
Overview of women's involvement in democracy struggle

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I would like to thank the Canadian Friends of Burma for inviting me to speak on behalf of the Burmese Women's Union. I am very happy to attend this conference because I am meeting people from different parts of Burma. I am also very happy at this moment because Prime Minister Sein Win for the first time mentioned women's issue as being a crucial matter. Thank you very much, Prime Minister.

Despite popular belief, we have had a very strong traditional role of women's involvement in politics such as in the independence and post-independence movements. There was even a woman cabinet minister in U Nu's government. Now, the role of women has been suppressed by the military regime. But even within our democracy movement, women's issues are not often discussed or adequately addressed. Women's issues are generally not considered a priority issue. Some suggest that we have to wait for democracy before women's issues can be addressed.

In fact, SLORC, or the so-called SPDC, is giving some attention to the issue of women but we know it is only superficial. They are using women's issues as a propaganda tool to undermine the opposition. They started to deal with women's issues at the time of the Beijing Conference in 1995. SPDC has founded a National Women's Committee to supervise the activities of women's issues. Moreover, it has formed a number of women's NGOs to receive the humanitarian assistance. In 1996, it became a signatory to CEDAW (the UN Commission on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). These "activities" are how the regime is trying to promote a nicer image at the international community level in order to gain more legitimacy and respect.

SPDC has also expended these activities by forming branches of the National Women's Committee. They force women, especially the wives of army officers and civil servants, to participate in that process. Throughout it all, the regime tries to give the message that women's issues are social affairs and have no place in the political arena. Obviously,

this propaganda is trying to underestimate the role of our leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Despite this propaganda, the real status of women in Burma is exactly the opposite. As many of you know, women politicians and activists have been arrested and given very harsh punishments. We have received the news about the imprisonment of Daw San San only a few days ago, and in fact, there are about a hundred female political prisoners currently in jail. Women in rural areas have to deal with forced relocations and forced labour on a daily basis. It is only in the area of human rights abuses where women are being treated equally as they are suffering just as much as the men, if not more. Since the economy is also bad, there has been a steady rise in the number of women engaging in prostitution. Many women have crossed the border to work in terrible conditions in Thailand. Inside Burma, foreign investment and 'Visit Myanmar Year' have also led to the increase in prostitution.

To date, we have been effective in highlighting the issue of trafficking of women and the lives of female sex workers in Thailand. The US Congress introduced the bill that will pressure the Thai government to take action against the trafficking of Burmese women. But in our opinion, we still need to do more to counter the propaganda of the Burmese military regime. We also believe that the process of education and empowerment is needed to promote the issues of women in Burma. This is exactly what our organization is doing in our small own ways. BWU had its first seminar this past January which comprised of Burman and ethnic women and we plan to work very closely with the other ethnic women's groups in the name of a brighter and more promising future. All women face the same problems and need each other to overcome the enormous challenges. We are thinking of launching a campaign to acquire a higher level of international attention and any support and expertise would be greatly welcome.