

Myanmar: Ludu Daw Ahmar on women's unpaid domestic labour

Thursday 12 August 2021, by [AHMAR Ludu Daw](#) (Date first published: 11 August 2021).

When I arrived in Yangon this time, I went to the home of a childhood friend. It had been a long time since we'd seen each other. Although I've gone to Yangon before, I've had to return hastily. I've therefore never been able to visit. So, this time when we saw each other, my friend talked nonstop. I likewise didn't run out of things to say. She has one daughter, who is married, has a degree and a job, and earns 450 kyat per month. Also, her son-in-law is a sailor. So, I said to her, "Friend, I'm pleased that your only daughter is well established in a situation like the present one. You're fortunate. You can rest at ease for your daughter." She smiled. Then she proceeded to tell me all about her daughter's life.

She said that her daughter has one child who is only two months old. In order to be able to return to work when the child was one-and-a-half months old, my friend's daughter looked for a nanny with whom to leave the child. She had trouble because she couldn't immediately find a nanny with whom she felt comfortable leaving her infant. In the end, she was able to hire as a nanny a Karen woman to whom she had to pay 350 kyat per month. True, she could be at ease with this woman looking after her child. But since she had to feed this woman, the total cost of childcare was more than 500 kyat per month. When my friend's daughter returned home from work, she had to visit the market and buy stuff to cook. When she got home, she had to immediately cook dinner. After eating, she had to immediately wash her clothes. And she had to clean the home. In the morning, she had to get up early, cook and prepare her tiffin box, leave instructions regarding her child, and then, worriedly, rush to the office. My friend talked without end of her daughter's poor and exhausting situation. She had no time to read or watch television like other people.

When I asked what support her daughter got from her sailor husband, she told me that he'd borrowed money to lease an imported car, pay the relevant taxes, and have the autobody repaired. She said her daughter received 3,000 kyat per month from renting out the car. When I said that it's a good thing her daughter got a monthly salary of 450 kyat, my friend said that each month her daughter must paydown as much as possible the 65,000-kyat debt incurred for her son-in-law to become a sailor and for the imported car. And she still has to support her in-laws with 500 kyat each month. So, my friend explained, her daughter had just enough left to eat.

Therefore, it seemed that it would be alright for her daughter to stop working when the debt was repaid. And given the exhaustion of working like that, and since her income was completely spent on childcare, I said that it didn't make sense for her daughter to continue in that job. My friend said it wasn't like that yet. My friend's daughter hadn't left her present employment, nor did she dare to quit. The reason is that she couldn't be sure how much longer her husband would be able to work as a sailor. She didn't know how her husband's health would be when his ship returned.

Among people with lives like that, some husbands are alcoholics by the time they come back with the ship. Some get foreign diseases and return home from the ship. So, she said, if their wives have some decent work, then they won't end up in difficulties. She was pleased her daughter was wise

enough to know that. She concluded by saying, "I can't bear looking at my daughter's exhaustion, but what else can I do, my friend." And that's how her life had come to be like this.

A woman with a degree, a job as a salaried junior official, and, moreover, a husband working as a sailor—if someone with all that has still ended up in a situation like this, then how difficult must the circumstances of other women be. I can't even imagine their miserable and exhausting situation. In the past, I thought it was only in Yangon that the cost of living was high, and that in other cities it was bearable. Now, in any city, food prices are like a "Mogok price" [meaning expensive]. Therefore, among the urban classes, father, mother, and children must all together do paid labour to survive. When livelihoods are poor and constrained, it's women and mothers, more than others in the world, who have to endure the harmful impact of this poverty.

Since 1985 was the end of the Decade of Women, the United Nations held a Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya in Africa. This conference declared that, in this world, women are compelled to do two thirds of all labour for society. Yet, women only receive wages for one tenth of this labour. The Nairobi Conference Declaration's measurement was calculated for the whole world, I guess. Among our women [in Myanmar] there are a lot of jobs they must do for a lifetime without earning a penny. And a lot of that work doesn't get recognized as work. Even so, compared with other people, we Myanmar women have had, from the start, more rights. Women in neighbouring countries who do not even have as much rights as us Myanmar women, and women in undeveloped countries further away, are in an even worse situation.

For example, in a marriage there are children. We consider raising children to be solely the responsibility of the family. And furthermore, we consider all the work involved in raising and taking care of a child to be solely the mother's responsibility. For this, a woman gets no pay. No one acknowledges the pay that a woman should get for this labour. In developed societies at the end of the 20th century, the raising of children is an issue not just for parents. It's a growing issue for the whole society. Therefore, it's accepted [in some other countries] that the whole society must come together to address all the problems connected with this issue. So, how much labour and how much time must a mother expend to raise a child? More developed societies have recognized that the labour needed to raise a person who is smart, wise, and capable of work is the responsibility of all of society.

They [governments in those countries] provide proper financial support so that a mother who is raising a child does not have to endure economic hardship, and so that mothers and children are healthy. Although a person raises their own children, this labour helps, feeds, and takes care of society. It should be recognized that this labour is done for the benefit of society. It's accepted [in those other countries] that the benefit, if a child is polite, or the loss, if a child is unruly, affects all of society. Among us, many educated women are employed. Many women are employed as hospital staff. And many women are employed as staff in other departments. When these women, who are doing the same occupations as men, want to have a child, they're granted three months of paid maternity leave. No one can say that's enough.

The truth is that although men and women do the same jobs, they don't get the same pay. Women are entitled to do whatever job they're capable of. But I haven't yet seen women being assigned to certain occupations. In many jobs and in many workplaces, it's still men who are the ones doing the work. Although some women are appointed to certain positions for show, this doesn't mean that the door is open to every woman. Some employers give positions to women. However, the employers claim that these women can't be promoted because they can't compete at the same level as men. Such employers give the excuse that women can't compete with men due to pregnancy and the sufferings peculiar to women [□□□□□□, e.g. menstruation].

The critical tasks conventionally assigned to women are: 1) cooking, 2) maintaining the household, 3) taking care of children, and 4) taking care of parents and in-laws. So that their marriage will endure, women carry out these tasks for many hours each day without receiving any wages. It's only when marriages are sustainable that society is sustainable. A society that doesn't recognize this labour, a society that considers this labour to be the responsibility of every woman—such a society can never be modern and advanced. In such a situation, the ingenuity of women isn't fully realized.

There's immeasurable strength and intelligence in a person. But so long as oppression hasn't been eliminated, a person won't be able to achieve the full potential of their labour. That's a law of nature [သဘာဝဥပဒေ, dhammada]. In truth, as some countries have started to provide for the health and happiness and equality of women (who comprise half of society and cannot be praised enough for the innumerable responsibilities they take on), Myanmar women are welcoming this bright dawn.

Ludu Daw Ahmar

Stephen Campbell translates Ludu Daw Ahmar's feminist critique of the gendered division of labour.

[Translator's note: The following is a translation of Ludu Daw Ahmar's article, "An unlisted occupation" ("မရယူသောလုပ်ငန်း"), published in Athway Amyin magazine in 1987. In this article, Daw Ahmar critiques the gendered division of labour that delegates to women the bulk of unpaid domestic work. She argues, as well, that childcare—being a form of labour from which society profits—is a social, rather than private, matter. A collective approach to childcare is therefore needed, she argues, to address the unequal gendered division of labour in Myanmar. The article thus resonates with wider social reproduction theory and with more recent critiques of neoliberal ideologies that would justify the offloading of social reproduction onto the (gendered) "private sphere" of the home. Written almost 35 years ago, the article remains an important contribution to the development of feminism in Myanmar.]

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