Rethinking Women and Leadership in Myanmar: A prerequisite of a harmonious society

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In this chapter I will examine notions of harmony and leadership in relation to the role of women. I propose that, firstly, the discourse and outcome of harmony will always be fragmentary without the active inclusion of women and, secondly, that women who commit to leadership roles, especially in a post-war context, can create pathways for attaining harmony. My definition of harmony is taken from David Cadman, and, as he puts it, 'asks questions about relationship, justice, fairness and respect in economic, social and political relationships'.[1] I will address the question of how the gendered functioning of societies hinders women's participation in peace processes and ask why and how women's voices matter by using Myanmar as a case study. Women in Myanmar face discrimination in terms of education, economic liberties, family codes (including the preference for sons), property rights, health, decision-making and political engagement. I shall focus on women in peace-making processes in Myanmar, how they take on leadership roles despite all odds, and of their vision for a better future. There is no systematic solution to the deep-rooted problem of gender inequality in Myanmar and the trajectory of women's leadership will be defined by several socio-political indices and by the variety of roles that women play in this culture. With a feminist orientation, I identify women as potential agents of change, capable of building a society that is more inclusive, sustainable, and harmonious. I also address factors that may pose the greatest challenges, including social systems, structures, and gender inequalities, and practices for the advancement of a harmonious society involving gender equality and the realisation of human rights.

Socio-Political Background: A gendered paradigm

There are indications from Myanmar that the country's semi-civilian government is pursuing democracy with restrictions, after five decades of military rule. Since 2011, the spotlight has been on nationalist movements that blatantly eschew certain sections of society – including the half of the population made up of women. Ironically, in the mainstream global media, the face of Myanmar politics (indeed,

the face of Myanmar itself) is often a woman – Aung San Suu Kyi; but this, unfortunately, changes nothing about the gendered functioning of the country and the lack of women's representation in political and social leadership. The sovereign state in Myanmar is a post-colonial construction and the issue of national identity continues to undergo major upheavals from its multi-ethnic and religious make-up, which has played a significant role in nation-building since Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948.[2] Fashioning a modern democratic country from multiple indigenous communities has been a daunting task for the ruling elite and has been fraught with tension originating from the relationship between the majority Burmese population and other minority ethnic groups, especially regarding the issue of autonomy for the latter and their grievances against the government.

The creation of a national identity has been made more difficult by unstable governance and an economy in recession that was catalysed by half a century of strife brought about by ethnic rebellion. Attempts to prevent, manage and resolve ethnic conflict by successive governments of Myanmar, through constitutional arrangements, military suppression and peace overtures, have thus far failed to produce satisfactory results. The present military regime's offer of a radical formula for harmony is too recent to yield measurable results. The first truce in 1990 failed to adequately support the harmony process due to factors such as a lack of active participation from both social stakeholders and international donors, and from militant uprisings.[3] Peace processes have been underway since 2011, however, as Stephen Gray emphasises, the models for harmony are continually undermined by the tensions between religious and/or ethnic communities which result from a lack of trust and positive interaction.[4] Gray advances his proposition by explaining that popular social rhetoric against Muslims, for example, states that Islam is inherently an aggressive religion which creates fear and suspicion among non-Muslims. A radical formula for harmony, in my opinion, should begin by challenging such stereotypes and educating people, using counter-narratives that challenge misplaced perceptions of religious and ethnic communities. Typical issues include human rights violations, forced labour, internal displacement, rape, political repression, and cultural misappropriation.[5] One of the most worrying outcomes of Myanmar's socio-political disputes resulted in the Rohingya crisis of 2016.[6]

It is not widely known that the longest civil war in the history of human civilisation is that of the ongoing 'Karen' conflict in Myanmar. The term, Karen, subsumes approximately a score of ethnic groups that belong to the same language family and represent the second largest minority group in the country. The Karens

are well-distributed across the length and breadth of the country and the majority espouse Buddhism, although some follow Christianity, Islam or animism.[7] Though the Karens are diverse in their traditions, dialects, religions, and regions of origin, they are united in a pan-Karen identity and a collective experience of oppression under the reign of the Burmese kings, and subsequently, under British rule: since 1948, the Karens have demanded an independent state. Gravers reports that there was a mass Christianisation of the Karens which helped them etch out an identity of their own, not only different from other Burmese, but also from the remaining Karens.[8] The colonial powers further inflamed conflict, laying the foundation for resistance and hostility, resulting in ethnic disputes.

Section 347 of the Constitution of Myanmar guarantees all persons equal rights before the law and equal legal protection, while Section 348 states that the government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the basis of sex. However, in May 2008, an examining committee expressed its concern on issues that are three-fold: how women within the constitutional framework are frequently referred to as 'mothers'; how local and national governing bodies rarely have any agenda, measures or policies aiming for improved participation of women in public life; and. finally, how the ethnic norms of gender biases continue to be dominant for the majority of the people over the constitutional guidelines.[9] Women in Myanmar have not only been the greater victims of the seventy years of conflict, but have also been left bereft of the most fundamental human rights.[10] Being excluded from participation in political decision-making processes and being subjected to gender-based bigotry impacts, of course, on women's ability to have both a voice and agency, which increases women's insecurity and reduces the possibility of instituting a sustainable society. The most ironic part is that the sectors in which women are better represented have opened doors for women, not because they deserve it, but because a woman with an inactive public life is rendered 'a wasted national resource'.[11]

Gender Inequality as an Ingrained Facet of Social Unfolding

In Myanmar, the family is the functional unit of society and governs cultural values and rights. However, this value is patriarchal and asserts that 'men are born with *phon* (power, glory, holiness) but women are not'.[12] It is believed that phon created the family, communal, and social order of Myanmar – in other words, men are superior and women, inferior.[13] Thus, the gender hierarchy of men over women in Myanmar has a long and consistent history. Phon validates the cause of

gender grading with the result that women are oppressed, marginalised, excluded, and discriminated against in social, political, economic, and religious spheres. This is a founding principle of social order, religious discourse, and political hierarchy in Myanmar.

The United Nations ranks Myanmar 106th out of 187 nations in its graph of gender disparities.[14] It recommends that state and non-state actors, together with civil society, have to work in the fields of education, health, business, leadership, and policy-making to oppose gender stereotypes. As J. Hedstrom states, the inclusion of women in all fields of social life is imperative, not only for women to avail themselves of fair rights and opportunities, but also to check the number of oppressed women who are now joining extremist or militant groups.[15] Insecurity and failed social systems often leave women in war-torn societies with the perilous option of joining rebellious groups. Hedstrom cites examples of women in IDP (internally displaced person) camps having their needs ignored because the men make decisions on behalf of all camp dwellers.[16] However, men may not understand that women may have different personal hygiene requirements, may need more water for their daily chores, or may require certain health aids and better protection. This aggravates women's feelings of insecurity, forcing them to leave the camps and fall prey to landmines and/or being shot and/or raped.

From religious ideologies to religious practices, phon governs the identities of men and women, in which the former is perceived as 'holy' and the latter has to follow strict restrictive codes. Not only are women excluded from positions of authority in matters pertaining to sacredness, their participation is sometimes restricted in rituals in certain holy spaces. A. Nwe, for example, reported a case in which a devoted and responsible minister, who assisted the pastor in the church, did not qualify to become a pastor herself because she was a woman.[17] In many communities, women are not allowed to partake in religious ceremonies, including ordination. In an authoritarian system, women are denied a voice.[18] Their qualities are not considered in politics, nor is their way of approaching democratic vision through harmonious means and non-violence.[19] A non-violent, particularly female, approach inherently calls for peaceful change and criticises the 'misuse of power that cause violation of human rights and repression'.[20]

Women Taking up Leadership Roles in Myanmar: A prerequisite for harmony?

One important consideration, as G. Hoogensen and B. O. Solheim put it, is if 'the

number of women leaders compared to men across the world is so low, it begs the question why'.[21] Patriarchal social structures all around the world have largely precluded the participation of women at advanced levels and social change has not yet been sufficient to allow a significant number of women politicians into prominent leadership roles; therefore, measures, such as reservation and quota systems have been implemented, both to increase the numbers more rapidly and to make women's leadership more normal.

It has been estimated that, globally since the late 1970s, women have been increasingly taking on leadership roles.[22] However, research by P. Minoletti suggests that women account for only 4.42% of MPs in Myanmar's national parliament.[23] This figure is extremely low in comparison with other ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries and globally. At the subnational level, women's representation is even lower than at the national level, with women accounting for only 2.83% of MPs at state and regional levels, 0% of administrators at township levels, and 0.11% of village heads. Women generally have a secondary role within Myanmar's various armed groups and their associated political parties. The state and regional parliaments that have women ministers are Kachin State (the Minister for Social Affairs and the Minister for Shan (National Race Affairs); Yangon Region (the Minister for Finance); and, Ayeyarwady Region (the Minister for Social Affairs). Women's participation is also typically narrow in other political parties, as well as in religious organisations. However, women's participation is at its peak within civil society in which women are engaged, not only in large numbers, but also often occupy senior positions with real managerial command over matters. For example, nearly 40% of judges in regional courts and nearly 50% of judges and judicial officers at the district and township levels are women, indicating proactive participation in the judicial spheres.

In non-governmental institutions, women head several organisations with the aim of combating conflict and working towards social welfare. Many village tract/ward administrators (VT/WAs) are women and the United Nations Development Programme's report on Myanmar in 2015 rightly remarks that having both male and female representation at union and rural levels helps a society progress steadily.[24] The VT/WAs work as an interface between the people and the government and have helped women emerge both as great leaders and flag-bearers for a better tomorrow. Initially, there were hindrances to women taking leadership roles, including cultural stereotypes, lack of experience and confidence, time constraints, religious interpretations, and lack of skills. Currently, there are forty-two female VT/WAs who have been elected at regional levels. One of the most significant strat-

egies of their leadership has been to introduce a bottom-up model for policy implementation instead of the usual top-down model. Though negative perceptions surrounding women in leadership continue to exist, these women are breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes in their own ways.

This chapter would be incomplete without mentioning the popular public figure and Nobel Peace recipient, Aung San Suu Kyi. Hailing from a politically well-known family, her life has been one of upheaval and struggle. Despite experiencing a series of home-arrests and rebellious campaigns against her, as well as being an easy target for the opposition, she consistently advocated peaceful means of protest and a high percentage of Burmese follow her and her ideology. In 2015, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a strong advocate of democracy and equal rights, emerged victorious in the elections.[25] Under her government, hopes were high that women would play a greater role in ending the conflict that has plagued Myanmar for more than half a century but, Suu Kyi, who ardently speaks and writes on gender equality, did little to ensure women's participation in the current parliament. Of eighteen ministers, there is merely one woman in the cabinet: Aung San Suu Kyi, herself.

Myanmar's *de facto* leader, Ms Suu Kyi once had her name listed alongside those of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and Saint Joan, for her unprecedented struggles to attain justice and harmony for the people of her country.[26] Since 2015, even though her name is still prominent, the reasons have changed drastically. The electoral victory of the NLD in November 2015 offered renewed hope that her authority would improve matters; however, the hopes have been shaken partially in Myanmar and greatly abroad.[27] She has faced condemnation across the globe for her inability to defend the freedom of the press as well as for one of the most serious crises in recent times: the treatment of the Rohingyas. Some scholars write that, as an insider, Suu Kyi is limited in her authority to take action.[28] However, many others feel that the lack of visible action taken against what the United Nations and the United States have termed an 'ethnic cleansing' deeply questions her worth as a leader.[29] Amnesty International accused her of commissioning or perpetuating several human rights violations and revoked its highest honour, the Ambassador of Conscience Award, which she was awarded in 2009.[30] It seems that she is unable to resist the prevailing ideology of the military government which Charles Petrie describes as,

> [the] age-old vision of domination by a nationalist Buddhist elite, who have difficulty accommodating any form of dissent, and demonstrate very little

> regard for the aspirations of the other ethnic groups, with whom they should be negotiating an end to decades of armed conflict.[31]

Women Spearheading Harmony in Post-War Societies

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have, perhaps for the first time, realised the full meaning of war and the possibilities of peace. The current world is a mosaic of regions, some involved in protracted wars, and the outcomes are heart-wrenching, to say the least. Indeed, high on the agenda for a better tomorrow is harmonious coexistence which may be influenced and encouraged by women. As Betty Reardon wrote,

> It was women who formulated and propelled this agenda. It is women who continue to envision humane alternatives for world society. It is women whose resistance to war and struggle for social justice and human rights have in fact provided many of our concepts of positive peace, of the conditions of human society that permit all to live authentically human lives.[32]

In ancient Greek literature, the story of Lysistrata provides a classic example of how women have always been the harbingers of harmony, despite being exploited and mistreated in social spheres.[33]

The popular newspaper, *Myanmar Now*, interviewed female peace activists and victims of ethnic conflicts and reported that it is particularly egregious that women suffer disproportionately in wars, but are excluded from peace negotiations. The lack of women's voices in conflict resolution is now a topical issue: there are tales of peace-building in Myanmar that are not only conceived by women, but are also spearheaded by them and, in my view, such initiatives are important points of departure for embracing harmony. There are various networks working towards this goal. One is the Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE), an initiative which works with children and women, especially the marginalised and those in the IDP camps, to help them with memory-healing counselling and education, and seeks to empower them economically and socially: it is a network of women for women, run by women. Another is the Sunflowers Group Social Enterprise which believes in 'doing good on the ground' and has dedicated platforms, both online and offline, to bring together the artists of Myanmar and train them, provide them with viable resources, and exhibit and sell their products (ranging from textile goods to paintings).[34] Sunflowers empowers

people economically and also conserves culture and heritage. Their efforts have been successful in bridging divides among several ethnic groups who perceive art and craftsmanship to be beyond ethnic identity and they provide a common platform from which people can engage with each other culturally, irrespective of their background. Phan Tee Eain (PTE) is another organisation that creatively participates in conflict management by supporting and facilitating women. Their primary mandate is to empower women by enhancing their knowledge and capacities; to provide consultancy and social business services, conduct research, strengthen social networks, and advocate decision making. The UN Women report of 2015-2016 states that, since the implementation of UN Resolution 1325, there has been more awareness among people about the need to be inclusive of women to ensure that measures of conflict resolution, peace, and security are sustainable long-term.[35] The Indigenous Women's Development Centre (IWDC) was set up by a Karen woman to cater to the needs of indigenous women who were victims of war crimes. Over the years, IWDC has trained, educated and supported women to be 'strong and self-reliant' and to help their families and the community. The Mon Women's Organization came into existence in 1988 when military attacks were at a historic high in their region.[36] This group exhorted women to be politically aware and active and catered specially to those in refugee camps or those who were victims of war-rape and abuse. Even today, they conduct capacity development workshops to resolve conflict through peaceful means.

The tales of success are many, but the stories of struggle are unending and depressing. The women of Myanmar have faced so much at the hands of violence and bigotry, and yet, instead of sitting down and giving up the divide, they are determined to face challenges and build bridges.

Conclusions

The narrative is never black and white. Ethnic minority armies continue to perpetuate division and vulnerable groups continue to be exploited by the military. The fight is not yet over between those who have signed the ceasefire and those who have not. Aung San Suu Kyi has visibly compromised on ethics and human rights issues. She is, perhaps, going to remain the *de facto* president even though every item of legislation she tries to pass can be, potentially, vetoed by the military. Besides the grave political climate, the nation has also been affected by a series of natural disasters. Hence, there is a long way to go before Myanmar can experience peace and prosperity. However, it can start by securing the rights and

protection of its civilians and take one step at a time to build a nation in which diversity is respected and celebrated.

The World Bank's 2012 *World Development Report* claims, compellingly, that women's ability to influence society and policy is a decisive aspect of their agency.[37] Following M. Nussbaum and A. Sen's pioneering work on 'capabilities', agency is held to have core bearing for women's individual well-being and quality of life, with a person's ability to make effective choices and exercise control over their own life being a key dimension of well-being.[38] In times during which the world is facing the consequences of grave mistrust, prejudice, and fear, we often commit the mistake of not including people from all communities. I am not claiming that women are better skilled than men at making decisions and implementing policies, but that they must have equal participation. After centuries of human civilisation, we are still stuck at 'why women?' It is time we reflect on 'why not women?'.

Given the unnerving situation of the world today, there is a need to redress the way we define harmony. The essence of harmony is not to encourage homogenous thoughts and experiences, but rather to recognise differences and attempt to create something beautiful out of them. We live in a world in which attributes like freedom are treated not as a right, but as a privilege. Universal human rights and ethical absolutes continue to be at best *ad hoc*. From the Far East to the extreme West, harmony is construed and exhibited in different manners, yet what binds it is the intent of what David Cadman calls 'justice and fairness in economic, social and political relationships' and what Nicholas Campion calls 'ideas of universal balance and the integration of all things [that] occur in many cultures'.[39] Harmony, in my opinion, can serve, not just as a tool, but also as a way to transform ourselves and the lives around us for the better. Understanding harmony may not offer easy answers to the conflicts that have engulfed our global community, but it can certainly provide normative frameworks to help us engage with others and inculcate the values of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding.

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