Intersectional Challenges of Muslim Women in Myanmar:

A literature review on citizenship, nationalism, and cultural barriers in education, employment, and political spheres

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Table of Contents

Introduction

From the era of the Kingdom of Burma through the colonial and post-colonial (the democratic parliamentary) period, Muslims played significant roles in nation-building and community development in Myanmar. They contributed in various sectors such as education, economy, social welfare, and politics (Shah et al., 2019; Crouch, 2016; Yegar, 1972). Muslims in Myanmar historically worked as officers, government employees, and military personnel, playing active roles in both the state and civil society (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Yegar, 1972). They were allowed to practice their faith freely and build places of worship (Yegar, 1972). In the 1960s during the democratic parliamentary period, "there was at least one Muslim minister and several Muslim members of the parliament" (Human Right Watch, 2002, p. 3). Since the 1962 military coup, the situation of Muslim communities in Myanmar has significantly worsened. However, non-Rohingya Muslim women, in particular, encounter distinct and often overlooked challenges. Therefore, this paper focuses on the specific difficulties faced by non-Rohingya Muslim women in Myanmar, including issues related to citizenship, cultural barriers, and anti-Muslim sentiments. All of which impact their access to education, employment opportunities, and political participation.

According to the 1921 census, Muslims made up 3.8% of the population, with a population of 400,000, up from 100,000 during the Kingdom era (Yegar, 1972). As of the 2014 National Census, "there were 1,147,495 Muslims in the country, or a 2.3% of the total population of 50,279,900" (Department of Population, 2016, pp. 3-5). However, this figure excludes the Rohingya from Rakhine State, with an estimated 4.3% of the total Muslim population (ibid.). Moreover, "Islamic leaders estimated the Muslim population at approximately 10% which is significantly higher than the government's 4%" estimate (Human Rights Watch, 2002, p.3). The census data showed that Muslims reside across various states and regions, with Kayin, Mon, Tanintharyi, Yangon, and Mandalay having the largest Muslim population. Since gender distribution within religious groups was not specified, it is difficult to estimate the precise population of Muslim women (Department of Population, 2016).

During the Kingdom period and Zerbadi during the colonial era, the early Muslim community in Burma, consisted of descendants from "Arab, Persian, and Indian traders" also known as Pathee (Shah et al., 2019; Crouch, 2016). Throughout the British colonial period,

many Indian Muslims migrated to Burma, particularly during the Anglo-Burmese war (Yegar, 1972). The Muslim population in Myanmar is very diverse, including Indian Muslims such as the *Chulia, Lebbais, Moplah, Kaka, Telugu, Deccanis, Gujerati, Soorti, Chittagong*, and others and the Burmese Muslims as *Zerbadees, Arakanese Muslims, Kamans,* and *Myedu* (Yegar, 1972). Moreover, Chinese Muslims, known as *Panthay*, are mostly found in Shan State (ibid.). The *Kamans* were only officially recognized as a national race under the 1982 Citizenship Act (Kyaw, 2015). The Malay Muslim or known as *Pashu* are present in small numbers in Myanmar (Crouch, 2016). Since the 1962 military coup, nationalist and racial movements, along with the ongoing military brutality, have severely impacted the identity and citizenship rights of Muslims, leading to widespread discrimination and exploitation (Kyaw, 2018; Shah et al., 2019; Ko et al., 2024).

Problem Statement

The issues faced by the broader Muslim population in Myanmar, including women and girls, are often overshadowed by the significant international focus on the Rohingya crisis, which has garnered extensive social media attention, press coverage, and academic research (Swincer, 2016). This emphasis leads to a common misconception that all Muslims in Myanmar are a homogenous group, conflating their experiences with those of the Rohingya. In reality, Muslim population in Myanmar is very diverse, and the challenges faced by non-Rohingya Muslims differ substantially from those experienced by the Rohingya. Utilizing an intersectional framework will help elucidate how overlapping factors—such as socioeconomic status, race, religion, and gender shape the experiences of marginalized groups (Mehrotra, 2010) underscoring the need to address these factors by examining the struggles of non-Rohingya Muslim women in Myanmar. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) emphasizes the necessity of protecting fundamental rights and human dignity for all individuals. Nevertheless, Muslim minorities, particularly women and girls, encounter significant obstacles. Frydenlund and Lei (2021) highlighted, “Muslim women’s dignified access to public spaces, education, and formal wage work outside the home, Muslim women’s own decisions regarding education, mobility “outside” the house, and work are often overlooked or dismissed by a focus on state- or community-led cultural and religious exclusion in Myanmar” (p. 304).

Moreover, discrimination based on race, gender, and religion compounds the difficulties in obtaining citizenship documentation, which restricts access to education, mobility, safety, and employment (Htun, 2022). The persistence of nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment further marginalizes Muslim women, adversely affecting their socio-economic well-being and political participation (Frydenlund & Lei, 2021). Thus, this research brief aimed to examine the intersectional challenges faced by non-Rohingya Muslim women in Myanmar, offering insights into their unique challenges and highlighting the need for targeted interventions and policies to foster empowerment and inclusion.

Methodology

This research brief is focused on the issues faced by other Muslim women in Myanmar, with the exception of the Rohingya. It examined the intersecting barriers they encountered, particularly from the military's 1962 takeover of power until the current military coup. Sources include published and unpublished research, books, academic papers, websites, news articles, blogs, and social media posts.

An Analysis of Intersectional Challenges Faced by Non-Rohingya Muslim Women

Citizenship Laws and Barriers to Educational and Employment Opportunities for Muslim Women

The 1948 Constitution of Myanmar initially recognized various Muslim ethnicities, including the Rohingya, as citizens (Minority Rights Group International, 2017). However, this considerably changed after the 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win. The subsequent 1982 Citizenship Act, enacted under the 1974 Constitution, linked citizenship into one of the 135 recognized national races (Taing-Yin-Tha) or ancestors who arrived the country before 1823 (ibid.). This Act introduced three categories of citizenship: 'citizens', 'associate citizens', and 'naturalized citizens', each requiring distinct documentation (Justice Base, 2018; NRC, 2018). The 1947 Constitution granted citizenship to those born in Burma with at least one *Taing-Yin-Tha* grandparent, whereas the 1974 Constitution required two *Taing-Yin-Tha* parents or prior citizenship recognition (Ko et al., 2024).

Apart from the Kaman, and other minorities such as Tamils, Gurkhas, and Chinese, Muslims had to apply for citizenship, demonstrating their ethnic background and ancestral status—a process complicated by the lack of ancestral records (NRC, 2018; Ko et al., 2024; Htun, 2022). The requirement of having two *Taing-Yin-Tha* parents to become Members of the Parliament further excluded many Muslim and Hindu minorities from political participation, despite their ancestors' contributions to Myanmar's development (Ko et al., 2024). Kyed (2021) claimed that many Muslims and Hindus, particularly in Karen State, lack identity documents, impeding their access to public services and rights. Consequently, this legislation has marginalized not only the Rohingya, but also other Muslim communities, particularly women and girls.

In Myanmar, women face significant obstacles in obtaining the National Registration Card (NRC), an important document in order to access rights and services. The 2014 national census indicated that 54% of women lacked identity cards, contributing to the broader issue of a third of the population lacking any kind of identification (Htun, 2022; NRC, 2018). While the census does not separate the data by religion, non-Buddhist minorities, including Muslims, experience notable discrimination in the NRC application process (Htun, 2022). Ko et al. (2023) found that there is higher proportion of women that lacks national registration cards or civil documentation particularly those from Muslim and unofficial minority groups. Additionally, several barriers include limited knowledge, unofficial fees, corruption, and political manipulation (Htun, 2022; NRC, 2018).

The state’s practice of replacing religion and ethnicity on documents —such as "Pakistani Islam" or "Bengali Islam," or Indian prefix instead of “Burma” —further complicates the situation (Minority Rights Group, 2019; NRC, 2018; Frydenlund & Lei, 2021; Kyaw, 2015). An example includes a Muslim woman who had her Citizenship Scrutiny Card (CSC) downgraded into a Naturalized Citizenship Scrutiny Card (NCSC), highlighting systemic barriers (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). In April 2022, the State Administration Council (SAC) mandated that individuals over 16 must have a citizenship card for domestic travel, imposing additional restrictions and increasing risks for minority women, including harassment and unsafe travel (ibid.).

Myanmar was ranked “118th out of 162 countries” in the 2019 Gender Inequality Index (GII), indicating persistent gender inequality (United Nations Statistical Commission, 2022). Moreover, the 2014 national census revealed that only 53% of labor force positions were held

by women compared to 76% held by men (Department of Population, 2016). Despite limited data on ethnic and religious distribution in the workforce, minorities without citizenship documentation, including Muslim communities, face severe employment discrimination. According to Mosaic Myanmar (2023), Muslims frequently encounter difficulties in formal employment due to religiously motivated policies and discriminatory practices. Even those with Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (CRCs) face significant challenges. For instance, Muslim doctors often struggle to find positions in hospitals and face patient refusals, emphasizing the impact of systemic discrimination on their careers (ibid.).

Moreover, educational barriers are notably significant for Muslim women in Myanmar. University students without citizenship cards are denied from obtaining degree certificates, which perpetuates a lack of professional career opportunities even for those who have completed higher education (U.S. Department of State, 2021; Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). This discourages further educational pursuits and relegates many girls to domestic roles and childcare at home (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). Additionally, financial constraints and systemic discrimination, often lead them to low-wage or informal employment, including street vending and domestic labor, instead of attending higher education (Frydenlund & Lei, 2021; Mosaic Myanmar, 2023).

Women with associate citizenship, due to their family's Foreigner Registration Certificate, face restrictions in pursuing higher education, particularly in fields like engineering (Ko et al., 2024). Consequently, many students, especially women, lacking proper citizenship documentation are compelled to abandon their educational goals. Likewise, the lack of citizenship documentation hinders women from owning land jointly with their husbands, accessing government aid, securing formal employment, accessing banking services, and traveling within Myanmar (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 8 promote equal opportunities for education and employment, regardless of gender, class, or religion (UN, 2020; UN, 1979). Nevertheless, Muslim women in Myanmar, especially those lacking citizenship documents or systematically downgraded to second-class citizens and are barred from these opportunities.

Nationalism and its Impact on the Marginalization of Muslim Women

From the colonial period to the present, historical events and political movements have greatly influenced the roots of nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar. The rise of Buddhist nationalism began during the anti-colonial movement of the 1930s and 1940s and was solidified by the military regime established in 1962 (Gravers, 2019). Early nationalist organizations, such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (1906) and the General Council of Buddhist Burmese Associations (1920), propagated the idea that "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist" (Harvard Divinity School, n.d.). Resentment towards Muslims and Hindus grew during this period, who were perceived as colonial immigrants or economic threats, culminating in the anti-Indian riots of 1938 that targeted mosques and businesses owned by Muslims and Hindus (Gravers, 2019; Nemoto, 2014; Yegar, 1972).

Despite Muslims' integration into Burmese society, including their adoption of local clothing and language, they continued to be viewed as outsiders, though groups like the Zerbadess or Pathee were more integrated into Burmese customs (Yegar, 1972; Gravers, 2019). After General Ne Win's military coup in 1962, institutionalized discrimination against Muslims intensified, affecting their identity, citizenship, and socio-economic status (Shah et al., 2019). The nationalization of Muslim-owned properties and Islamophobic policies led to significant losses for Muslims, including their reputation and social status. Under the military government, individuals of Chinese and Indian descent were categorized as 'foreigners', restricting their citizenship to associate position. This classification restricted them from civil service and from enrolling in certain university departments, such as “Science, Engineering, and Medical Studies, at universities receiving substantial national budget funding” (Shah et al., 2019, p. 9).

Furthermore, provocative rhetoric from Buddhist monks and official narratives portraying Muslims as invaders further intensify anti-Muslim sentiment (Frydenlund & Lei, 2021). Since 2012, anti-Muslim sentiment has escalated, exacerbated by insufficient protection and condemnation from the National League for Democracy (NLD). This has resulted to violence against Muslims, often incited by Buddhist monks and nationalist groups in riots across different locations such as Taung Gu, Kyauk Sai, Meikhtila, Lar Sho, and Rakhine (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Shar et al., 2019; van Bruinessen, 2018). A Muslim woman from Mandalay described her experience of fleeing collective violence, underlining a lack of equal protection under the law and skepticism about the NLD's ability to address deeply entrenched discrimination (Frydenlund et al., 2021). As a result, discrimination persists in everyday life,

with practices like "No Muslim allowed" in housing and public spaces. For instance, a broker's refusal to rent a flat to a Muslim applicant underscores such exclusionary practices (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). This discrimination extends to state institutions; for example, women wearing hijabs may be denied access or face discrimination in passport offices (Frydenlund & Lei, 2021).

In Myanmar, Muslim students face significant educational discrimination driven by anti-Muslim sentiments. Derogatory terms like 'Kalar' and 'A Tha Mae' and exclusionary practices from teachers and peers are common (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). While some families can avoid this by sending their children to private schools, this option is not accessible for all, leading to high dropout rates among low-income families (Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). Muslim women, especially those with Indian features or wearing hijabs, experience additional marginalization and harassment in public spaces and university settings, affecting their mental health (Frydenlund & Lei, 2021). Therefore, exclusionary nationalist ideologies, alongside persistent anti-Muslim sentiment and institutional discrimination, contribute to widespread social exclusion and harassment, thereby impacting Muslim women's well-being.

Cultural Practices and Barriers to Educational Advancement for Muslim Women

Since the Muslim communities in Myanmar are diverse and include both Indian and Burmese Muslims, they exhibit varied traditions and cultural practices. During the colonial period, Indian Muslims largely retained their cultural practices, while Burmese Muslim women, known as *Zerbadess* or *Pathee*, adopted local Burmese customs, including their clothing and language, and have achieved significant educational and public engagement (Yegar, 1972). This integration, however, led to tensions between local customs and broader Islamic norms, as seen in the 1958 split within the Jam'iyyat (Muslim organization) in Burma. This split emphasized differing views on women's roles and attire, including debates over women's participation in public meetings and the adoption of Indian dress for prayers (Yegar, 1972).

However, despite Islamic veiling practices, many Muslim women who converted due to interreligious marriage continued to wear traditional Burmese dress (Shah & Aung, 2016). Frydenlund and Lei (2021) noted that decisions to wear a hijab are influenced by personal

spiritual preparedness as well as perceptions of differentiating oneself from the Buddhist majority. Human Rights Watch (2002) observed that Muslims in Myanmar often adopt Buddhist-style attire and cultural practices, though some Muslim and Hindu women continue to observe purdah (Lambrecht & Mahrt, 2019). This indicates a complex interplay between Islamic traditions and local customs, compounded by the perception of Muslims as outsiders.

Regarding gender roles, like Buddhists and Christians, Muslims in Myanmar, view men as superiors, with women generally expected to submit to their husbands as head of the household (JICA, 2013). In some Muslim communities, women's opportunities are further restricted by social stigma associated to being widowed, divorced, or single, because they are often perceived as less respectable (GEN, 2015). Moreover, due to societal expectations, women often prioritize domestic responsibilities over educational and professional aspirations, reinforcing the perception that women should stay at home after marriage (ibid.). Conservative family attitudes and societal expectations considerably limit access to education for Muslim girls, particularly those wearing hijabs or with Indian features. These factors, combined with discouragement from some Muslim families, especially Indian Muslims, prioritize domestic chores and childcare over schooling, causing many girls to drop out from state schools (Crouch, 2016; van Bruinessen, 2018; Frydenlund & Lei, 2021). As expressed by one Muslim woman:

> I heard that girls are being instructed not to continue their studies after they had learnt how to read and write, because they have to work in the kitchen after they have married a guy. All of us sisters are educated, and my mom always tells us that we will never get a good husband because we are not skillful in doing household chores. She did not care about our education status. She just measured the value of a girl with the skill of doing chores. Previously, education for girls ended after they passed the matriculation exam. Nowadays, they can continue to study in university, but the family will encourage them to get married. Girls will also be forced to get married when they apply for a job. (GEN, 2013, p. 94)

Girls face more challenges in school due to cultural barriers and economic hardships which forces them into domestic roles. In rural areas, higher education is seen as costly and difficult to access, leading many families to prioritize immediate economic contributions than pursuing further education (Maung, n.d.). Hence, male students may attend Islamic schools, while girls are often kept at home to help with household duties or to attend classes in Quran

memorization, which are not recognized by universities or employers in Myanmar (Maung, n.d.; Frydenlund & Lei, 2021). As a result, there is a high dropout rate after primary school, with many girls leaving school instead of continuing their education (ibid.). Additionally, many girls are pulled out of school , especially in rural areas due to parental fears of harassment and violence from Buddhist monks, long travel distances and problems with citizenship cards. (Frydenlund & Lei, 2021; Mosaic Myanmar, 2023). Despite these challenges, some Muslim women are gradually entering public and professional spheres, reflecting a complex and evolving dynamics within these communities (GEN, 2015). However, cultural barriers, exclusionary nationalist ideologies, and economic difficulties continue to impede the educational and professional advancement of Muslim women in Myanmar.

Political Exclusion and Discrimination Against Muslim Women

The political landscape of Myanmar has been male dominated and women are largely underrepresented in decision-making roles (Doneys et al., 2023; Latt et al., 2017; International IDEA, n.d.). Muslim women face additional barriers due to their religious identity, restrictive citizenship laws, and nationalist agenda. Despite these challenges, they have been actively involved in political and social movements, contributing to the fight for independence and nation-building initiatives (Shah et al., 2019; Harvard Divinity School, n.d.; Crouch, 2016). During British colonial rule, Muslim women like Daw Saw Shwe, Daw Thet May, and Daw Mya Mya Tin led advocacy efforts through organizations such as the Burmese Muslim Women League and the All-Burma Burmese Muslims Conference. They supported the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and established the Burma Salvation League for Women (Shwe, 2011; MMSY, 2014). In the post-independence era, before the 1962 military coup, Daw Khin Khin and Daw Saw Shwe served as Members of the Parliament and represented Myanmar in international forums (M- Media, 2014).

The 1962 military coup and the 1982 Citizenship Act have systematically marginalized Muslim communities in Myanmar by labeling them as foreigners and prohibiting them from political participation through discriminatory policies. Despite constituting about 4% of the population, Muslims are underrepresented in parliaments and regional Hluttaw. There were no Muslim candidates in the 2015 elections. Likewise, there were only two NDL Muslim candidates who ran for winnable seats in 2020 (EMReF, 2020; van Bruinessen, 2018; The

Guardian, 2015). Furthermore, Muslim women are notably absent in alternative government bodies and only two Muslim men are holding leadership positions in the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the National Unity Government NUG (Ko et al., 2024).

Muslim women who have entered politics face severe challenges such as discrimination and nationalist-driven animosity. During the 2010 campaign, a Muslim woman candidate was accused of being a threat to Buddhist women, inciting public fear and prejudice against her (Latt et al., 2017). Moreover, a Muslim woman and vice-chairperson of the NLD in Mandalay, Daw Win Mya Mya, was disqualified from running for office in the 2015 election by her own party due to her religion. She expressed her disappointment in an interview with the Voice of America, stating, "I personally feel quite sad that there won't be any Muslims in the parliament. We were born here. I'm a citizen. I only speak Burmese. My grandmother and grandfather were born in Myanmar" (Lewis & Carteret, 2015).

Muslim women have played significant roles in major political movements in Myanmar, including the 1988 Revolution and the Saffron Revolution, where they participated in protests and some were imprisoned (Shin, 2024). Muslim communities have faced severe repression, including targeted attacks and destruction under the current military coup. Despite this, new civil society organizations and armed groups have emerged, advocating for Muslim rights and contributing to broader resistance efforts (Radio Free Asia, 2021, 2022; Frontier Myanmar, 2023, as cited in Ko et al., 2024). Muslim women and religious leaders have also been prominent in opposing the military regime (Frydenlund et al., 2021).

Muslim women in Myanmar show remarkable resilience despite systemic challenges like discrimination and restrictive citizenship laws, persisting in political and resistance movements. Mai Mai, a Muslim woman who campaigned for the NLD in the 2020 elections and later joined armed resistance is a notable example of resilience. During her training with the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), she concealed her religious identity because she was afraid of being discriminated. Despite enduring harsh conditions, including bomb attacks and combat in the forest, she made significant contributions on the frontline while struggling to maintain her religious practices (Shin, 2024). In conclusion, while Muslim women in Myanmar have a rich history of political and resistance involvement, they continue to face significant challenges due to systemic discrimination, restrictive citizenship laws, and

cultural challenges, leading to their persistent underrepresentation in political spheres and decision-making position.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Gender disparities in education, employment, and politics are exacerbated by long-standing military rule and entrenched cultural norms in Myanmar. For Muslim women, these challenges are heightened by systemic discrimination, restrictive citizenship laws, anti-Muslim sentiments, and military oppression, further marginalizing them. While the Rohingya Muslims are stateless, other non-Rohingya Burmese, Indian, Chinese, and Malay Muslim women in Myanmar are not stateless, they still encounter significant challenges, such as difficulties in obtaining citizenship cards, barriers to equal opportunities in education, employment, and political participation. These issues are intensified by exclusionary nationalist ideologies, socio-cultural factors, and discrimination. The extensive international attention and media coverage focused on the Rohingya crisis often overshadow the diverse challenges faced by other Muslims particularly women and girls. Hence, it is important to consider the cases of other Muslim communities who are also facing various forms of discrimination.

In order to enhance the socio-cultural, economic well-being, and political participation faced by Muslim women of diverse ethnicities as well as to address their specific needs the following are recommended:

- **Reform Discriminatory Legislation**: To amend the 1982 Citizenship Law to ensure equal access to citizenship, education, and employment for all ethnic and religious groups, regardless of religion, race, or gender.
- **Enhance Data Collection**: To collect and analyze ethnically sex-disaggregated data to gain a deeper understanding of the distinct challenges faced by various Muslim communities. This review may be used in conducting further studies aimed at reducing disparities in the areas of education, employment, and political participation particularly in the context of Myanmar.
- **Address Cultural Barriers**: To raise public awareness on the importance of women's education, professional growth and community engagement advocating for the empowerment of Muslim women and to challenge norms that restricts them to domestic roles.

It is imperative that these recommendations be addressed and implemented in order to promote an inclusive society where Muslim women can fully exercise their rights, agency, and contribute to the development of Myanmar.

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