



# Third World Feminism During the Coup in Myanmar:

## *Exploring the Role of Women in the Spring Revolution since 2021*

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## **Abstract**

Third World Feminism emphasizes the importance of recognizing diversity and addressing the limitations of mainstream feminism, particularly its tendency to ignore critical differences like class, race, and colonial experiences. Women in Myanmar have historically been marginalized due to deeply entrenched social norms and patriarchal practices, which are reinforced by the military and religious institutions (Than et al, 2018). Since the coup in 2021, women have played crucial roles in incorporating the struggles of addressing gender issues and women's rights into the anti-coup movements (Yee, 2024). This research brief examined the struggles of women in Myanmar during the Spring Revolution since 2021 through the lens of the Third World Feminist Approach and highlighted key findings on reclaiming women's roles. Women in the Spring Revolution were stepping beyond traditional gender roles to engage in paramilitary training and frontline activities. Their efforts have exposed the constructed nature of gender norms and rallied with male allies to join the fight against gender inequality, sexual violence, and militarism through innovative methods such as the Sarong Revolution. Despite progress, gender discrimination remains in revolutionary areas, limiting women's participation and perpetuating gender stereotypes, underlining the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Our findings suggest the urgent need for research and legal protection for women in revolutionary settings who face high risks of gender-based violence and discrimination. Addressing these gaps is crucial for the safety and involvement of women, particularly in times of revolution.

## Introduction

Third World feminism is a concept that seeks to value diversity while establishing cross-border alliances in the struggle against injustice (Ismail, 2020). It focuses on the relationship between the cultural and ideological construction of what it means to be a woman and the actual experiences of women—which are live, real, and unique. Third World feminism also challenges racism in mainstream feminism and criticizes the concept of "global sisterhood," which overlooks significant distinctions such as class, race, imperialism, and colonial experiences (Morgan 1984; Mohanty 1984, as cited in Ismail, 2020). Based on the lens of Third World feminism, this research brief explored the struggles of women and their feminist movements in Myanmar during the Spring Revolution since 2021.

In Myanmar, women have been historically marginalized due to social norms and patriarchal practices that diminish their perceived value (Tun et al., 2019). Moreover, questioning patriarchy implies opposing the country's two largest institutions, the military and Sangha (Buddhist religious order) (Than et al., 2018). They also reinforce customary laws and traditions, which further systematically undermine women's rights, particularly on inheritance, decision-making, marriage, and divorce. This systemic inequality is exacerbated among women from ethnic minorities and marginalized groups (Tun et al., 2019).

Since the Spring Revolution in Myanmar, women and minorities have played a crucial role in resisting the coup perpetrated by Min Aung Hlaing on February 1, 2021 (Jordt et al., 2021). Despite the inhumane dominance by the military forces, women are taking on a variety of positions during the revolution, such as participating as Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) members, backline supporters, and resistance group members (Wai, 2024). At the same time, women have

also played essential roles in incorporating the struggle of addressing gender issues and women's rights into the anti-coup movements (Yee, 2024).

As of January 2024, the ongoing conflict in various regions in Myanmar has displaced 2.7 million people, with women and children disproportionately affected (UN Women, 2024). The Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 estimates that 18.6 million people in Myanmar will require humanitarian assistance (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 2024). Among this population, 52% are women and girls, and 13% are people with disabilities, underlining the diverse vulnerabilities within the affected communities. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP, 2024), as of June 30, 2024, 21% of political prisoners are women (5,555 out of 26,936 people detained), and 1,050 women have been killed by the authorities since the coup. Despite being disproportionately impacted by the collapse of political, military, social, and economic structures, the unwavering political participation and resilience of the marginalized women in Myanmar have been instrumental in challenging and weakening the junta's entrenched authoritarian control (Burmese Women's Union, 2023).

### **Research Problem**

Since the revolution, women have been a part of the widespread demonstrations against the coup, who helped form a values-based, democratic revolutionary movement that is anti-dictatorship, anti-military, anti-racism, and anti-sexism (Jordt et al., 2021). Thus, feminism has grown in momentum with Myanmar's current revolution (Wai, 2024). Women have served a vital role in generations of struggle, but their civil rights are not fully accepted by the society, and individuals across all religions, social classes, and ethnicities continue to face sexual assault and other types of exploitation and forms of discrimination (Wai, 2024). Thus, critical movements

must address greater systemic barriers rather than attending to the issues of the privileged populations. Justice for all Myanmar women should be prioritized over questions that provide only specific communities access to resources and opportunities (Yee, 2024). This paper explained the concept of Third World Feminism Activism by referencing different scholars. Moreover, the role of women during the Spring Revolution was analyzed using the Third World Feminist Approach in order to understand the current landscape of women's movements in Myanmar.

## **Literature Review**

### **Third World Feminism**

The term “colonization” has been used to describe a wide range of phenomena, including the hierarchy of economy and politics and the emergence of a specific cultural discourse, the so-called "Third World" (Mohanty, 1988). Furthermore, he claimed that any discourse on the intellectual and political structure of Third World feminisms needs to consider two commitments: the critique of dominant Western feminisms and the development of independent, historically, geographically, and culturally based feminist issues and approaches, such as the case of post-coup Myanmar. The first approach focuses on deconstructing and dismantling, while the second one emphasizes on building and constructing according to the third world countries' experiences (Mohanty, 1988). Narayan (1998) stressed that different theories on feminism and political agendas should consider the diversity of women's lives, both inside and outside of national contexts. Therefore, a project that addresses the disparities between women's experiences and their needs is essential; otherwise, “it will support and perpetuate problematic and colonialist presumptions regarding the cultural distinctions between "Western Culture" and "Non-Western Cultures," as well as the women who live in them” (Narayan, 1998, p. 87). Third World women

who are marginalized and who lack resources serve as the model representation of Third World women (Narayan, 1998).

### **Third World Feminists as Culture Traitors**

Women are assigned with the responsibility of preserving culture. Interestingly, scholars have repeatedly noted that when third-world feminists attempt to challenge accepted beliefs, they are labelled as "stooges of Western imperialism" and "cultural betrayals" (Narayan, 1998, p. 91). For instance, although women from the Third World countries have collaborated with nationalists in their anti-colonial and independence campaigns, the majority of Third World feminists acknowledge that the historical relationship between states (nationalists) and women has been unstable (Jayawar-dena, 1986, as cited in Herr, 2014). This instability largely stems from the fact that male nationalists have consistently adhered to essentialist and masculinist ideas of country and nationalism, which rely on the subordination of women (Herr, 2014). As a result, nationalists in many Third World countries have upheld patriarchal legislation, marginalizing feminists by branding them 'inauthentic' and excluding them from political discourse. Similarly, development practitioners addressing gender issues often face accusations of lacking cultural sensitivity, as challenging deeply ingrained gender norms is seen as a threat to cultural traditions (Mukhopadhyay, 1995). This underscores how gender roles are perceived as central to cultural identity, and questioning them often faces strong resistance because it threatens long-established power dynamics.

Similarly, in Myanmar, feminism is often misinterpreted as advocating female dominance rather than women's rights (Than et al., 2018). This fear of feminism has led many female politicians and activists to use the term "gender equality" instead. Since the military takeover in

February 2021, women have led the opposition, challenging traditional norms that confine them to reproductive and care work while men handle politics (A & Gaborit, 2021; Burmese Women's Union and Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2004, as cited in A & Gaborit, 2021).

### **Essentialism and Impacts of Militarization on Women**

In essentialist perception, cultures are often portrayed as unchangeable and natural, reinforcing harmful gender norms as central to cultural identity (Narayan, 1998). In nationalist contexts supported by the military, women's identities and bodies have become symbols of ethnic or national identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997, 2009, as cited in Olivius & Hedström, 2019). These political agendas prioritize rigid gender norms, which dictate how men and women should behave (Banerjee, 2006; Narayan, 1997, as referenced in Olivius & Hedström, 2019). Third-world feminists criticize these essentialist perspectives, with many framing feminism as a resistance to warfare and militarization (Olivius & Hedström, 2019). A notable example is the Sarong Revolution during Myanmar's Spring Revolution, with its slogan 'Our Sarong, Our Flag, Our Victory.' This movement not only fought for democracy and condemned the military coup but also symbolized resistance to the patriarchal military system, advocating for gender equality (Reuters, 2021).

Feminist researchers have highlighted the connection between military conflict and with the notions of masculinity and femininity. Men are usually portrayed as aggressive and violent, having the duty of protecting home and country, whereas women are portrayed as non-violent and fragile, requiring the protection of men (Ehlstain, 1987, as cited in Olivius & Hedström, 2019). In Myanmar, the military is an exclusively patriarchal society, and religion is predominantly

masculine. Furthermore, values from Buddhist stories are used to comprehend, defend, and maintain unequal roles for men and women in the country (Than et al., 2018). In some revolutionary forces during the Spring Revolution, men often hold military-related positions, while women are working in logistics, medicine, and fundraising, even though there are no written gender rules (Collions & Gynn, 2014). However, Olivius and Hedström (2019) argue that militarized nationalism can serve as an opportunity to promote women's participation by solidifying the feminist organizations that challenge patriarchy and advance women's rights and equality, citing the example of the exiled Burmese women's movement after the 1988 uprising in Myanmar. After that, women activists strategically navigated between loyalty to ethno-nationalist movements and their own agendas for gender equality. By leveraging traditional notions of femininity to legitimize their roles and drawing on international advocacy, they reshaped gender roles and overcame their marginalization from the political and public spheres (Olivius and Hedström, 2019).

Using the lens of “Third World Feminism,” this study brief revealed the experiences and challenges of women in the most recent political shock in Myanmar reinforced by pre-existing patriarchal social norms. The intersectionality framework is used to analyze how women are positioned within patriarchy and gender identities, as well as within broader systems of oppression, including race and class (Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006, as cited in Mehrotra, 2010). Through an intersectional framework, this perspective also allows us to critically analyze the issue and enables us to recognize various levels of oppression experienced by the different women and marginalized populations from distinct socioeconomic statuses and experiences (Wai, 2024). Hence, the exclusion of women and marginalized genders in Myanmar is better understood from the third-world feminist point of view. Accordingly, this paper drew

information from published research, articles, reports, and data on Myanmar's Spring Revolution. However, due to the limited data on women in the revolution, this study examined and described links between the works of scholars and on-the-ground situations from academic literature and feminists in Myanmar.

## Analysis

### **Reclaiming the Position of Women during the Revolution**

Following the coup, women from the garment sector who arrived by bus from marginalized areas of Yangon were among the first to lead demonstrations (Hedström et al., 2023b). They chanted, "We must resist! We have nothing to lose but our chains" (Jordt et al., 2021, p. 8). Women in the revolution fall into four groups: Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants, demonstrators, backline supporters, and female combatants (Than, 2023). Women and girls composed 60% of the CDM, including teachers, healthcare professionals, human rights advocates, and labor union leaders, which earned a nomination for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize (Hedström et al., 2023b) and proof of women and girls' joint efforts.

A significant post-coup shift is the reclamation of women's roles in the revolution. No longer confined to traditional support roles, women are now actively participating in paramilitary training in liberated areas (Wai, 2024). The very first women's guerrilla group, the "Myaung Women Guerrilla Group," was established in late 2021 (Hedström et al., 2023b), signifying a break from stereotypes and highlighting women's active participation in the revolution (Wai, 2024). As a result, women are breaking traditional gender norms and taking ownership and responsibility in the revolution. Their active participation demonstrates that, although women are often perceived as 'soft' and confined to traditional roles, they are challenging these stereotypes by taking on the

same roles as men. Women are not only defying the established notions of masculinity and femininity but also proving their capability in military and leadership roles, reshaping the very nature of resistance in Myanmar.

### **Third World Feminist Movements Challenging Gender Norms**

Women in Myanmar are rebelling against society's treatment of them as the second sex while also breaking the influence of male-dominated leadership (Wai, 2024). Sarong Revolution challenges cultural essentialism and patriarchy in Myanmar. Patriarchal norms claim a man's "hpon" (aura or dominance) is diminished if he passes beneath a woman's sarong. Protestors used this belief by hanging sarong-draped clotheslines across streets, delaying soldiers and heightening their fear of losing power or dying in combat (A & Gaborit, 2021). Furthermore, they placed pictures of coup leader Min Aung Hlaing on pathways, compelling soldiers to remove them before proceeding, as stomping on the image was interpreted as undermining the dictator's hpon (Jordt et al., 2021). Such innovative methods highlight a difference in gender standards between the military and resistance groups. While the patriarchal military upholds sexist norms, demonstrators have amplified the debate in Myanmar (A & Gaborit, 2021).

The Sarong Revolution also effectively rallied male allies. An analysis from the women's organization on the ground (Anonymous, 2024) highlighted that the movement did not target men as the 'enemy.' Instead, it focused on dismantling systems that perpetuate gender inequality, sexual violence, and militarism. The movement exposed gender norms as constructed and unnatural and revealed the military's flawed logic, where 'big, strong men' feared entering areas due to a piece of women's clothing. Moreover, young women and girls questioned a variety of societal systems, including patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and cultural uniformity. An important component of their protest was opposing the hyper-masculine image of soldiers, which they questioned by

demonstrating transgressive gender expressions such as cross-dressing and the visibility of LGBTQ+ identities (Jordt et al., 2021). Hence, their actions threatened not only the state's power and coercion but also established power dynamics. According to Than (2023), the rapid expansion of anti-coup groups into a broader revolution emphasizes the importance of radical politics in exposing the patriarchal military's inhumane behaviour.

The #Manel Exhibitions, organized by Sawleen Institute and the Women's League of Burma (WLB), also sparked heated debate within Burma's democracy movement about the crucial need for inclusivity (SEA Junction, 2023). Furthermore, the display of #Manels (all-male panels) demonstrates the persistent exclusion of women from public dialogues. This exclusion not only silences women's views, but it also undermines the long-term objectives of federal democratic unity, peaceful coexistence, and justice in the country.

### **Reinforcing Gender Norms in the Revolutionary Forces**

Regardless of the Spring Revolution challenging gender norms, gender discrimination persists in revolutionary areas. Due to the lack of internet and phone service in some areas since the coup, people can only access the internet in specific locations, such as high-altitude mountains. However, women from a certain region of Karenni State are prohibited from climbing the particular mountain to access the internet since it is higher than the *Tagondaing*, which is a religious and cultural landmark. Women are thought to have less 'hpon and power' than men and are therefore restricted from standing physically higher than the *Tagondaing* (Collins & Gynn, 2024). Similarly, in Southeast Myanmar, a woman from the revolutionary army was barred from helping construct a roof, as it was believed that women could harm their 'hpon' by being at a height above men (Wai, 2024).

Additionally, menstruating women are prohibited from attending cultural or religious rituals and sleeping in living rooms (Collins & Gynn, 2024). Women are always expected to uphold and preserve cultural norms. For instance, Kachin women wearing non-Kachin fabric patterns face criticism for being unpatriotic (Kaw, 2024). One of the women from the Karen resistance areas stated that women are not allowed to go to the front lines, despite the fact that some women want to take on and participate in the battle (Collins & Gynn, 2024). It is frequently based on the unquestioned assumption that women are less capable and require more protection and attention than men in times of war (Collins & Gynn, 2024).

Wai (2024), a female member of the revolutionary army, observed that men believe they have to be harder than women and are accountable for their safety. Trainers judged women based on gender stereotypes rather than their ability, forcing them to work harder to show their worth and avoid elimination. Wai also received opposition from male members after becoming a squad captain in her armed-resistance force, showing the problems that women experience as a result of their identity. Hence, women's agendas have made limited progress during the revolution. Although attitudes towards women have evolved marginally, they must still comply with traditional expectations in order to prosper and demonstrate their dedication as revolutionaries (Collins & Gynn, 2024).

### **Different Challenges of Marginalized Women**

Some Western feminist ideas portray Third World women as monolithic, such as impoverished, illiterate, tradition-bound, and domestic, which should be challenged (Mohanty, 1988). Similarly, the challenges that women face in Myanmar are not the same since individuals from various socioeconomic groups, such as factory workers, war victims, LGBTQIA+, or non-Bama identities, have distinct experiences (Yee, 2024). The resistance has been sparked and driven

forward by factory workers and striking civil servants who are part of the CDM, along with young student activists and women fighters (Yee, 2024). However, non-Bama women face marginalization from both their communities and mainstream gender movements due to structural barriers in customary laws and traditional practices (Yee, 2024).

The society has been permeated by the military mindset that is entirely based on masculine characteristics such as toughness, strength, courage, and a desire to fight (Wai, 2024). Also, even in a revolutionary army, when everyone is armed, there is a power disparity and hierarchy between men, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals (Wai, 2024). Tatmadaw soldiers have used sexual violence as a weapon to degrade and torture women for decades. The report by the Burmese Women's Union (2023) documented 59 cases of sexual violence, including 36 cases of sexual assault and 23 cases of domestic violence and sexual exploitation, perpetrated by the military, armed resistance groups, and civilians. Due to the lack of direct access to the most vulnerable women, coupled with the societal taboo regarding this issue and the absence of safe resources for victims of abuse, the full horror of the reality on the ground is vastly underrepresented. Building solid evidence of cases committed has proven difficult, particularly when communicating with eyewitnesses due to displacement, outbreak of wars, connection issues, and safety concerns. The majority of women sexually attacked are also mentally unable to share what happened to them (Burmese Women's Union, 2023). Therefore, establishing specific policies and guidelines regarding violence against women, including sexual violence, law enforcement, and effective punishment and action against the perpetrators of sexual violence are recommended (Burmese Women's Union, 2023). Listening from marginalized female perspectives can provide a different framework for mobilizing the feminist movement in Myanmar and achieving justice by challenging patriarchy (Yee, 2024).

## Coordination and Networking among Women

The Women's Alliance Burma (WAB) was formed as a protest coordination group to bring together a variety of women's organisations and types of participation during the revolution. Although the resistance movement lacked a clear leader, ethnic minority women emerged as figureheads, rallying protesters in Yangon and in other major cities and instilling the anti-coup movement with demands for a future federal Myanmar that considers the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities and women (Loong, 2021, as cited in Hedström et al., 2023b).

Women's groups, particularly ethnic minority women, played an important role in granting leadership and humanitarian support to locals during the coup (Progressive Voice, 2021, as quoted in Hedström et al., 2023b). However, the international community has not met the funding needs of women's groups, and they face challenges, including assaults and threats, as well as a lack of communication channels, amenities, and safe housing where they can hide (Hedström et al., 2023b).

The National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar, established in April 2021, consists of 28 members, including 7 women, making up about one-third of the group (Hedström et al., 2023b). However, increasing the number of women in the NUG cabinet is crucial to enhance their active participation in decision-making and to address existing imbalances. Women's networks also serve as consultants to the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), which later developed the Gender Equality Position Paper for the revolution and transition period (Hedström et al., 2023b). Also, women's substantial engagement in the resistance to military rule is the product of decades of movements, particularly during periods of political improvements, which allowed women's groups and networks within the country to expand their operations, importance, and reach (Hedström et al., 2023b). According to Than (2023), feminism was strong

in Myanmar prior to the coup, but only one form was understandable to the outside world, particularly the Western world. Now, the revolution has strengthened the coordination and solidarity among women in Myanmar.

### **Agency of Women through Their Labour and Love**

While women's collective leadership has been vital in the resistance, it is equally important to recognize their personal agency by means of everyday labour and care work, which sustains both their communities and the broader revolutionary movement. The civil wars in Myanmar exacerbated women's workload and financial burden (Hedström et al., 2023a). Throughout Burma's Spring Revolution, women's labour, both in the home and in public spaces, has been critical to daily living and resistance efforts (Hedström et al., 2023a).

The recent conscription law implemented by the junta has compelled thousands of young people to flee the country. The law mandates the recruitment of men aged 18-45 and women aged 18-35, with married women exempted from conscription—highlighting the military's inherent misogyny (Reuters, 2024). This policy disproportionately affects low-income populations, further marginalizing women and LGBTQIA+ individuals. As men are forcibly conscripted, women face increased burdens, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. The exemption of married women from conscription may also increase the risk of early and forced marriages for girls and women (Reuters, 2024). In the absence of income, safety, and male family members, women have shouldered a greater share of the responsibility in building meaningful lives, further increasing their burdens (Zin Mar and Kusakabe 2010, Hedström and Olivius 2020, as cited in Hedström et al., 2023a).

Hedström et al. (2023a) further mentioned that division of labour based on gender roles allows less-resourced revolutionary armies to sustain revolutions by assigning men as combat

commanders, and according to the gender norms, women shall assume reproductive and care work. Despite experiencing mental stress, oppression, and relocation, women fought for a more just future through hard labour and affection for their families and communities. Moreover, they claimed that the labour share of women in rural areas helps households survive violence and build a better future, but it is often overlooked in discussions on nation-building and conflict resolution. Also, the alliance of women has made it possible for armed organizations to take advantage of women's labour more efficiently.

In addition to providing food on the table, love has the power to spark political revolutions. The fundamental goal of revolution is to integrate the gendered effort and passion for creating a meaningful existence with larger revolution (Hedström et al., 2023a). The contribution of women through their love and labour in the revolution movements is their way of practising agency in the Spring Revolution. Ong (1998) highlighted that women may have different ideas about justice and may seek or select other paths from what we consider to be the most desirable (as referenced in Abu-Lughod, 2002). Long-term conflicts manifest not only in combat zones but also in the everyday life activities in homes and communities as a form of Third World Feminism (Arjona et al., 2015, as cited in Hedström et al., 2023a).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Understanding feminism in Myanmar requires consideration of the contextual societal and political landscape, including the structural oppression and patriarchal standards that women face (Than, 2023). Despite facing exhaustion, insecurity, and fear, women demonstrate courage and commitment in resisting injustice (Hedström & Olivius, 2023). Both the Myanmar military and the People's Defense Force (PDF) are inherently patriarchal, reflecting characteristics typically associated with war and armed forces (Thu Pone, 2023). Consequently, women in the military

service must conform to these expectations. Thus, it is necessary to apply a gendered lens in examining armed organizations—whether state or non-state—since this adds critical nuance to the understanding of war and ceasefire processes.

The impact of the revolution on women has been underexplored. Although the role of women in the revolution is recognized in literature, there is still a lack of extensive research on the challenges that they face, whether at home, on the backlines, or in the PDF. Marginalized women, including garment workers, low-income informal workers, ethnic minorities, and rural women, have significantly contributed to the revolution. Findings of this review showed that in Myanmar, the term "feminism" is rarely used in literature due to its negative connotations. Therefore, additional research on feminism in Myanmar is crucial for better understanding of the ideological revolution and public advocacy as the movement dismantles the sexist dictatorship.

Moreover, addressing the challenges of women in the revolution should be prioritized on the agenda that may be used later as a basis to push for advocacy, education, and policy changes. The issues faced by women and LGBTQIA+ during the revolution, such as gender-based violence and discrimination and conflict-related sexual violence, must be recognized and addressed by the stakeholders. Furthermore, women's roles should not be limited to the background; their perspectives and voices must be included in public decision-making. There is an urgent need for more diverse women leaders to represent the broader spectrum of women's needs. The 2021 coup reaffirmed the feminist belief that "The personal is political" (Than, 2023), prompting feminists to focus on systemic oppression done by the military. Hence, the narrative has shifted from the past, emphasizing that society cannot be free if women are not free.

In conclusion, historical context and understanding of intersectionality are important to understand feminist interpretations of oppression and resistance experienced by Third World

women. Thus, it is important to recognize the different voices and agency of women, particularly those from the marginalized communities. The Spring Revolution has exemplified the resilience, activism, and solidarity of women in Myanmar, despite the brutal threats posed by the military. While women's activism and feminism have gained momentum through the anti-coup movement and grassroots of Third World feminist responses in Myanmar, there remains a need to institutionalize gender-sensitive mechanisms within the structures of the interim government (NUG), resistance forces, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to reduce gender inequalities in the country.

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