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

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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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