chances and can obtain economic, social and cultural rights. In order to improve women's employments and reduce poverty, the government has expressed its commitment to improvement and empowerment of women in the NSPAW (2013-2022).

Myanmar Women are taking up leadership roles in politics traditionally reserved for men. However, in local governance structures, women are still notable by their absence in leadership positions because of weakness of policies within parties and institutions. There are no women administrators in 330 townships in Myanmar, and only 0.001 percent of village tract administrators are women. Continuing gender biases tend to be unclear the economic role that women play in the household income and in the rural economy. But it can be seen that rural women in Myanmar work in all sectors of agriculture and also in domestic work. In addition, unskilled daily wages for women remain consistently below compare with men. In Myanmar married men are also considered the head of their households, according to patriarchal norms. Low levels of education inhibit confidence and capacity of men and women. As noted by one observer, "*...cultural and social pressure... is impacting Myanmar women's and men's attitudes towards the current transition...the lack of confidence in their knowledge and skills, the lack of political and financial and the feeling of being powerless are also important factors restraining women from playing a meaningful role in the current context.*"

With the goal of bringing Myanmar's laws into more effective compliance with CEDAW, Myanmar government has worked with the Gender Equality Network (GEN) and the UN to draft the Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women (PoVAW) Bill. The bill stipulates the need to prevent and protect women from all forms of violence. Over the past few decades, considerable efforts have been made at national, regional and international levels to enhance women's range of opportunities in public life. Women remain globally under-represented in decision making bodies both elected and appointed positions.

Myanmar women are facing many challenges and barriers because of social norms, and traditional perceptions and institutional barriers. These challenges are lack of equal job opportunities and participation in nation building. Positive transformation on gender equality

depends on economic reform and political transition of the country. Even though implementation of policies and practices for gender equality in the institutional mechanism, women may not empower to equal participation with men in economic, political and social life. Myanmar has a series of reforms since 2011, but there is no enough space for women in the transition policy negotiation and development systems. To implement gender equality, Myanmar women rights program is facing challenge to complete.

In order to develop for women's rights, President U Thein Sein government established the Framework for Economic and Social Reforms and the Comprehensive National Plan (2011-2030). Although reform program of the government address gender equality, the National Plan has not been linked to the long-term National Comprehensive Development Plan. As of tradition and culture in Myanmar, women empowerment cannot easily be achieved in society. Myanmar women face many difficulties like travelling away from home if they are not accompanying with their husband or relatives. Most people think that women have to do only housework and they let their households to work outside because men have to control their incomes. Therefore, cultural norms may be considered as barriers to women's rights. One of the challenges of gender norms is the lack of data, evident and information to link normative morals to fundamental discrimination. Culture and outlooks of people in all levels should change through encourage to implement plans, ideas, and procedures which cultural mindset of people should be recognized for gender equality.

The 2008 Myanmar Constitution comprises opportunities of gender equality and attainment of women's rights. Based on the experience from many countries, there are not practiced policy gap. For instance, although women can get equal salaries and spaces in working places as men according to the legal framework of gender equality. It can be seen that men get more salaries and more spaces than women in working places.

Conclusion

Myanmar is a member of international treaties such as CEDAW and BpFA for the aim of enhancing women for gender equality and plays a importance role in urging participation of women in Myanmar politics, economics and social fields. Myanmar is carrying out to achieving the MDGs and SDGs on gender equality. Myanmar government has adopted NASPAW (2013-2022) in 2013 because Myanmar is trying to protecting and improving women's rights and gendering equality. Although the laws and plans guarantee equality between men and women, law enforcement is still weak. Women face barriers than men in accessing and owning land, participating in consultations and decision-making processes, no receiving equal payment for work of equal value.

In political sphere, although Myanmar women involved actively before independence era, there was low women representation in Hluttaws after independence. But, there has been increasing women participation in politics under NLD-led government than the USDP government. Although number of women participation in Hluttaws has improved, women representation in Hluttaws does not represent all women in society. Rights and protection of women would not be considered as major issues for gender equality. Therefore, NLD government should consider 30 percent gender quota as a requirement along with capacity building for women, especially in 2020 multiparty general elections.

Although culture is a vital element of society, it is a significant barrier for Myanmar women. In Myanmar, there is still low awareness of gender issues and many people do not have understanding the concept of gender or knowledge. Main barriers for women are social norms which limit women's involvement in public, leadership and decision-making process.

There is a weak point in promoting gender equality among the members of Parliament or political participation regarding with women improvement. Political parties are incomplete in party platform and do not arrange special training programs for women candidates and members in party. Although, there have many women organizations and organizations for women empowerment in Myanmar, the activities of organizations like CSOs or women organizations are slightly improvement for women. All sectors of society including the government, the media, CSOs and the international society make efforts to collaborate for addressing gender inequalities and advancing women's participation and their opportunities to be in decision-making and leadership roles. It can be seen that cultural and social norms in Myanmar still remain in regard to determining status of women within the household and in the society they live.

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