

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 28

To accompany the July 2008 issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *Women in the Movement.*

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Discussion

Look at the picture and discuss these questions:

- What is happening? Where is it? What does 'Unity in diversity' mean?

Activity 2 Brainstorm

How many women leaders do you know from Burma? Make a class list.

B. Activities during reading

Activity 3 Match the vocabulary

- Go through the article and underline the words you don't understand.
- Match these words or phrases with their definitions.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. victim (<i>n</i>) | a. urgently |
| 2. desperately (<i>adv</i>) | b. someone who suffers a crime, disaster or assault |
| 3. well-known (<i>adj</i>) | c. to speak or write in support of something |
| 4. counterpart (<i>n</i>) | d. famous |
| 5. strive (<i>v</i>) | e. to remove, eliminate |
| 6. senator (<i>n</i>) | f. someone who does the same work as you |
| 7. strides (<i>n</i>) | h. to force something on someone |
| 8. advocate (<i>v</i>) | i. to struggle to achieve something |
| 9. prominent (<i>adj</i>) | j. unimportant, symbolic but without influence |
| 10. erase (<i>v</i>) | k. a member of parliament |
| 11. impose (<i>v</i>) | l. to not have enough |
| 12. token (<i>adj</i>) | m. progress |
| 13. significant (<i>adj</i>) | n. influential, leading |
| 14. lack (<i>v</i>) | o. important |

Activity 4 Gap-fill

Fill the gaps with some of the words from Activity 3, Exercise b, using the correct tense where indicated.

- Nelson Mandela is a _____ African leader.
- She was chosen for the committee because they needed a _____ woman representative, but they were not interested in her ideas.
- The new rules were _____ on the students by the school authorities. (*past participle*)
- Our organisation _____ to promote safe drinking water in rural areas. We also _____ free health care.
- Many children _____ education, as their parents take them out of school to work.
- The government is trying to _____ all opposition.
- The cyclone _____ were _____ trying to find shelter.

Activity 5 Match the summary

Here are summaries of the seven paragraphs on the first page of the article. Match each summary with the paragraph.

- a. Phyu Phyu Thin works for democracy in Burma together with men, like earlier generations of female political activists.
- b. Phyu Phyu Thin left her hiding place after Cyclone Nargis.
- c. Although some women are able to work equally with men, the democratic movement does not treat women and men equally.
- d. In earlier times, some women participated in politics.
- e. Phyu Phyu Thin wanted to help victims of the cyclone.
- f. Women's participation in politics stopped after Ne Win took power, except in the opposition groups.
- g. Cyclone victims are in a bad situation. Phyu Phyu Thin participated in the 2007 uprising.

Activity 6 Comprehension Questions

Answer the questions.

1. Why was Phyu Phyu Thin hiding?
2. According to the writer, is Phyu Phyu Thin as useful as male activists?
3. What did prominent women do in earlier generations?
4. What effect did this have on younger women?
5. What happened to women's participation in politics after 1962?

Activity 7 Prediction

What do you think the rest of the article will say about women's participation in political activism in Burma?

Women in the Movement by Violet Cho and Aye Lay

A handful of prominent female activists have made a significant mark on Burmese dissident politics, but true equality of the sexes remains elusive



A pro-democracy Burmese activist in exile holds a poster of Burma's democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a protest march in New Delhi, India, on June 19, Suu Kyi's 63rd birthday. (Photo: AFP)

in Burma. She is also part of a proud tradition of women who have made their mark on Burmese politics.

Women like Mya Sein, who was selected as a representative of Asian women at the League of Nations in 1931; colonial-era senators Hnin Ma and Dr Saw Hsa; and post-independence minister for Karen State, Ba Maung Chain, paved the way for women in Burmese politics.

But the strides made by these early advocates of a more prominent role for women on the national political stage were soon erased when Ne Win imposed military rule on Burma in 1962. After this, women who wanted more than a token role in politics had to join dissident groups.

Despite the progress made by women like Phyu Phyu Thin, however, many people say that there is still a significant lack of gender equality at the highest levels of the Burmese pro-democracy movement.

THREE days after Cyclone Nargis struck southwestern Burma on May 2-3, social activist Phyu Phyu Thin bravely came out of hiding to help victims of the storm.

"I knew that our patients were suffering desperately after the cyclone, so I wanted to be here for them and try my best to help," said Phyu Phyu Thin, an HIV/AIDS activist and youth leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

"They are poor, and now the storm has destroyed their lives. They've lost family, and they have no food or place to stay," said the well-known activist, who went into hiding last August after taking part in protests against the Burmese junta.

Phyu Phyu Thin belongs to a new generation of female activists who are able to compete with their male counterparts in organizations that strive to promote democracy

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GROUP 1

Activity 8 Match the Summary

Here are summaries of the eight paragraphs on the page. Match each summary with the paragraph.

- a. Democracy groups have a very small number of women in leadership roles.
- b. Everybody needs to help in order to create change.
- c. Ethnic minority political groups are linked to armed opposition groups, which do not encourage women's participation and have a male culture.
- d. Some people think gender is not important in the struggle for democracy – everyone is working towards the same goal.
- e. Phyu Phyu Thin thinks that it doesn't matter if you are male or female – people should cooperate with each other.
- f. Although there are some well-known Burmese women in top positions, it is difficult for most women to become political leaders.
- g. Some activists are not interested in gender issues.
- h. Reasons for the lack of women leaders are cultural, educational and because of traditional beliefs about male power.

Activity 9 Discussion

In your group, discuss:

1. A former political prisoner says that activists don't talk about gender much. Why do you think they don't think about gender?
2. Phyu Phyu Thin and Aung San Suu Kyi have achieved leadership positions. Why is this possible for these two women, but not other women?

Activity 10 Teach the class

In your group, prepare a short (10 minute) presentation on the information on your page. You can do this in any language. In your presentation you should:

- Explain what your page is about (don't read it aloud or translate – explain it in your own words)
- Prepare one discussion questions (not the same as the ones above) and lead a class discussion about it.

GROUP ONE

- As the leader of an NLD-affiliated social welfare group working with HIV/AIDS patients, Phyu Phyu Thin insists that gender is not an important factor in her organization: “Men and women can work together regardless of gender,” she said in a recent interview with *The Irrawaddy*. 8.
- Other women also say that activists’ strong sense of sharing a common cause makes differences between men and women seem irrelevant. 9.
- “We didn’t think a lot about gender,” said a former political prisoner and student activist who took part in protests in 1988 and 1996, speaking on condition of anonymity. 10.
- “Change in Burma is the responsibility of every citizen.” 11.
- Despite the views of these women, however, others say that Burmese women who strive to become key decision-makers still face numerous hurdles—a fact that can be easily forgotten because of the existence of a small number of high-profile leaders such as Phyu Phyu Thin and Aung San Suu Kyi. 12.
- A cursory look at the makeup of key political organizations in the democracy movement reveals that women make up less than 1 percent of the leadership. 13.
- This fact can be largely attributed to cultural factors, such as the traditional view that a woman’s place is in the home, a failure to appreciate the need to educate girls and a belief that men possess “*hpoun*,” a power derived from meritorious actions in past lives. 14.
- Meanwhile, in ethnic minority political organizations, the close association with armed groups has resulted in a militaristic culture that many regard as inherently male-centered. 15.

GROUP 2

Activity 8 Match the Summary

Here are summaries of the ten paragraphs on the page. Match each summary with the paragraph.

- a. Men are considered to be leaders, not women, because women have to look after their families and don't think about participating in politics. If they can get more education, they can participate more.
- b. Day Day Paw's parents made her leave school after 9th standard to look after her family, so she left home and joined the dissident groups.
- c. Education is not only a problem for young women.
- d. Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw thinks that education is the main reason women can't participate in leadership roles.
- e. Although Day Day Paw is a prominent Karenni leader, she often speaks out about the KNPP's failure to encourage women leaders. She advocates for women to participate in politics.
- f. Day Day Paw wished she could have attended university. In her Karenni organization, people sometimes ignore her.
- g. Day Day Paw's parents did not support her desire for more education.
- h. Day Day Paw has a lot of family duties so she doesn't get time to keep up with the news. This causes problems when she talks to men.
- i. People don't help women to become leaders.
- j. Women don't take up politics because they don't get enough education. Girls don't get education because they have to look after their families. They should be encouraged to get more education.

Activity 9 Discussion

In your group, discuss:

1. Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw says that many girls have to leave school to look after their families. What can be done to help these girls get more education?
2. Day Day Paw says that she doesn't have enough time to read the newspaper or listen to the radio, because of her family duties. Why does this make it difficult for her to communicate with men?

Activity 10 Teach the class

In your group, prepare a short (10 minute) presentation on the information on your page. You can do this in any language. In your presentation you should:

- Explain what your page is about (don't read it aloud or translate – explain it in your own words)
- Prepare one discussion questions (not the same as the ones above) and lead a class discussion about it.

GROUP TWO

But according to Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw, a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Karen National Union (KNU) and a leading figure in the Karen Women’s Organization, the most important factor limiting women is their lack of education. 16.

“Women don’t participate in the economic, social and political arena because they haven’t had a chance to study. When they are growing up, many girls have to stay home to help take care of their families, so they don’t go to school. This means that women have limited knowledge compared to men,” she said. 17.

She went on to explain that traditionally, men are considered to be the leaders of the family and the country. The idea that women should focus on caring for their husbands and children prevents them from aspiring to a more active life outside the home. Only with education and encouragement will women learn to have higher ambitions, she said. 18.

A lack of moral support is often mentioned by women leaders of the democracy movement as one of the key difficulties they encounter. 19.

Day Day Paw, the first and only female Central Executive Committee member of the Karenni National Progressive Party, said her parents never encouraged her to study. 20.

“They always told me to stay home and take care of the farm and look after my younger brother and sister,” she said. When her family forced her to stop studying in the ninth standard, she ran away to join the revolution. 21.

“I regret that I didn’t get a higher education,” she said. “Even though I am now a leader in the main Karenni political organization, it can be difficult for me to have my voice heard.” 22.

The lack of educational opportunities that many women face is not limited to their youth, however. 23.

“I need to spend a lot of time taking care of my five children and my husband, so I can’t find time to read books or newspapers or listen to the radio, which makes it more difficult to communicate with men,” said Day Day Paw. 24.

As the wife of the KNPP’s prime minister, Day Day Paw is regarded as the “first lady” of the Karenni people, as well as a leader in her own right. But this doesn’t prevent her from openly criticizing the KNPP for failing to promote women in the party. She is also outspoken about the need to offer encouragement to women who wish to pursue political careers. 25.

GROUP 3

Activity 8 Match the Summary

Here are summaries of the nine paragraphs on the page. Match each summary with the paragraph.

- a. Women need to look after themselves, and also need to spend their lives looking after their husbands, especially if they are in the armed groups.
- b. Without gender equality, the world is unfair. Gender equality is necessary for development.
- c. Myint Myint San thinks that men are seen as more powerful than women because they are seen as having *hpoun* which makes them spiritually more powerful.
- d. Many men think women are weak, and need protection by men. This is unfair, as many women are strong.
- e. Women need to get continuing education, and also teach men about women's rights.
- f. Women need to fight against ideas that women should stay in the home.
- g. Each woman can prove she is useful, but many women need to work to achieve a better situation for all women.
- h. Many women also believe in *hpoun*, so they do not think they can achieve political leadership roles.
- i. On the border, people respect leaders with a military record from one of the armed resistance groups. Therefore fewer women enter politics.

Activity 9 Discussion

In your group, discuss:

1. Myint Myint San says that women are considered less powerful than men because of *hpoun*. Why do you think this is?
2. She also says women must go into battle against cultural assumptions that women should stay in the home. How do you think women – and men – can battle these assumptions?

Activity 10 Teach the class

In your group, prepare a short (10 minute) presentation on the information on your page. You can do this in any language. In your presentation you should:

- Explain what your page is about (don't read it aloud or translate – explain it in your own words)
- Prepare one discussion question (not the same as the ones above) and lead a class discussion about it.

GROUP THREE

For Myint Myint San, a member of the Thailand-based Burmese Women’s Union, the root cause of many of these problems is the traditional religious belief in *hpoun*, which ascribes male domination to the inherent spiritual superiority of men, based upon their past merit. 26.

Because of this deeply ingrained cultural belief, many women come to accept a lower status or feel powerless to rise above their current station in life. This makes it difficult for most women to even imagine a more active role in politics. 27.

In border areas, where armed conflict has been a fact of life for generations, women are further discouraged from pursuing political careers by the perception that only those with proven military track records are qualified to lead. 28.

Myint Myint San said that many men regard themselves as “protectors” of women, and therefore as the rightful leaders of society. This view, she argued, does not do justice to the strength of women. 29.

“In fact, we have to protect ourselves, and besides this, we have to sacrifice our lives to serving our soldier husbands,” she said. 30.

To achieve equality, she said, women must be prepared to go to battle—not in the jungle, alongside men, but against cultural assumptions that confine them to their homes. 31.

They should never stop educating themselves; they must also educate men about their true potential and their contribution to society. 32.

“If there is no equality between sexes and classes there can be no justice,” said Myint Myint San. “Equal opportunity and equal participation are the keys to developing and improving any society.” 33.

There is a great deal that women can do individually to show men what they are capable of, but ultimately, it will require a concerted effort on the part of many highly motivated women to make a lasting change. 34.

GROUP 4

Activity 8 Match the Summary

Here are summaries of the nine paragraphs on the page. Match each summary with the paragraph.

- a. Day Day Paw is working to help younger women take up leadership roles.
- b. Khin Ohmar thinks women need to work together or the men will ignore them. She also thinks women need their rights put in the constitution.
- c. Zipporah thinks that women have difficulties with cultural and political structures in Burma. They should fight to change these structures.
- d. Khin Ohmar thinks women have been ignored, but that this should change.
- e. Women leaders are important as they show other women that women can be leaders, and that women and men need to participate in developing Burma.
- f. Burma needs to change before women can get equal rights. However many people continue to work on gender equality issues within the struggle for democracy.
- g. It is more difficult for women working inside Burma, and it is difficult to discuss these issues there.
- h. Zipporah doesn't like women saying they are weak.
- i. Inside Burma it is not possible to provide education and resources to encourage women to participate in politics.

Activity 9 Discussion

In your group, discuss:

1. Zipporah says that she does not like it when women say they are weak. Why do some women think they are weak?
2. Day Day Paw is encouraging young women to take up leadership positions in the KNPP. How do you think she is doing this?

Activity 10 Teach the class

In your group, prepare a short (10 minute) presentation on the information on your page. You can do this in any language. In your presentation you should:

- Explain what your page is about (don't read it aloud or translate – explain it in your own words)
- Prepare a discussion question (you can use one of the questions from 9, or think of a different one) and lead a class discussion about it.

GROUP FOUR

“If we want a new system, we need to have constitutional acts to deal with women’s affairs,” said Khin Ohmar, a founding member of the Women’s League of Burma, an umbrella group of exiled Burmese women’s organizations. “If we women do not unite and work systematically, we will be left behind the male leadership.” 35.

Today’s women leaders are playing an important role in supporting and encouraging more women to engage in political activism, promoting the idea that women have to take joint responsibility for Burma’s development. 36

“I really do not like it when other women say that they are weak,” said Zipporah, the executive secretary of the Karen Women’s Organization and a member of the KNU’s Central Executive Committee. 37.

“Although tradition and the political system in our country work against Burmese women, we can still try hard to overcome the obstacles we now face and battle to change the ruthless system,” she said. 38.

Meanwhile, in the KNPP, Day Day Paw has been busy encouraging a generation of women to take leadership positions in the party. “We will see change in the next KNPP election,” she said confidently. 39.

Women activists inside Burma have the extra problem of working under the restrictions of the military regime, which makes debate around this issue all the more difficult. 40.

“We cannot provide a place to empower women and teach them what they can do for the movement,” said Lae Lae, a member of the NLD’s Central Executive Committee. “We don’t have any resources to educate young women.” 41.

Until there is real change inside the country, it seems that the majority of Burmese women will remain subordinate to men. But this hasn’t stopped many exiled activists from keeping women’s issues on the agenda of the struggle against military rule. 42.

“We were ignored throughout history,” said Khin Ohmar. “It should not happen again.” 43.