

# The women's revolution: what the coup means for gender equality in Myanmar

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**A few weeks ago, a strange sight began appearing in the streets of Myanmar (Burma). Women have been hanging their traditional *htamein* - the pieces of cloth they wear as skirts - from ropes tied to windows or utility poles, suspending them above the streets like decoration for a parade. Some attach them to sticks and carry them as flags. These women are not simply putting out the laundry; they are protesting the [coup d'état](#) staged by the Burmese military on 1 February.**

"Men think they have special powers just for being men," Khin Ohmar, a women's rights activist in Myanmar, tells *Equal Times*. "And they believe that walking underneath a piece of women's clothing will make them lose their special powers." The *htamein* are thus used as shields to protect the protest areas and prevent the military from entering.

From the very beginning, women have been at the forefront of protests against the coup that deposed Myanmar's civilian government led by the iconic Aung San Suu Kyi.

As Wah Khu Shee, director of the Karen Peace Support Network and a member of the Karen Women's Organisation, both linked to the Karen ethnic group, explains: "The first people to take to the streets, the ones leading the movement, were young women in Myanmar. They were the ones that first began organising it. More people joined in and now it has become a national movement."

According to [data provided to Radio Free Asia](#) by the local organisation Gender Equality Network, women make up some 60 per cent of the protesters who have taken to the streets and between 70 and 80 per cent of the movement's leaders. Many are nurses, teachers and textile factory workers, who already found themselves in a [vulnerable situation due to Covid-19](#).

Many of the women who have taken to the streets have given their lives to protect Myanmar's fragile democracy, says Wah Khu Shee. The first was 20-year-old [Mya Thwe Thwe Khine](#), who became a symbol for the movement after her death on 19 February. Then came Ma Kyal Sin, a 19-year-old killed in early March at a protest in Mandalay, in the north of the country, who became another symbol, along with the phrase written on her t-shirt that day: "Everything will be OK."

The military announced its takeover in early February after months of refusing to accept the results of the November 2020 elections, in which [Suu Kyi's party was victorious](#). Since then, at least 769 people have been killed by security forces and more than 3,738 have been arrested, charged or convicted, according to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#).

## Signs of a failed democracy

Last February's coup d'état is nothing new for the people of Myanmar. The Burmese military first seized power in 1962 and would tightly control the country for nearly five decades. In 1990, after

changing the country's official name to Myanmar in an attempt to gain greater international recognition, the military government allowed for elections to be held. But when Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) opposition party emerged victorious, the junta annulled the election results and increased repression.

When the military government once again announced a path towards 'disciplined democracy' in 2003, the process was seen as another attempt at improving public relations. A new constitution, which reserved significant power for the military, was adopted in 2008 and in 2010 the first elections took place. The NLD refused to participate in those elections in protest of an electoral framework that prevented Suu Kyi from running. However, new elections in 2015 led to a handover of power to a civilian government controlled by Suu Kyi, a decisive step for many towards democratic transition.

But according to Gabrielle Bardall, Research Fellow at the Centre for International Policy Studies, University of Ottawa, and Elin Bjarnegård, Associate Professor in Political Science at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, the absence of women throughout this process has been conspicuous. The new constitution, for example, reserves 25 per cent of seats in parliament and several ministerial posts for the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, which only recently opened up to women.

"It was proof that this democratic reform did not go as deep as expected. And while women would not necessarily have prevented the coup, things might have gone better, because there is evidence that the inclusion of women in peace talks contributes to better peace-building," says Bardall.

Not even Suu Kyi's presence in key positions of power – though the constitution prohibited her from becoming the country's president because she was married to a foreigner and had children of another nationality – was not enough to change the country's political dynamics. "The example of one woman [in power] is not enough. We need women who understand women's issues and stand up for women's rights," says Wah Khu Shee. Suu Kyi, whose whereabouts are currently unknown, has been criticised for not making gender equality one of her priorities.

According to Bjarnegård, there has also been little change within the political parties. "I haven't seen too many big changes or signs that reform has been an important priority for the parties," she says. As she explains, one of the main problems has been finding women who want to go into politics. "All the women we interviewed needed the full support of their families and husbands to enter politics professionally," she continues, pointing to the country's "patriarchal culture" as one of the main impediments. In the November 2020 elections, [women won only 15 per cent of seats](#).

## **Shifting gender roles**

Khin Ohmar still remembers how difficult it was to be a woman in her early years of activism. In 1988, the country rose up against the military junta after a student was killed by the police. Ohmar, also a student at the time, refused to stay home. "I had a very difficult situation with my family because they tried to stop me from taking to the streets," she says. Ohmar went on to become vice-president of one of the student unions that formed in those years, at a time when women were often relegated to administrative and financial positions. "Some doors opened for women to occupy certain leadership positions, but it was still very patriarchal," she continues.

While in exile over the following decades, Khin Ohmar remained involved in the pro-democracy movement but felt that many still refused to take the issue of gender equality seriously. "They thought we only wanted to talk about women's issues. But we wanted to talk about politics, about

the federal system,” she explains. “That’s why our country is stuck. The roots of this patriarchy run too deep.”

But Ohmar has seen a change in gender roles over the course of the current protests. “In 1988, the leaders were men. This time, they’re women. It’s exciting,” she says. According to the 2019 report [Feminism in Myanmar](#), political reforms after 2010 “opened space for the coordination of efforts by women’s organisations inside and outside the country,” in an activism that has “engaged not only with fulfilling the basic needs of communities but also with the policy reform process.” The report further argues that women have improved their capacity for social mobilisation and networking during the years of democratic transition.

Bjarnegård has also observed a change in dynamics. “The current protests have shown us that something is changing. We see young people, both men and women. It’s another generation that is in some ways more liberal, that has had access to Facebook and that has been influenced by other countries,” she says.

Wah Khu Shee, however, fears that when the situation calms down, things will go back to the way they were. “When there is conflict and men are afraid, [women are welcome](#). But when peace is restored, it’s back to the usual gender discrimination,” she says.

She cites the example of the peace process between the government and some of the principal ethnic guerrillas (2011-2015), in which only four women were present in the delegations sent to negotiations (less than 6 per cent of the total number of representatives, according to Bardall and Bjarnegård’s data). However, she holds onto a small glimmer of hope: “I hope that, this time, we can see [the impact of] the improvements that women have experienced in decision-making [during the democratic period].” She hopes that these changes will prevent women from once again being “relegated to the kitchen” when peace returns. “There have been improvements but it’s still very difficult...we have to wait and see.”

*This article has been translated from Spanish.*

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**Laura Villadiego**

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**P.S.**

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