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SPECIAL REPORT - JULY 2014



## Strong women, strong Myanmar

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# What ‘feminism’ means in Myanmar

NORA PISTOR  
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WHETHER among activists, scholars or ordinary women, feminism in Myanmar falls under two major factions.

The more conservative say women here have, and have always had, the same rights and opportunities as men. Evidence, if presented, usually points to pre-colonial times – though whether we can call this view feminist at all is debatable, given it says everything is all right.

A second opinion – usually held by the younger and more progressive, as well as those working in newly established networks, NGOs and community-based organisations – says traditional gender roles are discriminating, repressive and crying out for systemic change.

Which is correct? It's true that Myanmar has made greater strides in gender equality than neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, Bangladesh, Laos and even democratic India, all of which rank lower on the Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index.

And Myanmar's legal framework does support gender equality – having ratified international conventions such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action 17 years ago. Gender equality is also enshrined in the 2008 constitution: Article 348 unequivocally states “the Union shall not discriminate [against] any citizen ... based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth”.

But a closer look – at the constitution and at the daily lives of women nationwide – reveals a very different story.



**“Naturally suitable for men only”**  
Despite Article 348, the constitution also provides for substantially unequal treatment of men and women, for example when it comes to the appointment of government posts, some of which, chapter 8 states, are deemed “naturally suitable for men only”. The generously advertised principle of equality for women receives a harsh restriction in light of the jobs they are actually allowed to



Photos: Aung Htay Hlaing

do.

Women's participation in key ministerial positions and in the parliament is further restricted by the requirement that 25 percent of seats of the legislature are reserved for the military. Recent developments also allow women to work in the armed forces, though mostly in positions related to healthcare and accounting.

Does nature determine if, and in which positions, a person can work in a country's government? Or might this “suitability” be socially constructed, rather than predetermined by a person's natural and biological features?

The most basic principle of feminist theory – the difference between sex and gender – appears violated, under the very system that writes “gender equality” on its facade.

**Women as second-class citizens**  
Especially in rural areas, various discriminating practices are supported or at least silently acknowledged. This include: polygamy; child marriage; mobility restrictions for women; discriminating inheritance rights; patri-local practices where women move into their husband's familial home upon marriage; not to mention existing dowry practices; male decision-making in the households and in government; and, as often, domestic violence.

Women also suffering from lack of reproductive healthcare services and rights, and lack of access to information and technology.

The contemporary patriarchal system and attitudes in society, which see women as second-class citizens, indicate that substantial equality of women and men is still a distant

hope. As one lady from a women's organisation in Chin State once told me when summarising her feelings of inequality of women and men in Myanmar, “Women are nearly like slaves for men.”

**Sisterhood for survival**  
With this background in mind, what possibilities for positive change toward substantial gender equality do women activists see? And what is the role of civil society to bring about that desired change?

.....  
**If gender inequality continues to be neglected, both social and economic development will be flawed, unsustainable, and twice as expensive.**  
.....

Civil society organisations working for women's rights and gender equality range from small-scale grassroots groups of a few people to bigger networks combining a number of national and international NGOs. While Myanmar's governmental institutions are overwhelmingly male, NGOs employ a higher number of female staff and often have female leadership.

The government's “women's machinery” expands to all administrative levels throughout the whole country. But often on the state and township levels the offices are under-staffed and sorely lack important resources. This gap is what many civil society organisations are eagerly trying to fill, by addressing some of the prevalent discriminations with their projects and advocating for the strategic goal of gender equality.

On the grassroots level, community-

based women's groups play a crucial role to trying to fulfill what might be called “typical women's interests”, such as (reproductive) health issues, education and childcare. These are the areas of life that traditionally fall under women's roles. Nevertheless, a positive side effect of these women's groups is the strengthening of Myanmar women's voices and acting as one, as a community of women. As such, they slowly contribute to rising empowerment of the female group

members and elevate their standing in society.

Even though the goals and initiatives of these groups might be conservative in nature, they produce practical benefits for those women struggling with daily needs. Sisterhood becomes a way of surviving the hardships of life.

**Fear of feminism means fear of equality**  
Why does feminism have such a negative connotation amongst many people – men and women – in Myanmar? Even female women's rights activists often deny being feminists, trying to avoid being labelled as such. Most initiatives that carry the label of working toward gender equality are indeed focusing on women's issues instead of on gender rights more generally.

Other categories of gender beyond

the female-male dualism, such as LGBTI rights (of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual persons) are hardly ever discussed in “mainstream” activists' circles as of now. In fact, current activities under the gender rights agenda truly constitute what we could call a new feminist movement – while both civil society and the public authorities are reluctant to commit to feminism as part of the gender and development approach.

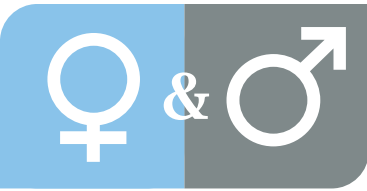
The biggest problem the women's rights movement in Myanmar faces is society's widespread failure to grasp that gender is pervasive and affects all spheres of life. Politics, peace, military and defence, economics, society and culture are just as much women's issues as they are men's. Unfortunately, it seems like the awareness on the importance of gender equality is not being fully grasped and endorsed. One Myanmar politician, struggling with the increasing workload since the new government took power in 2011, recently exemplified this by saying, “Yes, gender equality is important and interesting, but there are many, many things that are important and interesting now ... and we simply don't have time for that.”

**The personal is political, and the political is personal**  
Gender equality needs to be integrated as a crosscutting issue and mainstreamed in all areas and structures of Myanmar's government. If gender inequality continues to be neglected, both social and economic development will be flawed, unsustainable, and twice as expensive.

Further, portraying a whitewashed picture of an already established gender fairness and equality will only create more obstacles to the social changes we all desire.

Civil society plays the most crucial role in detecting discrimination and amplifying the new dynamic voices to challenge the old gender stereotypes. Painting the real picture, based on reliable data, is the first step. The second is recognising diversity and including the apparent changes of masculinities and femininities within the currently changing political system. ■

Nora Pistor is freelance consultant on gender and women's rights currently working in Myanmar. With an academic background in political sciences, international law and criminology, she has worked in the field of gender and development with various intersecting topics such as Gender Based Violence, Human Trafficking, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and regional development planning.



## What is gender awareness?

When the word “gender” is used, it is more than identifying men or women. It means identifying people as people and implementing fairness and promoting equality among people regardless of their identities.

In practising gender awareness, we educate people not to discriminate on any ground, not just between men and women.

## Do you talk to men also?

Participants include all genders, since this is not solely a women's organisation. Our purpose is to help women's empowerment, but it is important that all genders get equal rights, justly, and that issues be judged fair and square.

People usually get the wrong notion that “gender training” is only for women. We try to talk from both men's and women's perspectives and try to explain about women's empowerment to them.

## Women who inspire me

**May May Pyone** of NGO-Gender Group chooses three names out of many activists promoting equality and advancement for men and women.

**Suzanna Hla Hla Soe** (director, Karen Women Empowerment Group)

**Zimar Aung** (Rainbow Gender Group)

**May Sabe Phyu** (Kachin Women Network)

## With live-and-death struggles happening, are gender issues really important?

People said gender awareness was not the most important case during Nargis, and that everyone was equally in despair. In reality, women had to go through the most trouble – we saw that when we visited the sites. There were numerous cases of violence against women, harassment and abuse. [Life-and-death struggles are] when we most clearly understand that we need to branch out to help women's empowerment, welfare and development.

For example, in the past women couldn't hold their own money, but they do now. So what? If they don't get a say, money is not good enough. If patriarchy is still ruling in their household, there is no way they have their own say in their family. We don't consider that women's life standards are developing.

## What's happening with CEDAW [the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by Myanmar and 187 other nations]?

Myanmar has signed CEDAW and the government is required to submit an evidence-based report on situations of women's issues every four years. But no report has been submitted from within the country.

## Who and what does your organisation teach?

The NGO-GG focuses on awareness training and staff go to sites on

# Gender issues: The basics

May May Pyone, executive director of NGO-Gender Group, talks to MT's **Ei Thant Sin** about just what gender and empowerment is all about



Photo: Staff

request, usually through other NGOs.

For example, when projects need staff to go out on field trips to rural areas, women have to deal with only men, since the majority of heads of villages or regions are men and lack an equal respect for both genders. They cannot hear women's voices to understand and fulfill their needs.

We also talk about reproductive health (mostly for women), sexual reproductive health issues, even good governance where gender issues need to be considered.

During sessions we have to speak mostly in Myanmar but it's hard to translate “gender” or “gender awareness” into Myanmar language that the participants can easily absorb.

## What can be done to help sexually uneducated young adults?

Our country is quite a conservative nation with unsettled systems and with brainwashed, supposedly shared traditions and values. The “living-together” culture is not a big deal in an open-minded society, where two people just need an apartment and consent to stay together. But here, the society is not as open-minded yet and still hold on to old-fashioned values. Then people must stay with their own parents to prevent being named as “living-together”, yet still do stuff they want, because, well, they want to.

When one reaches 18, one is officially considered as a grown-up and can legally marry. However, plenty are officially married before 18. And plenty are not respected as grown-ups regardless of their legal age. Our unsettling systems and the years of practicing conservative values and social norms make changes more difficult.

It is impossible to completely rewrite the cultural norms and traditions or neglect them. However, those shouldn't oppress anyone and make them uncomfortable to stay in their own society. There is no one right answer that fits all but each person needs to find their own answer, let their voice be heard and stand up for their rights.

## What needs to change in terms of how gender is taught here?

When we grow up, no one really sits down and teaches us how certain genders should behave. We learn

she can play when she is young.”

The National Women's Affairs Federation (NWAFF), for example, doesn't really understand gender awareness. They emphasise only the superficial qualities of a woman, and teach how a woman must dress appropriately with long natural-colored hair and feminine figure. They neglect to emphasise what's inside, the leadership quality of a woman, how standards and development of women need attention. There are so many limitations on what women must look like superficially that what's within isn't emphasized.

The NGO-GG focuses on raising the standards of intangible qualities of women. We don't really care about what a woman must look like on the surface.

## How do we make these changes?

I would hope for the media to continue to address such gender

issues constantly so that society will absorb these ideas and break through the stereotypes and cultural barriers that oppress women. Beer ads, car ads, all these objectify women as sexual objects. People objectify women without even realising it, because it has been going on for a long time and is still happening on a daily basis.

I'm really glad to see women journalists because I believe they understand what they encounter daily and can represent Myanmar women in society and speak out for them.

For women to reach from ‘welfare’ level to ‘leadership’ level – from a ‘condition’ to a ‘position’ – we still need more spreading of such gender equality ideas through media.

I would be glad if pieces are written not only for women to read and be encouraged by but also for men to read and be convinced why women empowerment and gender equality is important. ■

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# Of men, for men, by men?

A recent report reveals vast disparity between the numbers – and priorities – of men and women in government, writes author **Paul Minoletti**

THE importance of women's participation in governance processes has been increasingly recognised around the world in the last quarter-century, by governments, civil society, international agencies and academics. In Myanmar, however, women's participation in governance remains extremely low, inhibiting equitable development.

Women account for only 4.4 percent of members of parliament (MPs) across Myanmar's Union-level parliaments, and only two of 33 ministers are women. Malaysia, the ASEAN country with the next lowest proportion of national MPs that are women, has more than three times Myanmar's figure (13.8pc). But it is not only ASEAN countries that Myanmar compares poorly to on this measure – out of the 189 countries for which data is available, Myanmar ranks a lowly 170<sup>th</sup>.

At the subnational level, women's representation in government bodies in Myanmar is even lower. Women constitute only 2.8pc of state and region parliament members nationwide, and in six state and region parliaments there are no women present at all. No township administrators anywhere in the country are women. And of the 16,743 ward and village tract administrators in government-controlled areas, only 19 are female (although women village leaders are common in non-government-controlled areas of Kayin State).

The problem with these figures is that international experience shows women's active participation in governance matters for both equity and efficiency. Male and female citizens typically have different preferences for what



Photo: Staff

decisions government at all levels ought to make. And increasing women's representation in key decision-making positions within government has shown to be a highly effective way of ensuring that government decision-making is more responsive to women's preferences. Increasing women's participation also helps to increase the efficiency of government, by enabling women's knowledge and perspectives to be incorporated in the decision-making process, and because involving women helps to increase compliance.

Research conducted for MDRI-CESD's report *Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar* suggests that women place greater priority than men do on issues such as healthcare, sanitation, children's education, day-to-day livelihoods, family income and microfinance. Men, in contrast, are more focused on the constitution,

promoting business opportunities and building roads. Views are also divided on gender-related topics such as domestic violence, rape, divorce and inheritance.

The good news is that there is a high level of gender equality in educational attainment in Myanmar, and this is broadly true amongst both higher and lower socio-economic groups. If policies aimed at increasing women's participation in government are adopted, there is a large pool of women with the necessary formal skills available to fill decision-making positions at all levels of government and parliament. Whilst women's widespread exclusion from state governance roles means that there is a small number of women with experience in this field, policies that successfully increase women's participation would soon change that.

Further, Myanmar's shift toward

democracy means that the informal skills required of its politicians are changing significantly, meaning that gender differences in experience are less relevant for performance here than in countries where democracy has been established for a longer period of time.

While few formal or educational barriers exist in Myanmar to women having a high level of participation in governance, other barriers do remain, many of them relating to social and cultural attitudes. Although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is highly popular as a political leader, many men and some women have a degree of resistance and/or scepticism regarding women taking on public decision-making roles. The common expectation that women complete "their" household duties regardless of other commitments can also make it difficult for them to dedicate time to actively engaging in governance. Social and cultural norms also contribute to a lack of confidence many women have for taking on governance roles.

A number of NGOs in Myanmar providing services at the local level have adopted various policies to try and increase women's participation in community decision-making, including the use of quotas. For instance, The National Community-Driven Development Project currently being piloted by the Department for Rural Development requires that there is an equal gender balance of members on village-level committees. The shift away from military dictatorship toward democracy ought to enable women to have a greater role in the governance of their country, and, amongst certain segments of the population at least, attitudes are

## The ASEAN perspective

### Women MPs in national government

Philippines	27.34pc
Singapore	25.25pc
Laos	25.00pc
Vietnam	24.30pc
Cambodia	20.33pc
Indonesia	18.57pc
Thailand	15.80pc
Malaysia	10.36pc
<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>5.79pc*</b>

\*For consistency with other country's statistics, Myanmar's figure in this list counts lower house only. For upper and lower houses combined, the percentage is lower, at 4.4pc. Also note that Brunei is not counted, having no elected parliamentary system.

Source: *Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar*, adapted from Interparliamentary Union website (<http://www.wipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>)

becoming increasingly accepting of women in public leadership roles. However, there is still a long way to go for women to achieve a high degree of participation in governance. Further policy initiatives are required to achieve rapid and significant increases in women's participation across Myanmar's governance institutions, and to accelerate equitable development in the country. ■

Paul Minoletti is Research Coordinator for the Myanmar Development Resource Institute – Centre for Economic and Social Development (MDRI-CESD), and the author of *Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar*

## Women who inspire me

**U Hla Maung Shwe** is with the Myanmar Peace Center. Here are some the women he's proud to work alongside in the bid to end conflict nationwide.

**Daw Yin Yin New** (special advisor, Myanmar Peace Center; former presidential advisor)

**Naw Rebecca Htin** (associate program director, Myanmar Peace Center)

**Daw Lampai Seng Raw** (Myitta Foundation; winner of Magsaysay Award 2013)

**Daw Gyar Nang** (Nyein Foundation)

when there is a domestic abuse case," says lawyer U Htay Oo, noting verbal harassment can constitute abuse.

Standard cases include cruelty, a man's infidelity, a man having a second wife or mistress, libel, and abandonment, while major cases consist of a woman's infidelity and major physical abuse.

Polygamy only leads to divorce if the wife files a suit.

During divorce, custody goes to an officially-married Buddhist woman regardless of the divorce's cause.

However, this applies only to officially married couples: Unofficial marriages bring complications.

Financial support for the wife and the children falls under the criminal law Article 488(a), which puts the minimum payment at K100 for the wife, plus each child under legal age.

Since this amount is no longer in line with living expenses, the Union Court was requested by letter on July 2 to amend the Article and issue a new draft, and also to amend other Articles that might need immediate attentions.

In cases of abortion, Criminal Law Article 312 states that the mother bearing the child and the person who assists in the mother's abortion must

## What's the law?

In light of a proposed marriage law to "protect" women, **MT's Ye Mon** lawyers up to see what's on the books already

WHEN a Buddhist woman in Myanmar marries a man from another religion, she does so under the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act, 1954.

Article 24(a) of the Act states that issues regarding successions and marriage possessions are to be solved according to the terms of Buddhist commandments.

"Issues either relating to successions or defining possessions after divorce all proceed according to the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act, regardless of what other laws the husband's religion state. When the husband passes away, the wife is entitled for all the possessions, regardless," says lawyer U Htay Oo (St John).

"However, if a Buddhist man marries a Christian woman, possession issues are going to be discussed according to the law that was being used while registering the marriage."

If spouses are not officially divorced, each is entitled to half the total possessions. However, if they are, the original entitled owner before marriage gets two-thirds of the original possessions while the spouse gets one-third.

Article 25(a) states that cases of divorce, defining possessions, successions and child custody are carried out either by the 1954 Act or by traditional laws, with both partners treated as Buddhists.

Most divorce cases are carried out according to Myanmar traditional laws. "Divorces can be carried out only

Photo: Aung Htay Hlaing



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# Four women who are holding back the tide

The completion of the government-funded Yin Taing Taung Dam in the Dry Zone’s Myaing district of Magwe Region is more than a relief for the four parched local village and farming communities that it will service. It’s also a major achievement for the group of determined young women who rallied the villagers and lobbied local government to make it happen, writes **Jacquetta Hayes** of the UN’s LIFT organisation

ONE of the features of the multi-donor Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT) is that it places sustainability at the heart of its rural development programming activities, with the aim that the ripple effects of its funding will continue long after a project has drawn to a close.

One way to achieve this is to inspire local communities to make their own development decisions by providing them with the knowledge and confidence to get things done. The story of the Yin Taing Taung Dam shows that this approach not only works – it can be extremely effective.

In 2011, LIFT – which comes under the United Nations Office for Project Services, more commonly known as UNOPS – funded the non-government organisation ActionAid’s three-year Community-Initiated Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction project. This provided training to young volunteers, called Fellows, in basic development theory and then set them at large on their communities to act as “facilitators of change”. The process involved an intense first month of participatory training.

“In the early days I went home

near Myaing, late on a hot Friday afternoon. Chan is one of four self-assured young women who have come after their day’s work to explain what has happened as a result of their training.

The women have quite a reputation. Earlier in the day, members of the community raised eyebrows and smiled when they heard that I was meeting them.

“Those girls are fearless,” said one Khamma resident. “They are James Bond,” quipped ActionAid’s driver.

After the first training series, the young women returned to their communities tasked with identifying its most pressing needs. This involved getting known by the villagers, building relationships of trust and confidence, setting up village meetings and doing home visits. All four admit that at first they were barely tolerated – the youngest, Nyein Nyein Phyo, was a mere 19 years old at the time – but after “more tears” and continued support from ActionAid, friends and family, they were gradually accepted and the communities began to listen, participate and produce village books that listed the needs and aspirations of the communities, while tracing the root causes of their poverty.



this is how the Yin Taing Taung Dam project came about,” added Myat Myat Htwe, also 28.

The young women enlisted the help of their older peers in the villages and, re-enforcing traditional village structures, organised them into what they nicknamed “granny groups”, thereby promoting the role of women in village decision-making. The village books traced the main cause of poverty and hardship back to lack of a reliable water source. To address this, the elder women

project area – who would benefit from the proposed dam. Acting as catalysts, the Fellows passed on their advocacy skills to guide these communities to approach government.

Acting with the Fellows’ guidance, the communities secured US\$200,000 (around K2 million) of government funds to build the dam.

The dam is to first serve its four closest communities, and any excess water will extend to a further six villages for both domestic and agricultural use. Aside from freeing women and children from having to walk miles every day to collect water, it is expected that the dam will allow a second yearly crop for many of the farmers in the area, dramatically improving their incomes.

Also notable is that the elder women groups and other community members were closely involved in consultations on the dam design and construction, bringing knowledge of the local conditions to decide the best position for the sluice gates.

After their experience, the four Fellows are clearly close friends or “comrades in arms”. Their conversation is animated – they cut in on each other’s chat, finish one another’s sentences, and all exude a sparkling self-confidence – a far

cry from their situation three years ago when, they say, they trembled in front of the smallest village audience.

But having rallied the community to identify their needs and equip them with evidence to lobby for government support to meet those needs, they say that anything is possible. The four are now busy working on other development projects.

“This country’s development is actually our responsibility, we all can be an active part of it,” says Nyein Nyein Phyo, now aged 22. “Our own efforts can really make a difference.” ■

Jacquetta Hayes is the Communications Officer for the LIFT Fund in Myanmar. Managed by UNOPS, LIFT funds and guides innovative and sustainable rural developments projects to help Myanmar achieve Millennium Development Goal 1 – half as many people living in poverty – making use of contributions from Australia, Denmark, the European Union, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. For more on notable projects like these, please visit [www.lift-fund.org](http://www.lift-fund.org) and [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org).

every evening and cried,” says Chan, a 24-year-old Fellow from Myaing township, Magwe Region. “There was so much information to take in, all that thinking and brainstorming. I just couldn’t absorb it all!” She laughs at the memory. “Then I realised that what I was being taught could help the people of my community.”

We’re sitting in ActionAid’s airy offices in Khamma township,

Progress was slow, however. Hearing the experience of other Fellows proved to be vitally important when the girls attended ActionAid’s Governance and Active Citizenship training in Yangon. “I learned that senior Fellows had established their own community-based organisations, and thought that we could do this, not only in our communities but across the region,” said Nan Ei Htay, now aged 28. “And

suggested building a large-scale dam at Yin Taing Taung.

By this time the LIFT-funded project had completed and the Fellows were working by their own initiative.

How to fund the dam was the next challenge. The Fellows started to work at a regional level coordinating with each other to draw together granny groups and rally other villages – well past the original

# Let’s talk about sex – or not

Sex education is frowned upon in Myanmar, but the lack of reliable information for teens and adults can lead to danger, writes **MT’s Cherry Thein**

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YOU mean sex?” I always get a counter-question whenever I interview someone about this topic.

Most people shun the subject, despite the fact that it is part of their daily life. And talking about it in a public place always brings funny looks from those nearby – especially if the ones doing the talking are female.

Parents, teachers, clergy, politicians – authority figures of all types tend to react with disgust. But asking why – trying to get at the root of why society shies away from talking about sex, when it’s the act that creates us and an ongoing issue of public health and welfare – only makes the questioner seem silly for wanting to raise such a question.

That’s not to say Myanmar is the only country in which discussions of sex is taboo. At the last UN meeting

were published. He cited author Kyi Aye’s story “Soe and Khaing”, which tackled the controversial topic of sex between siblings, as one boundary-pushing piece.

Several decades of repression, however, seems to have led people to self-censor.

Daw Nyunt Nyunt Khin, a mother of three girls who lives in Sanchaung township, said it is better to ignore the topic for the safety and security of youth.

“If your children know something about sex, they instantly go and try it, and then they ruin their life. We all will get into trouble. It is dangerous, but don’t worry: They will know when they are adults,” she said.

Dr Sid Naing, country director of Marie Stopes International, said the word itself carries “stigma” in some countries in the world. It makes breaking through and making people comfortable when giving health

**‘People confuse the issue with religion and culture because they have had a restricted and limited education system’**

– U Aung Myint, retired education officer

on millennium development goals, the question of “when do you start to give sex education to children?” was debated from dusk until dawn. Not business, not migration – sex education was the topic that kept these leaders arguing all night.

While some people say “don’t talk, don’t listen and don’t watch”, no one can deny sex – whether for procreation or for recreation – exists. Still, most say that their reluctance to face it head-on is because of social and cultural norms. In Myanmar, both are shaped primarily by Buddhism.

However, one member of the Buddhist clergy, who is the facilitator of Golden Lion monastic school education in Shwebo township, Sagaing Region, said he disagrees with the notion that culture and religion is a hurdle to sex education.

“There is no special encouragement for or against sex education. Buddha discusses sex widely in *vinnya* [teachings for monks and nuns]. In his teaching there are many topics related to sex for laypeople, but [the public] miscodes the topic as being restricted by religion and culture,” he said.

A retired officer from the Department of Education, U Aung Myint said that the lack of education is due to the impact of 60 years of military rule, not religion or culture itself.

“During the socialist years, there was no freedom in education. People confuse the issue with religion and culture because they have had a restricted and limited education system,” he said.

The earlier parliamentary era – between independence in 1948 and the military takeover in 1963 – enjoyed more press freedom, U Aung Myint said, and as a result some stories with sexual themes

education a difficult task.

“People respond, ‘Hey, no, we are not like this.’ Sometimes they add, ‘We are from this country, we have this culture etc.’”

Some people, he said, avoid discussing sex but manage to escape danger and then say it is not important to talk about. Others, he said, suffer problems secretly but pretend they are alright. “They don’t realise or accept the impact or the consequences in their daily life because they are too shy to accept it.”

Other times, simple confusion reveals the lack of knowledge. Some situations would be funny if they weren’t so tragic: In a well-known story in Myanmar dating to the late 1990s, after a team raised awareness on reproductive health to reduce birth rate, the facilitator found it hard to show how to use a condom so demonstrated using a bamboo fence.

When the project returned for a feedback survey, they found that folks had been diligently putting up condoms every night during the monsoon rains. The fence tips stayed dry, but the birth rate remained unchanged.

While many Eastern people believe that Western people are too liberated in their sexual lives, the topic is a controversial one there too, and has been at least since the Victorian times.

The Ecuadorian writer Andrea Almeida Villamil told *The Myanmar Times* that this constraint finds its roots in the need to control economic and productive systems.

“It is always better to unveil ‘the secret,’” she said. “By removing the myth about sex, more people will have the necessary knowledge to take informed decisions [in terms of planning desired pregnancies].”

“Also by being informed, women can make choices for their own



bodies, in terms of whether or not they consent to having sex,” she said.

Sexual identity can impact all aspects of a person’s life: ambitions and emotions can all be affected. But the education system does little to prepare students for what’s to come.

Teachers are shy to teach the subject. Teenagers may giggle, or sometimes gossip about the teachers’ own sex life to cover up their nervousness.

“We are invited to give talks on sex at school but most school mum censored to tell ‘condom’ and some other words they find embarrassing. We try to talk tactfully to reach our goals,” Dr Naing said.

He suggests parents offer children a book about sex written

in pragmatic ways because youths are always thirst for knowledge. It is beneficial both for health – to teach young women that menstruation is not a shameful thing – and for safety.

U Aung Myint said teachers should be trained specifically in teaching sex ed.

“We can’t use the word ‘sex education’ but we used another word, ‘daily healthcare’ (*bawa tweet tar kyaum kyin sayar*), as co-curriculum. But it was not successful and later was upgraded to core-curriculum. That was a failure too,” he said.

“In some cases, ‘family education’ is used, which is ridiculous but there is no better word found. It is easier said than done. Nevertheless we need to work for it by any means.” ■

## Students tell us what they aren’t being taught

When *MT* asked some Yangon students for their thoughts on sexual education, a few spoke candidly. We have omitted their names to protect their privacy.

**“Do you think we don’t know?”**  
One 13-year-old male in grade 9 said teenagers today are more modernised compared to how young people were in the past. Despite the topic being prohibited at home and at school, he said his peers are learning about it through other, less reputable channels. “Do you think we don’t know? It is ridiculous,” he said. “We don’t know everything, but we know some. Of course not from literature or texts – I bet that is boring – but from experienced friends and social media like Facebook or videos.”

He added attempts to keep sex “secret” have the opposite effect.

“The more it is banned, the bigger the curiosity,” he said.

**“It belongs to us”**  
One 14-year-old female in grade 10 said she has learned that sex isn’t a secret but that she is forbidden to speak about it in front of adults.

“It is a critical topic – not for sexual pleasure but to know our own body. I am interested in biology. I always ask questions [in the classroom] but the teacher rejects them and friends frown at me,” she said.

In grade 9, she said, students are introduced to biology using rabbits. But terms for sex organs are sometimes taught in English rather than in Myanmar language, out of “shyness”.

“Not all teenagers are jumping into having sex, despite the fact that Korean [soaps] or other social media often present us that way, or try to persuade us into sex. We only want to know what is it, because it belongs to us.” ■

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Photos: Staff

# A separate peace

Shorn of society’s traditional feminine beauty markers, Myanmar’s 75,000 Buddhist nuns seek spiritual freedom with grace and dignity

ZON PANN PWINT  
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Daw Talawadi remembers being brought to a convent in Yangon for a visit at the age of eight. When she arrived, she was charmed by the peaceful lives of the elder nuns, chanting prayers in their robes. At first she asked her parents to let her stay in the convent for a few years. After learning how Buddha’s teachings point the way to escaping the cycle of rebirths called samsara, however, she decided to spend a lifetime.

Now 54 years old, she has become one of longest-serving abbesses at Daw Nyarnasari Myan Aung Convent on Kyun Taw Road, Sanchaung township. She is one of around 75,000 nuns practicing in Myanmar – the highest number of any ASEAN country. And almost a half-century after her first visit to the kind of convent she would later call her home for life, she still believes strongly that Buddha’s teachings

– and the lifestyle of being a nun – show her how to escape being trapped in the grasp of suffering.

“Nuns don’t have worries about food and money,” said Daw Tulawadi. “We have to be content with donations we receive. In this way, we learn patience. Through the teachings, we are trained to see merit even in sweeping the floor, cooking and cleaning. Every day we are being taught to keep moral precepts, keeping our minds from sinful thoughts. Through this practice, we can hope for nirvana.”

The rewards don’t come easily. Convents, like monasteries, are supported by their communities, but to benefit from this support the nuns they must endure a rigorous schedule of alms-gathering, prayer, meditation, study and other mental and physical labour.

At 4:30am the bell rings at the two-storey building at Daw Nyarnasari Myan Aung Convent where the nuns sleep. They wake and say prayers, then at 5:30am, they partake the morning meal. Then they take on duties such as washing robes and cleaning the prayer room. In a traditional culture, this may not sound so different from a laywoman’s duties around the home, but the strict schedule in the women-only convents has a spiritual purpose. In monasteries, the traditional work of cleaning is often left to lay helpers, but for the nuns at Daw Nyarnasari Myan Aung Convent, it is integrated into their daily practice.

“Even young nuns can reach the attainment of nirvana while sweeping and cleaning,” she said.

As Buddhism has spread from India to China, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, the vows and regulations of nuns have changed to fit the culture of the country. In Myanmar, nuns take a vow of chastity and live strictly according to their religious vows. They must also give up traditional markings of beauty or femininity such as long hair or clothing, with all looking identical in shaved heads and identical pink robes.

Like all women, however, they struggle to earn the respect of a male-dominated society.

“The religious regulations set for nuns to comply with are more than the regulations for monks. One example is that nuns have to obey monks and listen to what they preach. That has existed since the era of Lord Buddha,” the abbess Daw Tulawadi said.

Nuns have often received lesser donations and been shown lesser respect compared to monks.

“*Phone-kyi* [the Myanmar word for monk] means glorious and powerful. If a newborn baby is boy, parents start to think of letting him to enter monkhood when he grows. But girls are different. They traditionally owe obedience to their parents and serve them. In society, women are viewed as being inferior and mediocre.”

She said that such traditional views “are now changing”, but a break in the ordination nearly 1000 years ago means that nuns remain unofficial in Myanmar and other countries practicing Theravada Buddhism (see sidebar at right).

Nonetheless, young girls from Buddhist families still take vows to become nuns for a short term before the age of 20, just as boys do. At Daw Nyarnasari Myan Aung convent, 400-500 girls are ordained each year, normally for a short period of five to seven days, especially during summer holidays.

While this marks a significant milestone for parents, Daw Nyarnasari – who founded the convent in 1948 – said most of the nuns living in the convent for the long term enter the order because of their own wishes, not those of their parents. She added she felt the same way.

“As a life-long-serving nun, I feel desire [to be a nun] comes from virtue in a previous life. I felt I was inspired to be the nun,” she said.

If a woman was a nun in a previous life, Daw Nyarnasari said, she will wish to be a nun in the present life as well.

Daw Zayawati, one of the



convent’s nuns, was first ordained at the age of nine, spending a month as a novice during her summer holiday. She said she was motivated by a “deep desire” to be a nun since first seeing them when she was young.

“I lived with my grandmother since I was a child. I always came along with her whenever she went to the monastery and nunnery and kept the sabbath.”

After graduating from university at the age of 22, she was admitted to nunhood at the Daw Nyarnasari convent. She is now pursuing a PhD in dhamma (Buddhist teaching) at the University of Abhidhamma on Kabar Aye Pagoda Road, and says meditation and prayers bring “a sense of calm and inner peacefulness” to her life which she did not have when she was studying science.

“Buddhism gives guidelines on how to break down the egotism and obsession that poison our minds. Day by day, I gradually learn to live according to Buddha’s teachings and find peacefulness through practicing

them,” she said.

“We believe we all will escape from this cycle one day if we keep practicing,” Daw Tulawadi said. She adds that every young nun experiences some difficulties when she first starts to learn how to make the transition to this new life. Some can’t wake up very early; others can’t sleep together with many other nuns in the same hall. But later these things become a habit. And having this structured community makes it easier to work toward nirvana.

“For ordinary people, it’s hard to break the cycle of failure, success, happiness and misery,” Daw Tulawadi said. “Living apart from anything else, nuns have only difficult time when we can’t do well at the exams. We don’t have much worry.” Even restrictions, shared by nuns and monks, about not eating after noon soon become simply “a habit”, she added.

“We all wear robes in the same colour, so we are free from a desire for colour and dress. This leads the way to a contented life.” ■

## The ASEAN perspective

## How Buddhist nuns struggle for acceptance

WADE GUYITT

NUNS, or *bhikkhuni*, have been part of Buddhism since Buddha’s mother gathered a group of women together and convinced him that women deserve an equal chance to benefit from his teachings and work toward nirvana.

However, for the past millennium, *bhikkhuni* have gone unrecognised by the wider Buddhist order. And it’s causing problems for women striving to be accepted as equals, even in a religious order that encourages looking beyond skin-deep differences.

Buddha required that a new nun can only be ordained by a monk and a nun together. In 1017 AD, however, the fall of the city of Anuradhapura in present-day Sri Lanka wiped out both orders. The king brought monks from Myanmar to revive the male chain of succession, but the other four Theravada countries at the time – today’s Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos – had no nuns yet. Monks therefore proclaimed that the *bhikkhuni* tradition had ended and could not be revived.

Women since then have continued

to live as nuns, but they have not been accepted as nuns – at least not on an equal footing with monks. And attempts to renew the order officially have found mixed acceptance.

A ceremony in Sri Lanka in 1996, using Theravada monks and Mahayana nuns (from the other distinct order of Buddhism, practiced in South Korea, Vietnam, China and Taiwan), attempted to restore the order by bringing together nuns from several countries, who could then revive the orders at home.

But the move proved controversial, and many do not recognise it, in Sri Lanka or elsewhere. This has led to legal problems in terms of the issuing of identification cards and the registration of convents.

Thailand was scheduled for a full ordination ceremony of its own in February 2014, but it was to be run by Sri Lankan monks and nuns. Despite 30 Thai nuns having been fully ordained in Sri Lanka since 1996, Thai monks are not allowed to participate in ordination ceremonies for nuns.

In July 2007, the International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role

in the Sangha convened in Germany and afterward declared all delegates were in “unanimous agreement” that the order should be revived. Until that happens, however, the women we call nuns in Myanmar are not called *bhikkhuni* (a female who depends on alms; similar to *bhikkhu*, a male ordained monk). Rather, they are called *shilashin* (owners of good moral conduct).

While *shilashin* live according to the vows required of nuns, they are considered exceptionally devout laypeople in society; it is a rule that the oldest nun must pay respect to even the youngest monk. Education, a traditional focus for nuns, tends to be within convents, rather than in public, as a nun is able to take on a less prominent role in public affairs than a monk is.

And the striking white-and-pink robes are, in fact, a symbol not of female power but of exclusion – fully ordained nuns in other countries wear not white or pink but robes of dark brown, or of colours matching monks’ robes. Whether that change of palette will come to Myanmar any time soon is uncertain. ■

### Eight rules for nuns relating to their interactions with monks

1	However old a <i>bhikkhuni</i> may be, she must pay respect even to a newly ordained monk.
2	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> must not stay in a nunnery to observe the Buddhist Lent where there is no <i>bhikkhu</i> nearby.
3	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> must invite a <i>bhikkhu</i> every fortnight to fix the date of Sabbath and the day to listen to the exhortation ( <i>Ovada</i> ) of the monks.
4	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> must perform the ceremony of Confession and taking advice both in <i>bhikkhu</i> ’s Sangha and <i>bhikkhuni</i> Sangha.
5	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> must observe the <i>manattna</i> discipline first from the <i>bhikkhu</i> and then from the <i>bhikkhuni</i> .
6	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> , after training in six <i>pacittiya</i> rules of <i>bhikkhuni</i> <i>patimokkha</i> , should seek <i>upasampada</i> from both <i>bhikkhu</i> and <i>bhikkhuni</i> sanghas.
7	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> must not revile a <i>bhikkhu</i> .
8	A <i>bhikkhuni</i> must not admonish a <i>bhikkhu</i> .



**U Zaw Zaw**  
Taxi driver



**Ko Htway**  
Art director,  
Myanmar Consolidated  
Media Ltd.



**Daw Mi Mi Thwin**  
Housewife



**Daw Khin Mon**  
**Mon Yi**  
Classifieds manager,  
*The Myanmar Times*

“I have an 11-year old daughter named Kyi Phyu Shun Lei. We are training her to be strong minded, well-disciplined, well-educated. We are giving her education so that she can be confident in front of people. We are also teaching her to have good code of conduct. Both myself and my wife are nurturing her to become a smart girl. She stood first in fifth standard. Now she is attending sixth standard. We give her all she needs for her education. I am trying hard to earn more as a taxi driver. As a bread-winner, my main job is to increase our income. We will let her do whatever she likes for her life. Only then she will be happy.”

“I have two daughters, nine and two years old. Every parent wants their children to be best. I didn’t hope for a boy or a girl. We must love them whichever they are. The strong points and weak points between sons and daughters are not very different. Both are the same. I don’t believe that parents should dictate what children must be when they become older. I would like to support them in everything they need. But I am my daughters’ parent so there are some traditions for a father to uphold. But I think those are not very important for me. I believe supporting their health, education and politeness is more important for them.”

“I have two sons and one daughter, a 16-year-old. I have taught her to be polite and clever since childhood. I struggle to educate her for success by teaching and learning her lessons together with her. My daughter is a clever girl so when I admonish her, nothing is an issue between us. I admonish her to keep up with the times but not be too ahead of the times. Now, my daughter has passed grade 11 with four distinctions. I allow her to choose any university she likes. I must support her in everything she wants.”

“I have two daughters, 12 and eight years old. I hope they are the best person for their surroundings and workplace by working for the benefit to all mankind, rather than because they must be a doctor or engineer. Then, they are girls so they must be polite and clever children. I give them the best things I can. When I was pregnant, I hoped to have daughters. Then I gave birth to a daughter so I was very happy. I am more responsible than a son’s mothers because a daughter’s mother must be closer with their daughters and be teaching them the right way under my very eyes.”

– Aung Kyaw Nyunt, translated by Mya Kay Khine





## The ASEAN perspective

## LGBT rights

WHILE 15 countries worldwide officially recognise same-sex marriage, no ASEAN country does, nor does any country in the Asian continent except for Israel.

That said, Vietnam seems to be at the forefront of change. In 2000 it repealed laws banning alternate forms of cohabitation. When a gay couple tried to hold a wedding in May 2012, they were stopped by authorities, but the event touched off a public discussion.

Vietnam's Justice Minister later announced that "in order to protect individual freedoms, same-sex marriage should be allowed". A bill, later passed, was submitted to remove the ban on same-sex marriage – though not yet recognising it legally – as well as remove fines for same-sex cohabitation.

The final version did not retain the draft definitions of legal rights for same-sex couples many hoped would be kept, such as the right to adopt or own property. But the law will be reconsidered in 10 years' time, and activists are hopeful that a full recognition of same-sex marriage will come. ■



# 'She really loves me – and I love her'

NANDAR AUNG

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IT'S a cliché to say that every woman wants to have a big wedding to the man of her dreams. For some the big ceremony itself is intimidating; for others it's not the commitment that doesn't feel right but the thought of having a man at the other end.

"If the law in Myanmar allows same-sex marriages, I want to have a wedding ceremony with her," said Ma Chit Hnin, 24. "I want to wear same wedding dress as she does and walk slowly down the aisle together."

Ma Chit Hnin has been with her girlfriend for eight years, since grade 10. That was when she started to notice that she was looking at her best friend differently. Fortunately, when Ma Chit Hnin admitted her feelings to her crush, it turned out she felt the same way too.

"I started to notice that I was a lesbian and became interested in women because of her," Ma Chit Hnin said, remembering those early butterflies. "She really loves me – and I love her so much too."

For a few years they were able to hide their relationship from both their parents. But when Ma Chit Hnin's parents died in, they suggested their daughter should be married off to someone they chose instead – a nice man.

Ma Chit Hnin said she would have forgiven her partner even if she had taken up the offer for a more socially ordinary life with a man. Fortunately for her, however, her partner didn't go along with the plan.

Now, the two are inspired by the very public wedding announcement of two gay men, Ko Myo Min Htet and Ko Tin Ko Ko, in May 2014.

The news brought cheers from same-sex supporters and threats and scorn from those who oppose the rights of two men – or two women

– in lifelong relationships to marry one another.

One daily newspaper said that the couple would be charged under Section 377 of the Penal Code, which is commonly understood to ban homosexuality: "Anyone who has carnal intercourse with a male or female or animal abnormally shall be given a life sentence of a sentence of 10 years in prison or a fine or both."

But while the laws are concerned about these things, Ma Chit Hnin says she no longer even thinks of her partner as unusual or different.

"I recognise her as a life partner," said Ma Chit Hnin. "I am not thinking of a girl or a boy. She is just my love." "She takes care of me when I am sick and tired. I am so happy when I am with her."

Ma Chit Hnin's parents, she says, understand the love between the two young women, and don't want to cause sadness to their daughter by interfering.

Now Ma Chit Hnin, who works at a hotel, is now trying to put aside K100,000 a month, so that she will be ready if the opportunity to marry comes about.

Like Ma Chit Hnin, 23-year-old lesbian Sue Chol wants to marry her girlfriend and follow in the footsteps of the groundbreaking pair.

"Ko Tin Ko Ko and Myo Min Htet's marriage make me want to emulate them," Sue Chol said. "I have a dream to have a wedding with the girl I love, wearing the same wedding dress in front of friends and family."

Su Chol works for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights and healthcare at local organisation Color Rainbow, with whom she is now assembling a study concerning facts and consequences about the Section 377 of the Penal Code.

She says the study will be published soon, and that Section 377 is flawed and unclear. She also says she is relieved no legal action has yet been



Photos: AFP

taken against the two men.

She adds, however, that discrimination remains, among the general population and even in the families of those who come out of the closet.

Having lived as a lesbian since the age of 12, Sue Chol says she suffered discrimination from other people and was neglected by her parents, who did not approve and wanted her to live what they thought of as a "normal" life for a woman – with a man.

"When I was young, I recognised I wasn't like other girls who like beauty and boys," she said.

She also speaks out about making assumptions about how lesbians should dress or behave.

Ma Chit Hnin, for instance, is a slim 5'2" with short hair. When not at work, she dresses in blue jeans and a white T-shirt, and with her two large tattoos on each arm and her more masculine way of walking, she presents the appearance of a skinny boy.

Sue Chol also opts for a more punk style, with a number of tattoos to mark significant moments in her life. She may be odds with traditional feminine fashion, but she says that not all lesbians dress or behave in a gender-bending manner.

"Not every lesbian tries to look like a boy. Some live like a girl, dress like a woman, but love women. As for me, I don't want to be a boy but want to live like this," Sue Chol says.

Self-confidence, however, only gets one so far in the face of prejudice: Sue Chol also knows of lesbians who have been denied jobs because they do not

dress like other women.

Still, Sue Chol – who has been with her girlfriend for two years, though they are still trying to win understanding from their parents – says she's not resentful of those who don't understand.

"Since I was young, my classmates and neighbours have treated me like an idiot. Whatever they did to me, I don't blame them. I recognise that they can't understand me and my life."

She does, however, want to change the minds of men who don't recognise the worth of woman, lesbian or heterosexual, and make them do household work and look after them and their children their whole lives.

Organisations like Color Rainbow, Su Chol says, have helped shine a light on LGBT issues and helped many accept themselves and their relationships in a healthier way than they otherwise could.

"Because the organisation exists we know there are others like us," she said. "We won't feel lonely anymore."

The National AIDS Program estimates there are about 240,000 LGBT people in Myanmar, though it does not keep track of the number of lesbians specifically.

Ko Nay Oo Lwin, program manager of Population Service International, estimates about 100,000 LGBT people are "out" – meaning they do not keep their sexual identity a secret.

"The rest of them live secretly because they afraid of the negative impact it will have on their relationships," he said.

He adds, however, that some can live "more openly" thanks to LGBT

organisations and public awareness raising events such as the marking of International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia [IDAHOT] on May 17. ■

## Women who inspire me

**Aye Aye Soe** won the gold medal in the women's athletic physique contest at the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Championship 2014. She shares her picks for five women who keep on making us stronger.

**Daw Aung San Suu Kyi**

I respect her a lot as one of the most outstanding women in the world. She has made the world know Myanmar. She is also a Nobel Prize laureate.

**Daw Yi Yi Win**

She is a very good coach who has been leading the next generation of Myanmar athletes.

**Daw Hla Nu Tun** (national director, Miss Asia Pacific World and Miss Globe International) She served as an important mentor, working hard for the development of a Miss Asia Pacific.

**Daw Lei Lei Aye** (managing director, Mandalay Highway Bus Line) She has picked up her business quickly and is on the road to success.

**Ma May Myat Noe** (Miss Asia Pacific World 2014)

She brought home the title for Myanmar.

# 'Smart girls are born here'

How girls-only schools bring out the best

BY MAY THINZAR NAING

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IN late 1964, under the military rule of General Ne Win, Christian convent schools in Myanmar were nationalised and re-opened as government schools of basic or high education for girls.

Among those which remain girls-only to this day is Yangon's No 2 Basic Education High School, Latha, which has one of the top matriculation pass rates and a reputation for nurturing some of the most outstanding female students.

"The school earned its reputation from its tradition of giving monthly exams which are exactly the same as the government examination," said a retired high school teacher from No 2 BEHS, Latha.

"As the boards of the respective subjects make the questions, the girls have to study everything. They cannot guess what the questions could be," she said. "Smart girls are born here."

Many influential women have attended girls-only schools. Studying in this environment grants the girls freedom, peace, dynamism and independent leadership despite there being no real difference in educational content between boys and girls schools.

"We teach the girls to be disciplined. We teach them how to help each other and how to behave, so they help each other and don't fight. Also they work hard to stand out in the class," said the retired teacher.

One successful graduate of the girls-only No 4, Tarmwe, is the singer and actress Smile.

"Our principal always reminded us to be disciplined girls. She taught us to work hard and not to be unkind to people. Plus, she always watched and looked after us before we went home. She thought she was responsible for keeping her girls safe and sound. That was quite a memory to me," Smile said.

Domestic vocational trainings, sports and art activities are all on the curriculum, giving young girls every opportunity to succeed.



Photo: Lwin Maung Maung

coed or separate – with a sex education program like in international schools. However, some say schools should not teach such topics (see **related story page 7**).

"It is important that young girls keep themselves in control with good sense of judgment. Girls schools keeps them from any harm," said a teacher who asked not to be named.

"Some parents have concerns about sending their girls to schools with boys. Teenagers should not be distracted; here they can just concentrate on their studies."

The teacher said, however, that older students should be exposed to facts about relationships and health, even if they're not attending classes with those of the opposite sex.

"Middle-school students should definitely be provided with a sex education program. We can't just look at the dark side. Positively, they will learn what they need to know so that they will realise what is right and wrong and how to keep themselves safe."

Asked if adolescence in a single-sex environment encourages romantic feelings between female students, she said it would not be a problem if it did.

"I also went to a girls school. I remember girls dated each other when they liked each other. I had friends who were very smart, beautiful and dated each other. So what? They kept themselves under complete control. One of them has become a professor now." ■

– Translation by Myat Su Mon Win

## In Myanmar, men having unsafe sex have created a new high-risk group for HIV: their monogamous wives

BY SHWE YEE SAW MYINT

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WHEN Ma Nan's husband left her to marry another woman, he left her with more than just a four-year-old daughter. He also left her with HIV.

After the divorce, Ma Nan – not her real name – found herself struggling to support her family by herself. Planning to go overseas to work, she went to the Moe Thee clinic to have her blood tested as was required.

The result wasn't as expected.

"The doctors asked me whether I had had a blood infusion or had been married. Before I took the blood test I said I was single. But finally the doctors said my test showed I have HIV and that they

would have to check my blood again at another laboratory," she said.

At the time she felt shame that she had lied to the doctors. But she had been lied too as well. The main reason for her matrimony problem, she said, is she did not desire to please her husband after she gave birth to her daughter. But it turned out he had been straying behind her back.

"When I discovered a condom in his pocket we started to fight, because I knew he was going to a brothel," Ma Nan said.

After her diagnosis, she said, "I

didn't know how to go back home crying. My problem was how to explain to my very elderly mother."

And to her daughter: It took the help of a friend, years later when her daughter was older, to break the news.

"Her aunty explained to her, 'This disease was given to your mother from your father and this is not her fault,'" Ma Nan said.

In Myanmar HIV is primarily concentrated among high-risk groups, including sex workers and their clients, men who have sex with men, and injecting drug users, said Myanmar Positive Women

Network (MPWN) chair Daw Naw Sha Wah. Since 2010, however, the infection rate among women has been higher than these groups. And they're getting the disease from their husbands.

"In Myanmar culture, the women choose their husband for their whole life. They love only one – and most wives' lack of sexual knowledge means they get infected with HIV," Daw Naw Sha Wah said.

After Ma Nan's diagnosis, she felt her life was meaningless. But today she works with MPWN to bring comfort to others living with HIV.

"I am finding women living with HIV in the community. I give knowledge to all women and then I talk about me."

The purpose of sharing her own story is to let others know that blameless people can be infected also – and to hopefully help decrease the spread of HIV to women and the stigma that clings to all who have it.

With funding from UNAID, MPWN has gone from a Yangon self-help group network to 13 regions in Myanmar, promoting access to better health, social and economical need by funding support from UNAID.

**"In 2011, the largest proportion of new infections occurred among low-risk women, i.e. partners of men with high risk behaviour." – UNAIDS 2012 Global AIDS Response Progress Report Myanmar**

Daw Naw Sha Wah said part of the challenge they work to overcome is women's fear of raising their voices about what they need.

"Many people are unable to speak about their disease and the lack of access to ART [anti-retroviral therapy] medication because they fear discrimination," Daw Naw Sha Wah Said.

"When my family found out about me [being HIV-positive] they sent me alone a village in Ayeyarwady Region, far away from the city. I tried to come back to Yangon because

I don't want to die there. When I arrived at my family's home in Yangon my father and other family members left me there with my mother because they didn't want to stay together with me."

Daw Naw Sha Wah added that women face an especially heavy burden: As the primary caregivers for children, they must explain the disease to their young ones.

And as Ma Nan did, they then have to dry their children's tears – while secretly thinking about who will do so if they are gone. ■

For a Myanmar-language explanation of HIV/AIDS, including answers to questions children may ask, see:

[http://www.unicef.org/myanmar/mm\\_pub\\_AIDS100\\_QA\\_MM.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/myanmar/mm_pub_AIDS100_QA_MM.pdf)





## Career fair

### Three young women talk about the work they love

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ROLE models, says 5 Network presenter and model Ma Yin Nyein, are one of the biggest factors when young girls come to choose their careers.

Many girls plan their path according to what is popular at the time, Ma Yin Nyein says, whether that's designers or accountants or any other of the jobs which are traditionally taken up by urban women.

Now, she says, broadcasting can be added to that list. "I think many girls are interested in media nowadays. Many broadcast media channels like MRTV-4, SkyNet and MMDC are promoting interest in media for girls. Many girls want to be presenters, announcers and newscasters. They think they can do these jobs if they can speak well – plus they get to appear on television."

She says being a presenter isn't just about looking pretty – it's about getting viewers to trust you. "I want the audience to get knowledge and information by watching my program."

To make that happen, she has to juggle a busy schedule. "My mother wants me just to attend university now. But I want to work in my field of interest." In the end, she has decided to do both, pursuing a master's degree while also working in her field.

### 'If I cannot teach after I am married, I cannot marry.'

Ma Hnin Yee Wint, 21-year-old student

Ma Hnin Yee Wint, 21, is pursuing a master's degree in journalism at National Management College and aims to become a teacher at university after she graduates.

"I think my dream is close," says Hnin Yee Wint – but she adds that her commitment may lead to difficult decisions in the future.

"My first priority in life is to teach. After I am married, I will still do my teacher job. If I cannot teach after I am married, I cannot marry. Being a teacher is more important than other things in my life."

It's a dilemma faced by many women, who are traditionally expected to handle all of the housework and family duties, on top of any commitments they may have outside the home. Ma Hnin Yee Wint says her family backs her up in her professional aspirations.

"I grew up in Kachin State with my parents, but I moved to Yangon without them to attend university because I want to be a teacher. My family encourages me to choose a career I enjoy."

Some women, however, pursue professions only to be pushed out of them by a lack of jobs.

"I earned a bachelor of engineering degree and studied architecture," says Ma Kay Thi May, 25, a graduate of Yangon Technical University. "But after I got the degree, I did not get any engineering jobs."

"When I did find a job nearly six months after I graduated, the salary was very, very low. So I gave up the work I enjoy and I decided to open my own clothing shop," she says.

It has proven a refreshing change, she says, because she's realised she doesn't want to work for someone else. Knowing that an office environment would be a drain on her well-being, she advises others to find a job that brings happiness and doesn't take away from other areas of life.

"One's career is important in life. We can be happy and enjoy life when we are doing work we enjoy. If we feel pressure in our work, we cannot be happy. We should try to do work that brings our own happiness."

Fortunately, Ma Kay Thi May says she sees a better future ahead for those growing up now.

"I didn't have many opportunities to choose my career but nowadays the young girls can attend many classes and have many job opportunities. They can choose their preferred jobs because the economy is more developed and the education sector is more developed." ■

# Finding Myanmar's Oprah

A new entrepreneurial course inspires up-and-coming businesswomen to turn their dreams into reality

BY MICHELLE SCHANER  
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ASK anyone in Myanmar below the age of 40 – and even some who are older – about their professional dreams and the majority will say the same thing: "To run my own business." In the old Myanmar, being a doctor was the highest academic achievement any individual could attain. But with the world now at its feet, the country is brimming with possibility. Everyone – nationals and foreigners alike – seems to have an idea on how to cash in.

In her mid-20s and working as a doctor in a private clinic, Zeelpi, or "Rosy" (a nickname), exemplifies this shift. Ambitious, dynamic, eager and young, living in the commercial capital Yangon and on the way to becoming a doctor, in the eyes of her family she has already made it. But she's also hungry for something else: something to call her own.

Rosy's idea to open an online "Facebook shop" selling traditional clothing first came to her as a medical student six years ago. Discovering she had a keen eye for fashion, particularly textiles from her native Chin State, she and a friend organised a fashion show where they displayed traditional longyis – the long, woven, form-fitting skirts worn by most Myanmar women. For most students, Rosy said, it was the first time they had been exposed to Chin culture and especially, Chin fabrics, which are known for being intricately woven and heavier in texture than most. The response from those who attended the show, she said, was very positive.

It wasn't until this past April, when she paid a visit to her home state and decided to purchase and re-sell Chin longyis to her coworkers in Yangon, that her interest in Chin fabrics developed into a business idea. The bright colourful skirts were selling at twice the price of a Bamar-style longyi – from K20,000 (\$21) to K50,000 (\$52) per longyi in Yangon – and the profit margins were significant. Her first sales attempt netted a hefty profit.

"I thought, 'I can work like this on my own,'" she said.

#### The incubator

At the same time that Rosy's idea was germinating, some expatriate social entrepreneurs were busy developing an "incubator project" for women called Project W, precisely targeted at women like her.

Funded by a Norwegian-based non-profit organisation called Partnership for Change and managed by Project Hub, which works to assist start-up companies in Myanmar, Project W is a six-month course for female entrepreneurs. The aim,

said project manager Josep Saura, is to provide participants with the necessary training and support they need to turn their business ideas into reality.

Project Hub ran a similar, incubator program in 2013 that resulted in the launching of two local tech companies, but the majority of participants in last year's program were men, Mr Saura said, which was something the organisers were looking to change this time round.

"Among all the entrepreneurs we selected [in 2013], only one was a woman," he said. "We realised that women don't feel encouraged. They don't have this self-confidence that they should have in order to apply to this kind of project."

Project Hub then joined forces with Partnership for Change, which mandated

### Most participants have full-time jobs and must carve out time on their evenings and weekends to devote to their businesses.

that women be the focus of the 2014 program.

Barbara Bauer, executive officer for the Myanmar-based organisation, said the majority of potential entrepreneurs in Myanmar are unaccustomed to competitive markets and the intention is to give participants "more clarity" on how to succeed in the face of competition.

Most participants, for example, lack exposure to marketing methods and techniques for using technology to expand sales and find new clients.

"They are new to this," Ms Bauer said.



Rosy



Photos: Yu Yu and Naing Win Tun

#### Taking the plunge

By late April, Rosy had sold out of her first batch of longyis and began thinking about ways to grow her business. She said she had purchased some items through local Facebook pages the previous year and thought using Facebook might be one way to move her own business forward.

"Other people are using Facebook for fun and they are making money from Facebook. I thought, 'Oh, it's a good idea – but how do they get the pictures of the products?' And then I thought it would be nice to do that ... I thought it would be good to sell them on Facebook because I wouldn't need much money to rent a shop."

Rosy was at the point of thinking about putting together a catalogue when a friend forwarded her Project W's call for applications from female entrepreneurs. Rosy took a chance and applied. A few weeks later she was interviewed and accepted to the program.

Two weeks after joining, with much encouragement from her teachers, Rosy launched her Facebook page. It got a handful of "likes" – two from people she did not know.

"I thought, 'Well, that's not bad,'" she said.

#### Encouraging entrepreneurs

A total of 45 women applied to the program and 10 were chosen. To weed out less serious candidates, Mr Saura said, they looked for those with the necessary entrepreneurial drive and the focus to make their businesses work. Some applications had great ideas, but did not have the motivation to make things happen in the long term.

One potential participant, for example, was making handicrafts out of recycled materials, but did not seem to understand how she could make money out of this great idea.

"We told her, 'What you are doing is great. You have been doing this for how long? How is it possible that in five years you never tried to sell any of those things to your Auntie, to your classmates, or to your friends?'" Mr Saura remembers.

"And she said, 'No, I never tried.' That was not a good sign," Mr Saura said. They proposed that she make 10 products and sell them at a Hub-organised fair. But the applicant demurred; she was keen to go straight to opening a shop.

her parents operate several clothing shops around the country – outlets of the Korean-based franchise called Bang! Bang! – and Hillary had been studying abroad to help her family manage and expand the shops in Myanmar.

While many would be satisfied – and possibly overwhelmed – with the task like this, Hillary is not. Since coming home, she improved sales and helped re-organise the franchise.

She also came to a realisation: She wants to go her own way, to develop her own line of clothing, and she wants to give Myanmar women something unique, not just something from Korea.

"Some of the Korean designs doesn't match well with Myanmar tastes," Hillary said. "We don't have a lot of flexibility with the products we [get from Korea]."

"I thought I would have much more flexibility if I manufactured my own products. Then I could tailor my products according to the tastes of local people – the size as well as the colors."

Hillary is aiming big but, taking the advice of her teachers at Project W, she's starting small. In addition to her full-time duties with her family's business, she is working with a pattern maker to develop samples and doing market research with focus groups.

"You don't have to buy a piece with other people's ideas and wear it according to them," she said. "I want (Myanmar women) to have more creativity in how to style themselves."

To start, she says, she will sell her pieces in her parents' shops, under her own brand name, Cici. The companies

participants, Mr Saura said, considered that step "seriously" at the start of the program.

The most important part of helping the entrepreneurs prepare, Mr Saura said, is helping them develop a solid, business plan – one which includes building a viable product, financial planning and marketing. The goal is to eventually pitch that idea to a group of investors at the program's conclusion, six months later, at

### The mentors – successful female Myanmar business leaders – give the participants advice throughout.

the end of November.

But the confidence to do this successfully doesn't come from a lecture or a book. This is where the team of mentors – successful female Myanmar business leaders – who give the participants advice throughout the course. They also receive moral and psychological

she emulates are international: Japanese ready-wear giant Uniqlo; Spanish-based Zara.

Despite her strong roots in the business, she admits that the process is a bit scary and intimidating and said that her involvement in Project W is helping her overcome her fear of moving forward.

"If I did it myself, I wouldn't have a timeline," she said. "I wouldn't have milestones or deadlines to follow. By joining the program, I knew I would have to keep up with the program and with other entrepreneurs. I don't want to be left behind."

Hillary said she has already taken note of other participants, such as Rosy, who have launched their businesses and are preparing to sell on a larger scale even before the program concludes.

"[Rosy] has already started selling her longyi through Facebook, but I still have so much to sort out before doing that stuff," Hillary said. "I think my business spans a broader scope. I think that just requires more time."

#### The countdown begins

Time – or a lack thereof – is something that all women interviewed at Project W are struggling with.

When not working at the clinic, Rosy said she is spending nights working on her business plan, and trying to contact and research potential overseas customers so she will be prepared for the big November pitch.

"Before presenting my idea to the investors I think I should have done it – by myself – at least once, putting the whole idea into practice ... For example, if I were to export to other countries, I must have at least once contacted a supplier by myself. Without trying the ideas that I present to the investors, they won't seem very realistic."

The important part of starting a business, she's learned, is making her ideas become real. ■

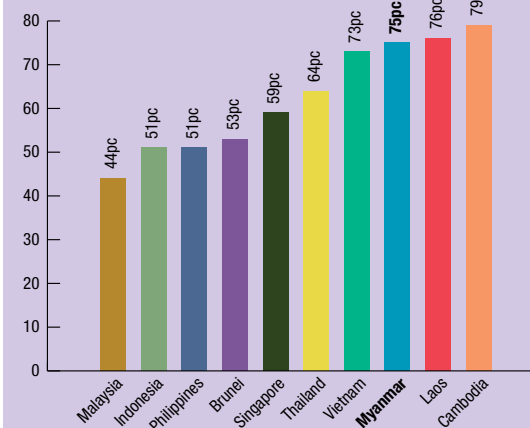
#### The ASEAN perspective

## Labour and education

WADE GUYITT

STATISTICS tell an interesting story when it comes to women in the work force in Myanmar and the ASEAN region. The assumption would be that in the four least-developed ASEAN countries – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, collectively called the CLMV group – women would be confined to home-making roles only. Likewise, we would expect that in the more developed nations women would be more likely to enter the workforce. Statistics, however, don't bear out this assumption.

#### Women's participation rate in the labour force, 2012



Source: World Bank

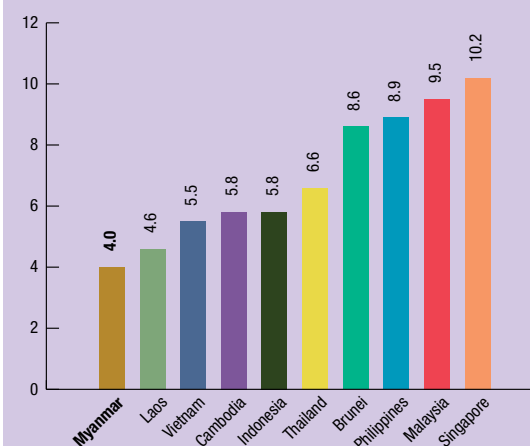
The data clearly shows that women in the four least-developed countries are most likely to be part of the work force. What's to account for this?

Particularly in strongly agriculture-based societies, the hand-to-mouth economy requires that everyone must play a role for a family to survive. While having both sexes working may give the appearance that women in Myanmar enjoy reasonably equal status with men, the statistics don't consider what kinds of jobs women are working in, nor do they consider the fact that women in traditional conservative societies shoulder the vast majority of child-raising and homemaking duties.

In the most-developed and most affluent ASEAN nations, we see the rate of women in the workforce is actually lower. (For a point of comparison, it may be useful to know that the Canada figure is 62pc, the US figure is 57pc, the UK figure is 56pc, and Japan is 48pc – all in the range of the other, non-CLMV ASEAN nations.)

These low figures can partly be explained by the fact that the totals include any female above the age of 15 – and doesn't consider students as workers. Education – especially higher education – may keep people out of the workforce, but it also allows a better quality of job and a higher standard of living in the future. This is one place where women's opportunities are limited in the CLMV nations.

#### Average years of schooling completed by adult population, 2011



Source: ASEAN Community Progress Monitoring System Full Report 2012

Here we see the CLMV countries are at the bottom of the table, with Myanmar lowest of all. So while high rates of women in the workforce is good, it doesn't reveal the full picture of women's lives. What kinds of jobs they are doing – and their level of agency in choosing those jobs – is also important. ■





## Dr Saw Nay Nwe

AA Medical Product Ltd

THE biggest perk of being a doctor, says Dr Saw Nay Nwe, is “having the ability to take action on public health”. And as executive director of AA Medical, the country's largest importer of pharmaceuticals, she's able to take a larger view of what's needed.

AA Medical was established in the 1990s as Aung Aung Enterprise, run by Dr Saw Nay Nwe's future in-laws. Dr Saw Nay Nwe came onboard in 2004 after graduating from the University of Medicine, Yangon. Since then, she says, she's witnessed dramatic growth in the company.

Best known for importing various well-known medicines brands such as Decolgen, Anavon-C, Obimin as well as vaccines such as

for cervical cancer prevention, AA recently also branched out beyond medicine, becoming the distributor of GM Chevrolet cars and motor engine oil such as Total on the side.

The success of the company has allowed it to give back to the community. AA has spent over K2,000,000,000 on donations over the past 10 years, including GM Chevrolet engines to colleges for engineering students to use as study aids; soccer balls for school sports; and blood donation ceremonies. In celebration of its upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016, AA is planning to set up a social services foundation.

Dr Saw Nay Nwe points to 2008 as a period in which she was particularly glad to be in a position to put company resources to good use.

“After Cyclone Nargis, not only did the company distribute medicine free of charge to patients across the country but I personally went to sites where the cyclone hit and gave medical aid to those in need.”

The company also looks after its 850 employees' health. Women at AA are allowed maternity leaves, brands of medicine distributed by the company are given free with doctors' prescriptions to employees and senior managers get financial support for medical fees in case of major operations. Funeral services for employees are also supplemented by the company.

“As a medical company, I feel grateful that we are able to assist on the health of people in society,” Dr Saw Nay Nwe says. ■ – Ei Thant Sin

## Three business trailblazers

MT surveys three local female entrepreneurs to find out how they got started

Photos: Yu Yu

### Daw Nang May Thein Kyi

Kham Le Gems and Jewelry

When you hear the word “Kham Le”, you probably will not understand what it means unless you are a Shan. It stands for a kind of pure gold with a full weight of 24-carat. It's a fitting name for a jewellery shop.

“If the price is the same, my products must be in better quality. If the products are of the same quality, my products must be cheaper,” says Daw Nang May Thein Kyi of Kham Le Gems and Jewelry.

Jewellery wasn't at the top of her mind as a child. She dreamed of becoming a medical specialist, but historic events intervened to set her on a different path.

“When I was attending fourth-year classes, the 1988 uprising happened. All the schools and universities shut down. I went back to my hometown. There, I got married. Then in 1990 the universities reopened and I re-joined to complete my course,” she said.

She earned a bachelor degree in engineering from the Rangoon Institute of Technology in 1990. After her graduation, she had two choices: to make a career based on her studies, or to join her husband, U Sai San Pwint, a businessperson who traded gems, in his business.

“I was very proud to be an engineer. I wanted to build my career profile in the engineering field. I wanted to become a civil servant, professor and the like. Nevertheless, I had to think logically. If I chose to be a civil servant, my family and I might have been far apart from one another and I would not have been able to look after my children. That's why I chose to participate in my husband's gems business.”

They started a small gold shop in Kun Hein. Her husband and her father-in-law were her mentors. Because the field was a very new to her, she had to start from scratch.

Daw Nang May Thein Kyi learned how to sell and practice



good customer service from a young age, from her mother, who was also known as a good salesperson. However, her mother died in a car accident when Daw Nang May Thein Kyi was 10, so when it came time for her to join the business world, she couldn't turn to her mother for advice.

“The most challenging part of my life was when we shifted from Kun Hein to Taunggyi in 1997,” she said. The gold shop in Kun Hein was growing, but their children's education brought them to uproot for a bigger city. While the busier environment brought them more possibilities, it also brought more challenges. They were confronted by various troubles, including liars and cheats.

Still, they persevered. Kham Le Gems and Jewelry opened in Myoma Bazaar in Taunggyi on January 1, 1998. In November 2011, they opened another showroom in Taunggyi. On May 24, 2014, they opened a new subsidiary in Yangon.

Now the business they started together makes them live apart: She runs the shop in Yangon, while her husband manages the gem galleries

in Taunggyi, as well as a hotel.

“As a part of our strategy to manage the whole of our businesses, including the gem gallery, shops, and hotel, I have to harmonise with my husband in separating duties and responsibilities,” she said.

This includes raising two sons and one daughter. But despite her success, Daw Nang May Thein Kyi said that she does not regard herself as a successful businessperson; rather, she sees herself as a businessperson who is still trying hard to be successful. In addition, she believes in honesty and working hard.

“I believe that being honest and trying hard persistently will bear many fruits. I always try to help those who have the two criteria.”

She takes part in women's organisations and social activities, including, during visits to Taunggyi, running awareness training for local young women. She says she is always happy to share her experiences with any women who are hungry for success.

“I always urge young women to try hard and be honest. Only these two things can make a person successful.” ■ – Lun Min Mang



### Ashlynn K Naing

Glamorous Myanmar Travel and Tours, Gandamar Media and Advertising, Myanmar Food Creation (MFC)

FOR a young entrepreneur, Ashlynn K Naing has an astonishing amount of experience.

When she first got into business at 19, she was entirely green. Her parents were government employees, so she had no family tradition to inspire her. But she knew the business world was the place she wanted to be.

“My parent supported me and I was enthusiastic about doing business. These two things encouraged my success,” she says.

Her first business, Glamorous Myanmar Travel and Tours service, began in 2009. Gandamar Media and Advertising followed, with Myanmar Food Creation (MFC) opening most recently.

MFC is taking up most of her attention now, she says, with half her mind on the food industry and the other half split between the other two.

“I love facing challenges. The food industry was new to me and I was so interested in doing it well.”

MFC includes The Kebab House, which sells Middle Eastern food; Shwe Myanmar, which specialises in biryani; and Malaysian franchise Hot & Roll. It also distributes organic juice, as well as frozen readymade food from Malaysia.

But she says she's still not satisfied. “I want to be more successful in the food industry,” she says.

Without a mentor for her business pursuits, it hasn't all been smooth. Having graduated from Yangon's University of Foreign Languages with a degree in Japanese, she took an advance diploma in business

before she set out on her own. But she says most of her knowledge came from her experiences on the job.

“My father trained me to keep a strong mind in every difficulty. When I entered the business field, his ideas gave me strength and helped me pass easily.”

She also says she would like to pass on some advice her father gave her, as “a present to the young women entrepreneur”. Be careful pursuing fame, as success won't necessarily follow. But if you achieve success, fame will surely come. ■

– Myat Nyein Aye

### Women who inspire me

**Aye Thidar Kyaw** is deputy business editor at *The Myanmar Times*. These are some of the women she keeps an eye on for the way they get the job done.

**Daw Lu Lu** (The Rich Gems)

**Daw Khin Malar** (managing director, NatRay Co., Ltd)

**Daw Khine Khine Nwe** (joint secretary general, UMFCO)

**Dr Thet Thet Khine** (chair, Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs Association)

**Dr Toe Nandar Tin** (secretary, Myanmar Fisheries Federation; managing director, Andawa Daewi fishery export)

**Daw Chaw Khin Khin** (CEO, MCC computer)

## Full house

A mother surrounds herself with love

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THE average number of children born per woman in Myanmar has been dropping steadily over the past few decades – from 6 in 1970 to 2 as of 2013 – but there's one Yangon family that's working hard to keep that number high. In fact, with 26 births and 11 children surviving, they can surely lay claim to being among the largest families in the country.

Daw Khin Thuzar married U Myint Wai in 1976. She was 18 years old when they wed; he was working in ships' engine rooms.

“At the time we got married, family planning pills were well-known. But I didn't use them because I thought I would give birth to children year-after-year non-stop, and thus I would be looked after by my children,” she said.

Since 1977, she has been pregnant 24 times. Having had two sets of twins, that means she has delivered 26 children: 14 boys and 12 girls.

Myanmar's overall ratio of boys to girls is 1.06 males for every female, so that makes this family more or less statistically balanced.



Photo: Kaung Htet

Daw Khin Thuzar, U Myint Wai, some of their 11 children, 15 grandchildren and 1 great-grandchild – plus Thar Thar the dog.

“After giving birth to three children, the obstetrician and gynecologist (OG) doctors scolded me that I shouldn't give birth again according to medical knowledge. I did not obey their noises.”

Sadly, nine boys – including a 28-year-old son – and six girls later died from jaundice or other diseases. (Gender-wise this is again in line with national trends, where women are more likely to live longer and there are only 0.77 males for every one female who live longer than age 65.)

Of the 11 surviving children, the eldest, a daughter, is now 37, while the youngest, a son, is 11 – around the same age as some of his elder siblings' children.

“I have 15 grandchildren and one great-grandchild,” Daw Khin Thuzar said. “All the children who live in Yangon come to my home each

morning with their children and they go back to their homes at night. My home is alive with their sounds.”

She said she has suffered no uterine diseases during her many pregnancies, and she has the looks of a woman in her 40s, rather than 57. “I enjoyed looking after them in their childhood days,” Daw Khin Thuzar said, having bathed each of them herself. But despite her love, raising such a large family was a financial hardship, with back-to-school time particularly difficult.

“I would have liked to buy so many things when they went to school. But I couldn't afford them. Some relatives helped me but we didn't enough for all the children.”

Over the years, Daw Khin Thuzar has taken on a number of extra jobs herself to help support the family, from car trading and real estate to

selling jewels at Bogyoke Market.

She also taught her children that their father is a civil servant so he won't get so much income, to keep their expectations reasonable and help them live sensibly.

Despite the challenges, she encourages others to have large families like her own. She said she has seen some families lose an only child and then find themselves unable to have another. She doesn't want that to happen to others.

She also says if one has a small family, and none of the children are clever, the parents may not get the full enjoyment of parenthood.

“I believe that if one child out of 10 is clever it is enough to enjoy for parents. But if there is only a few children and if no one is clever, it is a disadvantage to parents.”

Daw Khin Thuzar has encouraged

### The ASEAN perspective

#### Births and risks

Average births per woman, 2010	
Philippines	31
Laos	27
Cambodia	26
Indonesia	21
Malaysia	21
<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>2.0</b>
Brunei	18
Vietnam	18
Thailand	16
Singapore	12
Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2013	

Maternal mortality rate per 100,000 live births, 2012 (* = 2011)	
Laos	280.0
<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>233.0</b>
Cambodia	206.0
Indonesia	169.0
Philippines	129.0
Vietnam	69.0
Thailand	66.3*
Malaysia	27.3
Brunei	15.6
Singapore	2.6
Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2013	

her own children to follow her path in adulthood. “I ask my married children not to use family planning pills and other pills.

“I am a member of the Women's League of Burma and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association. But I can't tell women not to have as many children as they want.” ■

## Is skinny the new black?

And how come it's the bigger, older women who think so?

MABEL CHUA  
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“SWEETHEART, your cheeks have become enormous: You've definitely put on weight, haven't you?”

Instead of being asked how my 18-hour flight was or how I've been doing for the past two years, those were the words I was welcomed with as soon as I set foot outside the airport. Not knowing how to respond, I returned a faint smile, thinking at least it wouldn't happen again this visit. Boy, I was wrong!

I had, in all honesty, gained 5 or 10 pounds over the two years I had been at school overseas. But I hadn't expected it to be the big deal many of the older women I visited made it out to be. And talking to my other friends, it turned out I wasn't alone.

“I literally did not recognise my own daughter,” one friend's mother told me when I bumped into them in the grocery store a few days later. “She has inflated like a balloon in just two years! This girl needs to do something

about her weight.”

Another friend told me she'd actually been poked in the arm and asked whether she'd been eating McDonald's and KFC every day. You'd think there was a tonne of fat in her body, but her BMI (Body Mass Index) is perfectly normal, neither overweight nor underweight.

Now, most girls in Myanmar are admittedly fairly slim. But among older women it seems that while the traditional greeting for someone they see regularly is still “Have you eaten yet?”, for someone they haven't seen in a while – or at least, someone younger they haven't seen in a while – it's “Wow, you've put on weight!”

Even women who haven't met you before can sometimes get in on the act. With no memory of you to compare against, you'd think they'd keep quiet, but no: One friend's wife once had an older woman she had just met size her up and ask, as an icebreaker, “So, have you gained or lost weight?” It broke the ice, alright – like a

blast of cold water to the face.

It used to be a compliment to say that someone has put on weight: It meant she was eating well and consequently was affluent. Looking back a few chapters in history, during the Renaissance in the 1400s the beautiful women were the voluptuous ones. Painters and sculptors from that era idolised women who would today be considered fat.

Now, instead of accepting whatever weight we've become, parents (especially mothers) and relatives suggest that we alter ourselves in order to look like the supermodels they've seen on billboards and in magazines. They say “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” – society in Yangon seems to be fixated on skinnier body images, idolising them as a way to determine what a young body is supposed to look like.

One friend advised me to give the fat-callers the benefit of the doubt.

“When children go abroad, especially to the West, with different diets, weathers and cultures, it is very likely

that they will undergo some changes both in personality and physical appearance. When parents or family refuse to accept or try to understand these changes and automatically criticise children for ‘how fat they have become’ or ‘how westernised they are’, parents end up dividing an unnecessary wedge between them and their children, further adding to the rift caused by distance itself.”

With that in mind, I asked my mom why she had turned my extra 5-10 pounds into “erupting” cheeks.

“People here use the terms interchangeably, but there is a very thin line between being fit and being fat,” she said. “We [parents and relatives] point that out as the very first thing simply because we're concerned, like we always have been!”

So there you have it. Returnees like myself – or, really, anyone hasn't seen you in a while and has aged in the meantime, as people tend to do – are probably already aware of whatever



size they happen to be. As for parents and relatives, they're just worried we might later become overweight and have unnecessary health problems.

But there is no need for either side to exaggerate and pull the string tighter than it already is. While it's okay for parents and relatives to talk to us about our general health and well-being now and then, it's not helpful to throw a bucket full of insults right in

the face on first greeting. And to all the young women out there, try not to take these comments personally: They're not intended to be as cruel as they sound.

But if that doesn't help, look at it this way: Just like how high-waist jeans are back in trend, there is nothing at all wrong with looking like a full-figured French girl from a painting from the Renaissance. ■



# Daughters all

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**E**IGHT months ago last week, my mother Karen passed away suddenly, at age 69, at a hospice in California, before I could see her again or say a proper goodbye. She had a range of chronic health issues that suddenly peaked all at once, turning simple pneumonia into a grim diagnosis, relayed to her while still in the hospital, of living the rest of her life with a nurse and oxygen tank attached to her at all times.

She never went home again. Always pugnacious, she resisted being told what to do, and refused what her children wanted for her – or, really, for themselves. Told she would be released within days into assisted living, she willed herself to let go, and without even her much-loved little dog beside her, in less than two weeks she was gone.

For someone, like me, who trades in words – makes a living on them and tosses off emails so long they are the butt of jokes made by friends, colleagues and even myself – I honestly lack the vocabulary and clarity of thought to begin to deal with a loss of such magnitude that it occupies a realm of expression completely unto itself.

But I don't really need to use words to let her go, when it turns out I don't have really have to let her go at all, when I still see her every day, in some fashion. And not just see her, but live with her, love her and kiss her soft cheek, because she is my daughter. Nothing has rendered me quite so speechless in my life as witnessing the remarkable and unexpected ways in which my mother lives on – not through me, but through her.

When I look at myself, I can barely see her, though she's always there. It's something like trying to see your own back in a mirror: You know it's there, and that others see it all the time; you know it holds you upright and makes you who you are. But unless you contort yourself and your limbs from all angles, you can't really examine the whole of it without difficulty. And so it follows you, faithfully, literally, through life unseen.

Likewise, she is a part of me, but not just a part. Her organising force courses through me, and the echoes of her flesh are so embedded in mine, though dim to my view, and shape the very way I see so strongly that when I look at my own hands, I don't see mine, apart from hers; I simply see hers. So much am I my mother's daughter that without her mark on me, and the breath that came from her filling me still, I would be an empty glove, deflated, useless.

While I am unable to look at myself in relation to her with any kind of objectivity, or assign myself a sense of self as separate, my daughter has only ever been her own person, right from the start. Or so I thought. Because now my mother's legacy has suddenly burst forth again, in a way I would have never expected, but which seems designed to nurse a hurting heart.

My mother barely got to know both of her granddaughters;



just 5 and 3 when she left, they have already begun to stumble over her face in photos, trying to place it. When I smile and remind them of their cherished nickname for her, “Grandma Carrot”, their pliable young faces, full of light and anxious hope, gradually grow inert and turn away.

The youngest is as blond as a child can be, showing no trace of my father's Mexican blood, aside from her improbable surname (which they both carry, following the graceful Latin custom in which women carry their mother's maiden names). But it is not she who stops me in my tracks with a resemblance so acute to my tall, winnowy and freckled mother that her Nordic heritage seems to bypassed me completely and not come to rest until it filled my own daughter's bones its most essential marrow.

Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I catch my oldest, Maxine, spritzing past me, sassy and unstoppable. She is always formidably focused on her own solitary journey, whether it's to seek adventure and risk, or merely to cross the room for a toy, never alighting long, and the brief glimpse makes me suck in my breath, thinking I've heard my mother's voice from underwater, or seen her shadow dance across the dust motes in the sun.

Their likeness goes beyond their rudimentary appearance, though there is that, too – to an uncanny degree. Yet that aspect really only ever appears in photos, like the ghostly pale afterimage, otherwise inexplicable, that shows up on the negative of a photo taken in a pitch-dark, empty room.

These brief glimpses of my mother – never me – are most evident both in Maxine's physicality and in the starkly shifting temperature of her moods. She is my mother in the way she moves through life frenetically, always on a fine-milled edge, just about to burst into either tears or laughter. Like her, my daughter is entirely fearless, though the cost of that brazenness is that she can be impervious to the needs of others, be impatient with and lack sympathy for those whose thoughts move in more polite, confined orbits. Sharp-tongued and caustically funny, both of them endlessly drawing me to them with their restless intelligence, the strident vigour of their opinions, and then suddenly pushing me away, almost in anger, because in coming closer, I've marked the depth of their need for my love.



I also see my mother in the way Maxine will sometimes destroy the things she loves most, usually knowingly, as if to stave off later pain, and sometimes through a cycle of offhand neglect paired with smothering attention – a pattern that quickly soon reduces the loved object, often a devoted pet, to abject misery – yet does little to staunch the pet's blind devotion.

Where does it come from, and how it does it happen, this splitting of one's deepest mechanics into two, across many decades? Is it the blood they share between them that carried their single personality on a voyage through me – an impermeable conduit? Or was it implanted somehow through repetition, in the way of two who have learned to fit themselves together after many years, like a chair leg in a well-worn groove, coming to share or develop together the same bad habits, a preference for the same kinds of jokes, the same movies and shirts folded a certain way?

That is a transfer that takes much time, while my mother's and daughter's likenesses would have had to have been wrought through – at most – the few brief and irregular episodes of nurturing that my mother, while alive, cast Maxine's way. So perhaps this transfer of spirit was immediate with my mine. Did they look into each others' oceanic blue eyes that first time, when I brought Maxine to the US at 7 weeks old, and see the other reflected there instead of themselves, across more than 60 years? Was it as simple and unspoken as, “Ah, there she is”?

I will never know now.

Or maybe I do know, but I stubbornly prevent that knowledge from pushing past the reluctance I have always had to admit my physical resemblance to anyone else – even to my own mother, or to admit that yes, I am nothing without her, and yes, I am, in fact, without her now. Can I really not see that this legacy of personality, repeating itself during my lifetime, along with the shape and set of eyes and mouth, is not my mother's legacy, but my own? Or not even my own, but then neither my mother's but the sum of unknown generations of women long passed, which crossed some unknown distance, and did anything but skip me, but passed through me as it did my mother and now courses through my own daughter's young body, which came from mine and stands now on the brink of life, her heart beating bravely under my cupped palm like a little butterfly?

How these tendencies pass through blood or behaviour is a mystery to me, but it joins all three of us, and always will – even in the absence of my mother. And eventually it will travel on, this legacy, and surface again in a brief sparkle of waves, then ride submerged, perhaps for centuries, yet is never, ever gone for good.

But who wants distance, when I look at these photos of my mother and my daughter, twinned over a chasm of time, forever pinned at around 5 years old. They both stood there in that moment with everything ahead of them, yet with paths already inscribed in them somehow, yet unknowable – just as mine is in me, and is likewise something I can see with neither clarity nor distance. But vision falters, while feeling remains.

Physically, it is only too obvious: They are decisively of the same tribe – mine. But language fails to reveal or define this other mystery. Perhaps it needs no words, then.

Blood and love move in mysterious ways, and depart far too quickly. But I am grateful for them. ■

## REVIEW

WADE GUYITT

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IN the opening story of *How Does One Dress To Buy Dragonfruit? True Stories of Expat Women in Asia*, a new arrival to Cambodia discovers she has become “suddenly, glaringly visible”. Her companion doesn't seem to attract the same stares, so she reasons it can't be her white skin that sets her apart. Then she realises it is her skin – in particular, a few square inches of it, unthinkingly left visible on her exposed knees.

Such moments of not fitting in – or worrying about not fitting in, or wanting not to fit in, or fitting in in unexpected ways – recur again and again in this collection of 26 stories by contemporary women writers. The title is adapted from a line in that opening story by Shannon Dunlap. With its knowing use of the word “one”, it suggests the formality even the most informal settings take on when you don't understand their codes. While the phrase works well in the context of the story, a more engaging title for the collection might have been *How Do I Dress To Buy Dragonfruit?* – for, as each writer discovers for herself with the benefit of time and hindsight, there is no single, simple answer to that question.

## HOW DOES ONE DRESS TO BUY DRAGONFRUIT? True Stories of Expat Women in Asia

edited by Shannon Young | 2014 | 324 pages



If travel is about seeking something new, being an expat is about watching that newness settle into something familiar. You can never entirely disappear into your adopted culture, and neither does it ever entirely disappear from before your eyes. But after a while you stop stumbling over exposed knees and start exploring it more deeply, while at the same time dealing with whatever else your life may bring.

So while the common tropes of expat adjustment in Asia are all covered here

– struggles to learn a new language; make friends; figure out transportation, remember quick-dry hiking pants; place phone calls back home; chase the odd snake from the house – these stories aren't, predominantly, tales of newness. They're about what happens after the newness, but before it becomes old.

“You don't need to write a travelogue to remember because you're not traveling, you're living here,” Kathryn Hummel writes in the collection's closing story. She is right. But truly living, anywhere, is a journey in itself.

Growing up in Japan and seeing your parents in a new light for the first time; falling in love on a ranch in Mongolia; falling out of love on a bus in China; getting married in South Korea; having trouble getting pregnant in Hong Kong; getting pregnant in Hong Kong; riding to the hospital on the back of a motorcycle while in labour in Vietnam; raising your own child abroad in Japan – each story explores how the milestones of life are shaped by what surrounds us.

In “Moving to the Tropic of Cancer”, local writer Philippa Ramsden describes arriving in Yangon and happily settling into a new house during monsoon season. Within days, however, she finds a lump and soon finds herself making a stop at

Shwedagon Pagoda en route to Yangon airport, where she will fly to Thailand and be diagnosed with cancer. “I stood at the Saturday shrine in my bare feet on the slippery ground, pouring one cup of water for each of my years on this earth and placed a spray of flowers in the urn for that purpose. It is not difficult to guess the plea in those prayers.”

Other writers in the collection also submit to prayers, offerings, feng shui and even spirit possession in moments of difficulty. Each notes how different the outward manifestation of these inward yearnings are to them, and yet at the same time how natural they become.

In “Happy Anniversary”, Stephanie Han describes how best to explain how her cross-ethnic marriage: “You warn them that geography is a serious concern when thinking of multiple ethnicities, nationalities, and cultural origins, and that it's best to remember that nations are a relatively new construct in the spectrum of human development and that there are some people who test this idea of nation, in all of its possibilities, limits, and configurations, and these people are often, but not always, expatriates.”

Toss out your in-flight; leave the *Lonely Planet* alone. This is the reading they ought to be handing out on the plane. ■

## Women who inspire me

### Ma Thida (Sanchaung)

She has been a doctor, a writer, a journalist and a political prisoner – sometimes all at once. She edits *Shwe Amu Tay* magazine and *Pei Tin Than* journal and helped establish the Myanmar branch of PEN International. Here are some of the women writers she says inspire her.

### Khin Mya Zin

She has written several stories and is a famous writer among Myanmar fiction-loving fans.

### Khin Khin Htoo

An important writer for Myanmar readers of literature, she is famous for detailed research before writing a story or a novel.

### Ngwe Zin Yaw Oo (Mo-gouk)

She is a prominent choice for readers of Myanmar novels.

### Sa Bei Phyu Nu

She always tries to illustrate the feeling of ethnic tribes in Myanmar. She is an author we should be watching.