THE BURMESE WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN BURMA'S PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT: A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

MYRA MARIANO TORRES

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
(HUMAN RIGHTS)
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I offer my sincerest gratitude to my advisors, Dr. Sriprapha Petcharasmeree (Ph.D.) and Dr. Varaporn Chamsanit (Ph. D.) who supported and encouraged me in seeing this thesis through. I am very grateful to my two External Examiners, Ms. Pornpimon Trichot (M.A.) and Dr. Nalinee Tantuvanit that even in a very short notice, both agreed to read the rather long thesis of mine and accepted to be part of the Thesis Examination Committee. The Committee's practical inputs surely helped me a lot in refining some areas I overlooked while writing my draft.

This thesis could not have been completed without the generous support from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and the Swedish International Development Agency. To the Office of Human Rights Studies and Social Development (OHRSD), Mahidol University, the OHRSD staff, especially Chariya Bunto (the MA Program Coordinator), and my professors and lecturers during the entire coursework, I am very much grateful with their logistical/technical assistance.

My special thanks go to the women of Burma, particularly, the six case studies who imparted their valuable knowledge and critical analysis on the Burmese women's situation in general, but at the same time, sharing their real life experiences in order to realize this thesis and making it a success. Their names might not be written here for security reasons but to honor their tireless dedication in their struggle for freedom and equality in their country, this peace of work is humbly dedicated to them.

While being engulfed in thesis-writing in the academic world, I have been blessed to meet and share memorable moments with people who touched my life in various ways. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Christophe Menu for his all out support on the early stage of the construction of my thesis, during the proposal-making, in particular; for this, I am truly indebted to him. To Ed, Maria (deceased), Fred, Ces, Fe, SIPA friends, classmates, university friends and people I met randomly but have significant impact in my life; thanks very much to them for keeping me as sanely as possible on break intervals of lifting my eyes up from the book I have had been reading, or from the texts I have had been writing, re-reading and re-writing. Also, for reminding me that there is still life that is fun beyond the four corners of my room.

Words fail me to express my appreciation and wholehearted gratitude to my family who deserve special mention for their unconditional love, persistent confidence in me and thoughtful support: My Mom, Lulu Torres; my supportive siblings—Irma, Jon, Vin, Joyce, Leah and Rejee; Francis and Vanjie, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law respectively; and, last but not least, the three most important boys in my life—Angelo Kairos, Janus and Niko—my loving nephews who are always my pride and joy.

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ABSTRACT

This research is particularly about the Burmese women's political participation in the pro-democracy movement. It invokes real views and sentiments coming from Burmese women activists themselves as a major tool in responding to the specific issue of the marginalization and discrimination of Burmese women in the sphere of political participation. Using the feminist lens throughout, three key inter-woven points are highlighted in this study. First, it brings to light the marginalization and discrimination of Burmese women as a continuing phenomenon not only in the mainstream/'male'-stream society, but even in a social movement offering alternative politics such as the pro-democracy movement in Burma. Secondly, it exposes the patriarchal system that has been operative from generation-to-generation, maintaining its strong grip even at present time as traditional norms segregating man/male-woman/female roles in the society continue and influence the mindset of many Burmese, activists and non-activists alike. Thirdly, the imbalanced power relationship between the sexes/genders is further strengthened by the twinning-effect of the all-powerful institutions promoting male superiority in Burmese society, namely, religion and the military state. This study unveils centuries-old Burmese traditions and customs, originating primarily from the idea of man's *'hpon'* or 'man's innate power' and perpetuated by Burmese Buddhism, as chiefly contributing to the continuance of Burmese women's marginalization and discrimination in the political sphere. It is the foundation of the stereotype by which the present junta government promotes that all men are born leaders and decision-makers, while women are fit to perform the subordinate and supporting role. While this study basically concurs with the idea of woman *'agency'* and the uniqueness of individuals, women as thinking 'Subjects' and not just mere 'subjects/objects' of any situation, it also underscores the great influence of the larger society, particularly, the systemic traditional norms that cover the breadth of discrimination, as it continues to be the key hindering factor in the pursuit of getting closer to a society where gender parity thrives. With the setting up of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) as an umbrella group of the 12 ethnic-based women organizations, women's various concerns are slowly gaining ground and a number of women initiatives were highlighted as their issues are being acknowledged as priority issues as well.

KEY WORDS: BURMESE WOMEN ACTIVISTS/POLITICAL PARTICIPATION/ SEX/GENDER ROLES/ PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT/ WOMAN AGENCY

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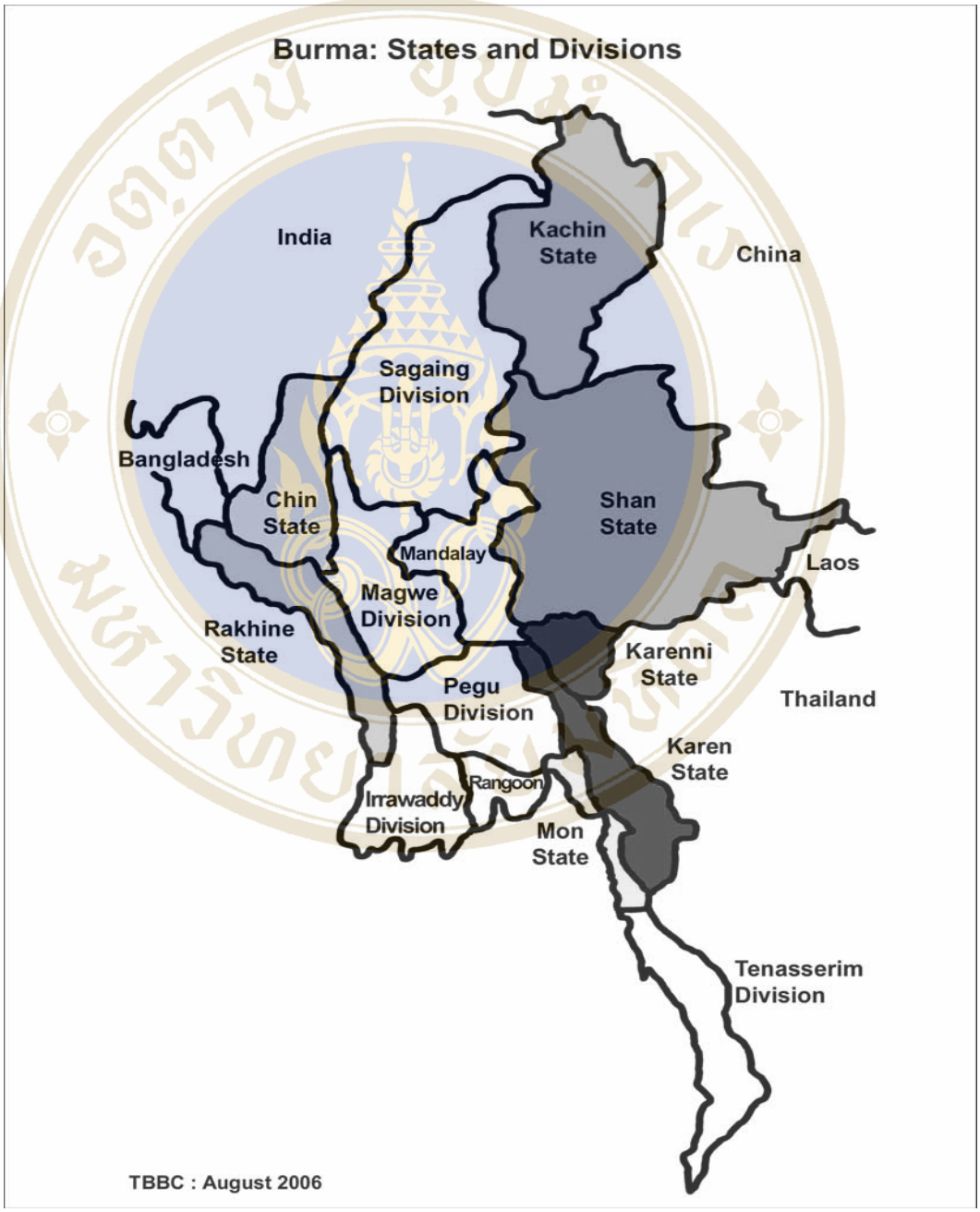
Burma Map



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALTSEAN	Alternative ASEAN-Burma
BPFA	Beijing Platform for Action
BWU	Burmese Women Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPR	Civil and Political Rights
ESCR	Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IID	Initiatives for International Dialogue
KNWO	Karenni National Women's Organization
KWAT	Kachin Women's Association-Thailand
KWHRO	Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization
KWO	Karen Women's Organization
LWO	Lahu Women's Organization
MI	Military Intelligence
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NCUB	National Council of the Union of Burma
NLD	National League for Democracy
PWO	Palaung Women's Organization
PWU	Pa-O Women's Union
RWU	Rakhaing Women's Union
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SWAN	Shan Women's Action Network
TWU	Tavoy Women's Union
WLB	Women's League of Burma
WRWAB	Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma
UNGA	United Nations' General Assembly

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Women in the Movement: A Breakthrough Symbolizing Gender Equality or Just a Mere Translation of the Workings of the 'Male'-stream Politics in Burma Society?

An oppressive and repressive military junta calling themselves the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is running Burma[1]. To date, *Burma*[2] represents the longest-running military dictatorship in Asia (*see* David, 2007:15). Its curtailment of its own citizens' human rights makes it a favorite of the international community's criticism and condemnation. The junta leaders rigidly impede the peoples' human rights, defying democratic processes and meaningful people's participation; and in the course, excluding the vital participation of Burmese women in the political arena. As expected in a society being managed, or better said, 'mismanaged' by 'men in uniforms' and treating the whole country as that of the 'Army', the favorable environment by which women needed to empower themselves is being narrowed down, especially with their exclusion in the political decision-making processes, leadership and other important political positions. While the present political landscape has a significant impact on every ordinary Burmese citizen's life regardless of sex/gender, age and social position in the society; the mere fact that the leadership is solely made up of military men is a blatant example of the more profound exclusionary strategy of the political system against the Burmese women.

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[1] See Appendix A for Burma Country Profile and Its Peoples, pp. 165 - 166.

[2] The word '*Burma*', which basically pertains to the country's name of the Burmese people, is going to be used throughout this research. It was in 1989 when the military junta changed the country's name to 'Union of Myanmar'. Though 'Myanmar' has been accepted by the United Nations (UN) as the country's official name, its old name 'Burma' is still preferred to be used by most in the opposition movement and supporters from the international community. This is in defiance to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)/SPDC's policies and as a symbolic protest against the ruling junta. For further readings on the 'name changing in Burma', s*ee*, Houtman, Gustaaf. 1999. Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics—Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA). pp. 43-58.

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On the other hand, despite the existence of the oppressive and repressive political atmosphere in Burma, it also produces several out-spoken and courageous women, risking their civil and political liberties for the cause of the elusive genuine democracy in the country. The list includes the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Winner Aung San Suu Kyi; the 2005 Rebook Human Rights Winner Charm Tong; the 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee Dr. Cynthia Maung; Su Su Nway, who earned Canada's John Humphrey Award in 2006; and all those women activists in various Burmese groups and organizations. These exceptional women are undoubtedly embodiment of strong *women 'agencies'*[3]; acknowledging themselves as 'subjects' and not just mere 'objects/victims' of a given complicated and difficult political situation.

With the presence of these few women who are epitome of strength in their steadfast struggle for political freedom and democracy in Burma and the human rights cause in general, does it signify that Burmese women's status in the area of political participation, particularly within the pro-democracy movement, is already having a great leap forward when it comes to the goal of attaining gender equality? Or, does the movement perform just like a micro-representation of the gender inequality going on in the mainstream/'male'-stream Burma politics?

1.2 "Where are the Women 'Comrades'?": Straight from the Horse's Mouth

Commentaries and personal opinions are being expressed by some Burmese activists and analysts within the pro-democracy movement on how the movement itself is treating their Burmese women comrades within their ranks (*see* Aung Myo Min, 1999; Moe Thee Zun, 2003; Aung Naing Oo, 2004; Democratic Voice of Burma,

[3] Woman *'agency'*/women *'agencies'* in this study refers to the idea that women have innate qualities or have inherent endowment to choose and decide and have the ability to be responsible and act on things that are happening in their own lives. Women as 'Subjects' and not just 'objects' of circumstances is a characteristic highlighted by this concept as well. It is a perspective that opposes the idea of women as basically 'vulnerable', 'weak', and always taking the 'victim' role and who do not have the freedom to choose and to make decisions of their own in a condition imposed by major outside forces such as the existence of systemic discrimination against them. This is in recognition that women, as agencies, are 'separate and unique individuals'; not just attachments to the men in general as propagated by most religions for example. It puts into question the pervading perception of women as mere incidental, followers, subordinates, dependents and bounded to just perform supplementary and supporting roles to men in the society. However, this research concurs on the idea that 'individual agency' is also influenced and shaped by the outside historical environment forces and reality. Here, it is taken into account that social environment, the institutional system and the normative/traditional practices have major influences in shaping woman agency.

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2006). Most of these criticisms' point of departure is on the role generally performed by the Burmese women within the democracy movement. It reflects their marginalized status—that is, in terms of the leadership and decision-making positions; and, the discrimination—may it be consciously/unconsciously and/or directly/ indirectly—placed against them; no other than by their male colleagues and comrades in the movement. These observations and commentaries coming out to the fore are among the cornerstones supporting this study's argument that Burmese women are indeed experiencing marginalization and discrimination even in their movement which is advocating for democratic changes.

Translating these observations and criticisms coming from the Burmese activists themselves, it can be drawn that aside from the iconic political figure *Daw*[4] Aung San Suu Kyi, there is indeed a very slim hope at the moment for women activists to be present and to participate in the decision-making and leadership levels. As women's political participation is continuously sidelined and downplayed in the movement, the impression that it risked emitting is that the movement itself, or the leaders for that matter, are nothing different compared to the undemocratic junta leadership; particularly, on how it continuously stunts women's political participation in the society. The preconceived notion of separate roles and unequal status based on sex/gender differences—which in essence gives credence to male superiority over female—is one of the important traditional concepts that the junta leaders have to continuously ingrain and maintain in the society's system. This is in order to prevail and stay in power; and, basically, to sideline the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi, the symbol of the democratic struggle, in the mainstream politics. Ironically, it appears to be that the same mindset plagued the pro-democracy movement leaders when they put direct and/or indirect restrictions on women to be part of the decision-making processes as leaders in their own rights and to participate fully in the political matters.

[4] *Daw* is part of the Burmese (Burman) honorifics meaning 'aunt' or 'madam'. It is used to prefix the name of an adult woman but it does not indicate marital status. For 'sir' or 'uncle', the prefix used is 'U'; 'Ko' for 'mister/older brother'; 'Maung' for 'mister/younger brother'; 'Ma' for 'older sister' and so on. As Burma has different ethnic nationalities, each grouping has their own set of honorifics/words that are much different from these Burman honorifics.

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1.3 Contextualizing the Issue of Women's Marginalization/Discrimination

Thirty-two years had already passed since the United Nations' General Assembly (UNGA) declared the UN Decade for Women (1975 – 1985) with its special sub-themes—Equality, Development and Peace. As we move on to the 21st century and 'democracy' being a by-word in every society, discrimination and marginalization still remain to be concepts subject to contention; especially, when we talk about gender inequality and its manifestation in the various areas of societal participation—public and private spheres.

Settling for the particular feminist agenda of the elimination of gender inequality/discrimination, the debate relates mostly on how to practically proceed on the eradication of gender inequality in various societies—this includes evaluating the application of the temporary special measures for women, assessing its effectiveness and so on—in achieving 'substantive equality'. Substantive equality is one of the three models of equality (the two others—formal approach and protective approach models) and an approach adopted by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It is a model that basically introduces the idea that: (1) at times, women need to be treated differently to achieve equal results; and, (2) if there is something that disadvantages women—social, economic, cultural, and so on—the State has the primary obligation to correct such situation to make sure equal results for women. Substantive equality is needed to ensure that women have equal opportunity (equality in laws/policies/programs), equal access to opportunities (eliminate obstacles/barriers—institutional, economic, social, political, cultural, and so on) and equal results.

But on the other hand, the widespread acknowledgement of the notion of 'individuality/uniqueness' propagated by the newer feminist perspective or the post-modern school of thought has also complicated the struggles for the aforementioned struggle for gender equality. This is due to the fact that part of its focus is the expansion of the post-modern consciousness that embraces 'differences' and obtaining 'strength in variation'. This is, of course, in line with the thinking that each woman has different lived reality and this view seems to be in contrast to the notion of the

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widespread discrimination against women and the impression that women shared or experiencing the same kind and/or level of discrimination in the society.

1.3.1 Contending Views on Women's Marginalization/Discrimination Issue: "Yester-years Reality…?"

There were assertions made by some scholars and writers that discrimination and marginalization of women in the public sphere of participation are not that prevalent anymore in the contemporary society as compared from thirty years ago—before the UNGA's declaration of the reputed Decade for Women. Substantiating these arguments is the presence of women occupying the economic and political arenas that were once seen primarily as men's niches. This is not a reality then, three decades back. To the extreme, there were also some who argued that marginalization and discrimination of women are not in any way happening or denying it ever became part of their societal history as claimed by Burma's government for example.

Adding to that is the view that gender roles of men and women are constantly modified or transformed brought about by some other important factors such as the growing impact of globalization and other eco-political changes transpiring in the international, regional and national levels which have direct and indirect effects on the everyday lives of the people. Compounding these so called changes is the mushrooming of new ideas and theories critically challenging the old ones. This includes the emergence of newer school of thoughts, like the post-modern perspective for example, aiming to set new parameters/methods, offering new set of perspectives and alternatives in understanding the contemporary social world. The abovementioned changes, transformations, or even new challenges also have its impact on the gender discourse as a whole with the introduction of new concepts and offering different perspectives in understanding the world today and in viewing some of the older feminist concepts/ideas as well.

Defining the 'private sphere' of the family/home, for example, which was one significant point of debate—whether the home as an area nurturing the 'domesticity' of women and as a source of women oppression; or, as an area of the good, nurturant essential, feminine that is outside of the polluting male power of the public sphere—

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some of the feminist responses range from prescriptions of politically restructuring the two separate realms of the public and private spheres to a rejection of such divides such as the contemporary thinkers arguing that such dichotomy are already collapsing completely in a post-modern world. To quote Sens and Stivens (1998:4) argument, the private sphere is "constantly shifting, being reworked and redefined by economic, political and ideological forces," especially in the contemporary Asia. Their contention is more on arguing that private realm is indeed constructed by the public sphere, a very public process in which the State, economy, religion and the likes have all played extensive parts. This particular argument also suggests that the private/public divide is not a rigid division and the so-called 'private sphere' is indeed another site of contests as well; not the 'public realm' only. In its widest sense, "politics is made in the kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, workplaces, malls of Asia, in the stock exchanges, parliamentary chambers" (Sen and Stivens, 1998:3) and so on.

In the feminist movement itself, the whole feminist agenda that is set supposedly to address the gender inequality/discrimination issue is now in hot seat. For one, the accepted generalized view of women's marginalization/discrimination is now being debated on and argued by some feminists as not always the case for all societies (*see* Ortner, 1996:139-172).

The claim that women's marginalization and discrimination may not 'always' be a reality in all societies could be true, especially, if we cite for example the presence of women in the political arena, not only as part of the electorate but as candidates for public office as well. There are also instances, like for example, in some societies from the western democracies wherein the gap between the men and women's participation in this area has somehow narrowed down. In some countries/governments, women at times even reached the highest point of the hierarchical political ladder functioning as head of States—presidents or prime ministers like for example President Pratiba Patil of India, Executive Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner of Argentina, President Borjana Kristo of Finland, Luisa Diogo of Mozambique, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, former President Megawati Sukarnoptri of Indonesia and so on—or as opposition leaders and other

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venerated positions in politics like former President Mary Robinson of Ireland, and, of course, the symbol of the democratic struggle in Burma, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

1.3.2 Contending Views on Women's Marginalization/Discrimination Issue: "Just an Outdated Feminist Idea…?"

Still in connection to the gender inequality issue, part of the debate is the contemporary feminist thought that questions the efficacy of the struggle aiming for 'women equality' itself, that is—with the set aim of occupying the spheres such as the public political sphere that were denied to the women/female gender before. As Hill (2006) puts it in her article entitled *'Post-modern Impact on Second Wave Feminism'*, "Discussions of gender inequality are no longer simply about things men have and women want." It is indeed become a little bit complicated especially with the proliferation of the post-modernist thought in the popular culture which highlights 'differences' and 'individual uniqueness' among others. Just like the other contemporary feminists with a post-modernist thought leaning, Hill (2006) criticized the liberal strategy propagated by the second wave feminist thought that focuses mainly on extending basic human rights to women—opportunities for education and improved healthcare for example—as not enough feminist agenda on the grounds that these opportunities are not equally distributed and that all women need to experience equality from a place that recognizes 'differences' and is not threatened by it. She stressed further that the popular liberal strategies for social liberation have been curtailed by the rightful suggestion that all women are not the same, need or want the same things, or define social equality in the same way. Complicating it more is the idea that radically questions the very meaning of 'women'. Bell Hooks, for example, in her book entitled *'Ain't I A Woman Too?'* argues that, "Women is an illusion, a social construction, a myth about who we are, and what we want," (*quoted in* Hill, 2006:1). In connection to the idea on 'differences' and 'individual uniqueness', Bell brought up the idea that there are power dynamics that render certain differences invisible that help create the 'illusion of unity and sameness'.

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1.3.3 Contending Views on Women's Marginalization/Discrimination Issue: "A Continuing Reality—Revisiting Some Factual Bases on the Global Level"

It might be agreeable that the liberal rights-based approach could be 'not enough agenda', especially, if gender equality/equal participation would be the set goal. However, in spite of the various criticisms on the liberal rights-based approach in addressing women's issue and even the quest for what it is really meant by the word 'woman' per se (on a theoretical level), it is still an inescapable reality that the public political playing field is gendered. And as for the question on the liberal rights-based strategy, at least for this study, it does argue that there is no available viable alternative/s now that has a more coherent approach with an aim of ending gender inequality, discrimination or any exclusionary practices against women in the society. This is also clearly encapsulated in Scott's (1996) words baring her thought on this realization: "I do not deny that feminism—at least when it claimed rights for women—was produced by the discourse of liberal individualism nor that it depended on liberalism for its existence; there was (is still) no alternative," (Scott, 1996:16).

Going back to the inescapable political reality of today, as most studies assessing women's political participation have shown, the big gap on the leadership and decision-making positions wherein women lag behind from men still remain (*see* UN-INSTRAW 2006, Karl 1995, Martin et al. 2005, CSDHA-UN 1992, Vianello et al. 1990).

Women in the Main ('Male')-stream Politics

Some fifteen years ago, the CSDHA-UN (1992) which focuses on women in politics and decision-making in the late twentieth century pronounced that the under-representation of women in political power positions is indeed a global phenomenon (*see* CSDHA-UN, 1992:27). After this particular UN research, a study by t*he Southeast Asia Women Watch or SEAWWatch*[5] (*cited* in Martin et al., 2005:7) carried the same result saying that either in terms of numbers or in the power that it wields,

[5] The *SEAWWatch* is a network which focuses its work on monitoring the implementation of the BPFA.

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women's participation in various levels of governance has not shown any significant improvement. It finds that even after 10 years of the passage by consensus of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), none of the countries came anywhere near the 30 percent target of having women in political positions of leadership. Throughout the world, at the top of the political pyramid, women are either absent or very poorly represented. In general terms, responding to the question: *'Are women in Southeast Asia gaining ground in politics and decision-making today?'*, Martin et al. (2005) pointed out in their five-country report pertaining to the Southeast Asian women in politics and decision-making ten years after BPFA that though many improvements have been undoubtedly achieved, there is still no major breakthrough toward a more equal political representation of women and men; neither, a more natural design of gender-responsive policies and reduction of other gender imbalances has occurred. This was already the political reality way back in early 1990s as CSDHA-UN (1992) reported that at every stage of the political process, the proportion of women's involvement becomes smaller (*see* CSDHA-UN,1992:29). More recent reports also exposed almost the same results. For one, in its released factsheet on women in decision-making, The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women or UN-INSTRAW (2006) reveals that the worldwide representation in Parliament of women is only around 16 per cent—with men occupying the 84 per cent, and the highest representation can be found in the Nordic countries, with about 40 per cent. Almost the same result yielded by Martin et al. (2005) supplementing that Asia follows with around 15 per cent; and finally, the Arab states with the lowest percentage of about seven per cent (*see* Martin, et al., 2005:1). UN-INSTRAW (2006) added that since 1999, the number of women representation within the world's Parliaments has risen to three per cent only, thus, one per cent rise can be seen since 2003. As exposed here by the reports, it only shows that the improvement in terms of number of women going up the political ladder is indeed very slow.

Having done skimming through some factual figures of the low percentage of women's representation in the mainstream ('male'-stream) politics, a quick glance on

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women's experiences in various peoples/political movements in the past would also provide a better picture of the gender-based discrimination which continues to exist.

Women in Various Social Movements

Historically, in times of political upheavals in all regions of the world, women have come forward to defend or struggle for national independence, liberation, as well as for greater democracy; but then, at the end of the struggle, women were usually expected to assume their traditional roles (*see* Karl, 1995:79). Also, women's participation was largely limited to supportive positions. The issues of particular concern to women like reproduction, child care, domestic work as well as the issue of discrimination against women, have usually been considered 'secondary' and subordinate to the 'general good'. The assumption then has been that women's emancipation would be achieved automatically by the victory of the struggle. Despite the fact that most victorious movements proclaimed the equality of women and stamped out blatantly oppressive practices, women's issues continued to be considered peripheral.

In some countries, Namibia (*see* Karl, 1995:79-87), for example, the struggle for national liberation illustrates the growing awareness of women and some of the strategies they utilized brought women's issues and perspectives to the agenda, both during the struggle itself and in the new governments. Women fought for the liberation of the country because they felt it was their duty and they were committed. But, then, within that struggle, there was also the struggle for recognition of women as 'equal' partners.[6] In the Philippines, Claudio and Santos (2005) stressed that the dialogue among feminists and the social movements which deals with issues of class and imperialism has been facilitated because of the women actors in the women's movements maintaining that the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression cannot occur without liberation of the entire people from imperialist oppression and vice versa…Yet, even with the recognition by other political blocs the equal

[6] For more examples on the topic 'women in the movements'—like in Chile, Russia, Mexico, Greece and so on, *see:* (1) Karl, Marilee. 1995. Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision-Making. London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd. pp. 79-87; (2) Basu, Amrita (ed). 1995. Women's Movements in Global Perspective. Boulder/San Francisco/ Oxford: Westview Press, Inc.

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importance of the reproductive sphere and the productive sphere in determining social conditions…'class' remains the most dominant discourse and women's issues are still generally considered 'soft' issues (*see* Claudio and Santos, 2005:9). However, there were some exceptions where newly liberated countries enacted legal measures to enable women to participate in the labor force and regarded them as essential to the building of the economy. But, then, other factors such as traditions/cultural barriers also contribute in maintaining/ strengthening/ complicating the gender issue.

1.4 Statement of the Research Problems

The contemporary political context in Burma and the existing patriarchal nature of the society, the presentation of the discrimination against women and their marginalized status in the decision-making and leadership positions in the area of political participation on a global level, the criticisms made by fellow Burmese activists on the negative stereotypes on women in their ranks, and, the presentation of the debate on gender issue itself within the feminist discourse—all these have helped shaping to problematize the issue and pursuing this study on Burmese women activists' political role in the pro-democracy movement.

Having laid down these related underpinning issues, this research strived to give a clear description of the Burmese women activists' marginalized status and discrimination that they are experiencing in relation to the wider political context in Burma where discrimination against women is prevalent. It attempts to theorize how the pro-democracy movement as one offering alternative politics still continue to be weak in terms of genuinely addressing the gender issue, particularly, the elimination of discrimination against women in their ranks. Invoking the real voices of women leaders in the process with the help of secondary data and seeing it through the feminist lens, this is what this research mainly endeavors to respond to. It suggests that the contemporary political context in Burma continues to be a gendered space since the centuries-old gender-based inequality remains rooted in the whole societal system with its effect still observable even in the pro-democracy movement. Part of the interest of this study is critically expounding on newer feminist concepts which basically acknowledge and promote the idea of individual 'agency' (the 'uniqueness'

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of each person) and woman as 'subject' (have their own subjectivity and not just object or victim of the societal consequences).

1.5 Framework of the Study

Housing various strands of feminist school of thoughts, feminism is indeed a topic that is complicated, intricate and contradictory at times. However, it can never be denied that feminism, with all its complications and contradictions, still represents the major change in social thinking and politics because only feminism radically questions our understanding of 'men' and 'women'. Thornham (2001:41) suggested, "Any definition of feminism must see it above all as a social political force, aimed at changing existing power relations between women and men," hence, coming from this specific understanding that this research employs feminism as its over-arching framework. As this study aims to critically examine the marginalization and discrimination being experienced by the Burmese women in the political sphere of participation—the Burmese women activists in the pro-democracy movement, in particular—it obviously invokes the idea that 'gender inequality' does exist and is still a social issue affecting many women in the society.

This study concurs to the principles set by the international human rights benchmarks, particularly, the specially designed anti-discrimination instrument *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*[7] (CEDAW), also know as the Women's Convention, as it is still a vital instrument for now providing the minimum standard which could be used as means to lessen, if not to eliminate, discrimination against women. The Women Convention supplied the basis for realizing the 'substantive equality' in helping to guarantee women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life (this, including the right to vote and to stand for election), education, health and employment. In addition, what makes this instrument significant for women is that, it is the only treaty which affirms the

[7] For the full text of the Convention, *see* Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR). 19 April 2007. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) [Internet]. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR). Available from: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/cedaw.htm> [Accessed 19 August 2007].

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women's reproductive rights and 'targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations.'

Basically, this study agrees to the formal definition of the term 'discrimination against women' set forth in Article 1 of the Convention which means:

> …Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (*cited in* OHCHR, 2007).

It accedes to the idea that forms of discrimination against women can be direct (that which has the intention of discriminating like constitution laws, policies discriminating women and so on), indirect, past or historic (due to discrimination in the past wherein women are not at a level playing field with men) or it could be a cross-cutting discrimination (denial of one right leading to denial of another). Discrimination can also be subtle, systemic and institutionalized.

At a macro level, the pervasiveness of the gender-based discrimination continues as traditional cultural norms remain to play a big role. The social and historical context make women experience discrimination in a unique way. Its prevalence is very much reflected in the mainstream political sphere or even in the movements offering alternative politics. Although, there might be changes/gains that could be counted in terms of the physical presence and greater representation of women in the political scene which stands in contrast from the reality of some decades back; still a lot needs to be done as many factual instances still points to the reality that patriarchy is still strong and running through the veins of the whole societal system. How this issue manifest in Burma setting and in the pro-democracy movement specifically is what this study is all about.

This study also concurs to the newer feminist concepts relating to woman 'agency' and individual 'uniqueness' which actually explains why the Burmese women activists, despite all the societal barriers for the realization of their full potentialities, chose the challenging path of trying to address the gender-based inequality/discrimination as one of the societal ills. However, on the idea that

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'agency' is basically an expression of autonomous individual will, or one that is said to be an innate characteristic of individual woman (or any other individuals), this study maintains that it is also an effect and shaped by the historical processes; the changes/transformations happening in the society. Individual agency is being influenced by the outside factors as well, thus, explains why it is so difficult for an individual to deviate from the norms and a real big challenge to address issues that are injected in a whole societal system. In relation to feminism, this is also in line to what Scott (1996:16) has pointed out while explaining the notion of agency:

> Instead of assuming that agency follows from an innate human will, I want to understand feminism in terms of the discursive processes—the epistemologies, institutions, and practices—that produce political subjects, that make agency (in this case, the agency of feminists) possible even when it is forbidden or denied.

Along these lines, this study further expounds on how this agency, through the discursive processes is being produced and manifested by looking at the selected Burmese women activists' observations and lived-through experiences.

1.6 Research Objectives

In order to present a clear understanding of the phenomenon surrounding the marginalization/discrimination against Burmese women with special focus on the contested space in the political arena, this study sets the following aims:

1. Provide a clear description of marginalization and discrimination against Burmese women activists in the political sphere of participation within the pro-democracy movement and to critically examine its link to the continuing social phenomenon of gender discrimination and the political reality in the Burma society as a whole.

2. Analyze the underlying factor/s leading to Burmese women's marginalization and the discrimination placed against them in the political

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sphere, its effect on the women activists and its implications on the pro-democracy movement's over-all call for democracy.

3. Identify and evaluate any 'initiatives' and genuine 'achievements' made by the pro-democracy movement towards equal representation of genders (women and men activists) in the decision-making and leadership positions.

1.7 Research Questions

Complementing the abovementioned objectives, this study aims to respond to the following specific questions:

1. How does the marginalization/discrimination against Burmese women activists in the political sphere of participation within the pro-democracy movement manifest in real terms? How does this phenomenon being shaped and/or influenced by the ongoing political and social reality in Burma as a whole?

2. What are the underlying contributory factors leading to the marginalization/discrimination of the Burmese women in the political sphere of participation in the movement? How do these key issues affect the women activists and the movement's over-all call for democracy?

3. What are the specific initiatives made by the women activists and the pro-democracy movement as a whole in relation to greater participation and alleviating discrimination against women in the political sphere? Invoking the principles of the existing standards on human rights/women rights and the concept of substantive equality as bases, are there any genuine achievements' in the public political sphere with regard to the elimination of discrimination against women in the movement?

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1.8 Research Methodology

1.8.1 Research Method and Tools

This research is qualitative in nature. In responding to the set objectives and questions posed earlier, this study focuses on the real-life experiences of the six individual-cases of Burmese women leaders, their own struggles as women especially when they joined the democracy movement in Burma, their personal and organizational perspectives on gender/women issue and so on. Some Burmese activists (women and men) who were not necessarily leaders but members in their respective groups/organizations were also interviewed in a casual way regarding their views on issues particular to women.

Backing up the actual personal in-depth interviews were the secondary data which were gathered mostly from various documents—previous interviews and pronouncements made by women activists on gender/women issue; news articles and book references depicting women's issues and those related to it; and other written sources that show, reflect and support the main argument of this research that marginalization/discrimination against women continues to be a contemporary societal issue.

In-depth Interview

Six women leaders from the Women League of Burma (WLB), a 12-member women umbrella organization, were purposively chosen to be the main subjects. These selected women shared their real life experiences while tending to their job in the women organizations and at the same time carrying out their tasks as political activists for Burma's democracy. This is on the premise that hearing the voices and perspectives from the standpoint of women themselves is a very significant process. It is hinged on the idea that women can articulate better the marginalization and discrimination that they are witnessing and experiencing in their everyday life, more so, of them becoming leaders in their respective women organizations; thus, in a more exceptional position to convey and propose ways in addressing the issue as well.

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General guide questions and a short backdrop of what the research is all about have been prepared and submitted in advance to the interviewees before the actual face-to-face interviews were conducted. Although, the interviewees were already aware of the guide questions, they sometimes got carried away a bit in describing specific topics and personal experiences which created much impact in their lives but were peripheral to the main focus of the research. Instances like this, the researcher felt the need to inject questions that would bring the discussion back to the main agenda of the study.

Earning the trust of the interviewees was one of the crucial points that the researcher has taken into account, especially in choosing the interviewees. Firstly, mistrust is very prevalent even among Burmese themselves as anyone they do not know for a long time could be doubted as connected or working with the Military Intelligence (MI) from Burma; this, of course, will pose a problem not only for movement but more so, the activist's personal safety. Secondly, it would be not that easy for interviewees, especially if they did not have previous personal contact with the researcher, to divulge some the movement's internal conflicts that some of their fellow Burmese activists might perceive and tag as another form of 'sabotaging' the integrity of the pro-democracy movement as whole. The atmosphere during the interview sessions was very congenial and the interviewer-interviewee relationship that has been built was somewhat in a relax mode which made the process easier, particularly during the sharing-sessions of the subjects' involvement in political activities and while giving their opinions on the gender issue within the movement where they belong. Working with the Philippine-based human rights solidarity organization called *Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID)*[8] for some years in the past and knowing most of the interviewees through the researcher's years of involvement on Burma solidarity work also helped a lot in establishing such setting.

[8] *Initiatives for International Dialogue* or IID is a non-stock, non-profit, non-governmental organization doing solidarity work and focusing on human rights issues, particularly, within the Southeast Asian region. In one of its project itself, the Burma program, short-termed and long-termed internships are provided for Burmese activists; first, for them to be exposed and be trained on various needs that their respective political and ethnic-based organizations expressed for them to be equipped with; and, second, sharing their unique cultures, experiences and so on that could help the IID as host organization in strengthening their solidarity and awareness-building work in the local/national level. To know more on the organization and its work, see, http://iidnet.org.

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Each interview with the six main subjects was tape-recorded and transcribed eventually. English was the medium of communication employed as most of them (five-out-of-six interviewees) already have long experiences of doing lobby work outside the country, thus, fluent in the English language.

Short Profile of the Six Case Studies

The six Burmese women leaders who were the primary subjects in this research came from different family backgrounds, age ranging from mid-twenties to 60s and even though they share general problems brought about by the political and economic difficulties in Burma, each of them revealed their rather peculiar but rich experiences and reasons why they joined the pro-democracy movement or their very own Burmese women organizations.

Two of them came from middle class family living in the urban areas while four of the women grew up from the rural areas or the refugee camps.

Four of the women leaders had the chance to study in the university while the two other gained informal studies through various year-long or months-long training provided by different organizations helping the Burma cause.

Two of the older generation women activists got directly involved with the armed resistance against the military junta, although, they did not engage themselves in the forefront.

Two are still single; one is still pursuing formal studies and working with her ethnic-based women organization while the other one is balancing her time from an ethnic group where she is performing as part of the management team and working in her own ethnic-based women movement as well.

Four of the women were part of the momentous commencement of the WLB.

All of the six Burmese women activists bear witness the hardship of the economic and political turmoil in Burma and these two external factors helped them decide to leave their country during their time.

They, too, have different opinions on issues like the quota system for example and as their deliberations resulted on deciding to finally embark on this particular advocacy within their own pro-democracy movement, they all conceded to help in

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lobbying all the organizations and groups to enforce this temporary special measure. This would see to it that women would be part of the decision-making committees in any groups/organizations, may it be directly working on politics or not. Same with the selection process in terms of opportunities in attending workshops, training and any informal education and so on.

With the women coming from a rather diverse and rich background, it is a bit tough to generalize and conclude that a particular factor determines the role and the level of their political participation in the movement. Conversely, coming from the different levels of their lived-through reality and witnessing injustice in their own eyes, this fuels their vigor to fight for justice and equality.

Observation

Built-in to most of the qualitative studies is the usage of observation (direct and/or indirect) as one of the data collection techniques and it depends on the amount of time one has to make this technique as one of the effective tools for data gathering. For this study, observational approach on various engagements with the Burmese activists—young and old, leaders and non-leaders alike—has been utilized as well and the past experiences of the researcher working with the target group in the past has proven to be very helpful for this research project. The researcher's personal contact with activists from various ethnic nationalities from Burma started in 1998 while working with IID's Burma Program. As one of the staff directly involved with the various projects within the Burma program such as the Burmese internship, facilitating sharing sessions and coming together of Burmese students based in the Philippines and the various campaigns and lobbying activities involving visiting Burmese campaigners; a number of behavioral observation points could already be harnessed in terms of how the two genders treat each other. Most of these observations were also validated during the researcher's month-long exposure mostly in the Burmese refugee camps in June 2003, and another one, during the actual field research for this study where the researcher had the chance to attend some of the Burmese gatherings. What made the field research special was the fact that the researcher was better equipped

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with framework and important concepts for analysis and better understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

Documentary Research

Papers, official documents, organizational reports, press releases, published materials (soft and hard copies), news articles and other supporting secondary data were garnered through a wide range of sources: (a) from various Burmese organizations— Women's League of Burma (WLB) and some of its member-organizations based in Chiang Mai, solidarity organizations working on Burma issue—Alternative ASEAN-Burma (ALTSEAN) in Bangkok and the Burma Program Databank of the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) in the Philippines, libraries and research centers that are based in Thailand like the Women Studies Center in Chiang Mai University, the Human Rights Program's Resource Center at Mahidol University; and, (b) the internet, especially for the online publications, press releases/statements, electronic news update provided by different information-based groups working on Burma issues like the Burmanetnews, Irrawaddy and so on.

Some of the publications containing past interviews with Burmese women refugees and refugees/activists and opinions coming from some male activists were also included in this study.

The Main Subjects[9]

The six primary subjects were all members of Women's League of Burma (WLB), an umbrella organization established in 1999 and now housing 12 women organizations under its wing namely: Burmese Women's Union (BWU), Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT), Karen Women's Organization (KWO), Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO), Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO), Lahu Women's Organization (LWO), Palaung Women's Organization (PWO), Pa-O Women's Union (PWU), Rakhaing Women's Union (RWU), Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), Tavoy Women's Union (TWU) and Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB).

[9] *See* Appendix B for short background on the six case studies, pp. 167 - 178.

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Even though this study is a purposive one and almost all of the women interviewees are friends of the author; there is still some criteria set by this thesis in choosing the six case studies. First and foremost, they should be women from Burma who are politically active in the pro-democracy movement, have rather a long involvement with their respective women groups under WLB and eager to share their personal views, observations and assessments on women issue and processes they have undergone in earning the recognition of becoming leaders as well. The selection process include that each must be coming from a particular ethnic-based organization. Although most of the women who were chosen here to be part of the study are influential in a way and having a rather high position in their women organization, that are having the responsibility beyond the ordinary member's duty and task, being leaders here do not mean occupying the highest post in their organizations but more of on their work experience working with their own people in the grassroots level and being involved in various Burma advocacy work within the movement.

1.8.2 Scope of the Study

There are a lot of *groups/organizations affiliated with Burma's pro-democracy movement*[10] and most of them are doing their work outside the country. Nonetheless, this study targets mainly the Thailand-based groups/organizations, particularly, the Burmese women's organizations under the WLB umbrella organization.

Field research was conducted in Chiang Mai given the physical presence of the WLB's headquarters there. WLB member-organizations have their representatives working directly within the WLB Secretariat. Some members based in other part of Thailand and those operating in the neighboring countries are occasionally visiting the headquarters for briefing/debriefing meetings on their attended regional and international conferences/workshops/seminars/ consultations, reporting, various trainings, and so on. Hence, as it also became in a way as a transit point for those who were not mainly based in Chiang Mai area, chances were greater in meeting the women leaders and activists in that area in terms of conducting the interviews.

[10] *See* Appendix C for the list of the groups/organizations/alliances affiliated with the pro-democracy movement, pp. 179 - 182.

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Actual field interview has been carried out between April and May 2007 in Thailand's Chiang Mai Province wherein six of the in-depth interviews and visits to some women organizations were made.

Secondary data was mainly garnered in three phases: the first half was conducted in Quezon City, Philippines, between January and March 2007; the second half was in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in time with the actual field interview; and in Bangkok, Thailand, during June to July 2007.

It might be that the insights and experiences imparted by the primary subjects in this study are not 'conclusive' and cannot be treated as 'shared' ones or as 'representative' of 'all' Burmese women's sentiments, let alone, the women activists in the pro-democracy movement. This research main objective is to hear the real voices of the women leader-activists; and, through their observations and direct experiences on the ground level, with the hope of sounding off how the majority of women they dealt with feel. All these with the aim of shedding light on the marginalization and discrimination against Burmese women in the political sphere. Thus, this became the main criteria for choosing the subjects—the women from Burma who have long history of political involvement and activism in the movement to share the processes they have undergone in earning the recognition of becoming leaders as well.

In providing some points for discussions, especially in highlighting arguments on the disputed claim of the existence of gender equality in Burma, this study resorted to some references which were quite old, specifically, Khaing's book for example that was published way back in 1984 (more than two decades ago). This is because of two major reasons: (1) the lack of material, especially written by a Burmese woman herself, that would more or less be a basis for evaluation; one that would serve as a comparison in the past or changes that have taken place in the societal status and roles of Burmese women of today; and, because of this also, (2) Khaing's work was the one widely used as reference by most authors/writers doing studies on women of Burma. This is also the main reference used by most of the Burmese authors in their works to justify their claim of the presence of gender parity in the country; most of them, pro-junta writers.

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Basically, this is a study attempting to present the gender issue as still an ongoing reality and being experienced/lived-through by majority of the women, may it be in the mainstream political sphere or even in the people's movements offering alternative politics. Although this study primarily examines the women's place in the present political reality in Burma with special focus on the pro-democracy movement, it does at times inevitably touches on the other spheres of participation and some older historical 'facts'. This is not only for discussion's sake but rather showing the difficulty to departmentalize areas of participation or to focus on just one sphere of participation in the society, where in fact, all spheres are indeed linked together.

The principles set forth by the CEDAW—especially with its understanding of the concepts surrounding the gender-based discrimination and equal participation as end aim—were the ones invoked as part of the guiding- framework of this research. As mentioned in the 'framework of the study' section, this approach on gender issue might be seen as not enough feminist agenda to really eradicate the inequality being experienced by the women in the society as a whole. Nevertheless, the fact that there is still no available better alternatives that could completely address this particular issue as a social issue/systematic inequality, the more that we need to make use of the available rights-based standards which in the long run, could also help us in devising important and positive changes.

Participation, though not always seen as a positive end, but, equipping women with the right tools like education and trainings as part of empowerment process would provide women greater opportunities and edge to soundly decide for themselves as informed subjects and real 'agencies' of their own.

1.8.3 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

On the concept of 'gender/s', for this study, it limits the use of the word as pertaining to the heterosexual male and female genders only. However, this does not in anyway imply that third sex like gays and lesbians do not exist, nor does it intend to discriminate genders outside the conventional understanding of heterosexual polarity.

As mentioned earlier, the Subjects were contacted and informed before hand about the research – on the general questions and the process of the interview as well.

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A series of correspondences (electronic mails and phone calls) took place before the actual interview dates/schedules were set as the interviewees were all busy bodies tending mainly to their organizational responsibilities. They all voluntarily agreed to be part of the research and to impart their valuable insights and experiences as women leaders in their organizations and as part of the pro-democracy movement as a whole. However, there were some ethical considerations that have been raised by them which this particular study responded to as well.

Most of the primary Subjects (five of them) expressed their concerns about confidentiality and requested the researcher to find ways to protect their identity. During the interviews, there were also some instances wherein most of the Subjects felt that what they have shared must not be put into writing as this research would eventually be for public use. Rationalization for this was the Subjects' expressed apprehension that exposed information could be easily accessed and be utilized against the movement by its detractors, especially those coming partial to the junta's side; and, some of their colleagues might get disappointed by them divulging some supposedly internal issues which could be labeled by some as another way of sabotaging their own movement, thus, would be creating disunity among their ranks.

First and foremost, the subjects' wishes were taken into consideration, although, the researcher haggled on some discussed points that were deemed important to be included and very much related to the research questions. Women leaders in the 12-member organizations of WLB are quite few and in order to address this particular consideration on protecting their identity, thus, maintaining their anonymity. This study would not be mentioning their actual names, or associating their ethnic background, the particular organization they belong to, and some personal information on the used pseudonyms. Each case study would be referred to with the corresponding cover-up Burmese names: Zaw (meaning 'Outstanding'), Zeya ('Success'), Kyaw ('Famous'), Khine ('Firm'), Ye ('Brave') and Win ('Bright'). Pseudonyms were also used to conceal the real names of the people with whom the interviewees made direct references to in some occasions.

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1.9 Significance of the Study

On the realm of the academic world, this research serves as a contribution in the general study covering gender/women issue and the social/people's movements. Given the fact that not much studies are focusing on the gender-based discrimination within these movements, let alone in Burma setting, this study is an attempt to help fill in that void. This research could also be taken as a critical assessment on how Burma's pro-democracy movement fair with its application of the Women Convention internally. It could give greater insights and can also be viewed as part of the process of constructive criticism mostly needed by groups/organizations and the various movements advancing human rights and democracy as a whole.

In a more theoretical level, especially with the usage of feminism as a framework, this study is one piece of evidence that the rights-based liberal approach in particular or even the feminism project as a whole, is not an 'outmoded' thought amidst the various social and political transformations taking place in the contemporary times. Arguments on changing gender relations or even the perception that feminism itself is inherently transformative in nature – for example, the debates on 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', discussion of these two concepts as applied to women and so on—do not however necessarily showing us the door to its obsolete-ness. There are, of course, changes on certain feminist notions on concepts and all like some contemporary feminists even seemed to lost the 'objective' of transformation/change that the older feminists were strongly advocating for before. These can all be said as part of the internal debates in feminism but it does affect the applicability of the feminist political thoughts into practice. For the time being, however, finding ways to combat/address the continuing issue on gender-based discrimination must be importantly put into consideration as it is indeed an issue right now and the voices of the women in this study are the living proofs to that. In addition, by using feminism as a tool in examining discrimination against certain 'segment' of a population (the Burmese women activists) in contemporary life also inevitably became an examination of feminism's relevance in the society itself. The applicability of the feminist thoughts and ideas, at least, for this study, surmounts the question on its obsoleteness.

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1.10 Organization of the Thesis

This research is divided into six different sections. It is structured in a way that it responds to the research questions/objectives per chapter. In the process, merging the primary and secondary data in answering the issues posed in each chapter.

Chapter one, which is the current chapter, introduces a general view of the phenomenon we are looking at, a backdrop of the processes involved and the whole direction of the study. It provides a short background discussion in understanding the choice of the research topic itself and the focus of the research that is—the depth of the topic which includes the choice of the research subject, the framework used and the context of the problem posed. This first chapter composes the research questions and objectives and the research methodology as well before proceeding to the in-depth discussions in response to the set research questions and objectives.

Chapter two dwells on the various perspectives drawn from the written published narratives on gender issue in Burma setting. It also expounds on the different sets of arguments proposing the 'uniqueness' of Burmese women's role in the society; the assertion of women's relative equality with men; and, another one which challenges the latter. The inter-connectedness of the various spheres in the society, may it be categorized as public or private spheres, is also shown in this chapter; thus, in turn, revealing that various human/women rights are indeed inter-linked as well.

Chapter three mainly defines the prevalence of the marginalization/ discrimination against Burmese women in general and the Burmese women activists in particular on the area of political sphere of societal participation. Although, the real voices of women gathered from the field research are presented along with the supporting secondary data in all the chapters, the concentration of data in the third chapter composed mainly of the first-hand information garnered directly from the research subjects.

The fourth chapter focuses in rooting-out the key factors leading to the Burmese women's marginalization/discrimination in the political sphere. It fosters a discussion on the interconnection between cultural/traditional beliefs and the political reality in Burma for the continued building up of the gender-based discrimination in

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Burma society. This section also elaborates how these factors affect the women activists and the movement's over-all call for democratic change.

Chapter five illustrates the specific initiatives of the Burmese women activists and the achievements made by the women's organizations/pro-democracy movement as a whole, that is, in terms of the aim of attaining a gender-balanced representation in the decision-making and leadership positions within their ranks. This provides a clear description of the Burmese women organizations' work in relation to addressing the gender issue and how their women agenda and set priorities being met in the movement.

The last chapter is the Conclusion which is mainly a summary presentation of the important points discussed from the previous chapters, a review of the results drawn from the analyzed data and putting forward some ideas on how to further realize the principle of substantive equality, not only for the Burmese women activists but for all the women struggling for their inclusion and participation in the political sphere.

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CHAPTER II
"SEX/GENDER ISSUE IN A NUTSHELL": FOCUS ON WOMEN OF BURMA

Burma's history is probably one whole narrative full of complex issues relating to domination. For, domination, as Fields (2003) says, confers benefits to the dominators, that may be economic, political or the mere psychic satisfaction of controlling the fate of others (*see* Fields, 2003:81); it fits Burma's experience as one perfect example. Although, talking about human rights in a broader sense, he identified bases for group domination—discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, race, language, nationality, sexual orientation, physical condition, mental or psychological state, class standing or work situation and so on. Fields grouped these bases into three categories: those where there are physical, biological or psychological differences that are visibly seen fall in the first categorization[10]; the second one is those that are based mostly on cultural differences; and the last category, those that are based on nationalist aspirations. And as he stresses, these three categories do overlap each other and often flow into each other in consecutive order (*see* Fields, 2003:104).

On Burma's case, all these forms of discrimination seem to be present and simultaneously existing at the same time. And, if we focus on the situation of the majority of Burmese women alone, the multiplicity and intersectionality of these forms of discrimination (intersectional discrimination: various forms of discrimination at the same time—based on race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, religion, disability, citizenship, health status) manifest clearly. Women experience the cross-cutting discrimination in a unique way just by being identified as female sex/gender. Often times, the denial of one rights leading to the denial of another is not just an exclusive

[10] One example of the 'difference' that Fields is arguing is the 'gender', for physical and biological difference is present here—women and men's difference in terms of genitalia and general body frame. To read further on the physical, biological or physiological differences as bases for group domination and rights, s*ee*, Fields, A. Belden. 2003. Rethinking Human Rights for the New Millennium. New York/Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 104-110.

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circumstance in women's case. For one, women's political participation which could be categorized as part of the civil and political rights (CPR) is actually very much connected to the issues on women's rights to education, economic/employment, mobility and so on which are all under the economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). This confirms the inter-relatedness of rights as well.

'Gender', an issue that has been widely recognized even by the UN system as the highest international body, cross-cuts all these elements of systematized discrimination. This is also the rationalization behind the establishment of the CEDAW as a binding instrument for all the State-parties to adhere to the principle of non-discrimination that basically aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the promotion of substantive equality. States have the main responsibility to promote equality through all appropriate means in all fields—political, economic, social and cultural—to ensure full development and advancement of women. The Burmese military junta is a signatory to this and as one posing as the 'legitimate' government, it has the primary obligation to respect, protect and uphold the rights of women within its territory. However, with the present political turmoil in Burma (wherein the junta is the law in itself—railroading any constitution, interpreting laws and policies that will satisfy the generals' whims) with human rights violations rampantly committed by men-in-uniforms running the country's affairs, resolving the long-standing gender issue has taken the back seat.

Given that the military State's continuous denial of any gender inequality happening in the country and 'women/gender issue' being treated by the opposition movement as not a priority issue compared to the bigger Burma democratization/regime change and ethnic issues; there seems to be a bleak prospect for women activists to press for the same level of concern on gender issue and to pursue the struggle for gender parity given this political backdrop. Only after the Shan women successfully published a report on 'rape issue' and other sexual violations committed by the *Tatmadaw* against the ethnic women that the women issue gained precedence.[11] Systematic violations on the rights of the women have been exposed,

[11] In 2002, the 'License to Rape' report was released by The Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) and Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). The report exposed the use of rape as a military strategy in Burma (particularly in the Shan State) which earned the SPDC another round of condemnation from

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verified and replicated through the other reports that followed which were made by various ethnic women groups/organizations in Burma. The 'rape issue' was also in a way became one of the 'winning-card' issues used by the opposition movement in naming-and-shaming the generals, beefing-up their various advocacies on democratization and the push for regime change. With the issue being widely recognized and garnering support from the human rights supporters in the international community, the military government was again put on the spot and earning another round of condemnation from around the world. The junta's periodic reports to CEDAW were bombarded by criticisms with its continuous denial of the crimes against its women population and its failure to substantiate the supposedly State obligation to respect, protect and uphold the rights of women. The sexual abuses against the Burmese women are clear-cut examples of direct violations of women rights. This only shows how women, as female gender, are experiencing discrimination in a unique way. The rape of the ethnic minority women, the persecution of women political activists and continued house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are among the main take-off issues used in strengthening the campaigns and lobby efforts of the opposition movement which basically aims to expose the non-compliance of the military regime in terms of the adherence to the principles set by the

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the international community. Again, between 2002-2005, SWAN documented over 100 incidents of rape by soldiers of the Burmese military regime involving troops from 43 battalions in 21 townships. At least 30 per cent of these women were under 18 of age; 65 per cent were gang raped; 58 per cent were raped by ranking officers; 26 per cent were detained as sex slaves while 18 per cent were killed after being raped (some brutally tortured). In no cases were the perpetrators prosecuted. In 2004, the KWO released a new report entitled 'Shattering Silences' which contains 125 cases of sexual violence committed by the Burmese military troops in Karen State within 1988-2004). It shows that 40 per cent of those women were gang-raped while 28 per cent of the women raped were killed after being raped by the soldiers. Following this, in 2005, the Woman and Child Rights Project-Southern Burma and the Human Rights Foundation of Monland released report entitled 'Catwalk to the Barracks' exposing official conscription of 'comfort women' by Burma Army troops and other evidences of systemic sexual violence against the Mon women. The report covers the years 2002-2005 and documenting 50 women and girls between 14 and 50 years of age. To read more on the reports, *see,* (1) SHRF and the SWAN. May 2002. License to Rape—The Burmese Military Regime's use of sexual violence in the on-going war in Shan State, Burma. Chiang Mai: SHRF and SWAN; (2) Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). September 2004a. Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) Newsletter #5. Chiang Mai: Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). pp. 4-5; (3) Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). September 2005. Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) Newsletter #6. Chiang Mai: Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). p.3.; (4) Women and Child Rights Project (WCRP), Southern Burma and Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), Burma. July 2005. Catwalk to the Barracks—Conscription of women for sexual slavery and other practices of sexual violence by troops of the Burmese military regime in Mon areas. Bangkok: WCRP and HURFOM.

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CEDAW and all the related international standards on human rights. Part of it also is to reveal how the illegitimate regime marginalize and discriminate against the Burmese women in the political sphere of participation.

On the other hand, the opposition movement is also faced by the same gender issue within its own backyard as the women activists and some enlightened male political activists within their own ranks are calling for women's greater representation and equal participation, particularly, in the political decision-making and leadership positions.

2.1 Various Perspectives on 'Women/Gender' Issue in Burma History

Some Burmese historians claimed that there were specific evidences showing women's active participation in the various spheres in Burma society, especially, in the areas of economic and household. This might be seen by some as a clear example that Burmese women in the past have had, in a way, early on thawed the line on the issue between the public/private spheres of participation and won the struggle in narrowing down these separate areas of participation; much earlier than any advance democracies in the West and countries elsewhere. While in the West, such was not a reality before and only in the recent past (especially in the early 1960s and 70s) that the clear call by the early western feminists—to tear down the public/private divide of participation which inhibits women in general to participate in the public realm of participation in society—became evident. More interesting to note is that this has been carried out at that time without the existence of a feminist or women's movement that we know of today.

In Burma's history, which will push us back as early as 11th century, especially during the times when the ethnic states were still living autonomously with their own monarchies, some writers argued that there were a handful of evidences of women rulers reigning as queens and as head chiefs in the communities and villages. Women could dispose their properties as they wish as shown by a number of inscriptions in the Burmese Buddhist temples of women donating large sum of property, women as having relative independence and equal status with men, and so on. But of course, these could also be counted as exceptional instances. Most of these few women who

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were lucky enough to live through the so-called independence and high status in Burma society gained such 'respect' because of the opportunity they have being members of the elitist or middle-class families and their connections with the powerful men in their lives. In short, it did not however reflect the experiences of the majority of women. Burmese women were, and are still, marginalized and being discriminated at, and as a main focus of this study, in the political realm of participation. This reality is quite obvious with the absence or the very minimal number of women in the political field and the same old role expected of them to perform. Just like in the past and even at present time, the political field is often seen as the men's turf in Burma society.

Scouring-through important segments in Burma's political history and granting us to hear the real voices of the Burmese women—as grassroot-members of their communities, as political activists and as women/female gender—this chapter will help provide a picture of the gender issue pervading not only in the mainstream political arena but even in the movement offering alternative politics as well. In a more focused sense, the presentation of the women's actual role in the society, specifically, as 'female gender political agents' reveals their marginalized status in the leadership and decision-making positions, thus, showing that the gender-based discrimination still prevails and remains to be an issue of concern even in the contemporary times.

Burmese women's involvements in other various areas of participation—in the household/family, the economic, cultural spheres—are also examined in this chapter in order to understand better how the whole system of male-domination is well-ingrained in the society. It particularly shows how the socio-cultural and economic factors often indirectly (or directly) contribute and serve to keep Burmese women out of the political arena. Aside from giving a lucid illustration of the 'gender' factor in Burma society, especially in the political sphere, this chapter exposes the link between the cultural/traditional beliefs and the bigger political context in Burma which in turn could be factored-in for the strengthening of the male-power pervaded Burma society.

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2.1.1 "No Gender Inequality at All"—Pro-Junta

Pro-SPDC Burmese writers and academics like Kyaw Win (2007), Daw Khin Aye Win (2007), Khin Aye (2007), Daw Myint Kyi (2007), Daw Than Nwe (2007), Ma Tin Win (2007) and Daw Thein Thein Nyunt (2007)[12] chorused in defending the claim of Burmese women's supposed equal status with their men counterpart and women's equal participation in all sphere of society as well. They all presented their papers at a junta-sponsored Women's Day Celebration in July 2007 supporting this argument of gender equality in Burma society which they maintained to be a reality in the past and even at present times.[13] In the late 80s, Matsui (1987), a Japanese writer who visited Burma made one whole chapter in her book which in essence supports the claim of Burmese women enjoying high status in Burma society (*see* Matsui, 1987:103-111). Although, spent 'so little time' in Burma as mentioned in her chronicle (she stayed there only for two weeks), she rationalized her claim on the grounds that 'egalitarian thinking' is unique to Burma and attributing it also to Burmese Buddhism. Even so, Matsui did, at one point, cited Buddhist ideology as a barrier from total equality, she still concluded that the problem which Burmese women were facing then was not one of sex discrimination, but how to improve the quality of their lives in general (Matsui, 1987:111). Although successfully identified some real women problems as stemming from economic and the Burmese Buddhism itself, the author failed to acknowledge and to critically examine the link of the issues as effects of the patriarchal nature of Burma society.

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[12] On the 3rd of July 2007, MWAF holds paper reading session as part of its celebration of the Myanmar Women's Day. All these works of the writers from the academe are essentially promoting the idea that Burmese traditions are generally upholding women's high status in the society. To read more on these papers, *see*, Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF). July 2007. MWAF Holds Paper Reading Session to Hail the Myanmar Women's Day [Internet]. Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF). Available from: < http://www. mwaf.org.mm/Activities/Paper%20Read/ Details.asp?id=233> [Accessed 10 July 2007].

[13] Alongside with the pro-junta's rhetoric on the said Burmese women's equality with men that exists since time immemorial; the SPDC took the stance of preserving the Burmese culture and traditions, although, they too, are the ones trying to erode the ethnic culture with the regime's various schemes toward 'Burmanization'.

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2.1.2 "Women, Not Much into Politics But Have High Societal Status": Taking Pride on Women's Place in Society

Meanwhile, accepting the fact that Burmese women's political participation is lacking, authors like Khaing (1984) argued that Burmese women have still relatively 'higher' status compared to that of the women in other countries in the world. For Khaing, it might be true that women's participation in politics is lacking but not so in the other spheres of participation in Burma society. Khaing (1984:26) maintained that customary laws in Burma ensure for women a position suitable to present-day concepts of equality and that Burmese women found their traditional roles and customary law as reasonably comfortable. Moreover, it is interesting to note Khaing's remarks that Burmese women consider the feminists 'Lib Movement' unnecessary because,

> For centuries they have enjoyed, in sound old traditions, most of the rights won by such movements elsewhere in recent times. At the same time they have no doubt, even when highly placed in their professions, of their total responsibility for cooking, serving, and cleaning up without help from the men (*quoted in* Belak, 2002:i).

In defense to the fact that Burmese women are marginalized in the political sphere of participation, she argued that even if women stayed away from public sphere of participation, particularly, in the political and administrative areas,

> When times have been critical and the need has risen, they will act, organize and associate themselves—something which they do only with religious or national need as inspiration (Khaing, 1984:159).

Probably, as a writer who could easily fall into the trap of romanticizing her observations and experiences as an upper middle-class city-dweller Burman woman, Khaing might mistakenly taken her lived-through life as resounding the experiences of the majority of the Burmese women. She also made it appear that women have a wide-range of choices and opportunities provided by the society; but, despite all this,

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women happily singled-out choosing their subordinate status with men—such as, to take full responsibility of the domestic chores in the family, serving their husbands and other men in their own families as their masters; and, embracing all those traditional practices and societal norms which support the gender-based inequality.

2.1.3 "Women Having Unique and Equitable Status with Men, But, Yes, Sexual Inequalities Exist"

Taking from Than Than Nwe's (2003) perspective who claimed she'd been using a post-modern framework in her research, she argued that Burmese women have a very unique status and for a certain extent, Burmese women hold equitable positions with men throughout Burma's history. She illustrated what she called the high degree of equality and independence that Burmese women enjoyed by citing some examples such as the women's considerable influence in domestic life, how women enjoy the cradle-to-grave names[14] their parents chose for them without changing it when they got married and the way women were legally and socially unrestricted to participate as entrepreneurs and professionals in the economic and political arenas (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:4-7:10). On the contrary, she also puts forward the idea that gender inequality exists in all areas of societal participation saying that,

> Sexual inequalities are found in the diverse spheres ranging from economic activity to political participation to the domestic sphere (Than Than Nwe, 2003:4).

> Male chauvinism is the rule rather than the exception (Than Than Nwe, 2003:7).

She figured that the greatest inequality and that one which is virtually impossible to surmount was in the area of Burmese Buddhist life favoring men; where women had been and continued to be in a subordinate position over which women have little real power to effect change (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:10-11). The author also criticized the Theravada Buddhism's influence on gender divisions and stressed the way these

[14] Most of the Burmese people only have first names which they carry until they die. The mother's name is also usually traceable from the names of their children.

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divisions are expressed and the boundaries defined in private and public spaces (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:1). This led her to conclude that:

> Women's space then is imposed by society (male), but accepted by females without question (Than Than Nwe, 2003:8).

In a way, this was also in line with Khaing's (1984) argument mentioned earlier on Burmese women embracing and loving their traditional roles.

At one point, Than Than Nwe (2003) seems to be a little bit confused with her argument emphasizing the Burmese women's high status and gender parity in the society in one hand, but in another, citing strong evidence of gender-specific cultural practices that undermine this apparent equality which can be traced back from Buddhism. Also, in the end, after giving sharp criticism on how 'gendered' the spaces are and the prevalence of the male-power in Burma society, she still strangely concluded that Burmese women are indeed holding equitable positions in the society. With her work, it seems that the concept of 'uniqueness' is being understood as hinged in just celebrating all the positive points alone of the idea of simply being 'different'. It does not dwell much on understanding the link/s between the individual and the reality outside her/himself; avoiding comparisons between genders and evades making sweeping generalization/s that could inevitably leads to a 'trap' of assessing ones situation against what is perceived as the 'standards'.

2.1.4 "Relatively Equal Status of Women with Men Might be a Historical Truth but Not in Present Burma"—The Anti-Junta Viewpoint

Tinzar Lwyn (1994), Mills (2000) and Smith (2002b) also mentioned in their works about the relatively equal status of Burmese women and men and somehow support the claim of this reminiscent past. However, the two authors, Mills (2000) and Smith (2002b), suggested that this reality does not hold true anymore in the present Burmese society ruled by the military junta. Smith (2002b) mentioned in his report that 'in general, women are regarded as having equal status with men', though, he did not substantiate much on this topic and in what terms and to what extent does 'equal

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status' mean. He discussed more on the human costs of the regime's economic and political mismanagement highlighting the issues of trafficking of women and girls, rape and so forth (*see* Smith, 2002b:27).

As with Mills (2000), she pointed out that there were documentary evidences, such as a number of temple inscriptions and chronicles within the 11th through 13th centuries, describing the high degree of freedom and economic independence of the women of Burma. Burmese women's freedom and independence during those eras were comparably higher even to those European women or the women in any more advanced States in the 19th or 20th century (*see* Mills, 2000:267-268). But then, despite this relative equality of Burmese women with the Burmese men in the area of economic and household sphere of society, their social roles and status were greatly affected when the military started ruling the country in 1962, hence, curtailing these customary independence and status (*see* Mills, 2000:265).

While citing commentaries that gives reference to numerous sources proving that Burmese women in some golden age of the past enjoyed relatively higher status and recognition than their women counterpart in other neighboring countries, Belak (2002) maintained that those women who were boasting of this 'reality' of women's high status, recognition and women's advancement in Burma society reflect only the experiences of educated middle and upper class urban elites and these were also often derived from a rather 'conservative male attitude of what constitutes status'—that is, within the parameters of the roles mapped out for them by their cultures, religions and the government. (*see* Belak 2002:33).

Having a much stronger stance, ALTSEAN-Burma (1997b) stressed that, throughout Burma's history, women have faced discrimination in their daily lives (*see* ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997b:1). During the past successive Burmese dynasties, the primary task of women has been to fulfill the wishes of men; women were oppressed then and they were treated as men's property (*see* ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997b:4).

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2.1.5 A Quick Glance on the Notion of the 'Private' – 'Public' Divide

The status as well as the opportunities the Burmese society offered Burmese women did not equal of that being enjoyed by their male counterpart (*see* ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997b:1). Moreover, in order to fit in the description of a 'good woman',

> A woman has to respect her son as Master and her husband as God (ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997b:1).

This traditional 'tasking' assigned to women by the society in general continues even at present time as Burmese girls are being honed by their parents to behave in a femininely way and respect men as their superiors.

Contrary to the notion that women rule the private sphere or the domestic realm of the family while men rule the public arena, this is one example which essentially shows that even the so-called 'private sphere' or the 'domestic realm' cannot be assumed as 'women's turf' or uplifting women's status. The family, being the basic institution in the society and usually signifies the private sphere of participation, is shown here as a machinery of the system that makes sure of the continuance of the male-power pervaded society.

Focusing on the political participation, aside from Than Than Nwe (2003)—having her post-modern point of view and a little bit unstable position on how to really look at the gender issue—along with the rest of the pro-SPDC writers; all authors were united in stressing the point that Burmese women throughout Burma's history were having a marginalized status in the public political sphere. Burmese women enjoying a relatively high status in Burma society in the past eras is a contentious issue. In addition, even if it did at one point exist in Burma history, what is significant now is the reality that it is non-existent, especially in the political sphere where marginalization and discrimination against women is most evident. And talking about women/gender-based issue in the political arena, this reality does not only hold true in the mainstream ('male-stream') politics but taking place in the alternative politics of the opposition movement as well.

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2.2 "Setting the Record Straight": Some Insights on the Commonly Cited Work on Burmese Women History

Talking about Burmese women history, the Burmese writer Mimi Khaing's published book is one of the prominent works that are commonly used and quoted even by contemporary writers. Khaing's (1984) work is somehow treated as a real blueprint of the general situation of the women in Burma, both by pro- and anti-junta writers. Some make use of her work to describe the historical past while some utilize it to justify the present condition of women based on their personal understanding and political leaning. In this regard, this study calls for a critical examination of her work which proved to be valuable in shedding light to some blurred analytical findings Khaing has made.

In defense of the existence of gender equality in Burma, Khaing (1984) maintains that: "Customary laws in Burma ensure for women a position suitable to present-day concepts of equality," (Khaing, 1984:26). Interestingly, at a certain point, she also accepted the existence of male dominance in Burma society but she made the idea of dominance a positive thing saying that: "The concept of male dominance is still accepted and often eagerly embraced by women," (Khaing, 1984:16). She furthered that sex/gender roles were totally accepted and with the woman as house manager, this very acceptance was, in a sense, a statement of equality in which for every male participation, there must be a corresponding female participation and vice versa (*see* Khaing, 1984:59).

As evidently seen here, this kind of rationalization can be traced back from the Burmese cultural values and traditional beliefs derived mainly from their austere belief in their religion—the Theravada Buddhism:

> Spiritually, he is her senior and tradition tells her to give recognition to this fact… A man has this, but a woman has more worldly satisfactions: management of house, control of budget and diversion of savings to jewelry, closeness to children, awareness of details, close living with one's own blood relations after marriage (Khaing *quoted in* Belak, 2002:i).

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As such reality of male-domination—which in fact retarding women's development and impeding their involvement in all spheres of participation—is obviously present in Burma society, Khaing still clung to the idea that even as Buddhism dictates that, women can never in any way equal a man's potentiality to achieve detachment as it is still every Burmese woman's aim to become a wife and the deepest pleasure of bearing child. She maintained that, "Burmese women found their traditional roles and the customary law as reasonably comfortable," (Khaing, 1984:26).

With these downright pronouncements, three important insights were brought to light here (not necessarily in order of significance):

First, it became clearer here how authors like Khaing generally see and understand narrowly the word or the idea of 'equality' in general or 'equal participation' in particular. Although she claimed that Burmese women are lavishing equal status with their men counterpart for long time that is comparable to the present concept of equality, it was evidently far from how the CEDAW—as an international anti-discrimination instrument and serving as a benchmark for women's rights—defines it from a rights perspective. Surely, everyone has the right to voice out their opinion/perspective on things and on any subject matter; however, when it comes to concepts related to respecting, protecting and upholding human rights/women rights, there are international yardsticks which serve as minimum standards that must be followed. Given for instance that Burmese women are indeed experiencing 'relatively equal status' with Burmese men in comparison with the condition/situation of female gender in other countries, this claim is not enough rationalization to suppose that this particular notion of equality that Khaing was declaring actually comply with and sits well with the concept of equality set forth by the human rights standards.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, Khaing's work is often cited by people doing studies on Burmese women. Her book was published more than two decades ago but her depiction of the situation of women then is still being used as a present-day reality of the Burmese women's condition of today. Contemporary pro-junta Burmese writers have been using it as reference on their campaign/propaganda countering women activists' gender discrimination allegations in Burma society, especially those violations committed directly by the military government and also to prove that there

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is gender inequality in Burmese society. Quoting somebody's work is not a problem at all as the content and the thoughts conveyed by the author's work must also be analyzed by one who is quoting it (or even the readers reading it). But, what makes it alarming is that Khaing's work has not been challenged and almost all of what she wrote was entirely taken as if it is an absolute truth in terms of the situation of the Burmese women. Being a Burman nationalist as well and taking pride on the 'Burmese way', Khaing was always referring to the 'uniqueness' of Burmese culture and traditions. The idea of a culture being unique appeals and is like a major boost to the nationalist sentiments of most of the Burmese people and this could also be one of the reasons why Khaing's study on Burmese women was not challenged or questioned in any way.

The way Khaing wrote the Burmese women's history and their social condition made it appear as if the 'inequality' in sex/gender roles is an outright chosen path of the entire women population—that, by conforming to the gender-based norms, they find most satisfaction and fulfillment in life. This very notion creating a 'make-believe' existence of women's power of choice appeals to some contemporary authors as well. Many of what Khaing wrote were even quoted by Than Than Nwe (2003) who herself labeled her work as one using post-modern feminism framework exploring Burma society's gendered spaces (spatial) and factors contributing to it. Khaing claimed in many instances that her work is history-based; in many instances too that history itself could prove her wrong. Conformity to the status quo could not be classified as an outright 'choice' or having the same weight as the 'informed-choice', especially on the part of the unjustly treated population, and in this case, the women sex/gender.

Third point, if at all, conforming to the normative system could be categorized as women's choice, expressing their will as individual agency of their own; it must also be always taken into account the influence of the social environment/bigger society where individuals are honed as well. Again, applying Scott's (1996) line of thought in explaining/understanding the notion of individual 'agency', that it must be understood in terms of the discursive processes—meaning the epistemologies, institutions and practices—that produces the political subjects, making the individual

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agency possible in a condition wherein it is forbidden or denied (*see* Scott, 1996:16). Short of saying, weighing the situation outside ones condition or the reality outside oneself or the individual/subject should always be taken into account as it is one of the main ingredients of the making of 'individual agency' as well. This also explains why different individuals might see things differently and respond in different ways or on different levels on certain situations as the process of interaction with the outside reality molding their 'beings' continue.

2.3 Gender and the Political Stalemate

From the point of view of the present military regime, it does not see women as having separate problems in Burma society. This is understandable for the SPDC always has the pronouncement that there is gender equality in the country which is being practiced for centuries. In denial of what is really happening on the ground, Khin Nyunt remarks that "women in Burma faced no restrictions, enjoying equal status and equal rights," (*cited in* Mills, 2000:277). The SPDC is even all praise to the traditional and customary beliefs and practices which in essence inhibit women to have an equal status with their male counterpart.

Going back to the popular perception on gender roles, as Khaing (1984:178) explains, 'the official trade involving entry upon entry and check after check through papers is mostly the work of salaried Burmese men while small time trade dealings which are being done in cash are mostly the job of Burmese women in the quick direct trade in the bazaar'. As we can see, many centuries had passed but this arrangement still holds true in Burma setting. Anyhow, Khaing (1984:179) also admits that Burmese women's involvement in trade is basically hinged on the premise that, "if money does not stretch enough from the man's regular earning, the wife-cashier must do something to mend the whole." While her argument is based on the idea that she wanted to prove Burmese women's experience is quite peculiar and different from that of the Western women, especially on the concept of 'wife being financially responsible'; her example has also showed the other side of the coin. It leads to the fact that, generally, it is being perceived in the Burma society that important 'big-time

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dealings' are for men while 'small-time' business affairs and the nitty-gritty part of trading are all left for the women to handle.

Translating it analogously to the public/private divides in the bigger society, big responsibilities in the 'public sphere' is for men to handle while matters in the small confines of the 'private sphere' is for the women to take on; though in the household, big and important decisions is still usually being done by the men in the house. In summary, planning and decision-making as men's responsibility, all the 'dirty' works of implementation as women's duty; 'important' matters for men to get involved in, 'mundane' tasks for women; important, valuable, crucial and vital dealings of great magnitude for men while trivial, petty, small time insignificant tasks for women; tough and mighty men taking charge, weak, subordinate women as followers; and so forth. Having mentioned these two opposite perceived roles of women and men as a creeping truth pervading all sphere of participation in Burma society, it leads to the view that there is a big connection between gender inequality and the seemingly unending political conflict in Burma of today. Three authors share their views in understanding Burma's political stalemate and the probable ways to move it forward.

2.3.1 Burma's Political Stalemate in the Context of Buddhism, Authoritarian Rule and Cultural Values

Putting the present political stalemate in the context of Burmese Buddhism, Houtman (1999:291) argues that, "The contemporary impasse may not only by one of different political ideologies and visions, but, in the Burmese context, a divergence between democratic *awza* and military *ana* which, after four decades of military government, will also need to be reconciled." In this argument by the author, the SPDC is said to possess the Buddhist concept *ana* which basically means 'authority/power'; while, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD has earned by their words and deed the *awza* or 'influence'. As cited earlier, Spiro (*in* Mills, 2000: 269) maintains that the 'exercise of *awza* is a male prerogative'[15] These two different

[15] Also, *see* sub-topic, 'The Opium of the People': The Idea of *'Hpon'* in Religious Beliefs, under Chapter 4.

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Buddhist concepts is very much interlink with the present struggle between the SPDC and Aung San Suu Kyi/NLD, thus, needed to be resolved.

With Smith (2002a:291), however, he stresses the point that there are three scenarios that can be put forward for change when it comes to discussing the political impasse. First one is the breakdown that leads to an uprising; second scenario is dialogue, which is the preferred solution of most; or, the third one, an incremental process of both development and reform, where political transition is achieved in the longer term. With all these three scenarios, he maintains that the armed forces are likely to remain principally involved. Smith (2002a:271) also puts forward the view that the present political crisis in essence did not begin in 1988, for, both in the national and military politics, a historical continuity can be seen. As he argues, understanding the modern time political impasse will lead one to revisit Burma's royal past when traditional Burmese state was strongly authoritarian in nature (also, *see* Smith, 2002a:270-271).

As with Mills (2000:286-287), her point is more on the idea that calls for 'reassessment of the fundamental cultural values' of Burmese society in order to provide a new scope for women in Burma. She advances that the current climate merely entrenches asinine male arrogance. Though, more Burmese men and women alike are coming to realize that both sexes/genders must contribute 'equally' to the shaping of their country's future; the fact still remains that "until the narrow male military culture…no longer dominates and distorts Burmese society the opportunity for this to occur in the near future seems remote," (Mills, 2000:287).

From all these three authors' perspectives, the analysis that can be derived is that the continuity (from the past and up to the present) of military authoritarianism and of 'male-power' pervaded culture and religion falls under the unresolved issue of domination or the continuance of the imbalanced power relationships in Burma and that this process of domination runs parallel with the olden issue of women subordination in the society. It became a system ingrained in all spheres—rooted in the family as basic institution, inculcated in the culture, embedded in the economic and well-entrenched in the political sphere—of the Burma society. This idea of domination of the powerful over the inferior, which is grounded from the premise of

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the obvious physical difference, resulted to the clear marginalization and direct/indirect discrimination of the female gender throughout history. Just like what Fields (2003:81) says, "Domination usually manifests itself through a combination of raw force, complex institutional practices and ideological justifications in which the dominated 'other' is characterized as somehow inferior or deserving of domination while the dominator is deserving of the benefits."

Such manifestations of domination are all present in Burma case—the 'raw force' symbolized by the male-dominated military regime; the 'complex institutional practices' which are epitomized by the ongoing direct/indirect discrimination of women gender in almost all of the spheres of participation in the society; and, the 'ideological justifications' of the male domination over the female embodied by the Burmese Buddhism highlighting the spiritual *'hpon'* which affirms men's superiority—guiding the everyday lives of the Burmese people. Its influence on the lives of the ordinary people is very obvious because for many centuries, this social setting favoring men's superiority in the society appeared to be 'natural' and 'ordinary' for the majority of the Burmese population—men and women alike.

2.3.2 The Gender Aspect of the Political Impasse

For the military leaders and its minions, clutching to the twisted recollection of gender parity and Burmese women's 'overrated' high status in Burma society is mainly to substantiate the SPDC's present stance calling for national unity and upholding traditional values and customs. This also entails promoting the idea that the regime has high regard on women and that various human rights violations such as 'rape'[16] and other sexual abuses of the women by the *Tatmadaw* soldiers and officials are not happening in Burma at all.

[16] Even though 'rape' of women and girls targets women from the ethnic nationalities at war with the SPDC, the harrowing act clearly demonstrates a lack of respect for all women. In many cases, rape of women is intended to send a signal to the communities that the SPDC/Tatmadaw is more powerful than the ethnic minority people. It is also the way of the junta not only to terrify the potential victims but to leave the entire community feeling powerless and unable to protect their women and girls. See Women of Burma. June 2000b. Shadow Report [Internet]. Women of Burma. p. 30. Available from: <http://www.womenofburma.org/Report/B5_report.pdf> [Accessed 12 July 2006].

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The SPDC's position with regard to the political stalemate—national unification and national reconsolidation is the answer through the process of a 'disciplined' democracy. Anyone, any party, group or organizations who have dissenting views against the military regime are being labeled as the 'enemy of the State', hence, must 'voluntarily' give up their cause and return to the 'legal' fold of the regime. If not, they must face the consequence of being exterminated. In essence, the SPDC wanted everybody to think and follow the 'disciplined democracy' as the only path to achieve the aforementioned 'unity' and 'reconsolidation' gearing for Burma's development. As it is indeed no doubt at all that gender inequality in Burma runs from centuries back, the modern issue of ethnicity also added up which makes the situation more complex.

Talking in the World Conference against Racism, Naw Chai Mei Hua (WLB, 2001b) from the Karen State and a representative of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) argues that the military dominates every aspect of life in Burma and that the non-military members are facing multiple forms of discrimination. Countering SPDC's pronouncement on the high status enjoyed by the Burmese women and gender equality in Burma, she points that, "We ethnic women, who are always non-members of military, face multiple discrimination because of gender and ethnicity…The root-cause of this multiple discrimination is half-a-century long civil war resulted from ethno-political conflict and militarization in Burma," (*quoted in* WLB, 2001b). She furthers that Tatmadaw soldiers commit sexual violence against ethnic women—the most obvious form of discrimination—with impunity. In the CEDAW Shadow Report by WLB (Women of Burma, 2000a:38), it is confirming the fact that Burmese women, especially in the conflict areas, are 'doubly and in some cases triply disadvantaged' because of the view that gender is destiny, thus, supporting the traditional stereotypes; second, women are disadvantaged by location as they are exposed to the myriad dangers by mere living in war zone areas; and, thirdly, women are being disadvantaged by their ethnicity as SPDC is targeting deliberately the ethnic minorities areas with its terrorizing *'Four-Cuts' policy*[17], forced labor, land confiscation and

[17] The SPDC's *'Four-Cuts'* policy, also known as the 'Four Deprivations' Strategy, is mainly to deprive the resistance groups of food, funds, recruits and information. This has been one of the main culprits why villagers are being uprooted from home, thus, leaving them helpless and in dire situation.

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extortion practices. This claim is also supported by other various reports, statements and media releases by the WLB with an aim to expose the real situation the women from Burma are experiencing (*see*, Women of Burma, n.d.b; Women of Burma, n.d.c; Women of Burma 2000a; Women of Burma, 2000b; Women of Burma, 2002; WLB, 2001a; WLB, 2001b; WLB, 2002; WLB, 2004; WLB, 2005). WLB pointed out that,

> The State must demonstrate a commitment to fundamental human rights for women before women can hope to advance. Effective work towards the genuine empowerment of women is not possible under the current political conditions in Burma (Women of Burma, 2000a:4).

Furthermore, it calls on the SPDC to put a stop on the armed conflict and engage in the tri-partite dialogue (with the legitimately elected government in 1990 elections and the ethnic groups) saying that,

> Until such time, appropriate measures to address women's fundamental health, educational and economic needs will be empty gesture (Women of Burma, 2000a:4).

In addition, with the WLB's 2005 report, it underscored the military rule as the key factor obstructing women and girls from enjoying their fundamental rights as humans, thus, proposing that 'only genuine political change and the restoration of the rule of law in Burma can guarantee the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls in Burma' (*see* WLB, 2005:27).

2.3.3 Political Stalemate and the Absence of a Gender Balanced Representation Impeding Women's Progress

The political impasse is one of the key factors hindering Burmese women's genuine participation and advancement in the political sphere. Resolution of this political issue in Burma goes hand-in-hand with Burmese women's advancement. Equally important, the absence or the marginalized status of women's representation (both from the junta's side and from the opposition movement) in talks and dialogues

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to resolve the conflict issues—the ethnic and the democratization issues—is also tantamount to ignoring the women's voices and concerns. This problem can be rooted-out from the wrong perception on women's worth—both by men and women—which basically conforms to the traditional idea on women as not fit to be in politics; more so, in the decision-making and leadership posts.

To emphasize this link, Belak (2002:280) and Aung Naing Oo (2004) argue that the ongoing Burma conflict is one of the greatest obstacles in women's path to political equality and that peaceful settlements are paramount to the advancement of women's political presence. With the presence of discrimination that prevents women from reaching the higher echelons of central government or even in the opposition politics, women for the most part have not been included in cease-fire talks or in any political dialogue. In cease-fire talks with the various ethnic minority groups for example, Belak (2002) argues that the lack of female presence at such crucial moments is indicative that women's concerns may not be properly addressed and that the problems that existed previously will be carried over into the cease-fire period and beyond (*see* Belak, 2002:80). In some instances, Aung Naing Oo (2004) cited the fact that the political organizations in the pro-democracy movement also carry the traditional perception on women believing that 'women's groups do not have a legitimate need to concern themselves with negotiations' as they are only considered capable in areas such as education, health and relief work. Far from being in delegations for any political talks, often if not always, the women comrades along with the general public are being kept in the dark whenever talks, dialogues or any political negotiations are underway. Sometimes, only partial understanding of what was agreed upon in any of these negotiations is being provided for them.

Burmese women's calls always include the appeal for inclusion and genuine participation in the public political sphere. Their sentiment dwells on the importance of gender equality in resolving Burma's political stalemate as well. This is highlighted by Debbie Stothard, a veteran human rights activist on Burma, saying that,

> Gender equality is part of democracy, and women's rights are human rights. This must be part of the future Burma that we are working towards (*quoted in* ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997a).

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CHAPTER III
"AND THE WOMEN HAVE SPOKEN": OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Opposing most of Khaing (1984) and the pro-junta writers' claims of women's relative high social status and gender parity in Burma, there are Burmese women leader-activists who think and feel uncomfortable with such blundering assertions on their supposed lived-through reality. Just like a round peg in a square hole, most of the description made by the Burmese author could not simply fit their observations on women's condition in the grassroot-community levels and even the concrete experiences of the women activists themselves. Women subordinate status to men and other negative sex/gender-based stereotypes were voiced out by the Burmese women leader-activists showing the prevalence of sex/gender-issue within Burma society as a whole, and, in the pro-democracy movement, in particular. It shows that discrimination against women is still very much evident in their everyday lives. The unequal treatment between boys and girls or men and women in terms of societal opportunities in making/helping individual personal advancement to achieve higher social status in society is an undeniable fact as well. Boys/men are given the priority over girls/women for most of the time.

It can also be said that SPDC's oppression against the Burmese people also brought some minor alterations on gender stereotypes. For instance, talking about the perceived gender roles in Burma society, there are small changes on how the new generations of girls/women see their roles in the family now. In contrast to the older generation of women's outright acceptance of the role bestowed to them by society, the younger generations tend to question such ideas of traditional beliefs and customary practices. In the migrant communities too in Thailand, these deeply rooted cultural, traditional and social norms, beliefs and prejudices, tend to frustrate women especially the young girls as they are caught in a cultural dilemma (*see* Won, 2000:32). But then, when it comes to actual terms, younger Burmese women end up

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still doing the traditional roles ascribed to female gender. However, within the male gender rank in general, very few enlightened men of the newer generation tend to perceive social roles as impediments to progress, thus, support the idea of a more gender-equal social environment.

Although gender alone can be said as not the only attribute which confers or reduces ones social status in Burma (*see* Belak, 2002:34), the influence of the long held perceived gender roles cannot be denied in shaping individual agency as well as people's relationships with each other. The other aspects that was identified by the women which can also affect ones social status were the following: monkhood, the age factor which is believed to go with acquiring wisdom, educational attainment, conformity to what is viewed as 'good behavior'; and, later on, the inclusion of acquiring wealth/money and association with secular power/connections (those in political power—those who have high governmental positions in the mainstream politics and those political leaders and decision-makers in the opposition movement). However, a critical examination on these stated factors would also lead us to the issue on gender as most of these are opportunities given by the society in preferential to the male sex/gender. Similar with the 'age' factor and acquisition and/or clinging to power/authority or the powerful in the society; these are also descriptive of patriarchal system operating in a society.

3.1 Traditional Beliefs and Cultural Practices Demeaning Burmese Women's Role/Worth in Various Spheres of Participation

Aside from the fact that the given examples by some authors advancing the idea of the so-called relatively 'high social status' and 'valued role' of Burmese women in the society in the past (or even at present) can be regarded as a contentious pieces of 'truth'; these are also in opposed from most of the Burmese people's everyday life. Living with the existing social norms, rituals, and the written evidences etched even in the Burmese proverbs and sayings which the people usually make references to gave it all.

One very basic example is the ordinary practice of having a separate *htamein* or clothesline for women's *longyi* or the skirt by which boys from their young age are being taught not to go under the women's *htamein* for their male-power will be

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lowered or diminished (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:8). Similarly, it also includes washing and drying of female and male clothing separately as not to pollute the males' with the dirty belongings of the females' for this will lessen men's power; the wife's belongings and even herself must not be 'physically' above the man's—like standing or sitting higher than the man for this will mean desecration of man's spiritual worth/power; when in public places, women should not work beside but behind her husband for he is the 'head spirit' of the family; women were expected to defer to men in public (*see*, Mills, 2000:268-269; Khaing, 1984:16), every night, wives are meant to pay respect to their husbands by bowing to them (*see* Belak, 2002:36) and the list could go on. A Burmese woman observed:

> Men lead the family, but we want to have the same level. We must pay respect to our husbands: when we eat, we cannot eat before our husbands. If women eat before men, their power will decrease. Even if they are out, we have to wait for them to return to eat! Why can't we put our clothes together on the line? We are told that if men cross under the laundry line, their power will decrease. We want to change these things. These are small changes that need to be made, but we need to change big things too (*Code CINT 127, quoted in* Belak, 2002:37).[18]

All these are hinged to the idea of '*hpon*' (see Chapter Four for further discussion on *hpon*).

There were also Burmese proverbs and sayings reflecting Burmese women's subordination with men in the society rather than showing women's independence, autonomy and high status in Burma's society. There was a Burmese proverb for example which listed a thief, the bough of a tree, a ruler and a 'woman among things not to be trusted' (*see* Mills, 2000:268). There were traditional sayings like,

> 'Husband is god, son is master'…'The hen's crow will never bring the dawn'…'A male dog is higher in status than a woman'…'A wife is ruined when separated

[18] The prefix '*CINT*' plus a number as shown above (e.g. *Code CINT* 127) is a code used by Belak with all its quoted interviews to protect the identity of their interviewees. Citing 'quotes' from this particular Report, this study simply copied those codes directly from the Report as direct references.

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> from her husband'…'A daughter in the family is the best slave' (Belak, 2002:33-34:36:41).

> Day will not break for the hen's cackle, only for the cock's crow (Mills, 2000:286-287).

These traditional cultural/social practices, proverbs and sayings are still very much alive in contemporary Burma society as people do not change much their old perspectives on sex/gender roles. This is also aside from the fact that major institutions—specially, the family as the basic institution, the cultural and political structures—in the country imbibed so much the patriarchal system while the system reinforced such gender-biased arrangement in those structures that it all become more difficult to break. When asked to give a general description in terms of sex/gender roles of the particular ethnic states they belong to, the women leader-activists responded in the same manner: "It is still a male-dominated society."

3.1.1 Traditional Roles Affecting All Ethnic Nationalities

Interviewees #1, #3 and #5 stressed that gender inequality is not confined within their ethnic minority group alone as this phenomenon is happening also in other ethnic groups within Burma—with other ethnic nationalities or even in the Burman majority ethnic group. The same gender issue is being faced not only by women in the mainstream society but also by women activists in the pro-democracy movement as male power/authority persists:

> Even in the workshops that we were conducting, the ethnic women are still saying the same thing about their traditional roles; I don't see any difference, that is in terms of the male-dominated society.…It's the same (Zaw).

> Many ethnic think that women should stay at the back...it is culture…Ethnic people (referring to the minority ethnic nationalities) have their own cultures—traditional, the women are at the back of the men; so, we need to fight by ourselves to break this gender issue. Actually, the Burmans also have their own traditional way,…but nowadays, I think they are more ahead than with any other ethnic women (Kyaw).

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> It is happening in the refugee camps and in the different communities…It is very strange for me….It is really traditional mind set, and it's really difficult to eliminate; it is still there," (Ye).

3.1.2 As Manifested in Religious Practices…

While many members of the country's non-Burman ethnic groups including many Karen, most Kachin, Chin, Karenni, Naga people, Rohingyas, 'Burmese' Muslims (of Indian descent), Hindus, Parsis, and others—are not Buddhist, an estimated 80-90% of Burma's population are Buddhist which explains why Buddhist thought is as constant a presence in the lives of Burmese people as the famed Buddhist temples that figure in the country's landscape (*see* Belak, 2002:34). Khaing (1984:vi) reiterated that Burmese people are happy and fun-loving despite the people's serious acceptance of the doctrines of Theravada Buddhism. This was in connection to the writer's desire to show that Burmese Buddhism was not that rigid or gender-insensitive at all. She highlighted that certain communities and religious festivities do allow an equal role for men and women, thus, strengthening her resolve that Burmese women do enjoy a certain level of equality with the Burmese men. As shown here, another problem with Khaing's perspective is that she forgot or did not include deliberately those cases which show direct act of discrimination against women. For instance, women cannot perform a number of common religious offerings and activities unlike the men. There is a gendered division of space in public gatherings of a religious nature and the boundaries cannot be transgressed but remain to reaffirm lower status of Burmese women (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:10); a reality that is evident on how a Burmese woman sees it:

> I am not opposing our religion (Buddhism), but I feel that some of the teachings restrict the rights of women…Some of these restrictions are obvious, some are not. For example, when we are offering something to the monks, they will ask, 'Where is your husband?' They want to accept the donation from the husbands as the procedure is supposed to be undertaken by the head of the house. We also can't light candles before a Buddha image as people think this is a man's duty…I think those superstitions are followed blindly by local people, but are not the real teachings of the religion…Even between nuns and monks there is gender

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> discrimination. A nun cannot sit at the same level as a monk. In my opinion both nuns and monks are following the ascetic life and they renounce their lives in the same way. As far as I know the Buddha never taught such discriminations between men and women. I think that people themselves have modified the religion. I accept the ethical teaching of the Buddha such as the five precepts. What I am opposing is discrimination in every social sphere by people (*Code CINT 276, quoted in* Belak, 2002:35).

There are also certain signs and demarcated areas where women are prohibited to enter as Khine said:

> There are temples with signs saying, 'women and dogs are not allowed' (Khine).

Prohibiting women and girls from going inside the temples is basically because female menstruate and this is being perceived to be 'dirty' and 'polluting' for male's *hpon*. This is one perfect example of direct discrimination against women. Women are even stripped of their human dignity as they were treated as the same level of the animal. At present times, many women do not agree with these beliefs but are forced to follow them so as not to incur the condemnation of their families/communities. Than Than Nwe's (2003) observation is useful in explaining this lot:

> In the multiplicity of social spaces that women are identified with and which reflect existing social conditions, it is in the realm of religious space that women's subordination is magnified. One could say such spaces are regulated and perpetuated by dominant discourses which favor men and over which women have little real power to effect change (Than Than Nwe, 2003:11).

However, some women also have the opinion that it is not the Buddhist religion per se which discriminate against women but how the 'men' understand the religious teachings and propagate the gender-based inequality:

> Buddhism is a flexible religion; it coexists with other beliefs such as in '*nats*' [spirits]. Buddha in his teachings did not make a distinction between men and

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> women, both are made of the same materials, mind and matter. But many people believe that male superiority is related to the religion. I don't believe this; I think that what people think the religion to be can lead to discrimination. Some Buddhist teachings have been written by men, monks, have been handed down from the past, but perhaps they are a reflection of the opinion of those men instead of Buddha's teachings. I don't believe that the idea that men are more divine than women and have more power to do things comes from Buddha's teachings. People have confused notions of what Buddhism really is. Most women I know cannot accept that men would be superior to women, but perhaps, that is because one tends to associate with like-minded people (*Code CINT 253, cited in* Belak, 2002:35).

3.1.3 Traditional Cultural Practices Stemming From Religious Beliefs

Zeya, while stressing the prevalence of gender inequality, also supported the argument that cultural practices stemming from traditions and religious beliefs were among the major culprits of the Burmese women's continued domination in Burma society:

> In Burma, since long time ago, we were dominated by men. It was the tradition, and, at the same time, religious—stereotype that men are the leaders. And, in the family, women must not go out and they just have to take care of the family in the house. With religion, we should give respect to the men; they are higher than the women. These are partly why men 'do not accept' (regarding the call for 'gender equality' by Burmese women organizations) because they do not know anything about gender equality (Zeya).

Segregation of sex/gender roles in different communities of the ethnic nationalities and in their political groups/organizations still exist. The roles performed by both genders usually manifesting the usual partition of what constitute women and men's work which is essentially reflecting the usual private/public divide—with women doing the more or less nitty-gritty housework chores while the men do their share of thinking and deciding on public issues and for the general good. As Kyaw stated, this traditional outlook depicting gender-based roles is a problem that the

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Burma society and the democratic movement have to address. She elucidated that the continued adherence to these negative traditional roles by the various ethnic groups in Burma is an 'ethnic problem' in itself:

> Actually, in Burma problem, it's ethnic problem; the traditional roles…In the church, in the festivals in the community; mostly, the women will cook, cleaning, decorations; but, not in the meetings or leadership roles. But now, I can see the women's leading roles in the church, but, not in the ethnic political group. There are very few young officers, women officer in military, very few…Even in the 'CEC' (Central Executive Committee or the decision-making body of the ethnic political group she belongs to), very few; only one woman (Kyaw).

3.1.4 As Manifested in the Family Life…

In the private sphere of participation, not much has changed regarding Burma society's perception on Burmese women's subordinated and submissive role. The traditional belief emanating from the Burmese Buddhism ensures the idea of gender division of labor to be followed in the family setting.

However, with Burma's economic and political down slope brought by the successive military regimes, some alterations on the Burmese family structure and actual women's role have taken place as well which affect some areas in the economic sphere of participation. With this modified role, two contrasting views could be taken into account as well. One perceiving it constructively, especially, for those who consider change as intrinsically positive; and another one viewing it as 'double-burden' and not at all geared on making the Burmese women's status and condition in the family and in the society as a whole any better.

In contemporary times, it is also important to note that while most of the older generation homemakers accept their role in the household which will not require them to go out and find a living for the family, many younger generation of women now prefer greater freedom of choice in choosing work inside and outside the home.

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1. "Husband as God, Son as Master" Being Practiced

In the family, as basic institution in the society, the 'male' or the 'father' is being placed in a higher plane, an important position which they termed as *ain-oo-nat* or basically mean 'the spirit head of the house'. Aung Myo Min, the Director of the Human Rights Institute of Burma (HREIB), when asked to share his general view on women issues and the limited roles of Burmese women in Burma responded that:

> Some people argue that Burmese women are enjoying their rights and that there is no discrimination against them in Burmese society, but, there is still a limited definition for women. If you want to be a good mother, you have to treat your husband as a god and your son as a master. This is a Burmese saying. Women are defined with that kind of definition. If you don't treat your husband as a god you will be labeled a bad woman. As for freedom of expression, if women want to speak out about something there is a traditional belief not to speak or be outspoken about what they think. This is the stereotype of the Burmese women. So we have programs to help them understand that they also have rights (*Aung Myo Min, quoted in* Irrawaddy, 1999).

Having boys/sons in the family is very much hoped for in the family as narrated by a Burmese woman:

> Most people prefer boys, even in our pro-democratic forces. Men want to have boy children, baby boys. They are so proud when they have a son…Women also have this kind of attitude, because you know if you have a baby boy, he can go through *shinpyu* (Buddhist ordination) and they can feel proud, but if you don't have boys, you can't do this (*Code CINT 94, quoted in* Belak, 2002:42).

In concrete terms, women should be responsible solely on family matters—meaning taking on the household chores, looking after the kids, and guaranteeing also that the traditions and customary beliefs and practices should be passed on to the next generations and all. But of course, important decisions are still seen as the role of the men in the household especially the husband as the 'head' of the family.

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2. Minor Changes on Women's Roles as Housekeepers and as Bread Winners

The military regimes political and economic mismanagement took its toll on the ordinary people's daily lives, and as the focus of this study, on women. Khaing (1984:179), as she herself is a Burmese, argues that their idea of woman is one "being responsible for the solvency of the family and having the added responsibility of making up the money." At present, this same line of thinking leads many girls and women to leave their homes to find jobs to augment family-income. Because of the patriarchal nature of the societies in Burma, women bear the largest portion of responsibility to securing the basic needs managed and administered within the home (*see* Women of Burma, 2000b:20). For women/wives who got lucky to get paid-jobs outside their households, they are also expected to do the usual house chores upon return from work, regardless if the men/husbands have paid-jobs or not. In Khaing's (1984) understanding, Burmese women seldom feel that their commitment to domestic tasks are denying them the chance to work at an alternative and more fulfilling or more creative responsibility (*see* Khaing, 1984:59). However, this same old-traditional mindset on women's supposed role in the family was also pointed out by Ye as a big hindrance in achieving gender equality in Burma society. Even in families where both husbands and wives work as political activists, traditional perception placing women in subordinate role is still being practiced:

> In the family, like in the refugee camp, even in the activists' families, still, you know, taking care of the baby is the mother's responsibility…You know, in the family, women have to do all these things for the sake of the children. Mother has to take it like look for the school, how to get the recommendation paper; mother is the one who has to do that everyday…For example, me and my husband – we both work for politics, the same position; he will go for his work and I will go for my work with the baby. When I go home, I have to cook because it is said to be women's responsibility…He seems to understand some but he still thinks like the other masculine men think. There are these two mindsets that are with him. But I try to talk to him, I try to negotiate with him; lots of talking needed. Even then, he is still acting like an ordinary man. In some cases, for example, when I go out like traveling or something like that, he didn't like it if a lot; but if not always, it's

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> okay. He didn't say but I can feel that he just wanted me to stay at home. It's a long struggle, even with my husband. So, that is how it is with the people from the movement – the activists. But, if you look at the ordinary citizens, it is worst (Ye).

Burma's various ethnic groups' traditions place women's roles firmly within the parameters of the home (*see* Belak, 2002:255). Nonetheless, Burmese women perform the mother/father roles combined, at times, especially in the absence of the 'head' of the families. This is especially true in the war-affected communities of Burma's borderlands. As quite a number of men (soldiers) who were mostly head of the families loss their lives or became disabled-bodies during the decades-long civil war, women's roles, particularly the widowed, change. As an example, in just one border region of the Shan State, officials of the United Wa State Party (UWSP) estimated that up until 1989, 12,000 Wa soldiers had been killed and many more disabled which leaves thousands of widows and orphans (*see* Smith, 2002b:27).

This dual role of women is evident in some Kachin communities as well. The Kachin Women's Association Thailand or KWAT (2005) divulges the fact that many Kachin families no longer carry out their traditional livelihoods as subsistence farmers and have to migrate to urban areas or lowland villages where chances of getting a paid-job is higher. Also, because of the lack of employment opportunities, growing number of men got themselves hook on alcohol and drug addiction, leaving the women in their families to fend for their families' needs alone. However, even if both husbands and wives work outside the households in order to make ends meet, the Kachin women were still the ones expected to do all the housework (*see* KWAT, 2005:14). As a result, women became not only as housekeepers but bread-winners for their families as well.

This was also the result of the Thailand based-Karen Human Rights Group or KHRG (2006) report on the ethnic Karen women showing that as men are increasingly forced into labor by the junta government, tortured or murdered; Karen women have taken up the responsibility providing household income and raising the family. Though it acknowledged the hardships the Karen women are experiencing, the report argues that the 'stereotypes of women as helpless and vulnerable under these

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circumstances do not apply to the Karen women. These women are now said to be assuming leadership roles within their communities, raising and marketing crops, preparing and processing food, acting as liaisons between villages and the military.

3. Alterations in Gender Roles in the Family and the Economic Spheres—Part of the 'Empowerment' Process or Just a Modification of the Continuing Social Injustice against Women?

During times of great economic, social and political instability, women—as mothers, wives and primary carers—are expected to prove stability within the family (*see* Women of Burma, 2000b:17). Women are in a way being 'forced to adapt' to the situation and to patch up problems in able to hold their families together. They are caught between opposing pressures of economic survival and powerful social expectation (*see* Women of Burma, 2000b:18). It left them no other choice anyway; it is like a 'do-or-die' situation. But of course, it is also agreeable that cases like this only prove that women are empowering themselves by refusing to just play the 'victims' role but acting on the problems at hand instead. That is through assuming some of the men's roles in the family and community in the absence of the men, aside from the original roles expected of them to perform in both family and community levels. The fact that women are carrying the 'double burden' of doing both the roles of men and women in family setting and within the community could be viewed that the very essence of the traditional family structure is now being eroded and could be seen as a positive development in breaking down the traditional norms.

On the other hand, it can also be a source of contention whether women are really empowered through assuming 'double responsibilities'. In the Burmese migrants life in Thailand for example, Won (2000) argues:

> As women, they cannot get away from their traditional role as housewives. They have a double burden. Despite their additional role, working mothers/women still have to take care of household chores and children before and after work (Won, 2000:32).

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However, Kyaw added that not all traditional ways related to gendered-roles are 'undesirable' as some should be retained as well. Seen as one of the positive stereotypes shaped by tradition, it was pointed out here that Burmese women's sense of responsibility and respect toward their families (as parents or as daughters for example) must continue to be preserved:

> I think not all traditional ways are bad, and we don't have to change all the traditional values like women should take care of their kids and also respect for the older people, the parents. But for child rearing, cooking and other household chores, it must be balanced, shared by both men and women (Kyaw).

3.1.5 Traditions and Popular View on 'Gender' As Propagated Through the Media

The tri-media is at the SPDC's disposal with the junta government having the absolute control of the tri-media inside Burma. As media proves to be an effective channel for any kind of propaganda, the junta government uses it as a tool to maintain its authoritative power. As one of those early student activists who decided to migrate in Thailand, Khine expressed that she rather be in Thai prison or in jungle than to hear all the junta's propaganda inside Burma:

> Better here being jailed, and, also, better in the jungle if compared inside Burma. At least here, we learned. In Burma, we don't learn anything. There, it's either you believe the government propaganda or not (Khine).

Also, the publications that are mostly available and that will pass the junta's censor board are movie magazines, romantic novels and journals, and other illustrating the popular culture aimed for the younger generation (*see* Belak, 2002:253). It propagates traditional culture that helps in preserving women's subordinate status to men as well. Frequent references were being made to Buddhist traditions in newspapers, text books, radio, on television and so on. Everyday expressions illuminating the way how women are viewed generally are reflected in media.

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3.1.6 Prevalence of Gender Inequality in the Education Sphere of Participation

Faulty economic and political administration of the SPDC has a trickle-down effect on other basic institutions such as reflected in the rotten education system. It is true that the whole education system in Burma is poorly managed with low *budget allocation*[19] and various military policies controlling and hindering development of critical minds. The following quoted interview on how a 12 years old Burman girl understands the political events in Burma is indicative of how defective the education system is:

> Moe Sanda (not real name) has heard of Khin Nyunt and has seen him very often on the television. She doesn't exactly know what his job is but she thinks that he is a construction worker because he always goes to pagodas that are under construction and gives orders to people. She is aware of some conflict between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Khin Nyunt. Her teacher told her that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi betrayed the Burmese people but she doesn't know what this means. She thinks that because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's father owned Burma, and the Khin Nyunt's group stole it from them, that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is trying to steal the country back. She thinks Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a British person and was surprised to learn that she was female…Her teacher explains to them all about politics. Moe Sanda can recite the three national causes in song form, but doesn't know what anything means except for national unity, which is something that when it doesn't exist creates many problems. Moe Sanda believes that you must obey the SLORC rules. She is scared of what will happen if you disobey, but doesn't know why (*Code CINT 143, quoted in* Belak, 2002:253).

Corruption within the system exists and students paying big sum of money just to acquire diploma certificates are rampant practices. Also, because of its excessive

[19] One of the major factors contributing to this worsening social condition is the SPDC's continued prioritization of budget for military expenditure. Over 40 per cent of the national budget is being allocated on the military and since 1988, the size of the Burma Army has doubled while only an estimated one per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is being allocated for public services like education and health sector. *See*, Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT). May 2005. Driven Away—Trafficking of Kachin women on the China-Burma border: A Report by the Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT). Chiang Mai: Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT). p.15.

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paranoia, the military regime see most of the schools and universities as meeting places where people could gather and instigate activities that will challenge the central government's power; just like what happened in the past when most of the students led the mobilizations, pickets and rallies to publicly air their discontentment on the SPDC's mismanagement. Because of this, schools and universities were usually being shut-down except the military school.

1. Education, Highlighting Issues on Gender and Ethnicity

Aside from the particular examples of the gendered-roles and gendered spaces, discrimination against women is also highly seen in the educational sphere that is conforming to traditional perception on gender:

> The traditional ways…the women have to marry to the men, they don't send their daughter for high education…if the family is poor, they would choose the boy to study instead of the daughter (Kyaw).

Within the destitute education system itself, marginalization and discrimination against the ethnic minority women is very much evident as well. However, Kyaw still believes in the significance of education—in terms of equal opportunity and better education system and foundation—as one of the tools for empowerment. In enriching individual's personal development and analytical mind, she cited 'education' as one factor that must be supported and enriched as part of women's empowerment. This will be of a big help in breaking the negative traditions and stereotypes inhibiting Burmese women to reach their full potentials and to fully participate in various sphere in society, particularly, in the political life. Kyaw added:

> Important is the education foundation; ethnic education foundation is not good, they are in the rural areas, and they are poor (Kyaw).

Another point that was traceable from Kyaw's statement was the observation of comparable opportunity between Burmans and the rest of the ethnic minority groups. Compared to other nationalities, the majority Burmans who mostly inhabit the

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urban areas were the ones who have the better access/opportunity to education. This was also backed by Win—a former teacher and a leader in a pool of volunteer-teachers' collectives; she used to be a volunteer-teacher in informal classes inside Burma (for Burmese children who did not have the opportunity to attend formal classes) and she headed a particular collective of volunteer-teachers as well before she decided to go to Thailand for further education in 2006; she joined one of the WLB member-organizations eventually. Win revealed that educated Burman women are usually respected in the society. As with the opportunity they have in pursuing higher education, most of the Burman women lead a good life, high social status and gain respect from the opposite sex:

> In Burma, the Burmans, not the ethnic (referring to the minority ethnic nationalities), they really have a good life. Women are really in top positions, I mean, in the society but not in the government position. Even if they are women, most men respect them. I don't want to say it is the same with the ethnic. You know, most Burman, they really have good life, good position in the society. If you have good education, the men, they can accept you, otherwise, they won't. But for the government, it is totally the opposite. There are no women in the top positions (Win).

2. Educational Attainment Leading to Economic Empowerment?

On the other hand, attaining high education does not really guarantee for a good job and economic stability in Burma. Some educated Burmese themselves were having difficulty finding jobs, more so, with women. Although, education-related problems exist, the number of women graduating from tertiary institutions was consistently high (*see* Mills, 2000:279); but, then, found their selves joining the big loop of unemployed graduates later on. There is little the local job market can offer as unemployment and underemployment is pervasive. Because of international condemnation on the military regime, foreign investments is still limited, manufacturing sector which is more likely to hire women is still low, and, the hospitality and service sector as probable source of employment for women does not thrive well (*see* Mills, 2000:278). Despite the fact that many women are qualified in public service jobs, quite few have been promoted to the senior-level positions

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because of the 'glass-ceiling' that women face in the workplace or in the political sphere (*see* Smith, 2002b:27). All these leads them to another option, that is—to search for greener pastures by migrating to other countries like Thailand, through legal or illegal means. But of course, for most, 'happy ending' is very evasive.

In the HRDU-NCGUB (*see* HRDU-NCGUB, 2007:366) 2006 Human Rights Yearbook, it reported that women continued to be under-represented in traditional male occupations, and, were effectively barred from some professions including the military. As all roles of political importance are assumed by the military, the opportunities for women to gain positions of influence are thus largely restricted. It reveals that women do not receive equal pay for equal work on a consistent basis. Even if women are legally entitled to receive up to 26 weeks of maternity benefits, this right was more often not granted in the year 2006.

The environment which supposed to support women's 'growth' is simply not there as stressed by Khine and #5:

> Probably in the cities like Rangoon, it might not be the same; but in the villages, all the boys go to school, very few girls go to school. That's still happening. And these days, it's even worst because of the economic situation (Khine).

> 'They' (men) are more educated, while women, for long period in history, never had education like them; and then, our women movement, started very late…So, women these years, we cannot achieve all (Ye).

It is clear that acquiring education is being seen here as a privilege rather than a right of people and girls/women are not the ones being prioritized by the society—basically, through their families as basic institution—to go for higher studies as their 'roles' as housewives/housekeepers would not need obtaining further formal education aside from the most basic reading and counting skills. It is also apparent from Ye's rationalization the women's acceptance of the fact that they have to bear the brunt most of the effect of the historical wrongs. This reality voiced out by the women leaders is very much tied-up to what Belak (2002) mentioned earlier regarding the disputed claim on the existence of gender equality in Burma. She argued that those

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who were still boasting of Burmese women's high status, recognition and women's advancement in society reflect only the experiences of educated middle and upper class urban elites. This kind of analysis were also often derived from what she called a rather 'conservative male attitude of what constitutes status' (*see* Belak, 2002:33).

3.1.7 Women and the Economic Sphere of Participation

For the vast majority of Burmese women, their early engagement in the public front is mostly related to the economic sphere. Women outside the private arena of participation in the household extended their involvement outside the home through contributing their skills in the economy mainly as business entrepreneurs in the bazaars, buying and selling stuffs in the market, or in any income-generating enterprises; while, for those in the rural areas, most women were engaged in the farming sector where very few income-generating enterprises could be found. This is seen by some writers hailing the idea that Burmese women are enjoying equal status with men as a kind of 'independence', thus, nothing comparable to women in other countries who have stunted participation in the society during the early times—that is merely confined at home. Khaing (1984) commented that Burmese women have been going about freely in the public places of trade and manufacture for centuries (*see* Khaing, 1984:150). She added that in the classical period, there were chronicles proving that women were already active in agriculture, in paddy cotton fields, or in spinning and weaving, aside from their involvement in trade (*see* Khaing, 1984:3). But with Belak's (2002) opinion, gender divisions between what is viewed as 'men's work' and 'women's work' are demonstrated by women's dominance in the field of trade as well (Belak, 2002:160). It was illustrated earlier how Burmese men gain their superior status in the society through the spiritual belief of the manly *'hpon'* and this same belief led the path for men to have better jobs society has to offer like working in the office and administrative work. In turn, women were left to deal with the more mundane aspects of life like buying and selling and that which involves competition and profit.

In the era of colonization and around the independence period which immediately followed, Burmese women's participation in the economic arena showed some changes. The British colonizers gave a chance for the Burmese girls to get

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formal education which the old Buddhist monastic system did not allow before. Though, the colonial government did not give full parity when it comes to Burmese girls and boys' education as it still gave greater priority to the boys getting educated as future civil servants in an administrative system that was exclusively male dominated.

In contemporary times, for women with little education or did not have the chance to get a formal education at all, especially those coming from the ethnic minority communities, finding good-paying decent jobs is very bleak. If ever there are opportunities available, there is a narrow option for them to choose from when it comes to finding jobs.

Women and Migration

Significant outflow of women from Burma to neighboring Thailand and other countries in search of employment was seen in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the number is increasing steadily through the years. For instance, it is not uncommon for Burmese women doctors to be found in Thailand as domestic workers or in Japan as dish washers (*see* Mills, 2000:279). Women economic migrants usually salvage for any job they can find; no matter how hard, difficult and degrading. Migrant Burmese women workers in Thailand are often doing the 'three D' jobs—dirty, difficult and dangerous; those jobs that Thai workers are unwilling to do (*see* Women of Burma, 2000b:4). Most who desired going out of the country have low level of acquired formal education and lacking the skills for better jobs; thus, found themselves working as domestic helpers, in the construction industry, and most ended up working in the Thai sex industry and/or being trafficked somewhere else (*see* Mills, 2000:279). Some enter the sex industry through their own volition, though, many were reportedly to be recruited and trafficked illegally by some scrupulous individuals who tricked these Burmese women with the promise of good life. Another sad fact is that, with some girls and women who tried to find jobs but ended up being trafficked, they face moral censure within their communities upon return, irrespective of the circumstances under which they were trafficked[20] (*see* KWAT, 2005:14). These particular problems of

[20] Because of shame and fear of their communities' moral condemnation, many of these trafficked girls and women are unwilling to speak out about their bitter experiences of being trafficked. *See*, Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT). May 2005. Driven Away—Trafficking of Kachin Women

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growing numbers of migration and trafficking and its root-cause were encapsulated in the 2000 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women stating that:

> The lack of rights afforded to women serves as a primary causative factor at the root of both women's migration and trafficking. The failure of existing economic, political and social structures to provide equal and just opportunities for women to work has contributed to the feminization of poverty, which has led to the feminization of migration, as women leave their homes in search of viable economic options. Further, political instability, militarism, civil unrest, internal armed conflict and natural disaster also exacerbate women's vulnerabilities and may result in an increased in trafficking (*UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, quoted in* KWAT, 2005:17).

In addition, linking the education issue to women's economic participation and empowerment, Khine dwelt on the notion that even migrant women from Burma working in Thailand, for instance, should not be seen as a kind of an outright women 'empowerment' or as a positive development on the sphere of economic participation:

> Every girl, come out; every boy, come out; they're not getting any education…Now, girls are coming out of Thailand and working for their families and sending money back home doesn't mean they are gaining anything. It doesn't mean they are gaining their own freedom, economic freedom (Khine).

What Khine has shared is very much connected to how Belak (2002) and Edwards and Roces (2000) explained this particular trend in the economic sphere. Although, stereotypes are changing a bit now in the present time, Belak (2002) argued that, generally, household chores are still expected and considered to be women's domain. In line with this, changing economic structure at present does not mean greater gender parity (*see* Belak, 2002:159). Structural economic change is 'gendered-process' and as to what Edwards and Roces (2000) argued:

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> It has often served to reinforce male privilege and further embed stereotypes about women's work (Edwards and Roces, 2000:10).

Picking up from the abovementioned argumentation, many of the various works done by women, may it be inside or outside Burma, actually strengthens and further supports women subordinate status in the society. As more and more Burmese women seek paid jobs, the usual jobs that they are getting are mostly those which relate to the traditional 'unpaid work' at home that they have been doing for centuries.

3.2 Gender and Politics: A Narrative of Women's Participation

As history shows, Burmese women's political participation is lacking if not absent in the public realm. The mainstream Burma society, when it comes to political arena, has evidently a symbol of 'male-stream' Burma society. Yet, despite the various obstacles which inhibit women to join the political sphere, they had learned to devise ways for their involvement to be felt and seen.

There were some Burmese women in the olden times who in their own ways have had tried to break through from the invisible private-public divisions set by society and involved themselves in the public domain. Conversely, these efforts could only be viewed as individual endeavors that were more focus on changing their personal standing in the society; not really to effect transformation in the lives of women generally. The early times of Burmese women's participation in the economic front, particularly, during the British colonial period, also marked an important segment in the history of Burmese women's political struggle. It was only in the 20th century that Burmese women gathered themselves and worked as a group in their effort to effect change in the society through participating in the political arena. In the years starting 1920s that the various political parties and the dawn of Burmese civil society became operative then. As Zaw Oo (2007) described it, the decades marked by fairly competitive local elections and decentralized functions of governance before obtaining independence from the British colonizers in 1948 (*see* Zaw Oo, 2007:31). By then, Burmese women may be absent in the hierarchy of power within the mainstream politics but early women's political participation was evident in the protest movements, especially during the time of colonization. Women started to

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organize themselves, though, not as feminist gesture pushing for women's rights and gender equality but more of as part of the nationalist agenda struggling for their country's liberation from foreign rule. However, it was still the men who led the nationalist struggle and women did the supporting role.

3.2.1 Women's Participation in the 'Male'-stream Politics Ruled by Generals

Economic and political problems continue to bury the Burmese nation deeper and deeper to poverty and all the hardships life could offer. A lot of Burmese men and women became more focused on finding ways to survive instead of participating in activities to challenge the military State. Most people's energies are focused on supporting themselves and any non-income earning activity is a luxury; especially for women who are usually responsible for their families' day-to-day concerns (*see* Belak, 2002:254-255). This, of course, is another reason aside from the fear of repercussion from the *Tatmadaw*.

In the midst of this bleak background, there are also quite a number of Burmese women who became politically aware of what really is happening in Burma and how this relates to their everyday lives. They now question and courageously challenge certain issues in the country—the military State, the gross human rights violations, the gendered power-imbalances in Burma society—and trying to empower themselves and other women to stand for their rights for the betterment of the whole country.

During The Early Years of the Junta Take Over…

Back in the early years of military rule in Burma, the official ideology of the xenophobic and conservative nationalist Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) during its reign was entitled, 'The Burmese Way to Socialism'; and essentially, with a goal of 'achieving a new economic order, an egalitarian utopia and national sufficiency' (*see* Mills, 2000:272-273). It was really a 'utopian' objective for the *Tatmadaw*, especially, if it did not know how to properly get there with the strong support from the people. So, it stick to its rigid plan—mismanaging the whole country's affair, while, on the sideline, feeding their own self-interests by reaping the

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country's coffer and resources. It tried to suppress and to ward-off anything that would stand in their scheme. One of the military regime's main focuses then was to preserve the 'traditional' Burman cultural values. In the process of putting too much emphasis on the integrity of the majority Burman ethnic nationalities, the *Tatmadaw* tried to suppress any pluralist features in society—the diverse ethnic minority groups, the political parties outside BSPP which can pose as great threats for the military State, the women's organizations challenging the social traditions and customs and the status quo of male-domination as a whole—as they all constitute a big danger for the *Tamadaw's* existence and its fear of the country's disintegration.

As a result of this suppression, all women's organizations were terminated by the military coup in 1962 as all social and political organizations were banned (*see* ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997b:4). A new constitution was promulgated in 1974 establishing Burma as one party state with Gen. Ne Win as the President after he formally resigned from the army, but still, the army remained the dominant influence. There were 449 contested seats in the BSPP legislature at that time and within the period 1974 to 1979, nine women representatives won seats while 13 women got in 1978 (*see* Belak, 2002:257). Though women's rights to political, economic and social equality were constitutionally guaranteed, only three out of 97 members of the drafting commission were women in the 1980s, less than three per cent of members of *Pyithu Hluttaw* or People's National Assembly were women and no women at all amongst the Secretariat or officials in general administration (*see* Mills, 2000:275). And as women are impeded from participating in the political process, women issues, especially health specific issues are also typically overlooked and neglected in the policy-making bodies (*see* HRDU-NCGUB, 2006).

It was in the third quarter of 1988 when thousands of people—women, men, young and old, students, professionals, workers, and even monks and nuns—took on the streets to show and voice out their discontentment on how the country was being mishandled economically and politically by the military regime and demanded for democratic reforms. What is significant here was that, for a long time in the whole history of Burma, never have had happened for this kind of popular demonstration to take place. As Mills (2000) elucidated:

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> There had never been an attempt in the entire history of Burma to control the misrule of the men in power by public revolt (Mills, 2000:276).

Also, it was the time when Aung San Suu Kyi with the NLD party started to gain momentum challenging the military regime. In response, the non-violent uprising was met with guns and bullets by the *Tatmadaw*. Further suppressions of the rights of the people followed then.

1. The SLORC/SPDC's Reign: "Politicized or Not, Women are 'Dragged' Into Politics"

The ongoing political chaos has a big impact on the lives of the ordinary Burmese citizens, the women, particularly. ALTSEAN-Burma Coordinator Debbie Stothard says that regardless if politically active or not, Burmese women bear the brunt of the military dictatorship in Burma (*see* ALTSEAN-Burma, 1997a). As fighting between the SPDC troops and the ethnic armed groups continue in some areas of the ethnic minorities, women (and pregnant women) are not spared at all alongside with children, the old people and even those with health ailments. In times of relocations, women are forcefully conscripted by the *Tatmadaw* Army in forced labor[21] for development projects, as porters for the army and even sometimes, as human shields. It is not unusual for women to do some tasks such as fetching and carrying while rendering forced labor work—that is without pay or any medical treatment, while they too have to provide for their own meals and tools needed for the work being required to them—for the SPDC. But during the actual combat between the military troops and the ethnic insurgents, the *Tatmadaw* requires women also to do hard menial physical work or to carry supplies and ammunition to the frontline. They are being used as human shields during the military offensives or to clear out the military path for any landmines. Aside from that, women are also vulnerable to

[21] Although forced labor is being implemented in the whole of Burma, conditions in the border areas were undeniably worse in those places. Mills cites the Mon-Karen areas which had been in the throes of insurgency for many decades as an example. This was the same area where the new Ye to Tavoy railway was being built in condition and circumstances not so different from those faced by Allied soldiers during World War II. The systematic abuse of Burmese women in these areas (and of the Rohingya women in Arakan State) reiterate the fact that 'ethnic cleansing' is taking place. *See,* Mills, Janell. 2000. Edwards, Louise and Mina Roces (eds). "Militarism, Civil war and Women's Status." Women in Asia—Tradition, Modernity and Globalization. Australia: Allen and Unwin. pp. 281-282.

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rape/gang rape by the SPDC soldiers. Those who resisted this assertion of male power were killed (*see* Mills, 2000:281). Women here as civilians are not partisans or politicized in anyway but they ended up being used by the SPDC for political ends. Since the SLORC/SPDC's political take over in 1988, Mills (2000) furthered that:

> Male dominance not only continued but it was further entrenched (Mills, 2000:275).

2. Women and the Significance of 1988 Uprising

Beyond the fear that the SLORC/SPDC implanted in the minds of the people, 1988 was indeed has a significant value in Burma's history. Aside from the veracity signifying the end of public tolerance of the existing government which in turn altered the logic and mechanisms of military governance in Burma; it also paved the way for Burmese women to reposition themselves more clearly in relation to the regime (*see* Mills, 2000:276). The event signified a big impact on Burmese women, especially on their normative social status as well as on their self-perception fueled by traditional beliefs and practices. By mere joining the 1988 uprisings and thinking critically about the country's political environment, women of Burma already started to tear-down the public/private divide in the society and begun to assert their political participation. Through this, women also started to learn looking at their social roles and analyzing it through the context of imbalanced power relationships that exist in the Burmese society.

3.3 "Women's Political Participation—A 'Democratic' Challenge in the Movement"

Women's political participation is not only an issue in the mainstream politics but it also holds true in the democratic movement as well. The culmination of the gender debates in politics could probably be highlighted by the obvious marginalization of women in the decision-making and leadership positions in the hierarchy of political power wherein women are hardly represented.

The mere fact that the women umbrella organization WLB has been established, with a special aim of putting forward the concerns of women that includes

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pushing for greater participation of Burmese women in the leadership and decision-making level in the pro-democracy movement, reflects the urgent need to address gender-based issue within the movement as well.

3.3.1 Unequal Representation

There is a big imbalance in gender representation when it comes to political leadership in the movement.

> A quick count of twenty or so political and ethnic organizations, including the Burmese junta, clearly shows that the ratio of men to women in leadership is 99:1. Some groups do not even have a single female among their ranks (*Aung Naing Oo, quoted in* Irrawaddy, 2004).

This is a glaring truth despite the fact that women outnumbered men in Burma or even in the refugee camps (*see* Aung Naing Oo, 2004). Gender-imbalance in terms of representation in seminars, trainings and other political gatherings within the pro-democracy movement is also a reality as underscored by Ye:

> Now, I would say that there's inequality in representation…When I was presenting in a major political organization, there wasn't a lot of women there yet, and you can see that there was discrimination, (Ye).

Being one of the students who joined the various mobilizations inside Burma in the late 1980s, Khine shared her own experience pointing to some of the girls/women imbibed notion that the environment/condition outside the private sphere of their home is not safe or conducive at all for fragile girls/women, thus, limiting their participation in the public sphere:

> Many women joined in before with the demonstrations but when we decided to go to the jungle, the number of women dropped significantly. For example, my Mom, she was worried that I might get raped by the Burmese troops or the Karen soldiers, but I didn't care at all. I said, it should be my fate but am still going. But a lot of other women, they didn't go to the jungle because of that. So, that

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> explains why the number of women decreased significantly compared to when we were still demonstrating. Before, I think it was more women than men because even housewives came out, even the children…Karen women had their own platoon too but I would say the number wasn't that big compared to men. Also, most were members of the KNU but not actively fighting. There were Karen women who were also fighting then, around 15-20 in all, not a lot (Khine).

This particular experience shared by Khine showed the strong clout of the social culture in shaping the minds of the girls/women in influencing their decision whether or not to participate in the other spheres of society outside their home.

3.3.2 "Criticism and Self-Criticism": The Women's Point of View

Commentaries and personal opinions are being expressed by some Burmese activists and analysts within the pro-democracy movement on how the democratic movement in general is treating their Burmese women comrades within their ranks. Just like what Kyaw has expressed:

> Even though am the founder of the 'Wife of the Leaders' (referring to the group set up by her and other leaders' wives of their armed ethnic political group waging war against the *Tatmadaw*), when you become a widow, they (men comrades) don't care. They do not want to appreciate the thing we do; but, not really because they just don't want to appreciate, they just still don't know how to appreciate women. Even in the decision-making, they think that women are not important; they still look-down on women (Kyaw).

> When I was still in Bangkok, I set up a women organization…At that time, women's organization was necessary. It was kind of a must because it also comes a lot from discrimination against women; because during those days, a lot of women were called (in their political organization) as 'shit'…or 'bag of shits'; because we were slow and a lot of arguments…'Okay, you were calling us bag of shits, we will show you we are not bags of shits. We are useful and we will do what we think is contributing to our movement.'…But, due to some reasons, some women who were there during our meetings did not really involve themselves in

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> this organization because they think it wasn't necessary at that time. So, it turned out that the organization became just like 'all-Bangkok' women (Khine).

Although recognizing the difficult task of 'proving' women's worth among their male comrades and taking it as a form of a challenge, Khine also focused on the problem of 'unity' even among women themselves or lack of enthusiasm from the part of many women comrades during the earlier years before WLB was established.

Echoing many of the Burmese women activists' sentiments on the same issue of Burmese women's marginalization and discrimination placed against them no other than their male activist counterparts, Thin Thin Aung stated:

> We ask them to accept the women's political participation is important to change the political and social situation in Burma…Women need to be at a decision-making level in all fields, so that women's perspective and women's protection will be put into the policy (*Thin Thin Aung, cited in* Straub, 2005).

3.3.3 What the 'Enlightened' Male Comrades Have to Say?

Most of the 'enlightened' male activists' criticisms' point of departure is the role of the Burmese women within the democracy movement which reflects their marginalized status and the discrimination placed against them in general no other than by their male comrades in the movement. These criticisms coming out to the fore also strengthens this study's argument that Burmese women are indeed experiencing marginalization even in a movement advocating for democratic changes. Discrimination against Burmese women by their male counterparts is very much present and this manifests on how Burmese women activists are being treated by their male comrades when it comes to the perceived roles that men and women should perform.

For one, Moe Thee Zun (2003), former co-Chair of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) and founder of the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS), observed that with the exception of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, women from Burma are continually denied the prominent roles within the Burmese pro-democracy groups and political parties that they so deserve as many males in the movement have

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the mindset that women are less capable of leading than men. The problem, he stressed strongly, was male 'chauvinism' citing the male leaders in the movement's repeated rationalization that the absence of women in the leadership positions is because of 'women's lack of experience and their inferior intellectual capacity'.

Supporting the idea pointing to Burmese male 'chauvinistic attitude', Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese political analyst in exile, in his article entitled, "Playing Second Fiddle", posed this probing question:

> Is it too much to ask fellow organizations, who themselves call for equality and recognition of their rights in participating in the resolution of Burma's conflict? (Aung Naing Oo, 2004).

This is in relation to the failure of the male political leaders in allowing Burmese women to perform leadership positions in central political organizations within the movement and to let the Burmese women comrades' voices and views be heard in important negotiations with the ruling junta. He maintained that if the peace process and resolution of Burma's conflict is to be effectively sustained in Burma, Burmese women's participation is critical and this could only be possible if all barriers to women's participation is removed and all myths of women's limited capacities be dispelled. While focusing on important negotiations with the military generals as one example where Burmese women's marginalization and discrimination is blatantly visible, Aung Naing Oo (2004) further argued that Burma's political and ethnic organizations usually place women's role as secondary to men only. From this observation, it can be drawn that aside from Aung San Suu Kyi, there is indeed no way or any chances where Burmese women can be a representative or to become a delegate in any important negotiations and dialogues with the ruling junta as the current requirements for one to be part of the delegation is to be holding a leadership role in the Burmese political organization. Sad to say, male leaders in those organizations do not allow women to penetrate such positions. Aside from this, women comrades are not even consulted in preparations for any negotiations with the SPDC and they are often kept in the dark regarding schedules of pre-negotiation meetings and/or given limited information if ever a negotiation has been concluded. And most of the time,

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men's argument ends up saying that 'women are meddlers in affairs that do not concern them'.

Aung Myo Min (1999) who is serving as the Director of the Human Rights Documentation Unit of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (HRDU-NCGUB) rationalized the issue pointing mainly to the traditional stereotype on Burmese women's role and the limited understanding of women's rights as human rights being part of the problem why Burmese women have limited role in the society. This reality, he added, could also be observed even in the revolutionary area for example, where women are still seen as good in nursing and teaching areas of work aside from being viewed as mainly housekeepers.

In essence, all these commentaries were basically to stress the need for the Burmese male counterparts to accept women's participation in the political sphere, especially in the leadership positions and decision-making processes in the pro-democracy movement. Opinion such as stated above, coming from male perspectives also proves that gender inequality is not just a fabricated issue generally made by women or the Burmese women activists. These observations were re-affirming this fact as well.

3.3.4 Just a Lip-service for the Women's Cause?

According to the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) General Secretary Zipporah Sein, when they spoke with the Karen leaders regarding women's participation in the truce talks with the junta, the women were told to wait until the negotiations in regard to military issues were over…In another instance, a Mon leader was asked why women were not included in the delegation sent for ceasefire talks with the junta government, the Mon leader simply replied that because 'women are not on the Central Committee' and it is 'unlikely' for them to be part of the delegation to the National Convention then (*see* Aung Naing Oo, 2004). With this, the Women's League of Burma (WLB)'s General Secretary Nang Hseng Noung responded that:

> It is a lame excuse that a woman cannot be a delegate because she is not a leader. Political leadership must recognize that we are valuable resources for change (*quoted in* Aung Naing Oo, 2004).

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Another opinion from a Burmese refugee reveals several important points as well:

> I know Burmese men, including many in the pro-democracy movement who are active campaigners for democracy, freedom and human rights, but at the same time, will come home and beat their wives and expect their wives to be servants to their needs. What about the human rights of their women? Would Aung San Suu Kyi be in her position today if it weren't for her father? I certainly like to think so, but one has to wonder. Also, if you notice the way that the military regime talks to her and refers to her, as 'little sister', etc., demeans her, and puts her into a 'place' where they want her to be: A submissive, demure, weak woman. Women make an important contribution to public life and should be encouraged to participate and lead (*Char Thaik, quoted in* Democratic Voice of Burma, 2005).

From this commentary, four significant points have been stressed again—one is the actuality of the private-public divide; second is the obvious manifestation of how deep-seated patriarchal traditions in viewing gender roles that it plagued even a movement advocating for democracy and equality; thirdly, it exposed the strong bond between the traditional gendered roles and the militaristic regime, with both strengthening each other, and last but not least, how women use the influence of the powerful men in their lives.

Conversely, Khine also stressed that in order for men to really acknowledge that Burmese women are capable of decision-making and leadership positions in the various political organizations within the movement, women must prove that by recoiling from their traditional roles set by the society:

> In a way, when I looked back, not that am supporting them saying that but I don't blame them because most of the time, some of us, when we get into some position, or, even in Burma, if you go to one village, we fear too much. 'How are we going to live there, would it be okay?' And all that stuff. We think too much. For me, I mean, I don't blame that kind of attitude of men. And, these women, even in the movement, are still like this. Even now (2007), women think that way. But these

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> days, at least, I can see some rays of light; women do not think strongly in that way anymore (Khine).

From the observation shared by Khine, it also shows how big and challenging the issue on gender is even in the democratic movement. In another case, being one of the veteran activists who have been involved in the struggle for liberation of their particular ethnic group in the past and for Burma's democratization now, Kyaw shared her direct observation and personal experience as she elaborates further the gender-based inequality going on in the pro-democracy movement. When asked if the 'traditional gender role' that she was referring to still predominates the present social set up in the movement, she responded:

> Still the same, but, change a bit. Still, the women cannot really penetrate. I can feel it myself…It's because of the tradition…Those Burmese men, the modern ones who went out of the country to study and then come back, those who are working in the NGOs, the activists; they know about gender equality. But, the old MPs (Members of the Parliament), the old NLD (National League for Democracy), the old people; they do not really accept yet. They accept it only by 'mouth' but not really doing it (Kyaw).

As notably mentioned here, there is only a slight change which transpired in viewing and accepting the idea of women's participation itself within the parameter of gender parity. This is also one of the manifestations of how the patriarchal system is deeply rooted in Burma society. Factors such as education, exposure to other countries' culture and the openness/willingness to accept new ideas/change contributed in the slight shift of the newer generation's mindsets in viewing gender parity. For the newer/younger generation, change is quite easier to accept but the resistance is more on the older generation who had long been immersed to the traditional way of life and thinking.

Amid the various issues presented here by the Burmese women, the WLB and its 12-member women organizations are now establishing itself as vanguard of women's voices. It works not only as an advocacy and lobby group to end military

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dictatorship but as ‘women’s movement’ advancing the idea of equal participation and gender equality in the pro-democracy movement and in Burma society in general.

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CHAPTER IV
TRACING AREAS OF CONTROL, MANEUVERINGS AND HEIGHTS OF RESISITANCE

This chapter focuses in rooting-out the key factors leading to the Burmese women's marginalization/discrimination in the political sphere. It gives details on how these factors, especially the cultural and the political aspects of the Burmese life in general, affect the women—the Burmese women activists in particular—and the movement's over-all call for democracy.

Moreover, this chapter further traces on the inter-connection between culture (specifically, the norms and traditions stemming from the religious beliefs) and the political reality for the continuing gender-related issue in Burma society. It expounds how the present political system and the cultural norms support each other and strengthen the male-pervaded Burma society; and, in the process, examining how these influence/shape various tendencies and responses, especially from the women themselves; for the formation of individual/woman agency.

4.1 Continuance of Gender-based Discrimination: The Root Causes

At present, it is indeed no other spheres than in the political and cultural arenas where the marginalization and discrimination of Burmese women are strongly evident. In both two important State machineries—the government and Buddhism, Burmese men were privileged over women. This was also evident in Mills' (2000) work pointing out that gender inequality is very much present in these two most important national institutions in Burma society:

> Traditionally, political power was a male preserve and membership of the Buddhist monk-hood an exclusive male privilege. Cultural concepts ensured official power gravitated to the male while Buddhist ideologies reaffirmed men's superior status in the hierarchy of rebirth (Mills, 2000:265).

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An observation mutually shared by Belak (2002) concluding that:

> The combination of government restrictions, religious demands and society's preconditions serve to ensure women face restrictions in every sphere. Any attempts to promote women's equality must work to change conceptions of women's capabilities and the strictures on their activities (Belak, 2002:33).

The succeeding military regimes in various ways see to it that Burmese women are barred from participating in the politics while the cultural traditions support the male-dominated political sphere in Burma society. The austere attitude of the Burmese people when it comes to religion, particularly Buddhism, reinforces the marginalization and discrimination of women in the political sphere of participation.

The dawning of direct military rule intensified the 'macho'-male culture of the patriarchal Burma society that has existed for many generations. Gen. Ne Win's military rule in 1962 brought a lot of detrimental changes in Burma. The military rule in the country continued with the SLORC/SPDC seizing power through another coup in 1988 and it still continue to rule Burma until the present time. The culture, particularly, religious traditions, and the successive forms of government in Burma are major factors contributing on the continuance of the discrimination against women which in effect produces their marginalized status. Cultural and religious stereotypes which dictate gender roles continue to underpin laws and practices, thus, preventing women from enjoying their full rights to personal safety, health, education, employment, freedom of movement, and participation in leadership, recreation and community activities (*see* Belak, 2002:33).

In many ways, this reality was reaffirmed by the women activists who were interviewed in this study. The twinning effects of the cultural and political reality in Burma are key factors in the continuance of the gender-based discrimination and marginalization of Burmese women in the political sphere of participation. They shared theirs and the other Burmese women's usual experiences in their own family life, in their ethnic communities and while working as activists in the pro-democracy movement.

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4.1.1 'Macho' Culture as Drove by Religious Practices and Beliefs—Strengthening Gender Discrimination

Buddhism is only one of the religions in Burma but majority of the people are Buddhists. Burmese Buddhism has great influence on other Burmese religion in the country like on Christian and Animist communities (*see* Belak, 2002:33-34); an observation that even Khine shared:

> I would say that 85 percent of the Burmese are Buddhists, or, probably, more than that. What I believe is that even with those so-called Christians, especially if they are Catholics, Buddhism went into their veins because we are the majority. There is no way of running away from it, even if they want to; but, I don't think they wanted to (Khine).

Custom and traditions are usually the bases of how Burmese people perceive women's roles in their societies; these too provide the bases from which women's rights are upheld or abused (*see* Belak, 2002:33). Majority of the Burmese people accept the rather myopic interpretation of Buddhism. With its centuries-old existence in society, Burmese Buddhism has formed and still continued to guide the way of life of the Burmese people. The concept is still largely unquestioned because as Khaing (1984) said:

> It has through the centuries run parallel with a full life of women (Khaing, 1984:16).

In Burmese interpretation of the religion, as based on the teachings and belief of what a 'good woman' should be, Buddhism was given by the Buddha who, as a man, gained enlightenment and showed the path for all to follow; and, as a man, Buddha attained the highest spiritual level and only as a man can another human being hope to do likewise (s*ee* Khaing, 1984:16). Buddhism supports the belief that all living things have a cycle of life after life, with the action of one shaping the next, it is then believed that the only way out for the women to receive such enlightenment is for her to be born again as a man—that is if she acts 'accordingly'. As seen here, religion

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as one of the basic institutions influences big time the way of life of the people and it is also obviously being influenced or used as a tool by whomever holding the State power in the society. This way, the one holding the scepter of power, the generals in Burma, have more space to maneuver as they could tinker on the state machineries to continue to substantiate and perpetuate their power/authority.

Ironically, the notion that the Burmese women having a relatively high status in the society and that gender equality does exist in the country is being promoted by the present military regime (SPDC) even now. This is despite the fact that the abovementioned cultural traditions are still influencing big time the way of life of the people; that women have to perform forced labor for the regime; the countless women who have been raped or/and killed by the Burmese Army because of their democratic ideology or simply because of their identification with the ethnic nationalities who continue to wage armed resistance against the junta government; the economic hardships that women have to face because of the SPDC's economic and political negligence; and, so on. Burmese women are left being more marginalized and discriminated at in an era where international human rights standards are already in place and people around the world are more aware of their inherent rights as individuals and as members of the group they belong to.

However, what is also significant here is the reality that in the face of the tight political control of the junta government, a number of Burmese women are becoming more conscious, analytical and aware of what is happening around them and questioning their situation in the society as a whole; a condition that also leads them to act and challenge the 'power that is'.

1. 'The Opium of the People': The Idea of 'Hpon' in Religious Beliefs

Marx was after all correct in saying that "religion is the opium of the people" for it held the Burmese people addicted and blinded by it in many centuries. The strong cultural/religious belief that men were inherently superior to women is one of the culprits of Burmese women's continued marginalization and discrimination in the society. To quote Spiro:

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> By cultural prescription, the exercise of authority *('awza')* is a male prerogative, so that any social status endowed with authority is, by cultural ascription, a male monopoly (*Spiro, quoted in* Mills, 2000:269).

Central to the notion of male superiority is the concept of *'hpon'* which strengthens the spiritual elevation that men enjoy in Burmese society (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:7). The men, in Burmese Buddhism interpretation, have innate spiritual quality called the *'Hpon' (*or may also be spelled as *'Hpoun' or 'Pon')* which women do not possess. *Hpon* basically means 'the nobility', the 'glory' of manhood', male 'power-aura' (*see* Mills, 2000:269). As Burmese women were made to understand that they do not possess in any way this manly attribute of *hpon*, most women accept their subordinate status to men and as second-class citizens in this kind of social arrangement. And as mentioned earlier, this arrangement runs from generation to generation that everything seems to be a life's routine for many Burmese. In support to this, texts published by the junta government like from the Ministry of Education for example often refer to tenets, folk-tales and customs derived from Burmese Buddhist teaching which actually give weight on men's possession of *hpon, (see* Belak, 2002:35).

Monks within Burmese society are granted the most prestigious status and perceived as a symbol and embodiment of the *'great hpon'* or 'great glory' called *'hpoungyi'* while women could become nuns or *'thilashins'* which means 'keepers of precepts' but this does not earn the same prestigious status as the monks do; *thilashins* are not considered as part of *'sangha'* or the formal monastic order (*see* Mills, 2000:269). This leaves the women to serve Buddha in a lay capacity in order to gain Buddhist merit. The *sangha* as Burma society's integral institution provides basic education to the males. While with women, they usually got their education from the family and with those privilege ones, they could also get educated by the *thilashins* or some lay private schools. Moreover, for a woman lay person, the noblest act of merit-making is for here son's novitiation and if she does not have a son, she must support other boys' ritual for novitiation (*see* Khaing, 1984:18-19).

However, for whatever reason, women were 'endowed' a duty to what they call a 'special' task as "the protectors of traditional culture" (Belak, 2002:34). Every

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woman must cherish, take pride and guard the male's *hpon* through the men in her life—her husband, son, father, brother—for them to fully attain the peak of being born as human and male (*see* Khaing, 1984:16). This is quite bizarre for the 'special' task in essence is for women to see to it that the chain of male-domination is securely placed around their neck.

2. The Idea Dividing the 'Holy' and the 'Filthy'

With the sex/gender-divide, one important view that could be factored-in as well is the perception connected to the idea of 'polluting' or 'contamination'. This was highlighted by Kristeva (1982) stating that:

> "Polluting objects fall schematically into two types: excremental and menstrual…with the latter threatens the relationship between the sexes (Kristeva, 1982:71).

These ideas of religious taboos based on this holy-filthy division as the foundation by which division of the sex/gender roles is hinged to do exist in Burma. Four Burmese women voices—a Buddhist, a Muslim, an Animist and a Christian—shared their opinions on this:

> Women's clothes are considered dirty just because we menstruate. This is a kind of superstition and a social disease – we have to reform these kinds of customs that give us an inferior status (*Buddhist, CINT 276, quoted in* Belak, 2002:36-37).

> Muslim can touch or hold the Koran when they are clean, that is, when they don't have period. Even though they can read the Koran, they should not rest it on their thigh or let it touch their sarong. Women can't enter the area of a grave. If they want to see the grave, they should stay outside the fence and look. If a woman enters the graveyard to see a burial when she has her period, the dead person may meet evil (*Muslim, CINT 67, quoted in* Belak, 2002:37).

The mere fact that the girls/women menstruate while boys/men do not, and, as this is basically viewed as filthy and contaminating to boys/men's intrinsic manly power; it

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certainly serves as a dead-end discussion relating to gender issues. This rationalization is coming mostly from the Buddhist and Muslim religious traditions which in essentially would not bring resolution in bridging the social gaps between the sexes. With the Animist and Christian traditions, the division of 'holy' man and 'filthy' woman were not that clearly expressed but the hierarchy of power, of male over female, is more evident:

> In the Animist community, there are some kinds of prohibitions for women. For example, in our tradition, we do a kind of ceremony for the spirits with chicken bones to predict things. Women can't lead this ceremony. We use chicken bones to predict almost as we read the Bible. Only men can do this (*Animist, CINT 233, quoted in* Belak, 2002:38).

> The women are told that the head of a woman is a man and the head of the man is God. So whatever it is, we have to respect our husbands. That's our Christian belief. But there's no discrimination (*CINT 97, quoted in* Belak, 2002:38).

Various cultural traditions and religious beliefs justify gender discrimination and all sorts of inequalities based on the nature-given, biological differences between the sexes, with woman's body being seen generally as unholy, filthy and inciting evil and sinful acts to the man.

4.1.2 The Present Political Reality and the State as Means and Ends of Discrimination

It is no more than evident but in the military structure itself—from the generals, army officers, down to the rank and file positions—where male-power pervades. As Mills (2000:272) says,

> *Tatmadaw* rule in Burma condensed a narrow, nationalist and masculine ethos within Burma's power structures.

By the mere representation of the men-in-uniforms on the pedestal of political power, it amplified the perception of the glorified men as innately mighty powerful, as

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leaders, as decision-makers, born to rule; that is, in contrast to the weak, submissive, subordinate, second class citizen women. Burmese women's rights are indeed doubly-violated in a militarized environment. Just like what Aung Myo Min stressed:

> Militarization is one of the reasons that women are being suppressed. All the military officers in the Burmese army are male. They assume that they have power because they are military plus they are men; so, they have a two-power position to suppress women. And, traditionally, women are defined to obey the man; and then, because the military rules Burma, women have to obey them. Because there is military rule in Burma, women are doubly violated in terms of their rights. There are many reasons that women suffer more than men. In ethnic areas, the majority of the refugees are women. The women and men live in one household. When the military impresses porters, the men work and the women have to take care of the family. When a woman is a porter, the family has to go there. This is how women face a double violation of their rights (*Aung Myo Min, quoted in* Irrawaddy, 1999).

In addition, with its various schemes and tactics, the junta government is underpinning traditional gender roles in Burma society. It reinforces the traditional Burmese women role while at the same time, preventing women from accessing avenues—such as opportunities for political participation and education—by which women would be able to change their status (*see* HDRU-NCGUB, 2007:366). In the draft constitution in the National Convention by the SPDC, one clause stressed clearly how the military generals deliberately excluding women's political participation. For one, it requires all presidential candidates to have served in the armed forces with full combat experience which simply ruled out Burmese women as the comparatively few in the armed forces—comprising of about 3,000 to 4,000 or one to two per cent—and without performing combat roles (*see* Mills, 2000:285).

It is no doubt that the political history of Burma is dominated by men, and even at present, this reality continues and further strengthened with the ruling junta in the position of State power. This was underscored by WLB representative Thin Thin Aung in an interview with Women's eNews:

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> Unless there is genuine political reform, this suffering of women will not end…So, that's what we ask for (*Thin Thin Aung, quoted in* Straub, 2005).

However, it is not only in the military regime by which the reality of male-power pervasiveness exists but it does too in the progressive opposition party like the NLD and other political organizations and groups. Military veterans hold senior positions also in the leading opposition parties while in most of the ethnic minority areas, armed opposition has long been a virtual way of life (*see* Smith, 2002a:271).

4.2 Woman Agency, Culture and Politics: In A Perpetual Process of Producing/ Shaping and Reproducing/Reshaping Each Other

As the realm of *culture*[21] is so powerful in shaping minds, people's values and behavior, it is usually being tapped by 'dominators' in the status quo—especially, those who are in political power—for them to continue benefiting from the social order. For one, instilling fear in the abstract and unknown, ideas and practices regarding *hpon* are continuously embedded in the cultural life (*see* Than Than Nwe, 2003:8) while the military State acts in collusion for women's exclusion and continued subordinate status.

These two spheres are major areas by which many Burmese women paradoxical situation is visible. Women are caught in a situation wherein they are rather forced to comply with the imposed socio-cultural norms while trying to catch up with the societal change; and, on another, questioning the status quo and struggling to break free from the cultural traditions that bind the female gender in a subordinate status with their male counterpart.

There are a number of courageous Burmese women activists who endeavor to defy the system of domination through involving themselves politically. This is a perfect example of how women as their own agencies struggle for 'inclusion' in a

[21] *'Culture'* is defined as an active agent, constantly changing, shaping and re-shaping and in the process reaffirming, strengthening or weakening existing social relations. It is also seen as providing the means for control and as being used to deny equal access to shared symbols. The visible imprint or the cultural landscape is clearly shown to represent contesting gender relations in both public and private space. *See*, Than Than Nwe. February 2003. Gendered Spaces: Women in Burmese Society [Internet]. Transformations, No. 6. pp. 3-4. Available from: <http://transformations.cqu.edu.au/journal/issue_06/pdf/nwe.pdf.> [Accessed 13 November 2006].

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society which is set to 'exclude' them from decision-making and leadership positions, particularly, in the public world of politics. It also shows how women negotiate for 'spaces' in various arenas of participation in Burmese society in *empowering*[22] themselves.

4.2.1 The 'Defeatist' Tendency

When one seems to fail or fall-short to deliver on set goals or on proving oneself, the self-confidence takes a nosedive as well. On the other hand, it can also be taken as women's simple acceptance of their limitation:

> 'They' (men) are more educated, while women, for long period in history, never had education like them; and then, our women movement, started very late…So, women these years, we cannot achieve all. So, we cannot expect all women know about equality (Ye).

This is one of the tendencies of how many women think about their selves, especially with regard to the gender inequality issue. A number of women may acknowledge the problem but feeling weak against the seemingly gigantic issue and take the defeatist path. There are also some who accept their subordinate status as Zeya revealed. She commented that:

> There are women who still believe in the tradition and accept gender inequality; I think it also depends on how they view it personally (Zeya).

Acceptance of gender inequality and their traditional role, some women become complacent with their subordinate status with men and trying to perform the best they can to live up with the societal expectation of what a good woman should be. However, some women, in their search or to simply experience being in 'power', are also devising ways to attain intrapersonal empowerment.

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[22] *'Empowerment'* - As understood here in this study, 'empowerment' is a process and is not something that can be given to people. Women empowerment involves the process of developing and increasing intrapersonal, interpersonal and women's political power itself for them to improve and achieve their goals and aspirations in life. However, there are certain circumstances and outside factors in the society that may hamper or serve as catalyst in the process.

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4.2.2 Devising Ways to Cope within the System

Going back to the discussion in the previous chapter on how gender perceptions influence women's access to power, it is also important to note that given the pervading system of male-domination in Burma society, some women continue to devise ways for them to participate wholly in the society (*see* Belak, 2002:267). Although it is not a conclusive truth with every Burmese woman attaining/exercising political power (even those in the mainstream politics or in the pro-democracy movement), reality cannot evade us that some women are using their men/male connections in their lives in order to be able to participate in politics. Approaches like this could be questioned for its 'political correctness' and its relevance to the women rights' cause of today but what can be derived from here is that given the various barriers on women political participation, women as 'Subjects' and 'agencies' of their own are using various means to surpass these hindrances (also, see first part of Chapter 5 for a more thorough discussion on women's initiatives in coping up with the system or taking on the challenge.)

4.2.3 "Taking on the Challenge to Resist": Involving Aspects on Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and Political Empowerment

In relation to greater participation and genuine recognition of the women's role in the society, some women take it as a challenge by taking action and pushing for change; may it be on the level of changing their own personal views and/or trying to influence others' mindsets by engaging themselves in programs designed to address the issue of gender inequality in general. Others respond by offering different perspective that is free from any standards of what women should be, must 'breakthrough' in, or, achieve in the society. Burmese women activists approach is basically one which adheres to the CEDAW standard and to implement the substantive equality within the pro-democracy movement. However, there seems to be some blurred areas with regard to the understanding on 'equality between men and women.' Take Kyaw's perspective as an example:

> I think we are all the same human beings, only sex are different, that's all I understand it. Women can do everything the same as men…In the future, I think,

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> as I myself experienced my own life I was in a foreign land, widow, younger, I was only 28 when I became a widow; I think women's participation is very important. If more women participate in the organization and in the community that organization will improve and progress even in the company or in the work place. I think in the future, if more women are involved in the politics, I hope all women can open their minds. But now, women in Burma, the ethnic, they think that politics is just for men. For me, my wish, my dream is to educate the young women, as many as I can, for the next generation; this is my vision. For men, they should be more accepting women's participation in every level…It's getting better now. And one thing now, in the Burmese movement, because of the WLB is quite strong in pushing…'They' (referring to the various Burmese political organizations) were forced to accept it, seems that way (Kyaw).

Kyaw shared her thoughts on taking the challenge to change the undesirable mindsets and negative stereotypes which undermine women, especially in their own political movement. She focused on greater participation of women in the political arena and the pressure made by the WLB to implement it among political organizations. But, it was evident that her general understanding of sex/gender 'equality' per se concurs more on the 'formal equality approach'. Although there are still some gray areas in terms of understanding 'women', from women perspective themselves (this argument on differences in understanding or viewing women is also part of the post-modern contention), this might not be seen as a big issue within the Burmese 'women movement as all agree that the focus of addressing the issue is affording rights to women from the CEDAW principle, and adherence to the principle international human rights standards in general.

With Ye, practicing at home what she is preaching on women's training is her approach to break from the traditional gender roles:

> My husband and I, we have some kind of understanding…He will listen to me and I will listen to him. So I am thinking, the women also have to talk and listen to their husbands. Some women are impatient, they don't want to talk. They think 'doing' is easier than 'talking'. So, they just do all the housework altogether and if the husbands see it and they wanted to help, then it's their choice, because it

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> really takes time to explain and for the men to understand it. Especially some men, they really need explanations although they seem to understand but, yes, they need trainings a lot. I am trying to do it. So, usually, the wives, they couldn't teach their husbands but they love to train other people. They also wanted to give counseling, woman to woman or woman to other men, but with their husbands, it's very difficult, you know. It's really difficult usually with your own family (Ye).

Given that the people in the movement fighting for a democratic cause and knowing that 'participation' is one of the major factors for a democracy to work, it seems that the conviction to really break-free from the traditional patriarchal system is still weak. Many of the Burmese activists' mindsets are still engulfed by the traditional mindset in viewing gender roles which only shows how strong the influence of the societal system in shaping people's minds, attitudes and behaviors is—the shaping of 'agency'. The structural/social environment outside oneself and the different levels of internal processing of these various realities among unique individuals are crucial factors in the shaping/making up of individual agency.

In addition, although coming from different family backgrounds, the intensity of various societal stimuli and the violence they observed and experienced in their lives, the Burmese women activists interviewed here in this study are undeniably sharing the same breadth of discrimination unique to women.

When asked on the prospect of gender equality in the pro-democracy movement in particular and in Burma as a whole, Zeya simply responded:

> I don't know; now and in the future, even if men do not accept this, we have to keep going and raise-awareness (Zeya).

A Burmese refugee in Canada gave her opinion on how to go about strengthening Burmese women's participation in the public sphere that would pave the way for Burmese women's genuine participation in the political sphere:

> It is true that we have few Burmese Women leadership in Burma. It needs to be changed. I believe that it is because of our culture. Burmese women are

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> traditionally supposed to be meek and gentle; a traditional Burmese woman is supposed to stay at home and do the household chores and depend on her husband. Besides, the Burmese children (esp, girls' making decision is largely depend on how their parents admonish them)...Women should go out and participate in sports and public affairs more instead of staying at home and doing the household chores. Going outside and exploring the world would help Burmese women to be future leadership. Good parenting also help children, especially girls, improve their public social and leadership skills. We should encourage women to voice their thoughts. Information and books nourish a person's thought so providing Burmese young women with good sources of knowledge would be a good way of encouraging their leadership skills. For instance, we should let Burmese young ladies read 'Letters from Burma', 'Freedom from Fear', 'The Voice of Hope', and 'The Lady: Aung San Suu Kyi: Nobel Laureate and Burma's Prisoner'. By reading those inspirational books can open Burmese young ladies' eyes and bring them into Women Leadership roles in Burma in the future. Then, I believe that there will be less gender inequality in Burma in the future (*Yee M. Khine, quoted in* Democratic Voices of Burma, 2006).

Indeed, in order for things to work towards eradicating gender inequality in Burma, the very first step is for the acceptance of the fact that it exist. The SPDC's continued denial of this fact does not help at all even if the regime is mouthing their commitment for the 'advancement of Burmese women'. Also, despite the conditions of conflict, social expectations remain to be unchanging and continue to exert strong pressures on women (Women of Burma, 2000b:18). This leaves the pro-democracy movement to act on gender issue, especially if it is in a way posturing as carrying the legitimate voice of the Burmese people. Also, the pro-democracy movement must also cease acknowledging and tackling the gender inequality issue as a separate issue and as an advocacy of the Burmese women activists alone.

In this light, both Burmese men and women in general must comprehend that as individuals and as a group, they can all help in tearing down the traditional Burmese belief and practices starting from themselves by changing their views and deeds towards a more egalitarian gender relationship and supporting each other to make the

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change possible (the ones concerning the ‘intrapersonal’ and the ‘interpersonal’ change). And of course, women have a great role in taking the lead in this struggle.

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CHAPTER V
SPECIFIC INITIATIVES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

This chapter presents the Burmese women activists various initiatives to stamp out gender-based discrimination in Burma society as a whole and what they have achieved so far in propagating gender equality within the pro-democracy movement. It provides a description of the Burmese women organizations' work in relation to addressing the gender issue and how far their women agenda and set priorities being met in the pro-democracy movement in terms of the aim of attaining a gender-balanced representation in the decision-making and leadership positions within the democratic movement itself.

Understanding 'initiatives' in a broader concept of the word as steps taken in foreseeing advantageous result—may it be for personal gain or for the benefit of the women's cause in general—the first part of this chapter illustrates the various initiatives of the Burmese women to break free from the traditional gender-based roles, which are usually (if not always) seen as disempowering and delimiting women's participation and attainment of their aspirations in the society. It portrays how these women seized opportunities, created/carved their own spaces and haggle for inclusion, particularly, in the political front of participation.

However, the 'ingenuity' might not always be described as a conscious effort to liberate women as a whole, that is, from the bondage of the gender-based roles imposed by traditional norms. Many of these women initiatives, especially those involved in the mainstream ('male'-stream) politics, could be categorized as concurring to the traditional pattern of attaining power in the society. But, then, how well these women handle the 'opened up' spaces for participation is also an embodiment of woman agency at work, especially the case of the Burmese women activists carving their own spaces within the pro-democracy movement.

In the process of honing/building up woman agency, this study also underscores the great influence of the existing societal system/arrangement in shaping

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certain women tendencies and responses on issues surrounding them as individuals or women as a group.

5.1. "Using the Male Connection in Politics

In understanding women's condition, one must always bear in mind that women as their own agencies—in coming-up for a decision to be involved in politics for example, finding ways how to be involved in politics, creating means to have a wider influence in public arena and so on—are also being molded and influenced by the environment outside themselves. Given this, women then have dual characteristics wherein they are regarded as unique individuals in their own rights and acting as 'products' of the traditional/normative society on the other hand.

Although, almost all Burmese women getting higher political positions in the mainstream politics follow the same traditional path of using the politically powerful 'men' in their lives in order to gain position in the political world; this is not a conclusive reality in the pro-democracy movement.

5.1.1 "An Expression of Women's Weakness or Path to Empowerment?"

In Burma, very few women who got the chance to enter the world of politics and/or got lucky to achieve decision-making and leadership positions were mainly because of their male connections—husbands, fathers, or other relatives. Throughout the country's history, it shows how significant the gender perception is as it has great influence on women's access or attaining political power. Usually, through the politically powerful men in their lives, that women as wives, mothers, sisters and other close affinities, could exercise political power such as the opportunity to hold certain political positions which are highly regarded in the social life. This analysis also sits well with Belak's (2002) observation stating that what this trend actually demonstrates is how greatly gender perceptions affect women's access to power and the difficulty women have to undergo in able to achieve public credibility.

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1. A Quick Peek in History: "Burmese Women Exercising 'Power' in the Ancient Past"

There were some significant evidences that could be drawn from Burma's ancient history wherein Burmese women—especially the wives and daughters of the male rulers/leaders—have had gained recognition in the political field. For instance, during the period between 13th to 15th centuries, the queens (especially the '*Mibaya Khaung'* or the Chief Queen) or the consorts of the reigning kings had strong status, for, queens were highly regarded as the king's advisers and earned praises or took on blame as well for the state of the kingdom (*see* Khaing, 1984:7). In 1826, a European author observed that:

> The wife of a judge or governor is often seen at his side, assisting in the decision of cases; and the wives of viceroys and other high officers are often permitted to hold their own courts, and decide independently on petitions presented to them (*cited in* Mills, 2000:267).

In another example, Khaing (1984) noted that when a police sergeant is not around, the sergeant's wife or the headman's wife in essence takes his place. If one has business with a police sergeant or *Thungyi* and finds him absent, one discusses and settles the matter with the *Sazingadaw* or *Tungyigadaw*, the sergeant's wife or headman's wife (*see* Khaing, 1984:12). During the height of various foreign invasions in the past centuries and even in the long civil war, there were proofs of women joining the battlefield in the ethnics' struggle to preserve their independence[23] (*see* Belak, 2002:258); chronicles showing Kachin, Chin and Shan women warriors fighting alongside with their men counterparts (*see* Khaing, 1984:9:12); substantiation that some women participated actively in politics, both in the forefront and in supporting roles.

[23] In this study, citing examples of women joining the forefronts in the battlefields does not mean that it in any way support violent acts or wars as this must be put in a proper context. During the early times when notion of gender discrimination or the idea of peace and non-violent movements or the civil society were absent still, women doing combat and committing such violent acts perhaps could be seen as a need rather than a choice to protect their sovereignty to ward-off foreign invasions. Moreover, if we stick to the fact that gender division of labor exist already which categorize joining the army and doing combat as 'male' domain and were 'manly' deeds, these women warriors had proved that notion wrong.

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However, women who had the chance to rule and/or had relative influence in political affairs then were just depiction of the 'elite' women's experiences; especially the kin of those in the military leadership.

2. The 'Powerful' Women of the Generals

The wives and daughters of the military generals for example, influenced and used their 'male connections' to gain political benefits but not really for the sake of uplifting the conditions of Burmese women or for the betterment of the country's situation at all. The centralization of the political and economic power in the hands of the military regime also gave considerable power to these women for economic and political maneuvering.

For instance, the daughter of Gen. Ne Win, Sanda Win, who, because of her advantageous position having access to restricted goods became one of the key players in the thriving black market (*see* Mills, 2000:278). This was also very much evident with Win's scrutiny of the situation adding that:

> Khin Nyunt's wife, because he was in the top position, so, his wife will also be in the top position. But if the husband is removed in that position, the wife and his friends also will be removed from their positions…So all the top positions which women can get depends on the positions of their husbands…The whole family can be in the top positions too, even in the government or in organizations like 'women' organizations. I don't know in English but they will say it's a non-government organization, but actually, it is also with the government. The government founded it to show that they care for the women in Burma. If the husband is in top position, then the wife will also have the top position for that women organization. If your husband is not in power, you also will not be in power. So, that means, you will just depend on your husband (Win).

The same argument could also be use with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi using her father's name in order to enter the world of politics. Like what Mills (2000) has said:

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> Her (Aung San Suu Kyi) initial rapid ascendancy to political prominence owed much to her identification with her father, Aung San, so that she conformed to the traditional pattern of women's attaining power in Burma (Mills, 2000: 283).

3. Women's Access to 'Power' in the Pro-Democracy Movement

Although Aung San Suu Kyi's attaining power could be classified with the traditional pattern, her end-goal is very much dissimilar with that of the elite women close to the junta leaders.

Remarkably different from the generals' wives and daughters of the Burmese military leadership, Aung San Suu Kyi became the embodiment of the non-violent pro-democracy struggle and most of the Burmese women activists identify themselves to her. She became the symbol boosting the female gender to be critical and be involved in politics. This sentiment was echoed by many Burmese women activists, just like this Burmese refugee:

> I heard about politics from older people from the time I was young. But I believed that it was not of concern to women. But then when the general uprising took place in Burma we became immediately involved in politics. Since Daw Aung San Suu Kyi joined the political arena and as we started listening to the international news, we learned that women could also participate in politics and they could freely choose to take part in politics (*6th woman/Code CINT 279, 'Focus Group Discussion with Refugee women of Different Ethnic Groups,' cited* in Belak, 2002:252).

Albeit, appearing as a physically frail woman, Aung San Suu Kyi projected a powerful symbolic contrast to the violent and aggressive image of the authoritarian military government in power (*see* Mills, 2000:284). She also acts not for her self-interest alone but with the vision for the betterment of all Burmese women's condition and to uplift the whole country from its economic and political dire situation. With her showing an undying commitment to end her countrymen/women's sufferings under the harsh military dictatorship; her patience, perseverance, non-violent actions and all for human rights and Burma's democratization; she became an inspiration and a driving force for many Burmese men and women to persevere in the midst of so

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many challenges for the sake of the country. In a way, just like what her father did at *Panglong*, she once again united the ethnically-diverse Burma; this time, in keeping the hope alive that there is an alternative to the present military regime—that is 'democracy'.

Kyaw's case is quite interesting as she has her own share on the subject on 'attaining power'. She disclosed her own life experience in marrying one of the political leaders of the armed resistance group operating in the ethnic State where she lived:

> I was just a student before I came to Thailand…I just graduated in high school. The revolution group came to my parents and me; they wanted me to go to Thailand for the sake of the people; to study more in foreign country; to work there with the people in the organizations…When I arrived here (Thailand), I had to marry our leader, the movement leader…They don't want to tell the whole story when I was in Burma because they worry that I won't come here. So, they told me that I have to study…so my parents said, okay…My parents were actually on the background. In the community, almost all of the people support the armed resistance group and my parent was a Chief in our area, so, they really need to support the resistance group. And also, we need to support the SLORC/SPDC. We were under the government control and we were also under the resistance group's control; so, my father needed to 'play' a lot between these power players...And then, when I came here, after four months, the leader told me about marrying my husband, one of their officials; but, my husband did not accept. He said, 'Why do you ask other people like this? If you bring her here to study, then let her study first'. But, the Commander and all other Officers…wanted me to marry my husband because he was a leader and he was quite old then….40 years old already. They think that the leaders should have family. Actually, his younger brother met me in the house and he was the one who asked me to come here in Thailand. It's a long story….And, so, that is why I joined the movement here. And since 1970, I married my husband…But, actually, we didn't have the chance to really live together.
>
> My husband was always traveling, always talking, negotiating with other ethnic revolution groups. My husband just came here (Bangkok) for buying

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> ammunitions and foreign relationship with other ethnic groups…I was the same like my husband, we're comrades. He never thought of me as a wife. He orders me, 'do this, do that'; to prepare for the soldiers food, clothes or equipment. At the time, we had a camp at the border and every time the soldiers will come to Thailand, we always have to prepare the food, clothing, shoes, socks, bags; everything, from head to foot. That was my duty. And also, I have to study Thai and English, my husband told me. I studied Secretarial and English course. After about six years, my husband was assassinated. Since then, I live with my three children. I brought up my children myself; I gave well education to the three of them (Kyaw).

Kyaw is like an epitome of those women who treads between what can be called as 'traditional woman' and on some level, one who braved to break the very traditional role expected of her to do. As a young girl, her discernment of the events and issues may not be enough then for her to resist the pressure that people (particularly, the male leaders and parents) around her were putting on her; especially on deciding on how to lead her own life. However, as a young girl's 'agency', she rose from the status of just being a mere 'subject' of the events (when she yielded to the societal pressure) and decided to be a real 'Subject' when she became decisive to do her part in helping women from the ethnic State where she came from:

> 30 years ago, I was also helping the young ethnic women from my State who were cheated by the brokers (illegal recruiters) like giving them good jobs; those being trafficked to Bangkok. So we bring them all together and send back or go to other place for job. We were doing it by ourselves; not under a woman's organization or any other organizations, the 'wife of the leaders'. They depended on me because in Bangkok, no other ethnic from our State; only me, only one family that time…
>
> Now, am choosing the young women to be coordinators (in their women organization, member of WLB) but I am still the supervisor. I still need to supervise them. I cannot give them all yet the 'power'; am still guiding them. We are working with the ethnic communities inside…my name is still influential so

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> we can go easily. But with the new generation, they don't know their background, they have no connection, so, they still need to use my name (Kyaw).

And just like Aung San Suu Kyi, Kyaw has a personality radiating of an unselfish leader. She has this noble vision of helping to uplift the Burmese women's condition through equal participation in all spheres of the society, especially in the political arena:

> I think women's participation is very important. If more women participate in the organization or in the community that organization will improve and progress; even in the company or in the work place. I think in the future, if more women are involved in the politics, I hope all women can open their minds. But now, women in Burma, the ethnic, they think that politics is just for men…My wish, my dream is to educate the young women, as many as I can, for the next generation. This is my vision. For men, they should be more accepting women's participation in every level (Kyaw).

5.2 "Breaking the Mold': The Courageous Women of Burma"

Because of the increasing economic and political problems in the country, more and more Burmese women are trying to break free from their traditional roles in the society as seen by the steady increase of the numbers of Burmese women working outside Burma for economic reasons or/and to join the pro-democracy movement's struggle for Burma's democratization, to work on the humanitarian field or on issues particular to women. Some even joined the armed ethnic groups that are still operating inside the country.

However, the number of these women 'being politicized' is still very small. Even in the ethnic minority areas where SPDC's terrorization is intense, women will tend to work on resolving problems in their families than to be directly involved in political activities. Burmese women are finding it harder to participate in the political sphere as problems brought by SPDC's mismanagement of the country wreak havoc in the private sphere too. But then, transcending such situation of always regarded to be just 'victims' of the situation, there are a handful of Burmese women who gain

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prominence and keep on to be role models, serve as inspirations and offer hope to their fellow Burmese women.

Despite the obstacles being faced by the Burmese women in entering the 'male'-stream political sphere, there are also quite a number of women who are trying and never stopped trying to transcend such barriers hindering them to participate fully in the public sphere of political participation. It is sending a very important message to the consciousness of both the Burmese men and women that Burmese women are starting to creep out of the 'box' of the private sphere where traditions and cultural norms had hid them for a long time. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi[24] for example.

These women are what we can call the 'crème of the crop' in Burma's long struggle for democracy. Ironically, the terror imposed by the military regime on the Burmese women was also the result of these Burmese women's earned prominence now. Furthermore, these inspiring examples of few famous Burmese women still clearly stand in contrast against the big pool of Burmese women who have yet to explore the public sphere of political participation and continue to live within the abyss of the traditional household's private sphere.

5.2.1 'The Lady' as a 'Role Model'

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, also referred to as 'The Lady', especially inside Burma, is a respectful title bestowed on her by the Burmese people as mentioning of her name out loud inside the country is prohibited by the military junta.

'In Aung San's Name'…

Interestingly, the SLORC/SPDC also refers to her as the 'The Lady', "less out of deference, however, than to avoid mentioning the name of her famous father, General Aung San," (Victor, 1999:5). She accepted the fact that because of her association to his father's name that the Burmese people bestowed the same love to her as on her father. As she said,

[24] Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was first placed under house arrest in 1989 and since then has spent 11 of the past 17 years in detention. Despite the public clamor internationally for her immediate release, her house arrest was again extended for a year by the SPDC last May of this year. To read more on details of her detentions, *See*, Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma). 23 May 2007. She Must Be Free. Bangkok: ALTSEAN-Burma.

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> I think the very first reason why the Burmese people trusted me was because of their love for my father. They had never doubted his goodwill towards them. And he had proved with his life that he was ready to sacrifice himself for them. Because of that they loved him and I think a lot of that love was transferred to me. So I started off with an advantage – a ready-made fund of *metta* on which to build. So you cannot separate the fact that I'm my father's daughter from the fact that the people and I have managed to build up solid bonds of *metta* between us (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi *quoted in* Houtman, 1999:361).

Liberal, Humanist and Buddhist Ideals…

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's vision for Burma was more based on the universal ideals of liberalism, humanism and Buddhism in achieving democracy; thus, her strategies of non-violence and civil disobedience manifest in her display of cool courage in the line of fire, her charisma, her eloquence, her vision and political tactics. She stressed the need for self-responsibility, for self-esteem and courageous action in waging her campaign as one of 'freedom from fear' (*see* Mills, 2000:284). Her unwavering courage and determination in confronting the military regime became a source of inspiration for the Burmese people and for her supporters around the world (*see* ALTSEAN-Burma, 2007:1) as she became the "true symbol of democracy" (Chan, 2007) for most of them.

'Feminist' Perspective?

One very important point is that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself had not infused the pro-democracy movement with a feminist perspective but her very gender became a significant attribute of her leadership as she victoriously broke new ground by presenting a model of fearlessness and transformed the feminine role from passivity to assertiveness (*see* Mills, 2000:284). Because of this, many Burmese women were inspired by her, thus, more and more Burmese girls and women are joining the struggle for Burma's democracy. Just like Mills (2000) emphasized,

> Her female gender and personal experience introduced the possibility for a different and democratic direction for Burma's political development (Mills, 2000:276-277).

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Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's case is indeed exceptional and she has a significant effect in Burma society. The mere fact that she has the power to influence the majority of Burmese population, a uniting force among the citizens of various ethnic backgrounds, and her being a 'woman' challenging the authoritarian male-pervaded military regime are fair enough reasons for the SPDC to get rattled. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi did not just enter and made a statement in the male-pervaded political sphere but she indeed 'rocked the boat' with her introduction of a democratic alternative where implicitly suggesting that equality could thrive; far more different from the authoritarian military rule where male-power is favored. In her keynote address to the 31st of August 1995 NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi says,

> The adversities that we have had to face together have taught all of us involved in the struggle to build a truly democratic political system in Burma that there are no gender barriers that cannot be overcome. The relationship between men and women should, and can be, characterized not by patronizing behavior or exploitation, but by *metta* (that is to say loving kindness), partnership and trust. We need mutual respect and understanding between men and women, instead of patriarchal domination and degradation, which are expressions of violence and engender counter-violence. We can learn from each other and help one another to moderate the 'gender weaknesses' imposed upon us by traditional or biological factors (*Daw Ang San Suu Kyi quoted in* Houtman, 1999:360).

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi again dwelt on the idea of a democratic political system, humanism and the concept of loving kindness which she cited as part of Buddhism; these three as alternative against the prevailing patriarchal system and male domination in Burma society.

5.2.2 'The Women MPs': Direct Participation in the 'Male'-stream Politics

There were also a total of 84 women who fought alongside with 'The Lady' with the aim of bringing democracy in Burma through direct participation in the 'male'-stream politics. They stood in the 1990 elections but only 15 lady MPs won

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the parliamentary seats. Aung San Suu Kyi was not among the 15 elected women MPs for she was detained and banned then by the SLORC/SPDC for participating in the 1990 elections. Those who got in were the following (note: name followed by their corresponding status at the moment): Sein Tein from Kachin State, deceased; Nan Khin Htwe Myint from Karen State, detained/released; May Hnin Kyi, detained/released and Ohn Kyi, dismissed as MP—both from Mandalay Division; Khin Htway Kywe and Tin Saw Oo, deceased, from Mon State; Hla Hla Moe from Pegu Division; San San Win, deceased; San San, exile in Thailand, May Win Myint, imprisoned; San May, dismissed as MP; Khin Aye Myint—all from Rangoon Division; Hse Hse and Khin San Hlaing—both from Sagaing Division; and, May Phyo from Shan State (*see* Zin Linn, 2007). Just like their male-MP counterparts, they were all barred from doing their parliamentarian jobs.

5.2.3 The Rights Activists/Grassroot-Community Leaders, Social and Health Workers Upholding the Public Good

As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and a handful of Burmese women MPs chose to directly participate in the world of politics by challenging the military regime through popular elections, there were also other Burmese women who ventured working for the public good in the humanitarian field and in organizations/groups helping in addressing issues related to human rights/woman rights through various advocacies, lobbying and campaigns. Many of these women are quite making a difference in their own communities and some even became a renowned name as they gain recognition in the international community with the work they are doing.

Among them is Su Su Nway, a 36 year-old women in Rangoon, an NLD Youth member and a recipient of the 2006 Canada's John Humphrey Freedom award (Chan, 2007). She is always on-and-off being held in prison by the SPDC for her courageous acts as human rights defender in the community level. She gain prominence internationally when she sued a local Burmese authority and successfully campaigned to bring to justice the four village headmen accused of forcing people to work against their will (*see* The Irrawaddy, 2005).

Another inspiring example is the refugee worker Paw Lu Lu who has managed a 'safe house' on the Thai-Burma border since 1993 as sanctuary for refugees (those

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coming from Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia and China), provides vocational training in areas such as weaving and sewing, cares for more than 100 HIV/AIDS patients and was among the 1,000 women worldwide nominated jointly by a Swiss movement for 2005 Nobel Peace Prize (*see* Shah Paung, 2005).

Same with Dr. Cynthia Maung, a 48-year old Karen, who was a 2002 Magsaysay Awardee for Community Leadership, in recognition of her humane and fearless response to the urgent medical needs of thousands of refugees and IDPs along the Thai-Burma border (RMACL, 2002). She was also the first to win the US-sponsored Jonathan Mann Award in 1999 and in April 2004 issue of the Time Magazine, she was listed as one of its cover stories on 'Asian Heroes' (*see* Shah Paung, 2005).

Another well-known young activist in the field of human rights is the 27 year-old Charm Tong. She begun her rights activism at the age of 16 and joined the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF), testified before the UN Commission on Human Rights about the situation among Burma's ethnic Shan, co-founded the Shan Women Action Network (SWAN) when she was 18 and have been involved in many more projects in assisting Shan migrants/refugees women and children. In 2004, she was named as one of the 'Women of the World' by Claire Marie Magazine; received the Reebok's Human Rights Award in 2005 and was included in the Time Magazine's list of 'Asian Heroes' (*see* The Irrawaddy, 2005).

Similarly, Zipporah Sein, the General Secretary of Karen Women's Organization (KWO) has worked with her organization since 1985. An energetic human rights worker, she focused her advocacy on the rights of women and children while contributed to a lot of conferences on women's rights issues and for democratic reform in Burma (*see* Shah Paung, 2005).

From the continuously unfolding reality of Burmese women growing activism, we can also reflect on several crucial points. First, the fact that Burmese women activists staying outside Burma like those working and affiliated in the women's organizations and other groups venturing to humanitarian field in the Thai-Burma borders have more space to maneuver in doing politically related activities than those staying inside the country—Su Su Nway and Aung San Suu Kyi for example—who have very limited 'space' for political maneuvering. The stake that the women inside

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Burma has to take are far greater compared to those who are staying outside the country. Inside Burma, women can face detention, military brutality of all kind, or even risk their lives with the direct control of the SPDC over the country. The women activists who managed to carry out their work in the border areas are far better-off and beyond the SPDC's direct control; despite of course the new dangers they are facing as migrants (documented or undocumented migrants) or as refugees and working as human rights/women rights activists at the same time.

5.2.4 The Women's League of Burma (WLB) and Its 12-Member Organizations[25]

Women who have fled Burma to escape what they describe as systematic violence against women by the junta government have banded together to help other survivors. Thinking also that starting from them, as women, they could effectively address their own issues and must act on it. As one of the Burmese women said:

> Women are more daring and have broader interests than men because they are suffering a lot from the crises of economy, family problems, the deterioration of the health and education systems. We have always suffered these difficulties and despaired. Usually, Burmese wash their cares from their minds by sitting in teahouses. Women can't do this like men. We have to tolerate our burdens. Therefore I believe that women know the difficulties more than men do, and we try harder than men do as well (*Code CINT 91, quoted in* Belak, 2002:295).

With the encouragements they got coming from some supportive individuals within the pro-democracy movement and people from solidarity groups/organizations sympathetic to their cause; the push made by funding agencies for the political organizations to take on women issue; and, above all, the political will of the women activists themselves to unite together; the Women League of Burma (WLB) was then born.

WLB incorporates in all its work the adherence and promotion of the human rights principles and standards, particularly those set forth by the CEDAW. With this

[25] *See* Appendix D for a short background on the work of the WLB and its 12-member organizations, pp. 183 - 196.

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as guiding framework, WLB continue devising ways in making the Burmese women voices heard as one in their fight against the military dictatorship and the patriarchal system as a whole; and, at the same time, strongly advocating for a genuine participation of women in the decision-making and leadership positions within the pro-democracy movement.

Inception and Its Work

WLB was founded on the ninth of December 1999 in Chiang Mai, Thailand as an umbrella organization of the already existing women organizations coming from different ethnic backgrounds. It was the culmination event of the 2nd Forum of different Burmese women's organizations wherein delegates who attended the forum shared their views on ways and means to find a common platform, and how to work together to promote the role and participation of women at all levels, including Burma's national affairs. WLB "believes firmly that the contribution of women in the struggle to bring about human rights, democracy and equal rights for all nationalities in Burma will have a great impact, and their participation in the national reconciliation and peace-building process is essential," (Women of Burma, n.d.a). From this, it drew its aims as follows: (i) to work for the empowerment and development of women; (ii) to encourage women's participation in decision-making in all spheres of life; (iii) to enable women to participate effectively in the movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation; (iv) by working together, and encouraging cooperation between the different groups, the WLB hopes to build trust, solidarity and mutual understanding among women of all nationalities in Burma.

Principally, WLB advocacy strategies which are designed and implemented by them as well are grounded on the idea of inclusive political processes. It simultaneously bring the messages of its member-organizations to international attention while at the same time garnering education, experience, connective relationships and resources for them to bring back to their related communities. WLB is seen to be uniquely positioned to advocate for women and change in Burma as it serves as a link where grassroots/local/national, regional, and international processes meet and connections are made ((*see* Women of Burma, n.d.a). In concrete terms, WLB advocacy work connects grassroots communities in and displaced from Burma

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to global processes and resources through the United Nations and regional forums - and vice versa. As its internal advocacy, WLB has taken on the role to be a platform for women of Burma to push for political change in Burma and work for gender equality in society as a whole. It advocates on behalf of its member-organizations representing women and their families in diverse situations—whether inside Burma, displaced to refugee camps or living as undocumented migrant workers in neighboring countries. WLB conducts gender education, training and empowerment amongst themselves and within its members' respective communities displaced from Burma. In order to respond better to the issues mentioned, WLB has set up three core programs namely Peace and Reconciliation, Political Empowerment and Women against Violence.

At the moment, WLB has 12 organizations under its membership—Burmese Women's Union (BWU), Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT), Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO), Kuki Women's Human Rights Organisation (KWHRO), Lahu Women's Organisation (LWO), Palaung Women's Organisation (PWO), Pa-O Women's Union (PWU), Rakhaing Women's Union (RWU), Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), Tavoy Women's Union (TWU), Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB). The umbrella group and its member organizations continue to garner recognition around the globe especially on their work on awareness-raising about human rights violations under the Burmese military junta. For one, the Peter Gruber Foundation awarded the SWAN and the WLB $200,000 and the 2005 International Women's Rights Prize in 2005 (*see* Straub, 2005). Women representatives from both groups traveled to New York and Washington to accept the award and to raise awareness around the globe about human rights violations under the Burmese military dictatorship.

5.3 Women's Initiatives and Achievements

With the birth of WLB uniting the 12 ethnic-based women organizations, the voices of Burmese women are now better heard as one.

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> We were able to form this Women's League of Burma umbrella group so we can raise the issue more strongly with our one voice (*Thin Thin Aung, quoted in* Straub, 2005).

The Burmese women activists now could advocate better and advance the women's cause in various fora, educate more young generation to be aware of the gender/women issue and those issues surrounding it, and on some degree, starting to participate in the decision-making and leadership levels within the pro-democracy movement. All these did not happen over night but through the help of some enlightened male comrades within the movement, the encouragement given by various organizations working on Burma issues, the push of the funding agencies for the political organizations to adopt a more gender-balanced participation, and above all, the political will and the strong commitment of the women-activists themselves to change the status quo of women's continuous exclusion in the political setting.

5.3.1 WLB as an Independent Women's Hub and Sanctuary

Having a physical office alone, working independently and as a hub where women could freely discuss Burma and women issues among themselves, WLB became a kind of sanctuary as well for women. Member-women organizations of the WLB which perform as just 'women wing' of the various ethnic-based political groups before shifted to being 'independent' ethnic-based women organizations. Before, women were just providing assistance and various services in the various political organizations they are in, like for example, setting up venues for important trainings, workshops, meetings (which includes decorating, cooking/providing food and cleaning/clearing up the place after the events/activities) manage the day-to-day financial and logistical/technical matters and devise small time income generating activities during important events. Now, women have more space for maneuverings on the kind of strategies, programs and projects they wanted to prioritize as women organization and not just as 'service providers', or women lobby and advocacy wing of any political groups. Also, women see to it that their work approach would benefit the women in their communities as well.

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> Because we are women organizations, we wanted to plan for what we wanted to be in the future. We just don't want to go internationally on the issues but we wanted to build the capacity of the women from the community. If some of us will think and go international and the local women cannot go with us, what will happen? From our Women Empowerment program, we have to give training and workshop, and, empowerment and capacity-building. So, in the community, we have to encourage them and give a lot of training for them to be able to speak up in the community and local level; making decisions; and at the same time, to solve some problems like domestic violence or trafficking; and encourage and empower them to come together and to speak in different levels (Zeya).

5.3.2 Adherence to the CEDAW

WLB incorporates in all its work the adherence and promotion of the human rights principles and standards, particularly those set forth by the CEDAW. With this as guiding framework, WLB continue devising ways in making the Burmese women voices heard as one in their fight against the military dictatorship and the patriarchal system as a whole; and, at the same time, strongly advocating for a genuine participation of women in the decision-making and leadership positions within the pro-democracy movement.

5.3.3 'Sneaking In' in the Male-Pervaded Political Organizations

One of the initiatives of the Burmese women activists that could be counted as well is seizing the potential of networking and reaching out to various political groups where women's views could be included and institutionalized within these organizations/groups. Networking of course could be maximized if the women themselves could gradually break in and directly access various positions, targeting especially the decision-making and leadership posts within these political groups in the movement. As Ye emphasized:

> Like [Thida], she is the Chairperson of [one of the political organizations]. Some leaders of the [women organizations] are also leaders of [the political organizations]. We are taking different positions so one person or three must work on women's organizations and take responsibility because we wanted to

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network with them and we also wanted to have a ‘space’ in the leading political organizations, that’s how we try to ‘sneak in’ (Ye).

5.3.4 Devising a Political Structure that is ‘Hierarchy-Free’

Courageously taking the risk of initiating new ways of thinking and implementing it within WLB, and at the same time, encouraging all its member-women organizations to do the same could be one of the counted successes of the WLB already. Their introduction of an organizational structure that is free of the usual ‘traditional top-down structure’ and proving that it works only proved that there are still ‘viable political alternatives’ beyond what is being offered by the present system. However, how this work in a much bigger political setting should need further exploring.

5.3.5 Quota System as Temporary Special Measures for Women

Another women initiative within the movement is their introduction of the temporary special measures such as the quota system which is already heeded by some political organizations and even the various committees inside the refugee camps. This affirmative action is basically to ensure that at least 30 percent in various leadership/decision-making positions/committees that women should be represented and be part of the whole decision-making process. This could be counted as another very positive development.

5.4 Challenges: “Traveling the Long Road to Democracy”

The identified women ‘initiatives’ given above—starting from the inception of the WLB; using CEDAW as primary tool not only in seeking redress but applying its important principles within the pro-democracy movement as well; the conscious effort not only to ‘network with’ the political organizations within the movement but to be ‘part of it’ and occupy the posts which were made inaccessible for them before; devising alternative kind of management within their women organizations which is more based on ‘team work’ rather than conforming to the traditional hierarchical type of organizational structure; and, the introduction of special measures for women such as quota system in order to realize equal results—turned out to be on some levels, as

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accomplishments of the Burmese women movement already as all these seemed to be pointing towards positive development that could help them move towards their over-all goal of achieving gender equality in Burma society; which means, starting the groundwork within the home turf of their pro-democratic movement as well. And, early on, they are reaping some of the fruits of their labor as their work are slowly making way and being recognized and accepted by their comrades within the democratic movement; not to mention the fame they are garnering in the international community and even the 'scornful' recognition of their work by the SPDC as well.

However, the road to genuine democracy and attaining equality is still a long way and their journey would surely be not without difficulty, or else, it could not be called as a 'struggle' if it is that easy. This groundbreaking phase is very crucial as well given that change is not static entity. Various factors would continue to influence, shape and re-shape the women's thinking, their work, the reality outside their Subjectivity and so on.

> The strength of the women I think now became strong because of the WLB. We are trying to organize all ethnic women forming a strong community among ourselves to push for gender equality with the men. I think the men are strong, powerful because of the traditional values in the society that place men as leaders, while with women, there is still a need for them to speak out, learn to speak out. Most are not yet ready for decision-making position in the movement; they have no confidence on themselves. Even myself, I've been with the movement for many years already…and also, we have to speak on our mother tongue. But when in the movement, sometimes we need to speak Burmese or English; we are not confident to speak out because we don't use the language always (Kyaw).

In here, Kyaw pointed out the difficulty of the empowerment process itself as power dynamics lurks within the three different levels—intrapersonal, interpersonal and the entire system in society that maintains gender inequality.

5.4.1 Changing the Traditional Mindsets…

In determining achievements concerning any movements towards positive change of a given advocacy, assessing its impacts (direct and indirect) could be one

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basic measurement that could be used in gauging progress relating to gender equality. For one, any change on how the Burmese women view 'politics' now as compared before when WLB and the different women's organizations were non-existent yet could be one effective way. The following are some of the responses of women who when asked about what comes to their mind when they hear the word 'politics':

> When I began to hear about politics I thought that it was not of concern to women. And I thought that it was also not of concern to me. I thought that it was solely for men. Later, since we gradually got involved with the organization, we accepted that women also could take part in politics (*1st woman, Code CINT 279, quoted in* Belak, 2002:252).

> At first, I believed that politics could only be done by MPs. I didn't think of the things that we were doing in our community as politics. In the beginning we thought that only the higher-ranking officials like the MPs and township and village LORC members could do politics. And if we heard about the politics, it was beyond our comprehension. Most people knew that politics was something done by the wicked for the sole purpose of grabbing power from one another (2nd *woman, Code CINT 279, quoted in* Belak, 2002:252).

> When I was in Burma I simply thought that politics could not impact civilians anyway. If I heard 'politics' I thought that it is a business which only the very highly educated or most experienced people who know very well and can talk about politics are able to do. We knew that the national politics had stagnated, but even then we had no idea about being involved in politics. We also had no confidence to get involved, because we had no hope that we could access the political process and we thought politics was above us (4th w*oman, Code CINT 279, quoted in* Belak, 2002:252).

> As I am a rural woman and lived in a rural place all of my life, like other rural people, I was afraid when I heard the word 'politics.' We thought that politicians were just people who oppress ordinary people, that's all. But later we realized that politics is of concern to all ethnic nationalities (7th w*oman, Code CINT 279, quoted in* Belak, 2002:252).

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> Before I joined the revolution I used to listen to the radio secretly about the political news, not like here where we can listen to the news freely. So I had heard about politics but had never dared to talk about politics. But when I came to the revolution and also my husband was serving in revolution, sometimes he told me about the politics, and I have learned that both men and women can be involved in politics (8th w*oman, Code CINT 279, quoted in* Belak, 2002:252).

For women activists or even for those whose lives have been touched in one way or another by WLB and its member-organizations, changing their long-held views about politics in connection to the sex/gender roles would be a very positive shift contributing to the positive shaping of the women agency, especially in appreciating themselves as women and a boost for their self-worth and human dignity as well. With their fellow male activists, they 'pushed' them not to marginalize or set aside women's roles in the movement.

> We ask them to accept that women's political participation is important to change the political and social situation) in Burma. Women need to be at a decision-making level in all fields, so that women's perspective and women's protection will be put into the policy (*Thin Thin Aung, quoted in* Straub, 2005).

A call that one of the leading Burmese male activists, Moe Thee Zun, has made as well:

> It is time to get past our misconceptions and fears about women in leadership positions. They will succeed or fail in the numbers no greater than men have succeeded or failed. I am not suggesting that we have a 'quota' for women in leadership positions—that would be as foolish as the current policy of exclusion. What I am saying is that we need good leaders. There is a shortage of good leaders in our movement. That shortage is because we have excluded women from leadership. The time to rectify this egregious mistake is now (*Moe Thee Zun, cited in* Burma Debate, 2003).

On the other hand, although calling for equal opportunity when it comes to leadership and decision-making positions, Moe Thee Zun did not see the application of the

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temporary special measures such as the imposition of quota as needed to equalize opportunity for women on the area of political participation and some educated women activists also share the same sentiment as his.

5.4.2 Continuing Defiance of the Pervading System

The recognition that the WLB umbrella group along with its member-organizations and the respect garnered by the eminent women within the Burmese 'women movement' at the international level are all pointing to the fact that women are indeed gaining grounds, particularly on the aim to heighten international awareness on women's plight in the present political situation in Burma. Believing that 'empowerment' must also begin within them as 'individual' women and women as a 'sectoral group', from their meager budget and with the help of some funds coming from outside sources, the women organizations have managed to survive and push through with their political advocacies through various activities which actually benefiting the movement itself and their own communities. Some critiques and the women themselves see it only as 'baby steps achievements' and as part of learning to grope the rope towards the over-all goal for gender equality and genuine democracy in Burma. Others see it as landmark 'breakthroughs'; a major shift on the role of the women as compared from the stiff traditional past. The significance of this development is highlighted as well by Zeya, Ye and Zaw:

> Before, 'they' (referring to the various male-led political organizations) do not recognize us, the women issue; and, we have to give awareness among those in the movement. They were saying that after we get the democracy, we can start women's work. But for us, these two go together. We are now drafting a constitution for the future of Burma. WLB is also asking for the 30 percent quota to put more women's information or gender awareness among them and for the future. We are trying to put and raise awareness about gender equality issue. WLB is also talking with 'them' (the different organizations in the movement) raising awareness on gender equality (Zeya).

> Until now, even the top line leaders, if we just say 'gender equality', they think it's women's responsibility. They didn't think that it's men and women's

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responsibility. They didn't know that it's not only for women. Like for example, we had one seminar organized by [one of the political organization], and then, we talked about women's representation in some kind of leadership level…decision-making level [in that organization], and then, they said that, "That is WLB job."…We are talking about gender equality, not only women participation. Gender equality has to be in every level of the [political organization's] division in decision-making level. And they said, "Oh, we already found WLB and WLB has to do that." So, what we are trying to say is that every organization have to think about gender equality in every thing that they do; that's what we meant when we said that it's not only WLB's job…

Because it is a long battle…long, long battle, we have to say, we have to be patient. We don't have to be angry, you know, so that, we can indicate how much we still have to struggle for, for the women. The crux of those who attended that seminar are leaders and even with them, they don't understand about gender equality yet, so how much can we expect from the grass-root or the membership? Even the leaders, they don't understand it, so, we are working on it. Now, how many years…13 years already, and we have achieved some. We can send our representatives to other major leading organizations and there were also many women representation. You can see that in many workshops and political seminars. Usually, in the past, 10 years back then, only males can sit in the political seminars. But this time, you see, there are women already representing.

But still, women are very limited…For example, like in one seminar, seven representatives for women were needed but we don't have enough women sometimes because we are still training, or we lack human resources, something like that. At that time, what the men were saying was that, "You just ask for it but you cannot really follow through with it…We give you the chance but you couldn't take it because you don't have enough human resources." You see, they don't really think to train the women; they always blame the women's organizations training the women. So they said, "Training women is your job; you asked for the space and we created the space for you, so that is your chance to grab it, but if you don't grab it, that is your weakness." It's like that, "You failed". It was not because they gave this space because they are committed. By force, they really have to give it because the donor pushes, the international

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> pushes, all the networking and women are also getting stronger. With all these pressures; they have to create this space. So, whenever the women make a little bit mistake, the women groups, if they find a little bit of our weakness, they will bring it up (Ye).

Another initiative of the WLB is the introduction of the quota system in various Burmese political organizations and non-governmental organizations with the high hopes of making women's voices heard by being part of the decision-making processes within those groups. While dealing with the junta and pushing for Burma's democratization and women rights on a macro level, the Burmese women activists initiated democratic changes that they want to see, towards gender parity in particular, within their own pro-democracy movement. Using the CEDAW principles and other international human rights standards as tools, especially the concepts of 'participation' and 'genuine democracy', women compel not only the military junta leaders but the male leaders in their own political movement to change policies which discriminate against women. This may not be genuinely responded to by the junta as it was still in denial of gender inequality in the country but starting from within their ranks and initiating policies such as the quota for sure could result a more tangible change. For one, on the drafted alternative constitution made by the opposition groups, WLB joined the drafting committee to ensure that women's concerns would be included.

> I think now, people acknowledge what we are doing and instead of seeing women as just someone to take care of the 'services' that they don't consider as part of the social community or the social and political, not considered as political work; I think, women's movement now is recognized and they see how women can be effective—effective in bringing the voice of the people and bringing the world's attention, especially after the release of the License to Rape. And also, effective in giving services to people. So, we are doing everything on the ground with all the programs we have. We are advocating in the community, with the regional and international community for the change. We provide emergency and long-term empowerment program and at the same time we are doing the advocacy. It is being recognized by the community and how the women's role in making this change.

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> In the past, they may think that 'we have no head and no tail' because the structure of our organization is more on teamwork, based on teamwork. It was run by program coordinators and oversaw by the Management Team and supervised by the Advisers. In terms of hierarchy, people say that we work as a team and they don't believe how it is going to work. That was why they said it was something like 'no head and no tail' because we don't have a Chairperson, second leader, secretary and things like that. They said, 'who will decide what?' I think, we proved it not only in the community but in the Burma pro-democracy movement as a whole. They now recognize our work (Zaw).

Taking the risk of initiating new ways of thinking and implementing it within WLB and encouraging all its member-women organizations to do the same as well could be one of the counted successes of the WLB already. Their introduction of an organizational structure that is free of the usual 'traditional top-down structure' only proved that there are still 'viable political alternatives' beyond what is being offered by the present system.

> After the release of the License to Rape, it was the first time that the issue of sexual violence has ever been recognized. Nobody knows about the issue of women and children; the men do not pay attention before. We speak on different levels; we speak to the UN and in the international level as well. When we voice this out, because it's an embarrassing thing and very shameful action, nobody wants to speak. Actually, it's not only happening in Shan State, with the women. Other ethnic groups stand up and document their own experience which never happened before. And this is the movement, you can see all the women feel this to be empowered and they also want to say the same because they are also facing the same thing, not only about our own ethnic people or that people in our State suffer alone. When we do our campaigns, you know, because of the right timing and all the support, network support that we have, we were able to bring the issue.

> Until now, it (the women issue) has been one of the main instruments in any Burma advocacy in bringing any pressure to the regime. The regime was also very upset; not very happy about us getting the world's attention…Some people

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> also say that it's very powerful and can make the whole world pay attention on what's happening inside Burma. But we have to work more (Zaw).

5.4.3 Issues Confronted by Women in Their Own Backyards

Just like the other social movements having a generally united front and position on issues they are working with, may it be in the Burmese women's movement or the pro-democracy movement in general; the fissures 'within' are quite inevitable as different ideas and opinions that are both products of the society's influence and the 'individual/women agencies' clash with each other. Nonetheless, these cracks and cleavages in contrast to the seemingly united front and united position of the movement against the militaristic and patriarchal nature of the Burma society can also be positively gleaned as an indication that the 'seeds' toward genuine democracy are already sown; starting within the pro-democracy movement offering an alternative politics.

1. The Quota System as Temporary Special Measure

As mentioned a couple of times in the previous chapters, women in Burma, in the refugee camps or in the various organization usually outnumber men but leadership and decision-making positions still proves to be elusive for women. On its effort to equalize the big disparity a bit, WLB together with its 12-member organizations introduce quota system for every groups/organizations within the pro-democracy movement to comply with wherein they are lobbying for 30 percent sits in the policy-making body to be allotted to women. Just like Moe Thee Zun (2003), some women activists are not quite comfortable with the whole idea of it from the very reason that women felt they do not deserve the 'position' as they were just appointed.

When further asked on how the principle of gender equality being met by the different political organizations within the movement, Zeya disclosed:

> Some, they accept it, but some, still do not accept. It is difficult to say. When we talk to them, they will say they accept, and they seem to accept; but in reality, it is not really happening…Like for example, for the men,

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> they are working in the democracy movement and they are trying to participate, but, only few men who really understand…In reality, 'it' (the women's call for gender equality) is still a problem. There is still a lot of debate and a lot of arguing in the movement (Zeya).

Debates on quota system also trickled-down on other programs ran by the various groups in the movement and its effect is better felt with those projects/programs which involve 'selection' processes—the informal schools and conducting training/workshops activities for example. One of these kind of schools trains ethnic youth about current issues, honing the youth's knowledge in preparation for some who would be studying abroad, or simply equipping the youth on new skills that they can take back with them and share in their own communities and being one involved in running the school, Zaw explained the difficulty they faced trying to make the selection process 'all inclusive' and 'gender-balanced':

> I think, as a school, it's not only about the quantity, you know, but we discuss about the quality, and if we compromise the 'levels', then, it's enough to saying that we're not empowering anybody. What we have to do is how we are going to have programs that will empower the ethnic women who are less advantage, so that they will be prepared…For the whole selection process, we are trying to maintain the quality and to be as all-inclusive as possible. But of course, we need a lot of resources, we need to do a lot of coordinating, we need to be really effective in order to organize this (Zaw).

As explained by Ye:

> There are many qualified women who are educated, but when they are compared to the men, they always lag behind. That's why because of that situation, we are asking for quota system. But some academic women, they think that it is not necessary to ask for the quota system. They said that, 'We don't need that. If we have skills, the same with the men, then people will see it and the people will choose it', that is what they said, 'no need for a special space or special chance to create like the quota system,' (Ye).

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Meanwhile, following the line of argument by the educated Burmese women activists who do not approve of the quota system, in addressing the gender inequality issue or to simply provide equal opportunity to women, a 'formal approach' such as this as an example wherein women and men are treated the same and gender neutral policies are to be implemented does not always work. For one, the biological and social differences between men and women are not acknowledged in this kind of approach and the policies in effect discriminate against women. It also forces women to perform to male standards in order to participate and be 'accepted'. In response to some women who do not think quota system is needed, Ye pointed out further:

> But 'they' (referring to the educated women) are not chosen. What they believe and what is really happening in reality is not the same. So, they believe that if they have the same qualifications as men, people will choose them, but in fact, usually, they will choose the men even if they have the same qualifications. That is what's happening, that's why we ask for quota system…We cannot really boost ourselves even if we're qualified or we can work. We can be proud of ourselves but we cannot really boost it, you know. So, the situation needs a special space, an affirmative action for the women who needed that. Most of the women, even myself, sometimes, I don't want the quota system. I don't want it. But in the real situation, how can we get that position? Because we have a strong mindset tradition that 'we believe in men' and they wanted to depend on men than the women. If there is a situation that is complex, they think that men can handle it, not the women. Because generally, they see women are emotional; they cannot control their emotions. Even women still think like that, they wanted to depend on the men. This kind of mindset comes from long history and long time practices, hundreds and hundreds years. So, it is difficult to get away with this, (Ye).

With this issue on quota system as an special measures which aims to close the gap, if not to equalize, the imbalanced representation of men over women in leadership and decision-making positions, Ye's argument is quite agreeable. Even if the women activists believe that they are capable and can be competitive as their male counterparts, it is still an inescapable reality that the political playing field is not equal

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at the moment and it does discriminate on women. This is also evident with Kyaw's observation as she bared the fact of the women's difficulty with the whole process of trying to participate in the political sphere. Some women really chose to be directly involved in the political arena but have been thwarted by the strong patriarchal nature of the society:

> Women in the community, they always have something to do. Even during the election time, women are working so hard than men but they are not elected. Why? I don't know. Maybe the people are not yet used to 'women in power' in the community. There were women who were really running for elections but not elected (Kyaw).

2. Organizational Dynamics

Some organizational fissures in terms of how to move forward and which issues of the member-organizations the WLB should prioritize, the gap between the old and younger activists point of view, some ethnic related issues, and so on were some of the bottlenecks confronting the WLB as an umbrella group along with its individual-member organizations within their own backyards. These issues in the women movement itself may be seen by some in a negative light, especially that the contemporary Burmese women movement calling for the enforcement of 'substantive equality' and greater political participation is still only almost a decade young, yet, it seems to be not as united as they claimed they were. This might also create an opportunity for some detractors in discouraging the women activists' work and their strategies in uplifting women's role in the pro-democracy movement as a whole. However, although confronted by these difficult issues within and among themselves, these did not pose as grave enough issues that would pave the way for the dissolution of the Burmese women's movement or to continue working on important issues. WLB and its member-organizations are very much aware of these challenges and by acknowledging them as issues within and among them, the other half then would be dedicated to finding better ways to minimize or to address these conflicts. At this point, striking a balance amidst these differences, compromising and finding common grounds among them, is paramount in the processes women employs in order to arrive

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in a unified position which enabling their voices to be heard as one. As explained by Zeya:

> In the WLB, it is represented by different women organizations who have different ideas. So, how to come together, we have to take time and compromise to make the policy or to make the agenda or where the WLB wanted to go. We have to compromise. If we don't have skills, how could we fulfill the needs of WLB? WLB is where the different women organizations come and work together. So, if we came from different backgrounds and different ideas, so, we have to organize different workshops or organizational development…It's just compromising because WLB have different women organizations as its members. For example, one organization has a policy like 'No aid to the military regime' or 'No to Rape', or 'Stop Salween Dam'; they have to make it clear to WLB and we have to compromise to WLB. WLB also have to take into consideration the policies of the other women organizations. They have to collect all and to compromise so that if WLB will be invited for something, it can give the big picture of what the women organizations wanted. It really takes time but it's not really a problem but it takes time to compromise. We all have the same goal as the WLB, that is to go together, but the strategies might be different. And each organization must beef up their capacity. If our organization cannot run very well, then how can we send representative to WLB? If we don't have representative to WLB, then how can communication flow very smoothly? We have to go together. (Zeya).

Focusing more on 'empowerment'

Despite certain organizational dynamics that needs to be sorted out among themselves, the Burmese women activists continue to give more credence on the struggle that binds them together from the very start—that is, making Burma society a better world for Burmese women wherein democracy and equality thrives. Concretely, expressed needs on how to move forward and to push harder on issues concerning women's greater participation in the political scene involves a lot of efforts as well. This was greatly acknowledged by the women activists themselves and helping in laying the ground for Burmese women's 'empowerment' is one of the crucial needs that Zeya, Kyaw, Zaw and Ye pointed out:

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> I think it will still need to take time (pertaining to their goal of gender equality) and we still need to go on with this awareness-raising in the movement…At the same time, we need to encourage and give a lot of empowerment to the women to participate in different levels and different levels of decision-making. For us, we are doing that also for social change among us. We cannot say that after the 'democracy' then we can go on with the gender equality, we cannot say that; it has to go together. We have to empower especially the young people because for the old people…they are difficult to change. We also need to put up a lot of income generation so we can put up schools. Focus more on the young generation, and at the same time, give more capacity for the women (Zeya).

> We need to have trainings first…trainings for both sexes in uplifting their gender awareness to penetrate the traditional thinking…We women sometimes are afraid but we really need to be included in all levels of participation (Kyaw).

In a more tangible example, training/workshop on gender and even in schools supported by the women organizations which basically prepares youth as future human rights advocates or in preparation for their admittance to studying in the university abroad, gender issues were incorporated in the curriculum. As a member of the managing team in their own school, Zaw explained that they have a separate subject tackling gender/women issues. This is complemented by other equally important topics as well which generally shows how women approach gender issue as not separate from the general issues they are confronting with the present political arrangement in their country:

> We talked about human rights; democracy; system of governments; health—basic health; environmental protection and advocacy; learning about the constitution and basic law and what is the constitution now in the process; we also learn about media—how to collect information and to publish, and the process of publication, we also tried to invite the political cartoonists who were very famous to share their knowledge with the students; we were also giving information and learning in trainings and workshops about trafficking and the work of different groups like on health and other different subjects; so that, we can raise in nine months the consciousness of the youth and the students…so that, they can be more involved

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> in their community and take part in the social and political movement in our State and also in Burma (Zaw).

Along this line, Ye also gave some more examples of their organization's work:

> For [our organization], our advocacy to continue to address gender inequality is by publishing our Magazine, and also, we have continued discussions, training on those issues, and, we also include men and women in our training….We are also doing campaigns on sexual harassment and domestic violence. In our training program, we include men and women so they will understand slowly about the women's issues; we are doing this continuously.
>
> And then, we have a program, like internship. Although we train women only, but these women, they will understand more on gender equality and women's rights so that they can educate again. They have to be gender sensitive because if women are not gender-sensitive, how can men become gender-sensitive? Firstly, we think that it's our job because we are the people who need to change first because we are the people who are victims. I don't want to say that we are victims but because people discriminate us. We have to change our mindsets first because we also grew up in the same structure of the system. So, our mindsets are mostly the same as the men in the past. I think, some of the women are even worst than men. So, we have to educate and empower the women first so that they can change; so that, they can change the men; and then, they can change the whole community and the whole society. That is what we are doing in our internship program, the training program.
>
> We have a library. This library is also a place where the women can get their knowledge; but this is not only limited to women, men can also come and read the books. These books have something on health, politics, and also for Christians and non-Christians…they are all included in the books. Many men are coming and many women are also coming. Through that, we are also trying to educate them (Ye).

All of these as part of the 'empowerment' process.

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Finally, echoing the political strategy of the WLB and the ethnic-based women organization she belongs to, Zaw recounted:

> I think, in Burma, we have to address everything at the same time. We cannot talk about democracy without gender equality or address the issue of the gender inequality. I want the movement to discuss it. And, at the same time, we cannot talk about ethnic group later. So, I think, what we've been trying and advocating for is to have all these things go together at the same time. We have to address it at the same time…We cannot talk on women's issue later or to say that women are not that important, or all the women's work. And there is something that we have to work out in our community levels, we have to convince and also to raise awareness in different levels. The Women's League of Burma is playing an important role. People cannot just ignore that women's participation is needed in the constitution drafting…We have been telling this to them so we're the one who call for it.
>
> We wanted women to be leaders also, but this is on all levels, you see. And some people might see us as only advocating for women's issue but in fact, it's benefiting everybody, the whole community. When we speak and do anything, the effectiveness goes to the community. I think it has been clear and that's why we can see the turning point is capacity-building training for women. And we have more new generations who can do the same (Zaw).

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CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSIONS

In an era where words such as 'human rights', 'democracy' and 'equality' are becoming proverbial expressions, it is ironic that their true meanings are still yet way-beyond to be truly experienced by many. Understanding the basic principles attached to these seemingly simple but actually complex concepts which supposed to serve as guidance on how people relate to each other proved to be a difficult task. For one, it did not just go on to exist without opposition, may it be on the ideological level or on how it could get through into the everyday life of the people. Ideological-wise, these concepts served as points of contention and debate to some who were critically challenging the whole rights project; especially when these terms have been extended and applied to 'women'. Discussions would course through inevitably questioning the very process and the end goals in terms of what and how these really mean to women.

Critiques like the post-modern feminists see the rights agenda as incomplete along with its grand plan of achieving equality in a system that basically breadth inequality. In another level, enforcement of rights which subscribes to the abovementioned principles proved to be problematic as well with it continuously denied and out of reach from ordinary people's enjoyment. Its denial explains the existence of words such as 'human rights violations', 'repressive rule' and strengthened further all sorts of 'inequalities/discrimination' in the society. There are times too when its widely accepted definitions from a rights perspective are being watered-down, particularly by despotic rulers, as it may run counter to a traditional societal system they are benefiting into, thus, resulting to further marginalization and discrimination of certain sectors in the society, and in this case, the women. On this note, it is by no doubt that Burma subscribes to this kind of setting, especially when it comes down to tackling the gender/women issue.

Certain findings garnered by this study led to the following conclusions:

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6.1 Gendered Roles

Gender-based roles manifest in the various spheres of participation in Burma society. Starting from the family as basic institution, in the community, extending to other societal institutions and the multitude of levels of participation, it is evident how social expectations and opportunities are partial to the male gender/men. Generally, it is being perceived that important 'big-time dealings', big responsibilities in the 'public sphere', decision-making and leadership positions are for the tough, mighty and logical men to handle; while, 'small-time' business affairs and the nitty-gritty part of trading, matters in the small confines of the 'private sphere' are tasks left for the weak, emotional and subordinate women to focus on.

There is only a slight change which transpired in viewing and accepting the idea of women's participation itself within the parameter of gender parity. This is also one of the manifestations of how the patriarchal system is deeply rooted in Burma society. Factors such as education, exposure to other countries' culture and the openness/willingness to accept new ideas/change contributed in the slight shift of the newer generation's mindsets in viewing gender parity. For the newer/younger generation, change is quite easier to accept but the resistance is more on the older generation who had long been immersed to the traditional way of life and thinking.

Even though some argue that the notion of the public and private divide as non-existent anymore, in Burma case, not much change could be seen altering the usual male/female roles in relation to the idea of the public/private divide in cotemporary Burma. On the whole, a sharp private/public divide still exist when one talks about expected social roles of men and women in Burma society and strong mindset of gender-based roles continue to plague the minds of many Burmese people. This kind of mindset still lingers and influences even on how Burmese political activists think of their own role and their expectation of others role in the movement. Many men in the movement could readily verbally accept the women's cause for equality but when they reach their own homes, they go back to the same traditional gendered-role expectations. Same with women as some could be staunch women activists advocating for women rights but in their own families, they still succumb to

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the traditional gender-based roles. 'Restrictions' imposed to women could also at times take the guise of 'protecting' women from the outside world.

In the mainstream ('male'-stream) society, words like human/women rights, democracy and equality could be far-fetched for ordinary people's understanding, while on the other hand, political activists in the movement may have the difficulty of internalizing the cause.

6.2 The Pervasiveness of Gender Issue

'Gender' is an issue that has been widely recognized even by the UN systems and it cross-cuts all elements of systematized discrimination in the society. This is also the reason why CEDAW has been established as a binding instrument for all State-parties to comply to and adhere to the principle of non-discrimination. In whole, it basically aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the promoting the idea of substantive equality for women to obtain equal results. The SPDC, posing as the legitimate government in Burma became a State party to this in its attempt to gain more 'legal recognition' in the international community, but on the sides, it continue to deny Burmese women enjoying their rights.

The contemporary political context in Burma continue to be a gendered space since the centuries-old gender-based inequality remains rooted in the whole societal system. Gender-based discrimination persists as traditional cultural norms remain to play a massive part in the everyday lives of the people.

It is no more than evident but in the political sphere wherein women are deliberately excluded. Although it is true that there are notable exceptions, but in most cases, women of Burma are still marginalized and discriminated at in Burma society in many ways. Burmese women experience the cross-cutting discrimination in a unique way just because they are women. Often times, the denial of one rights leading to the denial of another is not just an exclusive circumstance as majority of women experience the same thing. This is also despite the reality that women sector composed the more than half of the Burma population and yet, their voices remain to be suppressed. . In various levels of acquiring political 'power' in the mainstream

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('male'-stream) politics, women are either absent or not properly represented which explains how women issues are not addressed at all.

Marginalization and discrimination of Burmese women are not only a reality in the mainstream ('male'-stream) political sphere as the issue zooms in even in the pro-democracy movement wherein Burmese women activists' participation on the decision-making level and leadership positions are being sidelined no other than their men comrades.

6.3 The Twinning Effect: Continuance of Gender Inequality

The existing political system and the continuing patriarchal nature of Burma society play big-time roles and have its twinning effect in the continuance of the marginalization and discrimination of the Burmese women in the public political sphere, particularly, on the leadership and decision-making levels of participation. Gender roles, emerging specifically from cultural and religious traditions, continue to boost and strengthen laws and practices that contribute to the continuance of gender inequality in Burma society. In the same way by which those who hold the political and economic power propagate the 'macho/male' culture in order to justify and strengthen their existence in Burma society. Laws, customary practices and cultural traditions help in legitimizing male-domination in the society as it is being used effectively by the military regime to perpetuate the system where men-power rule. The SPDC continue to marginalize and discriminate Burmese women and this is very much evident in the political sphere of participation.

However, this set up is not only confined in the mainstream ('male'-stream) Burma society alone wherein Burmese women are deliberately scratched out from participating in politics and the popular culture propagating the traditional role of women enhances the gender-based stereotypes. This reality extends even in the pro-democracy movement offering alternative politics.

With the military State's continuous denial of any gender inequality happening in the country and 'women/gender issue' being treated by the opposition movement as not a priority issue compared to the bigger Burma democratization/regime change and ethnic issues; there seems to be a difficult task for women activists to press for the

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same level of concern on gender issue and to pursue the struggle for gender parity given this political backdrop.

6.4 Underlying Factors

A magnitude of levels of domination is all present in Burma case and it guides the everyday lives of the Burmese people. This is embodied in the 'raw force' symbolized by the male-dominated military regime; the 'complex institutional practices' which are epitomized by the ongoing direct and/or indirect discrimination of women gender in almost all of the spheres of participation in the society; and, the 'ideological justifications' of domination of male over the female gender embodied by the Burmese Buddhism.

From past to present, the continuity of military authoritarianism and of 'male-power' pervaded culture and religion falls under the unresolved issue of domination or the continuance of the imbalanced power relationships in Burma. This process of domination runs parallel with the olden issue of women subordination in the society. It became a system ingrained in all spheres of Burma society—in the family as basic institution, inculcated in the culture, embedded in the economic sphere and well-entrenched in the political realm. This resulted to a clear marginalization and discrimination of the female gender/women throughout Burma's history, especially on the leadership and decision-making positions.

As with Burmese Buddhism and religious beliefs, it highlights the spiritual *'hpon'* which affirms men's superiority over women. Its clout and strong influence on the lives of the ordinary Burmese people is very obvious because for many centuries, this social setting favoring men's superiority in the society appeared to be 'natural' and 'ordinary' for the majority—men and women alike.

The political stalemate is one of the key roadblocks hindering Burmese women's genuine participation, empowerment and general advancement in Burma society. Equally important, the absence or the marginalized status of women both from the junta's side and from the opposition movement is tantamount to ignoring the more than half of the population's voices and concerns. This problem can be rooted-

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out from the wrong perception on women's worth fuelled by the traditional cultural and religious beliefs which basically conforms to the traditional idea of women as not fit to be in politics; more so, in the decision-making and leadership posts. Resolution of this political issue in Burma goes hand-in-hand with Burmese women's advancement.

6.5 The Idea of Women Agency: Woman as 'Subject' and 'subject'/object in the Society

It is inevitable that as part of the bigger society, women are molded, influenced and shaped by factors outside of themselves as well. It goes without saying that women run the risk of playing the victims of circumstances, to yield to what is common and to submit to the dictate of the system or being co-opted by the very system that they are trying to change. But with strong will enough to resist these factors influencing their lives, women continue to devise ways to challenge the norms and make a difference that would benefit not only themselves but the entire society's progress as a whole.

In the past eras, some Burmese women have had been able to find alternative avenues and devised ways for them to participate in the political arena, even though politics was basically seen then as men's turf. They were able to use their personal link with 'men' in political position—as wives, mothers, daughters, and so on—paving the way for their participation. Nonetheless, instances such as this were rather exceptions to the rule as most of these were just lived through experiences of the elite and educated women. Besides, such move could also be seen as concurring to the traditional women stereotype, that is, just 'depending' on the 'male' gender in their life. However, on a more positive note, another angle could also be drawn here in looking at women in history (or 'her'-story), that is—how Burmese women as their own 'agencies' adapt with the changing times of a 'male-glorifying' and 'male-power dominated' Burma society.

Although, almost all Burmese women getting higher political positions in the mainstream politics follow the same traditional path of using the politically powerful 'men' in their lives in order to gain position in the political world, this is not a

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conclusive reality in the pro-democracy movement. Among the six case studies, there was an instance of this actuality where one of the Burmese women activists sounded off through her own life experience the striking similarity of the path she 'chose' or has been 'forced to choose' due to various circumstances then. However, she rose from this typical stereotype by critically analyzing her situation and courageously tried ways to initiate change not only for her own benefit but for her fellow women as a whole.

Given the grim political backdrop wherein junta regime rules and patriarchal nature of the societal system still prevails, the mere fact that the Burmese women activists have chosen to join the pro-democracy movement in defying the military State and exposing discrimination and inequality, particularly the gender-based issue, is already a proof of strong women agencies; of women refusing to be just the 'subject/object' or victim of circumstances. This is a perfect example of how women as their own agencies struggle for 'inclusion' in a society which is set to 'exclude' them from decision-making and leadership positions, particularly, in the public world of politics.

The difficulty that the Burmese women activists face within the pro-democracy movement could probably have some resemblance especially in terms of the hardships that most of the women activists have experienced in liberating themselves from the oppressive and repressive patriarchal system such as the struggle against the well-entrenched negative cultural traditions producing the sex/gender stereotypes in the society. Nevertheless, it is interesting to know that Burmese women activists of today do not speak much about feminism or calling themselves as 'feminist activists' but more of as 'human rights activists'. Their key concern is more on having a united women voice against the military junta, to expose the injustices through the well recorded reports they gathered of the women who have been raped, killed, molested, and other forms of human rights violations and abuses committed by the *Tatmadaw*. Short of saying that their advocacy from the beginning was very much hinged to the campaign of the pro-democracy movement in 'naming and shaming' the SPDC in the international community, thus, in the hope that this could pressure the SPDC to give in, at least, to the slightest political demands of the opposition; and, for

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the international bodies to act on these pressures as well. In a way, gender issue was also raised but it was limitedly linked to the general context of the SPDC against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or of the military soldiers against the ethnic women for example. Only in the recent years when criticisms coming from some fellow activists on how the men/male comrades treat their women/female counterparts that a focus on a deeper understanding of how well-entrenched the imbalanced power relationship between the sexes/gender emerged. This is very much clear when the six cases detailed some of the issues they observed and experienced as well while working with their male counterparts as comrades and/or as husbands. Marginalization and discrimination against women do not just happen in the mainstream politics after all but a reality in the pro-democracy movement as well.

For Burmese women activists, this is a huge task that they have started to work on in the pro-democracy movement and even in their own women movement as their own agencies are continuously shaped/influenced and reshaped by the reality outside their own 'Subjectivity'.

6.6 Moving Forward

With the physical set-up of the WLB alone, working independently and having its office where women could go, it became a kind of sanctuary as well for women. Its member-women organizations which worked just as 'women-wing' of the various ethnic-based political groups before shifted to being independent ethnic-based women organizations. This way, women have more space for maneuverings on the kind of strategies, programs and projects they wanted to prioritize as women organization and not just as women lobby and advocacy wing of any political groups.

The women activists accept the fact that the road to democracy and equality is still a long way but what is more important is the hope that it would change for the better and they are reaping some of the early rewards of their hard work already. The once grim and bleak future has now turned into a very promising one with women strategizing and devising various ways to reach their goals. Women empowerment and helping them in paving the way to make it happen for women to access the same opportunities afforded to men would benefit not only the women activists themselves

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or the movement itself, but also, their communities and the entire Burma society as well.

Although this study, on some levels, has touched issues which deals with 'politics' with the small 'p' that is beyond the usual understanding of politics that is happening in the public arena with the big 'P', it was more to show that imbalanced sex/gender relationship is present on different aspect of everyday lives of the people. This was also to illustrate how interlinked the different spheres of participation in the society are and how male-pervaded the Burmese society still. This thesis evidently has its focus on 'P'-olitics where big-time political dealings are happening; where every decision that leaders and officials make and would be making could have big impact on a short and/or long term basis on the lives of the people; and, politics as a place where some still ideally believe and not losing hope that they could carry and represent the voices of their people and haggle for the interests of the majority. And women as composing more than half of the entire population, this research chiefly view that they should be able participate in all the political processes in various political levels, especially as political leaders and decision-makers. This is first and foremost, regardless of what they would be 'imparting' when they get there or what sort of alternative politics they would be introducing. Every democracy-loving individual should be helping in facilitating women with the right tools for them to empower themselves such as creating spaces for women to reach their maximum potentialities through affording same opportunity and access to various spheres in the society that were usually offered to their male counterparts only.

After all, political participation, proper representation and giving weight to voices of the majority are the main ingredients for a genuine democracy to work which would lead one to rightly conclude, "Let the women participate and their voices be heard".

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APPENDIX

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APPENDIX A

BURMA: COUNTRY PROFILE AND ITS PEOPLES

The data here were taken mostly from the reports made by the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), financial institutions and so on. But there is a caveat here for some of the sources of the reports were also taken from the Burma official sources. As it is no secret at all, the junta regime is notorious in tampering statistical numbers concerning the country's affairs by which they wanted themselves to appear in good light, thus, bending the result in accordance to their will and interests. However, facts and figures that are not likely to be manipulated such as those showing geographical characteristics and the general profile of the various peoples inhabiting the country might be safe enough to be concluded here. Moreover, for this study, presenting an example such as the difficulty even with obtaining basic data on Burma which are supposedly public documents and should be readily accessible by anyone strengthens the study's resolve on how disreputable the military regime is.

Location

Burma is located in Southeast Asia and it is the largest among the mainland Southeast Asian states (*see* Mills, 2000:266). It has a land area of 676,552 square kilometers or 261,218 square miles. As seen in the map above, it is composed of seven states namely the Arakan, or the Rakhaing, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni or Kayah, Mon and Shan State. It has also seven divisions, the Ayewaddy, Bago, Magwe, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintayi and Yangon (*see* Sakhong, 2006:44). However, these modern boundaries of Burma are not historical but more of a legacy of administrative convenience of the sixty years British colonial rule in the country (*see* NCGUB, n.d.).

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Natural Resources

Burma is endowed with rich natural resources. To name a few, it has a reserve of tropical forest and teak which are in high demand in the international market; the agricultural land is rich, though, under-utilized; it has a long coastline, 1,930 km, with access to the Indian Ocean and tremendous fresh water reserves lying in the Irrawaddy, Salween, Chindwin and Sittang; there are mineral resources like lead, coal, zinc, copper, tungsten, tin, limestone, precious stones like jade and other minerals that are still untapped; natural petroleum gas reserves that are just beginning to be tapped; and so on (*see* Sakhong, 2006:45-46).

Its People

With approximately 50 million people inhabiting the country (*see* Sakhong, 2006:44), Burma is also one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world today with its population speaking over 100 different languages and dialects (*see* Smith, 2002b:3). Though Burmese is the declared national language and is being used mostly as the medium of instructions in education, other languages widely spoken by different ethnic groupings are the Arakanese, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Mon,Shan, Wa, English and so on (*see* HRDU, 2006:7). The eight largest groupings among the ethnic nationalities are the Arakan, Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and the Shan. The Burmans, being the largest ethnic group is believed to be holding two-thirds of the entire population while one-third of the state's inhabitants are ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples (*see* Smith, 2002b:3, 15-20). Occupying the major towns and cities as well as the rich agricultural regions of the central valleys and coastal flats are the Burmans while the rest of the ethnic minorities dwell mainly in the hills and mountainous hinterland of the country (*see* Mills, 2000:267). An estimated 89 percent of the total population are Buddhists in religion; four percent are Christians—three percent are Baptists, one percent are Roman Catholics; four percent are Muslims; one percent belonging to the animist religion; and, the rest two percent, for those who are having other religions not included in the identified ones here (*see* HRDU, 2006:7).

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APPENDIX B
THE SIX WOMEN LEADER-ACTIVISTS: A SHORT BAKGROUND

The six Burmese women leaders who were the primary subjects in this research came from different family backgrounds, age ranging from mid-twenties to 60s and even though they share general problems brought about by the political and economic difficulties in Burma, each of them revealed their rather peculiar but rich experiences and reasons why they joined the pro-democracy movement or their very own Burmese women organizations. Two of them came from middle class family living in the urban areas while four of the women grew up from the rural areas or the refugee camps. Four of them had the chance to study in the university while the other two gained informal studies through various year or months-long trainings provided by different organizations helping the Burma cause.

Here are some of the excerpts from the interviews made with them where they gave a short background of their lives before they have decided to leave Burma and finally, work with the pro-democracy movement:

Zaw:

I was born in the conflict area in [our ethnic] State and my parents sent me when I was six to the Thai-Burma border; that was where I grew up, in an orphanage house. I only see my parents once a year, or, probably once every two or three years. At the orphanage house in the Thai-Burma border, I can see what's happening. I had the chance to study in the local school and also, learn some English. Already, we have some questions about why we were here, things like that, when we were still young. In the late 1990s, I was inspired by the Newsletter that was produced by [one of the ethnic organizations].They were talking about what was the situation inside Burma and in [our ethnic State], and things like that. It was really interesting and I asked so many questions. Also, I told them that I wanted to join them. Because we grew up in the

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Thai-Burma border, we know and we are aware. I like the way the Newsletter is produced and gets the people informed; those things that people do not know about the situation. It gives a lot of information to me when I was there and I am very proud that they were already typing on a computer way, making leaflets; you know, it was so advance in those days. And then, they were producing it and spreading it. I read many things that I also have many questions; those that we do not know; giving overviews on issues and giving information on what's happening inside. I think I liked it, what they have been doing. It was just like breaking the silence, bringing more people and also for them to have more understanding and also for support. So, I liked to join. At that time, I really like to work with them. I maybe can write and can help with something, so I asked for if I can be their intern. Because I know [the person], even from the village, so I went and asked [the person] directly.

I joined the [organization]. They collect information and they produce Newsletter. Also, I had the chance to interview people, about their lives and why they came here, their work, their difficulties and things like that. So, that's how I started. And then, I had the chance to attend another [organization's] Internship Program. It also opens for me to learn more on advocacy and campaign; also, on how to advocate for human rights within our work.

Well, for me, it's like I wanted to learn more on human rights and how it should be protected and what people should have. And I think, what people are facing, everything is violated. They do not have any rights, you know, that was from my experience and as a witness on that. I just wanted to do something or anything that will help change the situation or contribute to some change. I saw people being trafficked, the land grabbing, children couldn't go to school because they have to run from the conflict, families fleeing the country having nothing, you know. For everyday, we witnessed it, and also myself, I was separated from my family, so it was very clear to me. But you know, when I got the chance to meet the person who was working with the first [organization I joined before], I was so happy, to know what I can do or can contribute too; anything that can make change.

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Zeya:

When I was young, I stayed in a village in [our ethnic] State until I finish my primary school. It was far, far away from the town. My family, they were also farmers. They were very simple. They were never connected with political or armed group…We are seven, and my eldest sister lived in the city so I was staying with her during the weekdays when I was still going to the university. I was taking care of her children and at the same time, I was also attending the university. I also stayed with some relatives who were staying in the city and a little bit rich. I am the sixth child but my youngest sister passed away already…After I left, she got married very young, 16 years old. She got two children already and then she had an abortion and she died. My elder brother also passed away because of malaria…One of my brothers joined the [ethnic] army because it was compulsory. All of my family is still inside Burma.

In our village, it was called the black area, the forced relocation site. We were beside the main road so we did not need to move out but many of the other villages moved to our area and it became a big village…

…After I finished my primary school, I moved to the city and I finished my high school. Then, I volunteered as a school teacher in the town and at the same time, I was attending the university at the capital of our [ethnic] State. When I went back to the village, I was also teaching our ethnic language to my friends, to my sisters, because many of them, they don't go to school, they just finish primary school.

In the big villages, we have the headman leader and we have different sections—sections 1, 2, 3 and 4…and in each section, we have headman leader. He has his secretary. My elder brother is a headman leader in one section. Sometimes, my brother cannot collect enough bottles of wine, or alcohol or pork…so we have to get from our own house. During the nighttime, when the soldiers would come, we do not have time to collect from the people what the troops will need so we have to get it from our house. So, my brother couldn't work for the family anymore but work for the military instead…And if the Burmese military are fighting near the village, the people have to buy and provide them bullets. Also, if some of them will die, we have to pay compensation.

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When I was in high school and until middle school, many of my friends left and went to Thailand. They came here to find work because even when you finish high school or university or got a master's degree in Burma, it is difficult to get a job. So many young people go to Thailand but after 1995-'96, even old people try to find work in Thailand. When all of my friends left for Thailand, I said to them that it's okay if they wanted to go…Later, one of my friends who left for Thailand got involved with a woman's organization and some NGOs, she came back and talked and shared it to me, but I didn't understand at all. 'What kind of NGO? What kind of women's organization? What they're doing?' I then became interested and asked permission from my father and brother. I said I wanted to go to Thailand. They said to me, "Do you want to get married? Do you want to get a husband?" They thought that I cannot get married in our [ethnic] State because nobody likes me. They didn't want me to come here to Thailand because some of my friends who came back became infected with HIV, became single mothers, no husbands. Some were trafficked migrant workers, a lot of problems, so they didn't want me to come.

My friend, because she used to work with the NGO, she sometimes asked me to go with her to the relocation sites, people relocated far away to the mountains. We help give bamboos to build their shelter, and then, she explained to me about why they have to leave. The two of us, we walk around the village and we took some pictures and interview some people. For me, I didn't know, I just followed her...So, when I left, I didn't tell anyone, I left with my friend…When I arrived here in Thailand after two or three days, I wrote back to my family and I told them that I arrived already and told them I was working in the night market….I worked there, only for a few months. After that, I told my employer that I will go back to my [ethnic] State and I left. I then volunteered to [one of the organizations with women project]. Only for one year that I arrived in Thailand, I already joined the group to the United Nation. It was really funny, what happened to my life. Within a year, I already joined the delegation to UN. It was like a dream. I worked with [the organization] for six months. I did internship with them and at the same time, I was part of the Working Group which I was representing my organization, the [ethnic-based women organization] which was newly formed by that time.

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Kyaw:

I was just a student before I came to Thailand. I was just a high school student; I just graduated in high school. The [Revolution Group], come to my parents and me. They wanted me to go to Thailand for the sake of the people, to study more in foreign country, to work there with the people in the organizations…When I arrived here, I had to marry our leader, the movement leader…They don't want to tell the whole story when I was in Burma because they worry that I won't come here. So, they told me that I have to study, so my parents said, okay…

In the community, almost all of the [ethnic] people must support the Revolutionary Group] and my parent was a Chief in that area, so, they really need to support. And also, we need to support the SPDC. We were under the military/government control and we were also under the [Revolutionary Group's] control, so my father needs to 'play' a lot between these power players.

And then when I came here, after four months, the leader told me about marrying my husband, a [Revolutionary Group] official…but my husband did not accept. He said, "Why do you ask other people like this? If you bring her here to study, then let her study first." But the Commander and all other Officers (from the 'inside'), actually, their aims, they wanted me to marry my husband because he was a leader and he was quite old then, 40 years old already. They think that the leaders should have family. Actually, his younger brother met me in the house and he was the one who asked me to come here in Thailand. It's a long story, and so, that is why I joined the movement here. I married my husband and after about six years, my husband was assassinated. Since then, I live with my three children. I brought up my children myself. I gave well education to the three of them. One was educated in Thailand, my eldest son was educated in UK. Since then, I was involved in our [ethnic-based] community, even inside or outside.

Khine:

My mother, she's apolitical. It was like, "Okay, yes, you go to demonstration, please come home before dark." For her, she thinks it was necessary to air your disagreement to the government but she didn't really take an active role. When I

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started this activism, she didn't stop me anyway. I wouldn't think that she's apolitical though. My younger sister at that time, probably she was 18, 19…I didn't ask her to join in. For me, I think she was still too young. But she knows what was happening. My elder sister, she disappeared long time ago so we didn't know what was going on with her. My father was quite political, yes, for quite a long time. Since the communists uprising, he was the general secretary, in 1975,…he got involved in that but he was too old already, he was over 60. Actually, most of my political thinking was from him. When he was talking to some of his friends, I didn't know that they were communist before.

In 1987 the de-monitization, 25, 35 and 45 kyat notes that they de-monitized and a lot of people went broke and our family was the same. But we were still lucky at that time, my family used to have a business, we had a grocery shop. The whole of our house was full of these onions, rice, cooking oil, blah blah blah….and that big shop went medium and then disappear. In 1987, we still have that small grocery shop but after de-monitization, we lost almost everything. Almost all of the notes that we had had no value….we tried to exchange…the government tried to compensate it back but we didn't get much.

In late 1980s, I was around 22 or 23 and I was already running the business and my father also have the traditional medicine shop—like for indigestion, for women when they have period, etc. During that time, my father and mother got divorced, so me, my mother and sister stayed together. So, I have to do almost everything for the family. My mother was helping too at that time, but like fixing the roof, I have to do it.

I was in my third year then in the University, Botany major. (10^{th} grade is marticulation in our time, but with my sister's time it became grade 12.) I got older sister and another younger. That was bit of a…probably starting point for me to be…not politicized maybe but it made me start to think what's wrong. In the suburb, I started seeing people getting poorer and poorer…and maybe it comes with the age too….and probably with the education…and those with little education. In the university, during the ceremony in the day, we'll see they're wearing black, also wearing certain kinds of clothes…and we asked why they were wearing that, blah blah

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blah…then we got the idea. The name "88"…we weren't thinking…I mean my whole family, we didn't think it was going to be that date. It was just the student, then the rallies becoming bigger and bigger and in the evening, it was becoming serious…So we thought, it's going to be something…

At that time, I was in my final year as a student. So, the schools were opened then closed, I could not remember which month. And when we went back in August, to attend the classes back, the students gathered together and the students' demonstration got more intense. And I joined them. Almost all of my friends also joined at that time. I just joined in the demonstration. Some of my friends, they joined but the others, they weren't allowed by their parents to go out and join. I joined in and gave some speaking a couple of times and then came home everyday around 6 or 7 in the evening. At that time, we didn't even have a student union. That's why you'll understand why the regime always closed down the university and schools because that was where we could easily gather.

At that time, any students who have loud voice can start on with the talk and talk about what happened that night in March, who died and then we gather around and follow someone who talks. At that time, I think there were a lot of student leaders but I wasn't thinking of following anyone. I thought then, okay, there was injustice by the government and we have to ask for justice. I think, to me, a lot of us, we were thinking more of acting for a solution to that problem than asking for democracy or human rights at that time. At that time, we were only thinking, "This is not fair, for justice, we have to ask for it." We wanted the real information, the true information for what happened because the government at the time usually say, "We were only using rubber bullets"…but rubber bullets don't kill but why these students die, right? So, these were the things we were asking but the demonstration got heightened and then the whole "88" thing happened. And I was kind of a junior leader in my own suburb.

All of us in the suburbs ran-out of rice. We have to find rice and for some people who were poorer than us, we tried to buy rice sacks from friends who managed to get some rice sacks and distributed it to people who were poorer than us. And during the night time, because there were curfew, because the army were patrolling

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around, so during the morning we demonstrate and in night time, a lot of rumors, because we have to find food for the demonstrators and water and there were rumors that the water have poison, blah blah blah. So, we have to take care of all that. We have to make sure it was safe. And sometime along the demonstration line, there were people who fainted, and I was the one responsible with that because I was a Red Cross member (but I forgot totally now). And then, the army took power, and a lot of people died…

And then I came out, I couldn't live there anymore. Many of my friends had been arrested at that time. And then we gather in one of the monasteries, we gather together and then we came out. We were actually supposed to go to [one of the ethnic] State. Then the guy who was supposed to go with us was shelled near the university so we lost our contact to go to that State. But we thought we couldn't stay longer so we just have to go. So we took off and we went. All the way, I think the military know; all the checkpoints, they knew. We were young, in our twenties, and traveling together going to the jungle but they just let us go. Only at one point before we cross the river, we got checked by the military and one of our friends got arrested so we just ran. Two days after the coup, we went up. The military were all over the strategical places, especially the hotspots. So, they checked us and my friend had some medicine with him and some other stuffs and they became suspicious, especially because we were near [another ethnic] State already. From other checkpoints, we were checked but not that closely. So, when we reached the other side of the river, we just ran without looking back. They came after us but they didn't shoot because a lot of people there coming and going. And then we found a woman selling stuffs in the market and asked her if the military asked to tell them that we were her sisters. Our friend who got arrested, we didn't know anymore what happened to him even now.

We arrived there (the ethnic State) …they welcomed us but you know, we can feel right away that there was 'distrust'. I remember, after a month in the brigade I joined, my eyes were really shut from infection in the jungle, I was pretty sick, but one couple, they welcomed us. There were some kind of 'moderates' there at that time. Many of the students went to [this ethnic] State because it was pretty much accessible,

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I mean the road was more flat and all than in the one we originally supposed to go to. When there was like political training, etc, we attend that or help the medics at times.

At that time, I was thinking, we were just killing each other. We won't be able to win in this way. And also, a lot of distrust among us, I can sense it. So I thought, this I can't really handle, so, I didn't see that my place is there. Some of my friends died fighting; some died with malaria. I realized that armed struggle wasn't the answer. Not that I see people who are in the armed struggle wrong, I think they are right too. It's necessary in any political change in any country but I don't see it that way. It's probably because of what I saw in the border, you know, probably being a small woman on the border, we just got sick of the malaria and all you can do is trying to survive and not be killed by malaria. So, all of these combined I think, so I left.

Ye:

At that time, I was still very young; my mother moved so I have to follow her. The only reason I remember was that it was very difficult for her for survival. It was because my father passed away and then my mother had to work, though, she didn't know how to do business. That was the time when my mother's uncle asked her to live with them, because they were living outside Burma and so we followed them.

My elder brothers at that time left, because they were both involved in the '88 uprising. The elder one became a soldier [for one ethnic group] and we couldn't have any contact with him until this past 2 years. He left the camp because he lost his foot when he stepped on a bomb. He is not good for a soldier anymore. So, he got married and had children and living now in 'black area'. He went to the black area. Black area is like liberated area, nobody controls it and it is where anyone can go and live there. Mostly, people live there for cutting woods; logging. He worked there only because he left the camp already. When we left, I stayed in the Thai-Burma border and studied there…

Because my mother was also a member of the [women organization], but not as a leader, only a member; I heard about the [women organization] when we were at the border. But I was so young and I didn't know what were their aims or objectives. I had one teacher; male teacher from America. He was the one who really encouraged

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me to join the [women organization], showing me the way for my future. So, he contacted other leaders and they talked about me; and, they decided to take me in as an intern…Women who wanted to join the organization must be 16 years old; that was why they didn't take me as a member. So, when I was at the border, I learned English and then, that was when I got more interested with the [women organization]. I became an intern for one year and then became a member, but not yet a full time staff, not qualified yet as staff. I was then just waiting for more opportunities to study. I was also helping in the office work like mailing, filing, you know…that was the time that [a woman] came into our office and talking about the internship at their regional organization so, I was chosen for internship and then went to Bangkok for nine months. And then, I came back for a few months and help in the office work, only as a member and as part time staff, but not yet a full time staff. Then, after that, we heard that [another regional organization based within the Southeast Asia] was calling for internship again. So, the leaders encouraged me to go in applying and I was chosen. Before I came back, I saw the application form for Foreign Affairs Training so I filled it up with the approval of my leaders in my [organization]. I was a member, so I always need their approval. If they don't agree, then I cannot do that…So, that's how it all started.

Win:

My family, we can live in a pretty good situation. We have our own factory which is not connected with the government or in politics. We have the noodle factory, but of course, every factory should have to give tax to the government. We have to give tax because we are citizens but it doesn't mean that we support the government. We are not friends with SPDC at all. The SPDC do not support us and we are not supporting them, we just give tax.

Our business is noodle shop; it's with people, not at all political. So, during that time (the 1988 uprising), we had a little bit of difficulty but after that, the business continues. It's because the people have to buy it, they have to buy noodles. But now, they really have to struggle for a living, so, we also are struggling because we connect

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with the people. If the people are rich; then, we will be rich, we can sell noodles. But if they cannot afford to buy noodles, then we will also suffer.

Fortunately, my family is still alive now. After that, my family went on working for the business. My brothers, because they are men, no one can control them if they wanted to get involved in politics, if they wanted to join. It's like we're separated; the brothers can join but not the rest.

I was a volunteer teacher for four years. I live in a village which is like the center. Sometimes I wrote articles for children because everyday I wanted to share my experiences with the children, just articles. I was teaching kids like 16 years old, like middle school or like in the high school. I was a volunteer teacher, I had no salary. In nighttime, I was a volunteer teacher; in the morning, I had to work in our family business. My dad gave me salary so I survived.

We organized ourselves, like four or five people and we teach the children. That was because if we organize officially, they won't allow us, so we make it like small groups. Like with my friend, me and other people, we teach the children, just like an NGO, 100 per cent, not government. Nobody control us. We were teaching kids, the age range was like eight to 12 or nearly 15. In Burma, we have like the monastic schools, they give free education. So, we were part of those volunteering for them to teach the kids. Some of these children before they come to school, they sell flowers or some small things like what they were selling here in Thailand…Normally, the school started at 9 but the children would get up early like six or seven. They would sell flowers and other things, then, they would come to school like 9:30 or 10 to study. And then, the next day, they had to work again.

I left Burma to study, I'm studying here and then joined the [women's organization].

For me, you know, I don't really mind if either a man or a woman can get a good position. If you are smart, then you can get a good position. I mean, I really respect smart people. If you are not smart, then you shouldn't get a high position…I know some women who do not have the capacity but they still wanted to get a high position. I think, if you want to do or get something, you must try yourself. For the men, they also have to accept that. I don't want the idea that because we are women,

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we should be given more opportunity than men…I don't want women or men to be marginalized. I always say that we are human beings. If you want to do something, you have to do yourself…That is my opinion; that is also how it is in our family. I am a girl but I work hard so I get more opportunity than my brother.

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APPENDIX C
LIST OF GROUPS/ORGANIZATIONS/ALLIANCES WITHIN THE OPPOSITION MOVEMENT

I. National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB)-Umbrella organization of the various groups and alliances (Founded in September 22, 1992)

A. National Democratic Front (NDF)-ethnic alliances/ armed groups

(*Joined NCUB on May 14, 1976)

1. ALP – Arakan Liberation Party
2. CNF – Chin National Front
3. LDF – Lahu Democratic Front
4. PSLF – Pa-laung State Liberation Front
5. PPLO – Pa-O People Liberation Organization
6. WNO – Wa National Organization
7. NMSP – New Mon State Party
8. KNPLF – Kayan New Part liberation Front
9. KNU – Karen National Union

B. Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB)-ethnic/ democratic forces

(*Joined NCUB on November 18, 1988)

1. ALP – Arakan Liberation Party
2. CNF – Chin National Front
3. LDF– Lahu Democratic Front
4. PSLF – Pa-laung State Liberation Front
5. PPLO – Pa-O People Liberation Organization
6. WNO – Wa National Organization
7. KNU – Karen National Union
8. ABSDF – All Burma Students Democratic Front

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9. OBLF – Oversea Burmese Liberation Front
10. OKO – Oversea Karen Organization
11. ABYMU – All Burma Young Monks Union
12. CRDB – Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma
13. DPNS – Democratic party for New Society
14. PLF – People's Liberation Front
15. PPP – People's Patriotic Party
16. PPF – People's Progressive Front
17. PDF – People's Defense Force
18. MLOB – Muslim Liberation Organization Burma
19. ABMU – All Burma Muslim Union
20. DPA – Democratic Party for Arakan
21. ALD – Arakan League for Democracy
22. NNLD – Naga National League for Democracy
23. MDUF – Myeik Dawei United Front
24. NDD – Network for Democracy and Development
25. FTUB – Federation of Trade Union Burma

C. National League for Democracy-Liberated Area (NLD-LA)

(*Joined NCUB on February 14, 1992)

D. Members of the Parliament (MPU)

(*Joined NCUB on May 15, 1996)

Short Background

The Members of Parliament Union (MPU) is the political organization constituted by the exiled Burmese MPs-elect. Members are from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the ethnic-based political parties as well as the independent MPs. Following the formation of the MPU on 15 May 1996 on the Thai-Burma border, the MPU was formalized at the MP Conference held in Dublin, Ireland on 4 October 2000. Its mandate is to form a provisional government in exile and to continue the struggle for the restoration of democracy and human rights in

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Burma. It is responsible for electing the prime minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), and as an institution, its main focus is to raise international awareness on Burma and to garner the support of parliaments, parliamentary institutions, political parties and political institutions for the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP*) and the democracy movement of Burma in general.

The Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) was formed by the NLD and political parties of non-Burman ethnic nationalities to perform the duties of a parliament.

MPU Congress is the Parliament of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The MPU is one of the founding pillars of the "National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB).

The National Council of the Union of Burma is a Front. At the same time, it also undertakes the duty and responsibility of the United Front. By late 1990, a group of NLD Members of Parliament (MPs), led by Dr. Sein Win-Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin-was sent into exile in order to mobilize international support for Burma. The MPs, with support from the Democratic Alliance of Burma, the National Democratic Front, among others, formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The NCGUB has since been working with all the democracy and the disenfranchised ethnic forces through the National Council of the Union of Burma as well as with the other exile and student groups. The NCGUB has led the call for a tripartite dialogue between the ethnic nationalities, the NLD, and the military to resolve national problems. Over the past 8 years, the NCGUB has mobilized the international community to withdraw all financial and moral support to the dictatorship.

The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) is the government of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma must submit it's report to the National Council through a group of representatives of the Peoples' Parliament. The constitution, and the rules and regulation to form the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, must be approved by the National Council of the

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Union of Burma. The National coalition Government of the Union of Burma was formed by the full support of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the National League for Democracy-Liberated Area (NLD-LA). The Prime Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, Dr. Sein Win is the Member of the Presidium of the National Council of the Union of Burma (*see* NCGUB, n.d.).

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APPENDIX D
A SHORT INTRODUCTION ON WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA AND ITS 12-MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA (WLB) – December 9, 1999

- An umbrella organization comprising 12 already-existing women's organizations of different ethnic backgrounds from Burma.
- Believes firmly that the contribution of women in the struggle to bring about human rights, democracy and equal rights for all nationalities in Burma will have a great impact, and their participation in the national reconciliation and peace-building process is essential.

Current membership:

1. Burmese Women's Union (BWU)
2. Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT)
3. Karen Women's Organization (KWO)
4. Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO)
5. Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO)
6. Lahu Women's Organization (LWO)
7. Palaung Women's Organization (PWO)
8. Pa-O Women's Union (PWU)
9. Rakhaing Women's Union (RWU)
10. Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)
11. Tavoy Women's Union (TWU)
12. Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB)

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Mission:

- To work for *women's empowerment and advancement of the status of women*
- To work for the *increased participation of women in all spheres of society* in the democracy movement, and in peace and national reconciliation processes *through capacity building, advocacy, research and documentation.*

Aims:

- To work for the empowerment and development of women.
- To encourage women's participation in decision-making in all spheres of life.
- To enable women to participate effectively in the movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation.
- By working together, and encouraging cooperation between the different groups, the WLB hopes to build trust, solidarity and mutual understanding among women of all nationalities in Burma.

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ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Advocacy:

- WLB is uniquely positioned to advocate for women and change in Burma because it *represents a nexus where grassroots, regional, and international processes meet and connections are made.*
- Its advocacy work connects grassroots communities in and displaced from Burma to global processes and resources through the United Nations and regional forums - and vice versa.
- The advocacy strategies designed and implemented by the WLB incorporate working at these multiple levels to simultaneously bring the messages of their member organizations to international attention while garnering education, experience, connective relationships and resources to bring back to their related communities.
- WLB's advocacy work is characterized by a dynamism and spatial complexity that crosses many borders and extends in many directions.
- Principally, *advocacy strategies are grounded in a belief in inclusive political processes and therefore broad-based social movements inside Burma with support at the international level.*

- **International Advocacy** - UN, international forum, etc.

- **Internal Advocacy**
  - The role of the WLB is to be a platform for women of Burma to push for political change in Burma and work for gender equality in society.
  - It advocates on behalf of its member organizations representing women and their families in diverse situations (whether inside Burma, displaced to refugee camps or living as undocumented migrant workers in neighboring countries).

- **Dimensions of WLB's advocacy:**
  - Lobbying at the international level
  - Gender education, training and empowerment (amongst themselves and within their communities) displaced from Burma
  - Raising gender issues in programs inside Burma
  - *To create understanding on the issue of gender equality within the Burmese democratic movement and society, WLB is working through community-based interventions and actions.*

Programs

- Peace and Reconciliation
- Political Empowerment
- Women Against Violence

1. BURMESE WOMEN'S UNION (BWU) – January 1995

- An independent organization with the aim to organize women along the

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Thailand-Burma, India-Burma and China-Burma borders as well as internationally.

- Membership is open to all women of Burma regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, marital status, sexual preference, or livelihood.
- Has members in Australia, Canada, the USA, Norway and Japan as well.
- Helped in the inception of the WLB
- By creating a forum for the various women organizations of different ethnic backgrounds to discuss the common problems and goals, the BWU *hopes to improve cooperation among the women's groups of Burma in exile*

MISSION/AIM AND OBJECTIVE

Aims and Objectives:

- To promote the role of women in Burma
- To efficiently increase the contribution of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights and establishment of a genuine democratic federal union.
- To advocate for the acceptance and exercise of women's rights in the Burmese society according to the standard recognized internationally.
- To use women capacity to establish stable peace and long-term development in the society in future.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITIES

Programs and Activities:

- **Internship program**
  - Caters for youth coming from inside Burma or the border areas.
  - Provides training on English language, computer literacy—word processing, emailing, and basic office management--bookkeeping, filing, and so on.
  - Interns participate in political discussions (human rights, women issues, and so on; attend BWU meetings, seminars and so on to increase interns' political awareness, listening, analysis skills and so on.
- **Income-generating projects**
  - Organized by the regional organizing committees.
  - Contribute to the social welfare of members—e.g. pig- farming project in the camps to help members generate income to support their families.
- **Nursery schools**
  - Operating since 1988.
  - The school supports its members by providing free education to their children and it gives mothers time to focus on other areas such as jobs and personal development.
  - Three teachers are provided for 25 children.
- **Libraries**
  - These libraries reach out especially to Burmese women migrants' workers in Thailand, China and India.

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- Provide reading materials such as journals, cartoons and magazines.

- **Trainings, workshops and seminars**
  - To empower women and develop their skills and capacities;
  - Regularly conducted for members and non-members, documented and undocumented migrant women workers in Thailand, China and India.
- **Drop-in Center**
  - Assists migrant women workers in Mae Sot; provides them with much needed skills and learning opportunities.
  - The women receive free sewing training and can use the laundry services.
  - Books and documentary videos are also provided at the center.
  - Each month between 46-50 women workers visit the center from different factories. Many come on the weekends to read and share their views

- **Publications**

*** Dove Newsletter**

- Dove or "Kyoe-Lin-Pya" in Burmese is a bi-monthly women journal published in Burmese language—carries commentaries on the issues of women and gender within the Burmese society; portrays the lives of women in Burma under the military dictatorship; reports about the women's movement around the world and so on.
- Distributed along the Burma borders with India, China and Thailand, where other pro-democracy groups, women's groups, refugees and migrant workers are based; to BWU members abroad, as well as to other international supporters and organizations.

*** Cycle of Suffering**

- A research-based report detailing the complex difficulties and tragedies faced by Burmese migrant women in Thailand.

*** Women's Human Rights Manual:**

- Covering the history of the women's movement, international human rights law and treaties, gender and advocacy (the first of its kind in Burmese language).

*** Handbook on Domestic Violence (Sept. 2003)**

- Aims to increase awareness on the issue of domestic violence (DV) and how it affects women's rights.
- Provides a definition of DV, why it occurs and ways of dealing with it as an individual and within the community.
- Distributed to both women's and men's organizations, to the women in refugee camps and migrant worker communities along Burma's border areas and in Aug. 2004, it has also made its way to women inside Burma

*** Handbook on Sexual Harassment**

- Covering information on sexual assault, background and so on.
- Joint report on Women Political Prisoners report with the cooperation of AAPP (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners), both in Burmese and English version.

*** BWU activities report and Joint Reports (with WLB).**

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BWU members participated in the production of three reports presented at international forum.

- "Women in and from Conflict Areas of Burma" - distributed at the Beijing +5 Conference (June 2000); focuses on reproductive health, violence against women, basic needs and education for women in conflict areas.
- " Burma: The Current State of Women in Conflict Areas – A Shadow Report to the 22nd Session of CEDAW" - presented to the Committee of CEDAW (Jan. 2000).
- "Breaking the Silence" - distributed at the Commission on Status of Women (March 2002); focuses on environmental degradation and its impact on the lives of women in Burma.

- **Networking**
  - Working together with various groups - NGOs, political groups, youth, different ethnic nationalities and women groups.
    Members actively participate and facilitate the monthly 'Women Exchange' sponsored by Migrant Assistant Program (MAP) Foundation in collaboration with Mae Tao Clinic on health issues.

2. KACHIN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION-THAILAND (KWAT) – December 9, 1999

- Recognizing the urgent need for women to organize themselves to solve their own problems, the KWAT was formed in Chiang Mai on the 9th Dec. 1999.

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Aims:

- To develop the skills of women
- To promote children's rights
- To empower women to be more involved in leadership positions
- To promote women's awareness of gender and women's rights
- To promote women's awareness on how to manage and protect the environment

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Activities:

1. Skills Training Program; 2. Internship Program; 3. Publications; 4. Women's Exchange meetings; 5. Documentation & Research; 6. Health Education; 7. Income generation

3. KAREN WOMEN'S ORGANISATION (KWO) - 1949

- A community-based organization of Karen women working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border and with Internally

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Displaced Persons (IDPs) and women inside Burma.
- Believes that women's contribution is an essential factor in the peace-building and national reconciliation processes of Burma.

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Objectives:
- To assist women in the endeavor to be free from all forms of oppression.
- To promote and empower women in all spheres of life, including education and general living standards.
- To encourage women to participate in the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality.
- To develop women's knowledge, ability and skills, including political and organizational skills.
- To achieve the rights of women and equal status with men.
- To promote and maintain Karen culture and traditions.

Aims:
- To empower women through offering various capacity building trainings to teach skills, build confidence and create new opportunities so that women will be better able to solve problems.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Advocacy:
- Since its formation in 1949, KWO expanded its focus from one of purely social welfare to try to encourage an awareness of Women's Rights and to promote women's participation in the community decision making and political processes.

4. KARENNI NATIONAL WOMEN'S ORGANISATION (KNWO) - 1993

- A non-profit, grassroots organization established in 1993 by the Karenni refugee women who fled to Thailand.
- Based in Mae Hong Son province
- Implements projects in the two refugee camps in the northern Thailand border and for the internally displaced people inside the Karenni State.
- Has over 500 members.
- In collaboration with local and international NGOs, it provides various opportunities for refugee women to improve their well-being (e.g. development projects).

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Goal:

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- To provide Karenni women with useful skills for the future, to prepare them for a greater role in leadership in a future Karenni State
- To create lasting links with the international community.

Aims:

1. To empower Karenni women to play a leadership role
2. To organize education, income generation and other projects for the benefit of the entire Karenni refugee population
3. To increase international awareness of the Karenni situation
4. To promote gender equity and fight all forms of discrimination
5. To preserve the customs, literature and languages of the Karenni people
6. To promote and advocate for women and child rights
7. To take care of women who are affected by violence

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Programs:

1. **Capacity Building**

- Has implemented training programs covering various topics (e.g. leadership development, gender issues, income generation, peace building, office and financial management, adolescent education and HIV/AIDS).
- Through an internship program, women gain hands-on experience in community development work; made available to KNWO members and staff of other ethnic organizations in the border.
- Continuous community education campaigns focusing on violence against women, women and child rights, peace building, reproductive health, and many other gender-related topics are facilitated by in-house trainers.

2. **Child Development**

- Runs a nursery program in the two Karenni refugee camps and inside the Karenni State
- As of 2007, a total of 18 nursery schools have been established in both refugee camps that provide pre-school learning and supplementary feeding to at least 2,075 children.
- More than 150 project staff, school teachers, and community facilitators, mostly women, are involved in this project.
- Capacity building trainers deliver trainings on child care and development, and proper hygiene and nutrition to parents.

3. **Vocational Development**

- Income-generating activities such as sewing, loom weaving, back strap weaving, and handicraft- making are made available to women inside the camps.
- KNWO acts as a marketing arm for the products in coordination with network organizations. Sales from these products help support the family income of women weavers.
- Traditional sarongs sewn by training participants are distributed for free to both

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men and women in the camp.

- KNWO also supports individuals or small groups in starting a home-based enterprise through a micro-credit facility. It regularly runs a skills training course on sewing and traditional loom weaving.

4. Women and Children Protection

- Offers counseling, protection and para-legal support for women who are victims of domestic abuse and other forms of violence.
- Women rights education is done through trainings, house visits and distribution of information materials.
- Baby kits and hygiene materials are given for free to mothers.
- In coordination with NGOs, KNWO extends its services to women in the IDP areas through provision of hygiene kits and health education.

5. Research, Documentation and Advocacy

- Endeavors to collect information and investigate issues on human rights violations particularly that which relate to discrimination against women.
- Documents cases of women abuses and shares its reports to partner organizations.
- Works with other community-based groups and partner groups for stronger advocacy actions to support the cause of women.

5. KUKI WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION (KWHRO) – January 1, 2000

- Believes that the role of Kuki women should be improved within Kuki society as stated under: *"History and tradition might have denied us (women) any positive role in society and women might have been confined within the four walls of the kitchen, but with the changing times and the progress of civilization, the time has come where women have to play an important role in society and politics that is equal to that played by men. In fact there are areas where women even excel men.*
- *Therefore, KWHRO (B) appeal to all Kuki women to shake off their shackles and emerge out of the kitchen to play an active and positive role in shaping the future of the Kuki nation. It is time we realize that unless we go forth and play the roles expected of us during the times we are in, the struggle of the Kuki nation will be that much weaker."*

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Aims:

- To bring to the world's attention the rampant violation of the basic human rights of the Kukis of Burma by the military junta and to seek an end to it.
- To work towards the dissolution of the military regime and the restoration of democracy in Burma.
- To enhance the participation of women in all areas of socio-political activity and to promote human rights awareness among the masses.

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ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Activities:

- Organized a basic and advanced vocational tailoring training course at Moreh town on the Indian side of the Indo-Burma border (2001-2002).
- Has taken part in various political activities with other pro-democratic organizations to restore human rights and democracy in Burma, especially in Manipur and New Delhi.
- Since its inception, KWHRO has been working to promote social, educational and health rights of women, and gender equality among Kuki society and other communities both inside and outside Burma.
- Has organized the Kukis in Burma to unite and fight the military government to establish democracy in Burma.
- The organization has been working for not only women but also for the entire Kuki community to get equal rights and status within a future federal democracy in Burma.

6. LAHU WOMEN'S ORGANISATION (LWO) – October 30, 1997

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Aims & Objectives:

- To preserve the Lahu cultural traditions.
- To improve the education of Lahu children, youth and women.
- To address the health needs of Lahu people.
- *To resist discrimination between women and men.*
- To work for the development of Lahu women in every sphere together with other indigenous women.
- *To promote the participation of women in the democracy movement in Burma.*
- To reduce illiteracy among Lahu women.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

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Activities:

1. **Basic education program for Lahu refugees**
- Orphan School and Lahu Language Schools started in 1999 at the Thai- Burma Border; several teacher training workshops held

2. **Training and workshops**
- Skills training for women—income generation, basic computer and English, office management
- Workshops to empower women—including peace-building, human rights and women's rights, conflict resolution
- Basic health/ HIV training inside Burma
- Awareness-raising about child trafficking

3. **Publications (Lahu and Burmese language)**
4. **Documentations of human rights violations**

7. PALAUNG WOMEN'S ORGANISATION (PWO) – October 14, 2000

- Believes that women need to be empowered in order to be granted equal status within their communities, and so that policies will then reflect women's experiences and needs.

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Objectives:

- To empower Palaung women to improve their lives.
- To promote and preserve Palaung culture and literature.
- *To enable Palaung women to actively participate in the democratic movement with a full understanding of women's human rights.*
- To free Palaung women from all forms of oppression to fully enjoy equal rights.
- To work together with other women's groups from Burma towards peace and democracy in Burma.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Activities:

1. **Publications**
- Publishing the Palaung Women's Journal ("Shwe Phi Oo") that covers issues concerning women in general and Palaung women in particular, and also documents the various abuses they suffer.

2. **Education/Training Program**
- Working with other women's organizations to upgrade the skills of the Palaung women (in Mae Sot area), so that they are able to participate in community and political affairs, e.g. in the monthly women's exchange program.
- Conducting education programs, such as organizing and sending its members to

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attend various capacity-building trainings (e.g. computer skills, media skills, human rights, medical skills and English language)
- Participating in some relevant international workshops and conferences.

8. PA-O WOMEN'S UNION (PWU) – November 5, 1999

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Purpose:

1. To promote the Pa-O women's movement.
2. To promote Pa-O literature and culture.
3. To improve the life of Pa-O women.
4. To promote human rights and democracy among Pa-O people.
5. To join hands with other democratic movements.
6. To work in unity with other Pa-O organizations.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Activities:

In coordination with several local and international NGOs, PWU is working for the health, education, welfare and human rights of Pa-O refugees in Mae Hong Son area.

1. **Health Care and Relief Operations**
   - Has carried out the health care and other emergency relief for displaced Pa-O in Thailand
2. **Publications**
   - Produces annual magazine; pamphlets on HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, maternal and child care.
   - Also in contact with the Pa-O inside Shan State, Burma, and has produced and distributed publications to monks, government servants, traders, villagers and workers inside Burma.
3. **Trainings for Women**
   - Women's political empowerment: leadership; law and constitution; women and Thai law; environment and grassroots leadership; women as peace-builders; women's rights; federal affairs;
   - Health: human rights and reproductive health; HIV/AIDS; counseling
   - Skills development: computer skills, office management, accounting, fund-raising, English, income generation (including sewing and mushroom farming); documentation and media skills
   - Coordinating with other local organizations to hold women's exchange meetings, youth exchange meetings, and to organize events on days of significance for the democracy movement in Burma.

9. RAKHAING WOMEN'S UNION (RWU) – November 14, 1998

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

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Aims:

- To build the capacity of Rakhaing women to become progressive leaders.
- To work for the protection of the rights of Rakhaing women and children including basic healthcare.
- To advocate for the advancement of the status of women in the community.
- To work together with other individuals and organizations for the freedom of Rakhaing people from all forms of oppression.

10. SHAN WOMEN'S ACTION NETWORK (SWAN) – March 28, 1999

- SWAN is a network of Shan women active in Thailand and along the Thai-Burma border.
- Founding member of the WLB.
- Through its affiliation with other women's organizations, establishes common platforms to promote the role of women from Burma in the struggle for democracy and human rights in their country.

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Mission:

- To work for gender equality and justice for Shan women in the struggle for social and political change in Burma through community-based actions, research and advocacy.

Objectives:

- Promoting women's rights and the rights of children.
- Opposing exploitation of and violence against women and children.
- Working for peace and freedom in our society.
- Empowering women for a better life.
- Raising awareness to preserve natural resources and the environment.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Programs:

1. **Education Program**

- Operating 12 schools providing basic literacy skills, and one nursery with the collaborations of the Shan community along the Thai-Shan border.
- Producing Shan language text books.

2. **Health Program**

- Runs a community clinic for displaced Shan on the Thai-Shan border HIV/AIDS education outreach work in Shan communities along the Thai-Shan border
- Production of Shan language leaflets on HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases & reproductive health

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- Production of Shan language audio tapes on HIV/AIDS

3. Women's Empowerment Program

- Internship Program (to fulfill the need for capacity development of women to run SWAN's programs along the border and inside Shan State, it started an internship program in 1999)
  - Each year three women have been interns with SWAN.
  - Since 2003, it has expanded its internship program into a one-year course (equips Shan women with the skills needed to be a community-based social worker).
- Trainings and workshops (Has provided training to women on: Leadership, Facilitation, Documentation skills on VAW, Women's Human Rights, Gender Issues, Constitutions, Electoral systems, Federalism)

4. Crisis Support Program

- Runs two crisis support centers
- Provision of counseling
- Referral of serious cases to other networks
- Provision of emergency assistance (access to health services, clothing, shelter and food) to survivors of violence and sexual assault
- Basic training at various sites along the Shan-Thai border for women to be local counsellors in order to assist survivors of violence and sexual assault in their communities and to become peer educators on the issue of violence against women

5. Information & Documentation Program

- Production of newsletters in Shan, Burmese and English
- Production of booklets on gender, women & human rights in Shan language
- Documentation of violence against Shan women
- Production of campaign materials in Shan language (posters and leaflets on VAW, environment protection)
- Production of Shan language comic booklets on trafficking and state violence
- Production of Shan language video tapes on trafficking in women

6. Income Generation Program: Weaving, Tailoring, Catering

11. TAVOY WOMEN'S UNION (TWU) – May 5, 1995

- TWU pledged to maintain the historical role of the great Tavoy women's movement and will work for: democracy and peace and a genuine union where equal opportunity and unity of all ethnic nationalities exist along with other ethnic and democratic forces and women's organizations from Burma.

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Aim:

- To establish an equal, liberated, just and peaceful society in Burma.

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Objectives:

- To gain gender equality and rights for women.
- To promote women's greater participation in Burma society
- To work for women's security and development.

12. WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND WELFARE ASSOCIATION OF BURMA (WRWAB) – February 1995

MISSION/AIM/OBJECTIVE

Aim:

- To promote the status of Burmese women as a major aim.

Objectives:

- To promote education and improved living standards for women of Burma from all spheres of life.
- To extend support and assistance to Burmese women in India who need help to start a new life.
- To bring about greater unity among women of Burma and fight against all forms of discrimination and oppression.
- To cooperate with other women's organizations around the world and participate in various activities together.
- To spread awareness of equality and rights among Burmese women and to enable them to speak out against injustice.

ADVOCACY/PROGRAM/ACTIVITY

Activities and Programs:

- Primary & pre-nursery school in New Delhi
- Tailoring training courses in New Delhi, Mizoram and Manipur
- Health care centre in New Delhi
- Handloom weaving training course in Mizoram
- English and Hindi language classes in New Delhi
- Basic political training courses in New Delhi
- English language school in Manipur
- Computer training courses in New Delhi
- Human rights, women's rights and legal awareness training for women
- Constitution awareness workshops for Burmese women
- Networking and solidarity building with local women groups
- Participating in international conferences, seminars and meetings
- Knowledge-building and exposure trips for members.

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