



DIVIDED FEMINISM? RETHINKING FEMINIST ACTION IN MYANMAR'S REVOLUTIONARY LANDSCAPE



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Abstract

This research brief examines the re-conceptualization of feminism in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup, a period characterized by intensified militarization, ethnic conflict, and social fragmentation. Even though women and LGBTQ+ people have joined the resistance in significant numbers, feminist initiatives are divided and often face challenges such as harassment, male-dominated norms, and exclusion within armed groups. Thus, this study critically reviews the historical evolution of feminism in Myanmar, the impact of militarism, intersectional challenges, and ongoing tensions surrounding queer inclusion by drawing exclusively on secondary sources. The brief concludes with recommendations for building more inclusive, intersectional, and transformative feminist movements capable of addressing the complex realities of post-coup Myanmar. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of how feminist movements can adapt and respond within revolutionary contexts shaped by intersecting systems of oppression.

Introduction

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar marked a violent clash in the country's fragile democratic transition (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In response, widespread resistance emerged, ranging from armed struggle to mass civil disobedience (Brooten, 2023). Women and LGBTQ+ individuals quickly became visible actors within these movements, participating in armed resistance, organizing humanitarian aid, and leading community defense efforts (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Zaw, 2023). However, this increased participation has not translated into a coherent or inclusive feminist political agenda. Instead, feminism during this revolution remains contested, fragmented, and insufficiently articulated (Connell, 2017; Kyaw, 2021).

While many individuals and groups involved in the resistance identify with feminist values, their practices often reflect inconsistent and sometimes contradictory ideological positions. Some adopt liberal empowerment narratives focused on women's visibility (Wells-Dang, 2020), while others operate within ethnonationalist or militarized frameworks that reproduce patriarchal hierarchies (Brooten, 2023; Sukumar, 2020). Simultaneously, reports of secular harassment, internalized misogyny, and the exclusion of queer individuals within People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) underscore the

structural challenges to transforming resistance spaces into genuinely feminist ones (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Zaw, 2023).

This research brief seeks to unpack these tensions by examining the ideological and practical fractures within feminist thought and activism in post-coup Myanmar. It argues that Myanmar's feminist landscape is not absent but rather fragmented by a complex intersection of militarism, ethnic politics, class dynamics, and cultural narratives (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Mohanty, 2003). Using feminist ideas and existing research, this brief argues that feminism must be re-imagined to resist the reproduction of power imbalances, even within movements that are supposed to fight for freedom. (Mohanty, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Myanmar's 2021 military coup triggered not only a democratic crisis but also a profound rupture in existing gender dynamics, as women and LGBTQ+ individuals emerged as prominent figures within resistance movements. However, this visibility has not translated into a unified or transformative feminist praxis. Although activist spaces have become more diverse in terms of participation, they remain ideologically and structurally fragmented. Feminism in this context is variously articulated through conflicting frameworks, liberal rights-based advocacy, ethnic autonomy movements, and militarized resistance, each of which carries distinct assumptions and inherent limitations.

The lack of a shared feminist vision is further compounded by persistent sexism within resistance movements, the exclusion of queer voices, and the reproduction of male-dominated power structures keep repeating themselves even within the resistance. This tension reveals a core contradiction: the movements seeking liberation from authoritarianism often replicate gendered and heteronormative forms of exclusion. These patterns, if left unaddressed, risk undermining broader struggles for gender justice, particularly for women and LGBTQ+ individuals within ethnic and queer communities.

Furthermore, international donor interventions frequently prioritize women's visibility and participation without adequately addressing underlying power relations. This ends up supporting western liberal feminist models that are poorly aligned with the real experiences of women in ethnic or conflict areas. There is thus an urgent need to critically examine how

feminism is conceptualized, contested, and operationalized within Myanmar's revolutionary landscape.

Key Research Question

How have feminist practices within Myanmar's post-coup revolutionary movements become divided, and what theoretical or conceptual frameworks can help reimagine of a more inclusive feminism that represents diverse voices after the 2021 military coup?

Methodology

This research brief uses published reports, articles, and activist writings to study how feminist practices have become divided and reconfigured in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. Rather than conducting fieldwork or collecting primary data, the study engages in a critical review of existing literature, reports, and activist discourse produced by local and international feminist scholars, grassroots organizations, and civil society actors.

The key materials include peer-reviewed academic publications on feminist theory; particularly postcolonial, intersectional, and anti-militarist frameworks as well as grey literature such as policy briefs, NGO reports, and public statements issued by women's and LGBTQ+ groups involved in Myanmar's resistance movement. Additionally, social media content, activist blogs, and public statements from prominent groups such as the Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) are analysed to capture contemporary feminist discourse.

The analysis is based on feminist theoretical perspectives and reviews existing writings by grouping them into common themes. Key themes such as ideological contestation, militarism, intersectionality, and feminist erasure are identified and traced across diverse sources. By situating feminist narratives within Myanmar's specific political and historical context while engaging with global feminist debates, the research aims to contribute to a contextualized and theoretically informed understanding of feminist practices in times of revolution and state collapse.

Limitations:

- Since this study only uses existing sources, it may not fully capture what is happening on the ground after the coup
- Online discussions largely reflect the perspectives of urban and English-speaking groups, consequently, rural or offline feminist activities may be underrepresented.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a theoretically grounded, context-specific synthesis that can inform both activist and scholarly approaches to feminist praxis in Myanmar.

Analysis

Global and Regional Paths of Feminist Ideas

Feminism as a global political and intellectual movement has emerged through multiple waves and traditions, each shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. The first wave of feminism, largely rooted in Western societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focused on formal legal rights particularly women's suffrage and property ownership. The second wave (1960s - 1980s) expanded its scope to include reproductive rights, workplace equality, sexual liberation, and critiques of patriarchy in both public and private spheres (Tong, 2009). The third wave, emerging in the 1990s, critiqued the universalist assumptions of earlier feminist movements by emphasizing identity politics, intersectionality, and the recognition of diverse women's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 2003). Contemporary feminist discourse, often referred to as the fourth wave, engages with digital activism, trans and queer inclusion, and global solidarity against gender-based violence (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

However, scholars have long critiqued the dominance of Western feminist paradigms, arguing that they often erase or marginalize the experiences and epistemologies of women from the Global South. Some feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), argue we must challenge the common view that portrays women from the Global South as helpless victims who need saving by the West. Instead, they advocate for feminist knowledge production that centres lived realities, local resistance strategies, and the intersection of gender with race, class, colonialism, and nationalism.

In Southeast Asia, feminist movements have often emerged from against colonial struggles, community-based organizing, and responses to government violence, rather than from Western-style rights-based campaigns. For example, in countries like the Philippines,

Indonesia, and Thailand, women have played key roles in armed resistance, community healing, and spiritual leadership (Ng, 2022). These movements usually focus on community, spirituality, and collective well-being, which is different from the more individual-focused approaches commonly associated in the Western feminism (Heng & Devan, 1995). At the same time, Southeast Asian feminisms have been shaped by experiences of military rule, strict religious traditions, and ethnic conflicts, all of which shape their priorities in unique ways.

Myanmar's feminism has developed at the intersection of global and regional influences. Local feminist groups have used international rights ideas and donor support, but they also focus strongly on resisting militarism, supporting ethnic self-determination, and challenging deeply rooted cultural patriarchy (Connell, 2017; Sukumar, 2020; Brooten, 2023). After the coup, feminism in Myanmar requires rearticulation beyond imported Western models, towards approaches that address the country's specific configuration of gender inequality, armed conflict, and revolutionary struggle (Mohanty, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2011). This means using global feminist ideas but grounding them in Myanmar's specific history, politics, and culture contexts.

The History of Feminism in Myanmar

Feminist activism in Myanmar has long been shaped by the complex intersections of colonial legacies, nationalism, authoritarian governance, and ethnic struggle. During the colonial period, Burmese women were often portrayed as symbols of national identity and cultural purity, a trope that persisted in post-independence nationalist movements (Than, 2015). These stories portrayed women as guardians of tradition and morality but did not challenge male dominance or allow feminist criticism (Kyaw, 2018).

Under successive military regimes, women's rights activism was heavily restricted, and the state co-opted the discourse of "women's development" through organizations like the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF), which operated more as a political instrument of the junta than an advocate for women (Connell, 2017). In response, exiled women's groups such as the Women's League of Burma (WLB), formed in the Thai Myanmar borderlands, began to articulate a distinctly feminist, anti-militarist critique, linking gender-based violence with militarization and state impunity (Lee, 2014). Their advocacy particularly on sexual violence as a weapon of war gained international recognition, yet their influence within Myanmar's urban civil society remained limited for years (South & Lall, 2016).

During the decade of relative political liberalization (2010 - 2020), a new generation of urban-based feminist organizations emerged, including Akhaya Women and Rainfall Gender Study Group. These groups focused on issues such as consent education, LGBTQ+ rights, and online harassment but often struggled to build sustained connection with grassroots, ethnic, and conflict-affected communities. The gap between exiled anti-military feminists, urban feminists, and ethnic women activists created divisions that became increasingly pronounced after the coup (Wells-Dang, 2020; Zaw, 2019).

Understanding Feminism in Myanmar

The framing of feminism in Myanmar is shaped by a combination of historical legacies, cultural narratives, ethnic politics, and external influences. Unlike in many liberal democracies, where feminism is often articulated in terms of legal rights and representation, Myanmar's feminist discourse often evolves in reaction to militarization, authoritarianism, and protracted ethnic conflict. As a result, feminist activism is deeply contextual, fragmented, and sometimes internally contradictory.

Historically, state narratives have promoted the notion that Burmese women were already empowered because of culture and religion; a perspective described by some scholars as cultural essentialism (Connell, 2017). This framing has been strategically used to dismiss feminist critique, reinforcing the idea that Myanmar does not need feminism because women are already "respected." Such narratives obscure persistent structural inequalities, such as gender-based violence, limited political representation, and economic disenfranchisement.

Feminist activism in Myanmar also reflects a tension between urban-based, donor-funded liberal feminist models and grassroots or ethnic minority women's movements. While the former often frame feminism around rights-based language and visibility-focused advocacy, the latter emphasize survival, community defense, and autonomy in the face of state and military violence (Sukumar, 2020). These divergent priorities have contributed to fragmentation, resulting in feminist actors frequently operating in parallel rather than in coalition.

In recent years, social media has become a key site where feminist discourse is increasingly framed and contested. Online platforms offer space for young, queer, and ethnic minority activists to challenge dominant narratives and confront misogyny within both state institutions and opposition forces (Brooten, 2023). However, these platforms have facilitated backlash, where feminists are often labelled as "divisive" or "Westernized," especially when

they critique resistance groups like the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) or the male-dominated ethnic armed organizations.

Furthermore, religious and nationalist framings often resist feminist discourse, especially when it is perceived as threatening cultural traditions or national unity. Feminists who advocate for LGBTQ+ rights or critique gender roles within ethnic or religious communities are sometimes accused of undermining cohesion in the national struggle (Kyaw, 2021). This limits the extent to which inclusive, intersectional feminism can gain traction in public discourse.

Thus, framing feminism in Myanmar is not merely about promoting gender equality; it involves negotiating complex intersections of power, identity, resistance, and survival. A more transformative feminist action in Myanmar requires reframing feminism not as a foreign or externally imposed agenda, but as a pluralistic, locally grounded project that rooted in justice, solidarity, and decolonial values.

Feminist Resistance in Myanmar After Coup

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar marked a renewed and violent assertion of authoritarian control, triggering one of the most militarized phases in the country's modern history. This resurgence of state violence has disproportionately impacted women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and ethnic minorities who often occupy the most precarious social positions in times of crisis. In response, many women have taken up arms within People's Defence Forces (PDFs), contributed to underground networks, and spearheaded civil disobedience movements (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Their participation has unsettled traditional gender norms and challenged the patriarchal monopoly over resistance.

However, this engagement with resistance is far from liberatory for all participants. Reports by Human Rights Watch (2022), Zaw (2023), and Brooten (2023) suggest that while resistance groups such as PDFs and EAOs seek to dismantle authoritarian rule, they often reproduce internal contradictions in their treatment of gender and sexuality. These accounts document internal patriarchal dynamics, including gender-based harassment and limited inclusion of queer and non-Bamar individuals. For example, women participants are frequently assigned to support roles or face arrogance, while trans and queer activists have reported experiences of misgendering, exclusion from decision-making, and, in some cases, overt hostility within certain resistance factions.

This paradox; identified in several feminist analyses (Mohanty, 2003; Brooten, 2023), highlights the challenge of resisting state militarism while inadvertently repeating masculinist and hierarchical structures within the opposition itself. These contradictions significantly constrain the possibility of building a genuinely transformative feminist movement. As Mohanty (2003) warns, visibility alone does not guarantee empowerment; it must be combined with deep structural and ideological transformation. As noted by feminist scholars such as Mohanty (2003) and Yuval-Davis (2011), the militarization of resistance can risk reducing feminist gains to symbolic inclusion. Visibility of women in these movements, without corresponding shifts in power dynamics, may lead to tokenism or conditional participation that reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal norms.

Critically, feminist resistance in this context must navigate militarism as both an external oppressor and an internalized logic. This duality underscores the limits of liberal feminist models that focus on inclusion without interrogating power relations. Instead, radical and intersectional feminist frameworks which view militarism as a gendered structure of domination are better suited to theorize the contradictions at play and envision alternatives rooted in peacebuilding, care, and anti-hierarchical organization.

Intersectionality and Ethnic Diversity in Feminist Practices in Myanmar

Myanmar's complex ethnic mosaic: comprising over 135 recognized groups demands a feminist praxis that is attentive to ethnic, cultural, and geopolitical diversity. Ethnic minority women, particularly those from Shan, Kachin, Karen, and Rohingya communities, experience compounded forms of oppressions shaped by militarism, systemic displacement, statelessness, and deeply entrenched systems of racialized patriarchy. Their lived experiences of gendered violence differ significantly from those of urban, Bamar-majority women, whose activism often dominates donor driven spaces and public discourse (Sukumar, 2020). This asymmetry has led to a fragmentation of feminist agendas, where donor-funded urban feminism may prioritize legal reform or symbolic visibility, while ethnic women's organizations emphasize land rights, peace negotiations, and militarized sexual violence.

Activists such as Kyaw (2021) argue that intersectionality in Myanmar must be more than an abstract theoretical commitment; it must materially link urban and rural, Bamar and ethnic, cis genders and queer struggles, through mutual recognition and fair sharing of resources. If this does not happen, feminism risks repeating the same exclusions it is trying to

challenge. Yuval-Davis (2011) warns against ‘universalist feminism’; approaches that ignore differences among women and instead promote a single, dominant perspective. In Myanmar, ideas about women’s empowerment that are centred mainly on the Bamar majority can silence or dismiss the struggles of indigenous women, especially when those struggles question the idea of a unified national liberation.

For feminism to be fair and effective in Myanmar after the coup, it needs to build solidarity across ethnic groups, share leadership more equally, and recognize that gender equality is inseparable from struggles for ethnic rights, environmental protection, and freedom from colonial legacies.

Queer Feminism and the Challenges of Inclusion in Myanmar

The liberalization period (2011- 2020) created modest openings for LGBTQ+ advocacy in Myanmar, marked by increased visibility through Pride events, public campaigns for legal reform, and digital activism (Htun & Win, 2020). However, the 2021 military coup shattered these gains, exposing queer activists to new forms of state and community violence. Queer individuals: particularly trans women and nonbinary people have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, sexual violence in detention, and systemic exclusion from both state and resistance spaces (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Queer feminist perspectives, particularly trans feminist and queer liberation frameworks, challenge not only state repression but also the heteronormativity and masculinist norms embedded within mainstream feminist organizing and resistance movements (Zaw, 2023; Myo Aung Zaw, 2023). These perspectives highlight how nationalist discourse frequently construct queerness as something foreign or as harmful to the national struggle. This mirrors global patterns of exclusion and securitization of LGBTQ+ identities (Puar, 2007). Within feminist spaces, queer and trans voices are often acknowledged but not meaningfully centred. As Brooten (2023) and Khaleim (2024) document, inclusion tends to be conditional or symbolic, rather than transformative. This marginalization limits the movement’s ability to challenge intersecting systems of gender, sexuality, and militarism in a holistic way.

For feminism in Myanmar to be genuinely inclusive everyone, it must make queer rights as a central part of its goals, not just as a peripheral concern. This means challenging ideas that assume everyone is cisgender, creating decision making spaces where trans and queer

individuals, and recognizing queer survival strategies and resistance practices as important forms of action.

Why Feminism Needs a New Way of Thinking in Myanmar?

The crisis in Myanmar demonstrates the limitations of one-size-fits-all feminist approaches, which assume that liberal, rights-based solutions are universally applicable. Existing models, whether liberal, postcolonial, or radical, often fail to capture the deeply interconnected nature of gender, militarism, ethnicity, and sexual norms within Myanmar's revolutionary context.

Building on the insights of Mohanty (2003) and Yuval-Davis (2011), Myanmar requires not simply an expansion of feminist engagement, but a rearticulation of feminism itself; one that is connected to local histories, material realities, and decolonial practices. This approach should move beyond simple binaries, like "activist vs. armed fighter" or "urban vs. ethnic," to foreground the multiple, overlapping struggles for gender justice.

This approach must actively cultivate solidarity across diverse identities, conceptualize militarism not just as violence but as a structure system that enforces hierarchy and silences marginalized voices, and understand that true justice means challenging patriarchy both within resistance movements and in the broader sociopolitical order. This rethinking is not merely theoretical, but it is essential for building a feminist movement that can sustain hope, unity, and survival amid war, oppression, and revolution.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research brief demonstrates that feminism in post-coup Myanmar is fragmented and contested, shaped by militarization, ethnic diversity, and changing political realities. Although feminist movements and activists remain committed to gender justice, they often work within conflicting approaches from liberal empowerment to militarized nationalism which can make collective solidarity and limits the potential for transformative change.

The history of feminism in Myanmar illustrates how colonial legacies and prolonged military authoritarianism have structured gender politics. The recent coup has increased militarization, which both challenges and reinforces patriarchal power even within resistance movements. At the same time, ethnic and queer perspectives reveal the limitations of

mainstream feminist ideas and highlight the urgent need for more inclusive, intersectional approaches to gender justice.

Recommendations for advancing feminist practices in Myanmar

The recommendations outlined in the table highlight practical steps for building a more inclusive and transformative feminist movement in Myanmar. By fostering solidarity across diverse groups, addressing militarism within resistance movements, amplifying grassroots voices, co-creating locally grounded feminist knowledge, and centering justice and queer inclusion, these measures provide a concrete roadmap for advancing gender equality. Rethinking feminism in this manner is crucial not just for protecting progress during ongoing conflict, but also for imagining a just and democratic Myanmar, where gender equality is integral to broader struggles for freedom and peace.

Table 1: Recommendations for advancing feminist practices in Myanmar

Focus Area	Action	Who is Responsible
Inclusive Solidarity	Build joint forums, share resources fairly, use ethnic languages	Feminist groups, NGOs
Challenge Militarism	Adopt codes of conduct, create gender monitors, value non-militarized roles	PDFs, EAOs, activists
Grassroots Voices	Fund ethnic/rural groups, use participatory grant-making, document local practices	Donors, grassroots orgs
Context-Specific Knowledge	Co-produce research, create feminist hubs, apply decolonial frameworks	Scholars, activists
Justice & Inclusion	Ensure queer leadership, train on intersectionality, link gender with land/peace rights	Feminist coalitions, NGOs

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