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The Weaponization of Women's Bodies in Burma

Hnin Hnin Oo

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary;
men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes, 1911

Preface

To begin, I would like to acknowledge my connection to the Burmese military to give insight on my positionality as I write this essay.[1] My interest in researching the military stems from my family's experience with the junta in the 1990s. The military is the reason why my parents, uncle, and two sisters fled from Burma in 1999 and later sought refuge in the United States of America. The cruelty of the junta hits close to home as my father and uncle were Burmese Freedom Fighters with the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) before immigrating to the United States. I write this critical essay today in honor of my family and in hopes of spreading awareness for our homeland, recognizing that not all Burmese families have been able to seek refuge away from the junta as my family has been given the privilege to.

In reference to Chandra Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* influential publication, I would like to recognize my personal association to the term "western feminist" (Mohanty 1984, 65). While I identify as a Burmese

American woman, the additional identification of "American" has challenged the validity of my opinions in my conversations with other individuals of Burmese ancestry. This essay is not to associate myself with the "homogenous identifier of third world women" (Mohanty 1984, 64), but to do quite the opposite. This text is written to discuss the sexual violence of ethnic women in Burma in the context of military intervention, where I acknowledge that the theories and opinions I discuss are not valid for all women in Burma, but for individuals who have been victimized by the Burmese military from 2000 to 2021.

Abstract

The Tatmadaw has continuously used sexual violence against women as weapons of war, where soldiers use assault as tools to build on the oppression and abuse of ethnic communities in Burma. Ruling from 1962 to 1974, 1990 to 2008, and seizing power once more as of February 2021, the Burmese military has adopted violent strategies as part of their military tactics, where they utilize this brutality on displaced ethnic communities and those surrounding them in borderlands within the country. In this essay, I will examine feminist narratives that have been discussed in publications studying sexual violence against women in Burma in the context of military intervention to argue how the Tatmadaw continues to use sexual violence as a military tactic to further oppress women within the country. I will discuss the history of the Tatmadaw as well as women's history in Burma to unfold the theory of the militarization of rape and sexual assault on both ethnic and borderland women in Burma as a tactic of war.

Introduction

The Burmese military has integrated sexual violence as a weapon of war against women in Burma. The sexual violence and trauma that they inflict onto women are multilayered. For instance, Annalise Oatman and Kate Majewski (2020, 269) refer to Jo M. Spangaro and collaborators (2015) to offer an insightful reflection:

> Sexual violence is both a public health issue and a justice issue that has a major impact on victims at many levels, including increased risk of sexually transmitted disease, traumatic

> injuries such as fistulas, as well a "depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, stigma and social rejection." (2)

The above illustrates how the result of the militarization of sexual assault on women is substantial on their health and wellbeing. Sexual violence is defined to include actions such as "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, pregnancy, abortion, and sterilization" (Oatman and Majewski 2020, 267). And when applying this definition of sexual violence to the Burmese military, the fact that the military has used this violence as weapons of war against women becomes apparent.

The History of the Tatmadaw

The Burmese military has been able to maintain its powerful presence in the country due to Burma's custom to male supremacy. In her article, *From Military Patriarchy to Gender Equity: Including Women in the Democratic Transition in Burma,* Zin Mar Aung discusses how "the male-dominated military dictatorship and traditional male supremacy support each other" (Aung 2015, 544), as the dominance of men in Burma has been the determinant of multiple crises within the country. The tradition of male supremacy is very prevalent in Burmese culture, thus providing leeway for the military to sustain their power as a male dominated entity for decades on end.

To truly get a sense of the Burmese military's tactics from 2000-2021, we must focus on the Constitution of 2008. Aung explains:

> The 2008 constitution was carefully designed to maintain military power over all state institutions and contained controversial provisions that gave the military veto power, thus barring the possibility of any transitional justice measures against the past military governments' serious human rights violations. (533)

This constitution further prevented Burmese civilians from justice from the Burmese military, yet another strategy of the military to maintain power within the country.

Women's history in Burma

The documentation of sexual violence in Burma has been limited because many survivors feel shame for the nonconsensual acts forced upon them, believing that their silence is protection from further abuse. To expand on the sexual violence on women by the Burmese military, we must first unravel the history of women in Burma by analyzing the structures of traditional gender roles within the country. Jessica Yee (2009) discusses these structures of "social control that may oppress AAPI women through expectations that women take a subservient position to men or that women should only think, be, or act in certain 'idealized' ways" (57). These structures are also prevalent in Burmese culture, where women in these communities have been marginalized in terms of education, politics, religion, and military involvement, contributing to the futurity of male privilege and power in Burma.

Because female literacy was banned until the 1920s, women in Burma continued to be considered insignificant in relation to their male counterparts due to traditional gender roles being heavily conducted in Burmese communities. This led to women spending less time on their studies than their male peers and spending additional time doing domestic housework alongside other women in their homes. As Aung (2015) states in her piece, "only a handful of elite women who had connections to senior government and military officials have, as a result, higher social status, higher education, and better economic opportunities" (542), emphasizing how only those with higher status and financial stability were able to receive opportunities nearly equivalent to that of men. Thus, the possibility of being educated and having access to some power as a woman in Burma is only feasible if having financial wealth and power before going into education.

In terms of political involvement, women were only granted the right to vote in 2013. The power of the female has been illustrated through a singular woman rather than a group of women, where Aung San Suu Kyi holds this privilege, and is known as "The Lady" who stands for democracy in Burma. Women have been known to hold interest in politics and official matters of the country but have "preferred to exercise influence through their husbands' names so as not to threaten men's authority" (Harriden 2012, 41). By recognizing women's eagerness to be involved in politics and education, we see how women step up against the traditional gender roles within Burmese communities and participate in change for their country using their own voice or by influencing others.

Regarding religion, the majority of Burmese people practice Buddhism. Due to the gender roles within Burmese culture and the religion, women are still marginalized and excluded in certain aspects of the religion. Oatman and Majewski (2020) cite contributions by Ikeya (2006) to explain that the marginalization of women has been part of Burmese history, for instance, "Buddhist women were traditionally barred from being a part of the *sangha* (Buddhist monastery) in any capacity, contributing to their cultural relegation to second-class status as human beings, worthy of significant participation in neither the religious nor the political spheres" (273). It is important to recognize that "Buddhism did not create social and gender hierarchies [but] Burmese notions of male spiritual superiority were often conceptualized in 'Buddhist' terms, which reinforced the belief that such hierarchies were entirely natural" (Harriden 2012, 19). This only helped to adopt the idea of traditional gender roles within Burmese culture since it was thought of being a part of the religion. Thus, creating a pathway for Burmese Buddhists to incorrectly embrace the idea that male superiority is a religious matter in their lives.

The fact that the Burmese military is male dominated comes as no surprise since the militarized discrimination and violence against women in Burma proves this to be true. Because women are valued as lesser beings than men in Burmese culture, traditional gender roles persisted throughout the military and beyond. As the military dominated the political system for the first time in 1962, "the status of women as a whole in Burma gradually declined" (Aung 2015, 541) and continued to do so during each additional time that the military seized power. Along with the women's right to vote in 2013 came the military's welcoming of women aged 25 to 30 who could enlist, where top positions were reserved "only for those with military experience (effectively barring women from them) and requiring that 25% of parliament be composed of military men" (Oatman and Majewski 2020, 272); the *Global Justice Center* (2013) offers a comprehensive analysis of gender inequality and women's political power in Burma. With this reservation and requirement of the parliament comes the approach that Burmese women are still barred from securing the same, if not more, power than Burmese men.

While women's involvement in education, politics, religion and military have changed, one thing remains as a constant: militarized sexual assault. Oatman and Majewski (2020) engage with scholars who have examined sexual violence in the context of war, for example, Blair et al. (2016), Hynes (2004), and Meger (2016)

and explain that history has ignored the militarization of sexual violence "because it often happened to women and was viewed as a natural byproduct of war or simply a domestic issue that did not merit consideration" (269). As Aung states in her piece, "the emergence of a much more skilled and stronger political awareness among women, both individually and organizationally, is necessary for Burma to move toward becoming a gender-equitable state" (2015, 550). Women's rights have been considered secondary issues in Burma, which is a custom that must come to an end for women to feel secure in their own country and even bodies. To put an end to this disregard for women's safety, we must stop ignoring sexual violence in Burma and force this violence to be consequential for perpetrators. Through the exclusion of women from positions of power throughout Burmese culture, women's safety is put on the sidelines of issues regarding the Burmese and considered insignificant.

The militarization of rape

The Burmese military has embraced cruel tactics in their strategy to maintain power in Burma through violence. The soldiers have used civilian fears of rape, assault, and murder as additional weapons of war, focusing their violence on oppressed women within the country. Militarization has been defined as "the multi-stranded process by which the roots of militarism are driven deep down into the soil of a society" (Enloe 2014, 7), where they then oppress ethnic communities by abusing their power as the military and force themselves into civilian life. The militarization of Burma has caused great trauma and fear on Burmese individuals in the way that the military uses fear to maintain power within the country. In fact, the Myanmar section of the United Nations report "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General," published on June 3, 2020, states:

> As presented in its report, the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar on sexual and gender-based violence found that sexual violence was a hallmark of Tatmadaw operations in 2016 and 2017.

Women in Burma are dehumanized and viewed as sexual objects to the military. Militarization in Burma has been persistent, as it has "re-entrenched the privileging of masculinity in both private

and public life" (Enloe 2014, 7) to produce power for the military through fear. Oatman and Majewski (2020) cite contributions by Cengel (2014), Nallu (2011), and Sann and Radhakrishnan (2012) to explain that in Burma, the military has maintained their presence in multiple villages and states, primarily having an impact on "the Kachin, Shan, Karen, Arakan, Mon, Palaung, Chin, Karenni, and Rohingya" (273), while "the communities most affected are the Kachin and the Northern Shan states" of Burma (273). The sexual assault and rapes that are committed by the officers are usually executed in front of the troops, and some civilians have reported that "the soldiers (both officers and lower ranking men) usually enter villages or internally displaced persons camps and inform villagers they have been ordered to rape" (274). The military officers have normalized their acts of rape and sexual assault against women, steering the way for their troops to follow suit. The significance of this systemically standardized practice comes from the officers' incitement themselves, where the normalization of rape furthers the degradation of women and reinforces the power of the military.

Among those affected are women who live near military bases. These women have a higher chance of endangerment as military forces are closer in proximity to them, leading soldiers to have to go to less lengths to find women to force into becoming their sexual objects. These actions do not exclude any women, as women "of their own state or of a foreign power, experience a regional militarization of space that other women escape" (di Leonardo 1985, 611) by being further away from them. Understanding that "women are more likely to be subjected to 'extreme war rape' during times of conflict, such as gang rape, torture, or mutilation" (Oatman and Majewski 2020, 268), we recognize how wars within countries like Burma further escalate these forms of abuse, as the junta continuously seizes power from the elected government. Through the objectification of women in Burma, the military furthers their strategy of using women as a tactic of war. Oatman and Majewski (2020) refer to Cohen (2016) and Farr (2009) in their examinations of the deep interconnections between war and different expressions of extreme violence against women.

In their powerful contribution to *Women's Journey to Empowerment in the 21st Century,* Oatman and Majewski (2020) reflect about groundbreaking feminist scholarship to assert that "the sexual violence seen in war was really the manifestation of men's general misogyny toward all women, allowed to be totally expressed in times of war" (270); Brownmiller (1975) and Meger (2016) are a *must read* for an in-depth conversation examining this topic.

When thinking of the militarization of rape and sexual assault, it is important to recognize the reasons why these crimes are continuously committed in Burma. For example, "[c]rimes are much more likely to be committed if the offender believes there is a low chance of being detected or held to account" (Spangaro et al. 2015, 4), which is portrayed through the abuse of the Burmese military as the soldiers easily escape from the consequences of being considered criminals. Sexual assault and rape are only reduced when these military criminals believe that there is a chance that they will be prosecuted, which has been proven to be highly unlikely with the Tatmadaw as time has passed. Along with other perpetrators of sexual violence, soldiers of the Burmese military are much more likely to commit crimes on the "physically vulnerable and those least likely to be believed, such as children and those with a mental illness" (Spangaro et al. 2015, 7), as their crimes are less likely to be detected or believed through these kinds of victims. The awareness of the militarization of rape and sexual assault on women and other civilians in Burma has been greatly neglected by Burmese culture and other countries. This disregard must come to an end to prevent further sexual assault and rape on women in Burma in the context of military intervention to truly begin the progression of Burma as a democracy.

Women in the borderlands

To further the discussion of rape as a weapon of war in Burma, I would like to include the systemic rape committed by the Burmese military in the borderlands. The militarized rape of these women is "employed as a military strategy to discourage resistance against the government by weakening the cultural fabric of ethnic groups in the borderlands as well as to terrorize them and encourage their removal from their land," assert Oatman and Majewski (2020, 275), emphasizing once more how fear and rape are used as weapons against civilians in Burma and its borderlands. In their reflections, the authors refer to Nallu (2011), who has widely examined this topic.

Via *Kachinland News,* Pangmu Shayi (2015) explains how "women's rights groups have documented more than 70 cases of sexual crimes, with at least 20 resulting in death, committed by the Burma Army in the Kachin area since June 2011," where they stress that the statistics of these cases are not all, but only a small portion of the number of sexual crimes committed by the Burmese

military in the Kachin region. It is important to recognize that these crimes are only within the Kachin region, so the additional cases of sexual assault and rape of other ethnic communities have yet to be included in these statistics of violence against women.

Burma shares borders with Thailand, India, China, Laos, and Bangladesh. With the borders comes additional military presence, where women residing near these borderlands are used as sexual objects submissive to the military. Here, women are "drugged, beaten, kidnapped, and forced to live among the Myanmarese army battalions cooking and cleaning during the day, thereby providing a source of free labor, and subjected to gang rapes at night" (Oatman and Majewski 2020, 274). Sann and Radhakrishnan (2012) invite us to think critically about these heartbreaking expressions of sexual violence against women in Burma in the context of human rights. Ergo, women living in the borderlands of Burma whether they are of Burmese ancestry or not, are continuously oppressed and terrorized by the Burmese military for their personal benefit.

Burmese military wives

While the Burmese military has relied heavily on its male power and privilege to exercise violence against women as a tactic of war, it's vital to acknowledge that some women see no wrong in the military's strategies but encourage their behavior while emphasizing what they believe to be the importance of traditional gender roles in Burma. Men hold authority in politics, religion, culture, and education, and some women identify these notions as being the correct way of life. Highly influential women's groups in Burma have included those created by military wives, where they laid the ideals of the military as the foundation of their rules and regulations. The wives of the military generals and officers structured their organizations to prompt "ideas about women's proper roles in culture and tradition, rather than challenging unequal gender relations" (Olivius and Hedström 2019, 5), which by default, allowed further oppression of women in Burma as the military wives would deem the cruelty of women by the military as insignificant.

Rape and other forms of sexual assault are not talked about in Burmese spaces due to the difficulty of women to identify as allies with one another. Zin Mar Aung (2015) engages with Jessica Harriden's scholarship to explain that there is "the cultural emphasis on male political authority" (538) within Burmese culture and

religion, making it difficult for women to resist said authority to amplify their own voices. Several Burmese military wives have assisted in furthering the ill treatment of women in Burma, which has only given more power to the Burmese military's men as their wives have deemed the experiences of victims as unimportant and inconsequential alongside them. Burmese military wives have encouraged survivors to silence themselves on their sexual assault rather than speak up through their women led organizations, aiding the military in their attempt to disregard the consequences of committing rape and sexual assault on women in Burma as a tactic of war.

Conclusion

Sexual assault has been used as a weapon of war against women in Burma for decades. In this critical essay, I have analyzed narratives on the Burmese military's assault tactics, where I have discussed the history of the Burmese military as well as women's history in Burma, where traditional Burmese culture has allowed for the continuation of male supremacy and privilege. The military has used more than arsenal equipment to oppress ethnic communities in Burma and the prevention of this assault will only begin to be initiated when women's experiences with the Burmese military are taken seriously. As Cynthia Enloe (2014) voices in *Understanding Militarism, Militarization, and the Linkages with Globalization,* "if the experiences of women are taken seriously, we have a far better chance of detecting how militarization and its complementing privileging of masculinity is perpetuated and perhaps how it might be put in reverse" (9). The Burmese military must be held accountable for their crimes against women and all other civilians in Burma, where sexual assault as a weapon of war will no longer be accepted, but consequential for all perpetrators.

The Burmese military must be held responsible for the violence against women in Burma. The leaders of the Tatmadaw are responsible for *all* expressions of violence they have exercised against women in Burma, all mechanisms should be mobilized to apply the most rigorous process to prosecute them legally. "[W]e, Women's Peace Network, and the undersigned organizations working for women's rights and against gender-based violence," is only a segment of the first sentence of a powerful statement published by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) on March 22, 2021. The remarkable statement was signed

by 191 organizations under the title "Hold Myanmar Military Accountable for Violence Against Women." This message is addressed to the President and Members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, and an assertive paragraph of the long statement asserts:

> We, members of the global women's rights movement, now urgently join forces to amplify the people's calls: the Myanmar military and security forces must be held to account for their brutality, and all impunity fueling their historical violation of women's rights and international laws and norms must end.

Scholars Annalise Oatman and Kate Majewski (2020) similarly addressed the above in their comprehensive analysis of violence against women by the military in Burma (280).

Cynthia Cockburn discusses in *Gender Relations as Causal in Militarization and War:* "war deepens already deep sexual divisions, emphasizing the male as perpetrator of violence, women as victim" (2010, 144) which then enables the mass rape of women in countries such as Burma. To stop the Burmese military from using sexual violence as a weapon of war means to document these atrocities, as sexual violence will only be considered riskier for abusers of power if there is an "increasing community willingness to take action" (Spangaro et al. 2015, 7) against these perpetrators. If community members support one another as allies without perceiving these survivors as shameful to the Burmese culture in its entirety, the power of women will be strengthened throughout the country.

The current feminist practices in Burma have been lost in translation, hence, to create allyships amongst women in Burma, feminism can also be reintroduced as a perspective that does not consist of hatred towards men to gain women supremacy. Instead, feminism is about empowerment that involves women and men as equals in areas that are currently male dominated. In addition to this, female organizations such as the Women's League of Burma should be incorporated into women's lives instead of women led organizations created by Burmese army wives, as "the WLB aims to unite women's voices across ethnic and political divides in order to advocate for women's rights and participation in both exiled and national politics (including the armed struggle)" (Olivius and Hedström 2019, 4). Understanding that "feminism is [currently] understood as an ideology to promote women domination rather than an idea to fight for women's rights" (Than et al. 2018, 2) in

Burma, we must work to translate the definition of feminism for its truth rather than its misconceptions to further build consistent support for women and their human rights.

The Burmese military has continuously escaped blame for their use of sexual violence against women as a weapon of war. The utilization of these terrorist practices has been implemented on women from displaced ethnic communities and those in neighboring borderlands, where these women have been exploited by the military's grotesque patriarchal ideologies and practices. In this essay, I have examined feminist publications studying sexual violence against women in Burma in the context of militarization to argue how the Burmese military has consistently used women as weapons of war to maintain their power in Burma and surrounding borderlands. Such weaponization of women's bodies was made possible to a great extent because of traditional gender roles implemented into Burmese culture in the context of the history of the military and women in Burma. To prevent further violence and trauma in the lives of women in Burma, individuals regardless of identity or gender must convene against the Burmese military to end their power in the country. They will only continue to use women as weapons of war if not putting their power to rest indefinitely at the earliest opportunity.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was the winner of the *Lora Romero Memorial Undergraduate Award for Interdisciplinary Research in Race, Ethnicity and Gender,* and it was selected by a committee of distinguished professors representing the Center for Women's and Gender Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, in the Spring 2022.

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