

## Book review: Jenny Hedström, Elisabeth Olivius (eds): Waves of Upheaval in Myanmar - Gendered Transformations and Political Transitions

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JENNY HEDSTRÖM / ELISABETH OLIVIOUS (EDS), *Waves of Upheaval in Myanmar: Gendered Transformations and Political Transitions*. (Gendering Asia 17). Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2023. 284 pages, 19 figures, £70.00. ISBN 978-8-7769-4322-6 (hc)

*Waves of Upheaval in Myanmar: Gendered Transformations and Political Transitions* offers a comprehensive account of the multifaceted processes of gendered transformation that took place in Myanmar between 2011 and 2021. The book unveils the promises and pitfalls of the rushed attempts at gender mainstreaming by Myanmar's short-lived quasi-democratic government and other relevant internal and external stakeholders from various spectrums. With wide-ranging feminist conceptual underpinnings and extensive empirical evidence from within Myanmar as well as from borderland areas, this volume helps us to answer, in part, how gender dynamics have been reimagined, reconstituted and reshaped within the ambivalent political and social landscape of protracted conflict in Myanmar during the transition years. It vividly demonstrates how gender is no longer a state of exception but rather an integral part of the Burmese resistance struggle in its pursuit of social and political changes. Building on the contested political ideologies and simmering ethnic and religious tensions, the volume offers an in-depth, critical analysis of the gendered dynamics of Myanmar's transitional politics, institutions and experiments through ambivalent policy-making and grassroots resistance.

This engrossing collaboration results from the authors' nearly decade-long interaction with various grassroots women's organisations and ordinary women in Myanmar. It consists of twelve chapters structured into three parts. In the first part, which includes three chapters, the authors provide an overview of the changes during the transition period, interrogating the manifestation of gender and its constraints in transitional politics, institutions and policymaking. Highlighting the tensions surrounding rising nationalism, the resurgence of fundamentalist groups in order to "protect" race and religion, the heterogeneity of women groups and their distinct priorities and, above all, the pre-existing male dominance, the authors examine how power dynamics perpetuated gender inequalities during the transition period. They illustrate how "transitional policy priorities continued to be defined by male-dominated actors and institutions, and women's voices remained largely unheard in institutional reform and policy-making processes", a phenomenon in which "the old was nested within the new" (p. 33). The chapters also reflect on the uneasy relationship and the "ideological back-and-forth among local and international actors" (p.75). Highlighting the complex interplay of diverse ideologies and actors in this process of balancing between "gender equality" and "gender harmony", the arguments vividly reiterate the fact that "when new terms are introduced, pre-existing ideas do not disappear" (p. 91).

Part two provides a lively discussion on women's grassroots mobilisation across Myanmar and how the feminist movement reinvigorated and expanded in scale and scope. It consists of four chapters: the first two present a detailed portrayal of the exponential increase in feminist peace-building at the grassroots level and, in the process, the challenges it encountered from the military and the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy) – the two most powerful institutions in Myanmar. The last two chapters discuss the renewed struggles for ethnic minority women in the aftermath of the February 2021 military takeover and the brutal suppression of the resistance movement. The authors document the persistent challenges that women encounter while seeking a balance among traditional gender norms and patriarchal practices, reproductive responsibilities and care work for families and broader communities, and embedded structural barriers that impede them from pursuing revolutionary goals. Calling attention to the insurmountable differences along ethnic lines, the authors argue that while women's rights and ethnic rights "go hand in hand", they lack "a corresponding level of inclusion in the formal peace process" (p. 112). In a way, ethnicised political identities and priorities overshadow the aims and objectives of striving for a unified women's movement.

Part three examines the everyday lives and politics of the transition phase using a gender lens. Highlighting the interplay of change and continuity and building on three key themes – land, labour and friendship – the four chapters in this section connect myriad issues. They provide critical nuances on Myanmar's transition from its long-established agrarian traditions involving customary and communal land use, which were suddenly dramatically disrupted by hasty liberalisation reforms, resulting in mass rural-urban internal migration. During these transitional years, progress towards economic, social and political reform was inconsistent. While the government made an effort to readjust some policies in order to benefit from global interests and foreign direct investment, those who anticipated radical social changes were immensely frustrated. The authors examine how the political and economic liberalisation "resulted in an influx of investors, crony companies (using military protection) and largescale infrastructural development", triggering arbitrary land grabbing, in which women were more vulnerable than their male counterparts as they were less likely "to have formal ownership of the land in which they work" (p. 189).

For the reader who is a keen follower of the events taking place in the conflict-ridden Rakhine state, one of the most distinctive anecdotal contributions of the volume lies in chapter ten, where the authors depict the interethnic personal relationships and shared cultural practices between Rakhine and Rohingya women. This welcome addition, which has long been ignored in otherwise burgeoning feminist literature on contemporary Myanmar, recentres intimate interethnic relations as pivotal for future peace-building initiatives and unsettles "the dominant discourses about Arakan [Rakhine] history" (p. 215). The volume concludes

with an afterword in the form of a conversation between two prominent scholars on Myanmar. The conversation attempts to complete the circle of this elegant collection by refocusing on the ways in which Myanmar's long and contested history shaped the gender norms and the scale and scope of the gendered transformations leading up to the transition period, which eventually shaped the aftermath of the February 2021 military coup.

Overall, the volume stands as a radical intervention against the articulation of Buddhist Romanticism long hailed in the Western World – both in academic and popular discourse. The strength of the book and its unique selling point lies in its anthropological nuances that persistently penetrate the unwavering religious and cultural practices that shape the role of women and their position in society. It is more than recommended for anyone interested in taking a look behind the orthodox account of the conflict, gender and peace-building initiatives in Myanmar. With sharp analysis, it offers an important and compelling account of political and social action by women and for women in a volatile and unpredictable terrain and suggests a reckoning with the past to guide the future.

*Anas Ansar*

OKAMOTO MASAOKI / JAFAR SURYOMENGGOLO (EDS), *Indonesia at the Crossroads: Transformation and Challenges*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2022. 420 pages, \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-9256-0837-3 (pb)

This co-edited volume about Indonesia post-1998 reformation was published in 2022, but the works compiled are based on a workshop conducted in 2017. Given the wide temporal gap between the time of writing and the publication of the volume, and given that the co-editors did not explicitly explain the choice of the word “crossroads” in the title, readers are left to wonder exactly what “crossroads” are being referred to. Nevertheless, the editors have clearly stated the publication's objectives and the contributors' professional backgrounds in the Introduction. One objective of this co-edited volume is to showcase the voices of contributors who do not usually publish their works in English, the dominant language of most contemporary debates and literature on the study of Indonesia. Another objective of the volume is to enrich the dialogue between academics and others who work in the field of Indonesian Studies. The volume compiles observations of post-Suharto Indonesia made not only by scholars, but also by field researchers and NGO workers based in Indonesia, Japan and South Korea. This admirable aim is somewhat undermined, however, by the lack of clarity with which the sources of some of the statistical data are presented in a few footnotes in the Introduction (pp. 8, 10, 21). Scholars often express