

Why are Myanmar nuns not granted the same respect as monks?

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A young Buddhist nun rides Yangon's circular train in June 2015. (Hkun Lat / Myanmar Now).

By Ei Cherry Aung

Born of Buddhist parents and raised in a Buddhist environment, I grew up as a typical Myanmar Buddhist girl. Under the care of my grandmother, it was hammered into my brain that we should worship and pay the utmost respect to Buddhist monks in all circumstances. My grandmother instructed me, for example, to never sit on the same level as monks, but place myself at their feet. Yet in all the years of my childhood she never said a word about how to behave in front of Buddhist women who had become nuns.

It's customary in Myanmar to make donations at monasteries during annual religious events and to donate to monks begging for alms on the street. I used to see my grandmother give rice and curries to monks every morning, before anyone had a chance to eat, and I learned that I should always offer food to the monks first. But when nuns came asking for alms she usually replied: "Sorry, please no offerings." Only occasionally a nun would receive a spoonful of rice or a one-kyat note - this was at a time when the bus fare for a short trip cost around 50 kyats.

Thus, I learned early on that nuns do not deserve the same respect as monks. Later, I came to understand this is due to persistent conservative views of women in Myanmar society and in religious practice.

When I was a child, an aunt decided to become a nun for life. I remember thinking that it was embarrassing for a woman to become a nun and shave her head. It is common in Myanmar for children to have their heads shaved from time to time as mothers believe this will give them thick, beautiful hair. I always disliked having my head shaved - it happened to me only three times, and I would cry my eyes out every time.

But in recent years as I've grown older, and perhaps more mature, a new thought entered my head. I began to ask myself: Why, as a Buddhist woman, should I feel ashamed to shave my head when I become a nun?

So, earlier this year I decided that I wanted to overcome my old anxieties and became a nun for 10 days during the *Thingyan* water festival in April. What I found during this experience is that nuns suffer not only a lack of respect due to negative, patriarchal views that still hold sway, but also a lack of public support.

I went to Shwe Min Wun Nunnery on Yangon's Dhammazed Road to be ordained. The living conditions of the 10 poor nuns in the tiny nunnery shocked me. The one-storey wooden building was small and cramped; there was no modern furniture and it had only one fan, two water tanks, a drinking water pot and bamboo sleeping mats.

Soon after the ordination I went to Tit Wine Monastery, a well-known religious centre in Yangon's South Okkalapa Township, for a short meditation course. There I realized how different the living conditions are for monks when compared to nuns.

The monastery was a grand, five-storey building installed with modern electrical items, such as air-conditioners, electric fans, and water coolers, as well as a generator in case of power cuts. The nuns at Shwe Min Wun have to scoop up every drink of water they need, the monks at Tit Wine got a refreshing drink of cooled water at the press of a button.

Upon closer inspection there is no end to the differences between the facilities at nunneries and monasteries; the gap in living conditions is huge.

Monasteries can count on numerous generous donors looking to earn merit through donations, but nuns arriving in front of a house to ask for donations for their nunnery usually leave empty-handed. Even in Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, there are only a few donors for nunneries, so we can imagine how nuns in rural areas are struggling to get by.

Negative views of women and nuns can sadly be found in some of the centuries-old Buddhist practices in Myanmar. Women and nuns can often not visit the holiest parts of religious monuments like men can. Nuns are not allowed to give sermons at important events, only monks can.

We are taught to step aside when monks are passing by because it would be bad karma to even stand on their shadow, yet little regard is paid to a passing nun. People will give up their seats on buses for monks, but rarely for nuns.

Tazar Thiri, a life-long nun living in Yangon, told me, “I’ve met men and women who would refer to me as a lay person.”

As a Myanmar woman and a temporary nun, it has been very disappointing to see nuns being treated like they deserve no more respect than ordinary lay people, and to see them struggle to live with dignity just because of their gender.

I believe our society has wrongly presumed that nuns do not deserve the same respect and support as monks just because they are women. In fact, both monks and nuns are living strictly in accordance with the instructions of Lord Buddha and deserve an equal amount of respect.

Poverty drives Myanmar girls into underage sex work

13/08/2015



A nighttime view of an area near Yangon's Pansodan Bridge where sex workers are known to solicit customers. (Hkun Lat /Myanmar Now)

By Htet Khaung Lin

YANGON (Myanmar Now) – Sixteen-year-old Wut Yee, left to fend for herself and her younger brother, was relieved when her exhausted mother finally came home after a week's disappearance, but the feeling was short-lived.

Her mother had two devastating pieces of news for her: Since her husband remarried she had been working as a sex worker to make ends meet and she had just agreed to sell her daughter's virginity to a businessman for \$3,000.

Wut Yee, who requested to change her name for this story, had quit school to handle household chores and look after her brother and she had no other source of income. Money was in short supply. The monsoon was coming and their thatch-roofed house in Yangon's Hlaing Thar Yar Township required urgent repairs; her brother's school fees and old debts also needed to be paid.

"My mother said: 'I've already accepted the money. I worry you would be in pain since you've never done it before, so I've paid an advance fee to the clinic at the top of our street to give you anaesthetics.' I cried the whole night," Wut Yee said, recalling the events from two years ago.

"The next morning, I had to follow this man after the doctor injected me with anaesthetics. He took me in his car to a house on the outskirts of town. I spent the whole day with him. I wasn't in pain when he sent me back home in the evening because of the medication, but I couldn't walk properly," the petite girl told Myanmar Now.

Soon afterwards, Wut Yee found herself working at a massage parlour that doubles as a brothel near Ba Yint Naung wholesale market, one of Yangon's busiest places. After two months, she quit over disagreements with colleagues and exploitation by the owner, and she decided to ply the trade alone on the streets, often following men more than twice her age into dingy hotel rooms.

Due to the clandestine nature of sex work in Myanmar, it is almost impossible to know how many underage girls like Wut Yee are engaged in the work in Yangon, the country's biggest city with more than 5 million inhabitants. Myanmar Now found one underage sex worker after interviewing more than a dozen workers, but was told that it was not uncommon for teenage girls to end up in the trade.

Aid workers warn the problem could worsen if authorities ignore it, especially as Myanmar society opens up after half a century of isolation under military rule. They also say rehabilitation and support is more important than punitive measures.

"This issue is directly linked to poverty," said Dr. Sid Naing, country director for Marie Stopes International Myanmar, which runs health education and support programmes.

“Underage sex workers have existed for a while so it is important the authorities do not deny their existence. Otherwise, their numbers could increase. It is also equally important for society to not just criticise them, but to understand why it happened and help them get on the right path,” he added.

“At a time when it is universally acknowledged that child labour is unacceptable, using children for sex should be completely out of bounds.”

VIRGIN MARKET

The practice of buying underage girls for sex is fuelled in part by superstitious beliefs that sleeping with virgins has health benefits, such as long life and curing the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), said Dr. Sid Naing.

Most underage girls arrive in big, commercial cities due to a combination of family difficulties and a lack of opportunities for well-paid jobs in the countryside, said Thu Zar Win from the [Sex Worker in Myanmar Network](#).

“Most child sex workers enter this profession because their parents or guardians sold their virginity,” she said. “In most cases, they themselves see very little money because pimps and brokers usually take a large cut.”

Some 0.45 percent of Myanmar women between 15 to 49 years of age - an estimated 40,000 to 80,000 - are engaged in paid sex work, according to government and United Nations figures released in 2013.

Poh Poh, a 21-year-old sex worker who requested not to use her real name, says most girls who became sex workers via the virgin market face difficulties leaving the industry. Many tend to work in brothels disguised as beauty salons or massage parlours, as they provide better protection than roaming the streets, she said.

“I’m also scared to ply the trade on the street,” said Poh Poh, a single mother who became a sex worker a year ago after separating from her husband.

SEX WORK AND THE LAW

Arresting and punishing sex workers would not eliminate prostitution, said Dr. Sid Naing from Marie Stopes. “I don’t want to say anything about whether sex work should be legal or not. What we can do is to accept the reality that they exist and help them so that they don’t face more suffering.”

Observers also say the current law governing sex work, the 1949 Suppression of Prostitution Act, limits workers' access to healthcare and makes them vulnerable to threats and harassment from security officials.

Under the law it is illegal to solicit prostitution, force or entice a woman into sex work, and operate or work in a brothel. It was [amended](#) in 1998 to increase sentences to between one and three years in prison, and to provide an expanded definition of what constitutes a brothel to "any house, building, room, any kind of vehicle/ vessel/ aircraft or place habitually used for the purpose of prostitution or used with reference to any kind of business for the purpose of prostitution."

Since Myanmar's political reforms began, opposition lawmakers and activists have called for amendments to the law. Sandar Min, a National League for Democracy lawmaker, submitted a proposal in parliament calling for decriminalisation of sex work in 2013, but it was rejected. Taw Win Khayay, a network of sex workers, is calling for an analysis and rewriting of the law.

Local media [reported](#) in July that a parliamentary committee proposed amendments to the law that would make procurement of sex punishable with a prison term of up to one year with hard labour, and a fine. It also proposed adding a section on "rehabilitating" sex workers through education.

The current 1949 law does not allow the arrest and detention of clients of female sex workers and police could only educate them, said Major Thi Thi Myint, deputy head of Yangon Police's crime statistics department.

Of the 1,772 prostitution-related crimes in 2014, very few relate to cases of sex workers under the age of 18, she said. "If we apprehend underage sex workers, we don't send them to prison. We send them to youth rehabilitation schools and teach them vocational skills and general knowledge that would help them to leave this job," she added.

SEX EDUCATION

Aid workers say underage sex work is not only morally reprehensible but also physically harmful.

Underdeveloped sexual organs are easier to bruise and injure and are vulnerable to sexually-transmitted diseases, said Dr. Sid Naing. Underage sex workers also tend to have poor knowledge of sex and how to protect themselves, he added, putting them at considerable risk in a country with a high HIV prevalence rate.

A 2014 UNAIDS report estimated that some 189,000 people in Myanmar live with HIV. Government figures cited in the study state that 23 percent of recorded HIV-infections in Yangon and Mandalay occurred among sex workers.

According to Sex Worker in Myanmar Network's Thu Zar Win, sex education is almost non-existent for youths.

"It's not just underage sex workers that lack knowledge of sexual issues. Young men are also unaware of such issues. They need to be conscious of other sexually-transmitted diseases that could spread, not only HIV."

"Parents and business owners need to protect children who became sex workers for various reasons. They entered this industry because they were exploited," she added.

Wut Yee had never encountered sex education. She was making an average of \$30 a day in a country where, according to a UN report released last year, 43 percent of adults live on less than \$2 per day.

"I was happy with how much I was making, but what terrified me was that my mother's health deteriorated. We found out at the end of last year that she has HIV," she said. "She was aware of the possibility of getting infected with the virus in her line of work, but I got really scared when it happened."

STRUGGLE

Without a high school degree, job opportunities for Wut Yee were scarce. But she decided to quit prostitution for a less-paid but safer job of a salesgirl at one of the hundreds of mobile phone shops in Yangon.

She is still struggling to explain to buyers the different phone models, brands and prices. She is two months into the new job and finding it difficult to grasp the technical terms and specifications. Yet she says she is determined to make it work.

"I am only earning \$80 a month now but I feel there is more security," she said.

She regularly wonders whether she should return to prostitution, even if temporarily, to allay her family's financial troubles. Her mother, now a street vendor and receiving healthcare through an aid agency, is against the idea, Wut Yee said. They now try and make do with their meagre income while her younger brother continues his school.

Wut Yee hopes one day to find a husband who she could be honest with about her past. For now, aware of the deep discrimination towards sex workers in a deeply conservative society, she is not taking any chances. None of her co-workers know of her past.

"I don't want to blame my mother for what happened to me. I will get married one day and I'm only thinking of ensuring my daughters do not have to suffer the same fate," she said. (Written by Htet Khaung Linn; Editing by Paul Vrieze)

Despite record numbers, women candidates still face hurdles in Myanmar's male-heavy election

01/10/2015



Nyo Nyo Thin, an independent lawmaker representing Yangon's Bahan Township in the Yangon Region Parliament, campaigning in her constituency. She is contesting a Lower House seat in the upcoming elections. (PHOTO:- Myanmar Now)

By Ei Cherry Aung / Myanmar Now

YANGON (Myanmar Now) - When Nang Mya Oo told her husband a few weeks ago that she planned to stand as a candidate in Myanmar's November 8 general elections he was less than thrilled.

“Will you contest in Taunggyi? No way!” she recounted his response to her plan to contest a state parliament seat in the Shan State capital Taunggyi as a candidate for the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD).

After arguing that she was the best hope for a Shan party victory in the area, he relented and agreed she could run, despite his concerns over her safety while campaigning in the region, which has long been destabilised by low-level ethnic conflict and a rampant trade in illicit drugs.

“My husband tried to stop me but I didn’t care, I want to get into parliament with the SNLD,” said the 46-year-old mother of one. “I want to improve the situation of my Shan people.”

Like Nang Mya Oo, many female candidates in Myanmar’s election - the first in decades to be contested by all main opposition parties - told Myanmar Now they are keen to exercise new political rights following the end of military rule, but face pressure not to run from concerned husbands and family members.

Although the country’s most famous politician, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, is a woman, Myanmar’s conservative society presents significant hurdles to women’s participation in politics.

Women who do gain the support of their families to run as candidates said they subsequently had to endure insults, rumours and political attacks based on negative gender stereotypes.

“Our society still cannot come to terms with the fact that women can also play a leadership role,” said May Sabai Phyu, director of Gender Equality Network Myanmar.

Just 13 percent of the 6,074 candidates in the November parliamentary election are women, according to the Union Election Commission, although their participation is considerably higher than in all previous polls.

DROPPING OUT

Nan Shwe Kyar, secretary of the Mandalay-based Wun Thar Nu Democratic Party, said her small party approached 20 women several months ago and asked them to run as candidates, but only three made the final list. The others stepped aside after their families voiced concerns.

In the 2010 general elections – which many believe were rigged by the then-junta - 45 out of 101 female candidates were voted in as lawmakers. In the 2012 by-elections, 26 women ran for political office, 13 of whom were elected as representatives, according to figures from the commission.

In the upcoming elections, 228 Myanmar women will run for seats in the Lower House, 119 for seats in the Upper House and 444 for a role in the legislatures of the states and regions, according the Union Election Commission.

“The number of woman candidates has increased compared with the previous elections but the percentage remains low,” said Devi Thant Cin, spokeswoman for Myanmar Green Network, an environmental NGO. “Capable women should be welcomed into politics.”

The opposition National League for Democracy of Aung San Suu Kyi is the party fielding the most women candidates at 168, while 72 women are running for the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

RUMOURS AND INSULTS

Women candidates say they have to endure slurs and malicious rumours, while some also fear for their safety as they campaign in their constituencies.

“My male rivals looked down on me because I’m a woman. They sometimes said nasty things to me,” said Nyo Nyo Thin, a respected, independent lawmaker representing Yangon’s Bahan Township who is contesting a Lower House seat. She added that she would file an official complaint with the Union Election Commission if she suffered any insults based on her gender.

Cheery Zahau, a candidate for the Chin Progressive Party in Chin State’s Falam Township, said rumours were spread about her because she is an unmarried woman living alone.

“One thing about being a young, single and a woman is that I have to endure a lot of smears and attacks on my integrity. I was accused of getting pregnant and then having an abortion. I was also accused of having affairs with this person or that,” said the 34-year-old.

“It’s still happening. I don’t have time to deal with them so I just focus on my work. I know the truth.”

Bawk Jar, the chairperson of the small opposition National Democratic Force in Kachin State who is contesting a Lower House seat in Myitkyina Township, said she faced similar problems while campaigning in parts of the remote, northern state. “As I was accompanied by some male colleagues during the campaign trips, some people claimed we were having relations,” she said.

Personal safety is also a concern. Phyu Phyu Thin, a candidate for the NLD in Yangon’s Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, said: “I am not very confident about my safety in Yangon during the campaign - the situation would be even worse for women in the conflict-affected areas.”

But Toe Nandar Tin, a female candidate for the ruling USDP, also running in a Yangon constituency, said she did not feel troubled by negative gender stereotypes as she was confident of the skills she acquired while working in business and traveling abroad.

“I will contest in the upcoming elections and serve the country and people with my knowledge and international experience,” she said. “I will promote equal rights for women and am confident of my experience when compared with the men.”

SUPPORTING WOMEN IN POLITICS

Women candidates and activists said there is an urgent need to address negative attitudes toward women and girls in Myanmar.

“Our society - the whole of Myanmar - has double standards. There isn’t a system to support women who want to do this (politics). You have to struggle on your own,” said Cheery Zahau.

“I wouldn’t be like this if it wasn’t for my father. He never treated me differently because I was a girl... But many families would tell their daughters to behave a certain way and stay at home. When you are treated like that from the age of two, it’s difficult to expect them to be assertive later.”

Khon Ja, an activist with the Kachin Peace Network, said it was crucial for more women to be elected so that they can promote the rights of women and children in parliament. She said it was unclear how many women would be running for ethnic minority parties, which are expected to form a significant bloc in the next parliament.

Mar Mar Oo, deputy chief of labour affairs at 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, said: “The capacity of women should be promoted for more woman candidates to enter parliament.

“Unfortunately, many graduate women in Myanmar are now housewives and dependent on their husbands. More opportunities should be opened up for such women.”

(Editing by Paul Vrieze and Ros Russell)

Law aimed at Muslims in Myanmar strikes Buddhist targets

16/12/2015



A family at their home in a slum area in Hlaing Tharyar, a sprawling township to the north of Yangon. (PHOTO:- Myanmar Now/ Hkun Latt)

By Thin Lei Win

YANGON (Myanmar Now) - T's husband ended their relationship with a simple text message. "He said, 'I don't want to be with you anymore. I'm going with her because she's better than you.' What can I say?" T said, looking down at the table.

The 26-year-old, who requested anonymity, was devastated. They'd been married for two years, and had been friends for 10. He left her for a woman he met via the Viber messaging app a few months earlier.

"I wanted to try my best to save the marriage. I didn't want to be known as a divorcee in society," she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

The sole breadwinner, T had used her earnings from selling fresh goods at the market to buy him a motorcycle, a mobile phone, and a gold necklace.

He took them all.

She turned to ward authorities, all of them male, whose responsibilities include supervising social affairs and resolving local disputes.

“They told me there was nothing they could do, that it’s very common. That last comment made me really angry,” recounted T, a slight woman with long black hair and traditional *thanaka* make-up on her cheeks.

Her neighbours were not much help either. They sniggered at her for failing to keep her husband, she says.

Faced with unsympathetic officials in a male-dominated and socially conservative culture, T, like dozens of women in Myanmar, found an unlikely ally in the controversial new Monogamy Law, which criminalises extramarital affairs and polygamy. Those found guilty could be imprisoned for up to seven years, and the defendant is denied bail.

“It’s good there is such a law. In fact you can even say such a law is long overdue,” she said. T’s husband left her in March and lawyers say the law, enacted on Aug. 31, cannot be applied retrospectively, but she says she is determined to find a way.

“I’m going to file a complaint. I’m not going to let him get away with it,” she said, her jaw set.

The Monogamy Law was the last and the slimmest of four “[race and religion protection laws](#)” enacted after lobbying by nationalist Buddhist monks who claimed Myanmar and its women were under threat from Islam. The law has fired the imagination of ordinary citizens, although perhaps not in the way its backers had originally intended.

Between Sept. 1 and Dec. 7, 29 complaints under the law were filed in Yangon alone, the country’s commercial capital, according to figures from the Yangon Police Force. The vast majority of them concerned Buddhist men. Three cases are against women.

"RABBIT TRAP CATCHING CATS"

Women's rights groups had [often said](#) existing laws governing marriage, divorce and personal relationships, which date back to British occupation in the 19th century, were outdated, unclear and poorly enforced.

Under the [Penal Code](#), the colonial-era primary legislation on violent crimes, legal sanctions already exist for polygamy but adultery is narrowly defined - only a man who has sexual intercourse with the wife of another man is deemed to have committed the offence.

Yet rights activists say the four “race and religion protection bills” are not the solution

and are in fact designed to discriminate against Muslims in the predominantly Buddhist country.

The laws enjoyed swift passage in the parliament and were endorsed by President Thein Sein. Anyone criticising them received threats from the powerful Patriotic Association of Myanmar, better known by its Myanmar acronym Ma Ba Tha.

The new government, which will take over next year, will inherit the laws, which are already proving to have unintended consequences.

The Monogamy Law was intended to “preserve the sanctity of marriage, to safeguard from the danger of Jihadi Muslims who are marrying many women in an effort to establish a Muslim nation, and for women to avoid the problem of polygamy”, Wirathu, a leading Ma Ba Tha monk, [recently wrote](#) in the group’s journal.

With the overwhelming majority of men charged under the Monogamy Law being Buddhist, however, Myanmar’s lively social media now describe the impact of the law with a traditional Burmese saying: “The trap was set for rabbits but caught cats instead”.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED?

In the run-up to the Nov. 8 elections, Ma Ba Tha openly campaigned against the National League for Democracy after NLD lawmakers objected to the bills. Even after NLD’s landslide win, the group has [warned](#) the party not to abolish or amend these laws.

Phyu Phyu Thin, an NLD lawmaker, was one of those who objected to the law.

“People are now talking about how the law was aimed at one thing but affecting another thing. Laws have to be consistent and not violate people’s human rights,” said the Lower House MP.

“It felt like (the laws) were enacted with a political purpose but using women as an excuse.”

The Monogamy Law states that it applies to everyone living in Myanmar, including foreign nationals married to Myanmar citizens. It prohibits a married person from entering a second marriage or “unofficially” living with another person while still married.

Anyone can file a complaint, and punishment for violations include loss of property rights upon divorce for the guilty party, up to seven years in prison and a fine.

CRIMINALISING PRIVATE AFFAIRS

Robert San Aung, a well-known lawyer, noted that cases under the law had been opened even before the relevant by-laws have been issued.

“Normally, by-laws are required before a law can be enforced and there are no by-laws yet for the Monogamy Law,” he told Myanmar Now in a telephone interview.

Rights groups say adultery is not an issue to be tackled by the criminal justice system and have questioned whether the government should interfere in private affairs.

“I personally support the idea of monogamy but the issue of adultery exists not just in Myanmar and in our time, but in every country, culture, race and religion. It’s about individual choice and morality... It doesn’t make sense to ban this through laws,” said May Sabe Phyu, director of Gender Equality Network (GEN) in Myanmar.

Human Rights Watch pointed out that legal provisions that criminalise consensual sexual relations between adults, regardless of marital status, violate [the right to privacy](#).

A United Nations working group on discrimination against women also said in 2012 adultery [should not](#) be a criminal offence.

PROTECTION

Yet for women such as T, the law could offer much needed protection in a society which celebrates men's virility, with popular sayings such as “A good man attracts a thousand women” and “If a tree is strong, ten thousand birds can take refuge there”.

Avoiding sexual misconduct is one of the five moral precepts Buddhists are supposed to live by, but it is a duty often ignored by Myanmar men.

K, a 48-year-old woman from western Myanmar, was married for seven years before her husband left her and married another woman, already pregnant with his child, in August.

“My husband learned from his cousins and uncles who behaved the same way. They showed him he could get away with it,” she said.

K only learned of the law’s existence from women rights activists after agreeing to a divorce, she said. She may not be able to use the law as her husband left her days before it came into force.

“If I could, I’d like to send all of them to jail to set an example.”

(Editing by Ros Russell)

Where are the women in Myanmar's peace process?

31/12/2015



Ethnic Kachin refugees gather during UNHCR special envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt and her son Pax visit to Jam Mai Kaung IDP camp in Myitkyina, capital of Kachin state, Myanmar, July 30, 2015. (PHOTO:- REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun)

By Thin Lei Win/ Myanmar Now

YANGON (Myanmar Now) - Women have been consistently excluded from Myanmar's peace negotiations and their continued absence could undermine the success of the talks aimed at ending long-running ethnic conflicts that have [displaced](#) more than half a million people, women's rights activists say.

The exclusion at talks of representatives of more than half of Myanmar's population is particularly egregious given that women have suffered disproportionately in the wars that have raged in the country's borderlands for more than half a century.

Rape and sexual violence, especially of ethnic women and girls, are [rampant and well-documented](#), and human rights groups have accused the Myanmar army of committing abuses with impunity in conflict zones.

“The long-term impact of conflicts are on women,” Nang Raw Zakhung, a female activist from conflict-torn Kachin state told Myanmar Now.

“Even if it is the men who die or are wounded in the conflict, it’s the women - wives and mothers - who have to look after the rest of the family,” added Zakhung, assistant director of Shalom (Nyein) Foundation and one of the few women who have been involved in the peace process in her role as technical advisor to the coordinating team set up by ethnic armed groups.

The nationwide peace process, underway since 2011, has been wholly male-dominated with women barely visible, despite a rhetoric of inclusiveness.

With two weeks to go before the start of a landmark national conference on peace, female politicians and women’s rights activists are voicing concern that the exclusion of women would undermine prospects for long-term peace.

Among two major government committees that negotiated the ceasefire from 2011 to 2015 - the 52-member Union Peacemaking Working Committee (UPWC) and the 11-member Union Peacemaking Central Committee (UPCC) - there were only two women, according to [the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process](#) (AGIPP). Both were in the UPWC.

One of the women, Kachin lawmaker Doi Bu, told the audience at an event on women and peace on Dec. 17 that her participation was in “name only”.

“We did not get the opportunity to really air our concerns.... And even when we did, we were only given five minutes to talk about gender issues,” she said. “We were always being told, “This is a discussion on war, so women should not be involved”.”

Women were also poorly represented among the ethnic armed groups negotiators, with just two women included, one of them Naw Zipporah Sein, Vice-President of the Karen National Union.

LEAN IN?

On Oct. 15, the Myanmar government and eight ethnic armed groups, including the Karen National Union, [signed](#) the so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement amid much fanfare.

But the deal fell short of its nationwide billing given that seven other groups, including the powerful Kachin Independence Army and United Wa State Army, declined to sign as the government refused to include several smaller groups in the deal.

The three new committees set up to implement the NCA and continue the peace process has a grand total of three women out of 96 confirmed members, said AGIPP.

One represents a political party and two are from ethnic armed groups. None are from the government.

Myanmar's peace agreement would be fairer and more sustainable with women's participation, said Nan Nan Nwe, general secretary (2) of the Pa-O National Liberation Organisation, one of the signatories of the NCA.

Yet attempts to adopt a gender quota into the nationwide ceasefire talks failed. Currently, the agreement only says there should be "a reasonable number" of women representatives.

Such vague and subjective wording offers no guarantees for women's meaningful participation in the peace processes and contravenes Myanmar's obligations under international laws, say women's rights groups.

"As we are the ones who suffer the consequences of it, we are also the ones who wrack our brains to think about achieving peace. That's why women's strengths, views and approval should be sought," Zakhung said at the Dec. 17 event organised by the Swedish embassy and AGIPP.

The lack of women at the negotiating table is symptomatic of entrenched patriarchal attitudes in Myanmar. Despite the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi, who led her National League for Democracy to a landslide victory in the Nov. 8 elections, the country remains socially conservative, with relatively few women in leadership roles.

PEACE CONFERENCE

[The President's Office announced](#) last week that the Union Peace Conference will be held on Jan. 12, 2016. It will be attended by 700 delegates from the government, parliament, military, political parties, ethnic armed groups, ethnic leaders and other "appropriate" individuals, according to media reports.

Some have [questioned](#) the speed and manner in which the outgoing administration is pushing through the peace process, but the key issue for women's rights activists is how many women will be invited to attend.

They worry that if women are poorly represented in the conference, it could set a standard and make it harder for women to participate in the future.

"We are concerned because the date of the conference is getting close. If anyone asks, we tell them there are these competent women, but then they always say, 'Would they really want to do it? Can they give time?' It's like they're looking for excuses," said Zakhung.

“Looking at what’s happening to the new Union-level committees where there are very few women, there’s a strong chance the same thing would happen again at the conference. We need to work on (changing) that,” she said.

AGIPP is calling for a minimum 30 percent quota of women to be included in the political dialogue, the next step of the peace process. It also says the 30 percent quota should be seen as a starting point, rather than a ceiling.

Thu Wai, vice-chair of the 48-member Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), told local media on Dec. 20 that he supported the 30 percent quota for women attendees at the conference.

“We will try to include as many women as possible. If there are women who are really competent, of course we will include them,” he said.

Zakhung, also one of the founding members of AGIPP, however, said determining “competence” is a subjective issue.

“How do you measure competence? Is it based on academic qualification, how many years you’ve been in politics, or how familiar are you with the topics that will be discussed at the conference?” she told Myanmar Now.

A MAN’S WORLD

For AGIPP, the low participation of women in the peace process is “indicative of the parlous status of women in Myanmar”.

Women’s participation in the public sphere in Myanmar is still limited, and female politicians [regularly face](#) ridicule, intimidation and harassment, ranging from husbands and family members who feel women do not belong in politics to smears and personal attacks by other politicians or the media.

There are currently only two female ministers at the union level, and less than 5 percent of Myanmar’s parliament members are women. This will increase to 12 percent in the new parliament which convenes at the end of January.

Doi Bu, the Kachin parliamentarian and member of the UPWC, said her male colleagues would constantly make excuses for women to be left out of the peace process, a reflection of the wider discrimination against women in Myanmar.

“The (men) regularly told me the roads are so bad and it’s not easy for women to travel to these places where the talks (with the ethnic groups) were held. I told them that my own constituency is very far and remote and I go there,” she said last week.

Doi Bu had some advice for women politicians and activists: “Please don’t wait to be called. We have to push for it ourselves.” (Editing by Ros Russell)