

# Gender Hierarchy in Myanmar

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## Introduction

In Myanmar the family and social patterns are communal or community-based.<sup>1</sup> People value their family, ethnic group and community. They maintain their unique communal value through their culture. However, this culture is very patriarchal, which teaches that “men are born with *phon* (power, glory, holiness)<sup>2</sup> but women are not.” This patriarchal and cultural *phon* created the family, communal and social order of Myanmar – i.e. that men are superior and women are inferior. Thus, gender hierarchy between men and women of Myanmar is adopted and exercised. The cultural *phon* is the cause of gender hierarchy and women are oppressed, marginalized, excluded, and discriminated in social, political, economic and religious spheres. Thus, *phon* is the cause of gender hierarchy and women’s oppression in Myanmar. Myanmar’s authentic communal family and society are distorted by the mythologized *phon*. Therefore, it is essential to critique the patriarchal and cultural *phon* to reveal Myanmar’s real value and authentic communal family and society.

## I. Gender Hierarchy in Myanmar

From an analysis of Myanmar’s family, social, religious and political systems, it is clear that *phon* is used as the ground of social, political, and religious hierarchy to legitimize women’s oppression and subordination.

### 1. *Phon* as Men’s Social Hierarchy

*My parents are unjust because they usually fulfill all the needs of my brothers but they neglect me as they think that girls are not equal to or as important as boys. I really feel so sorry that I am not equally loved and treated by my parents.*<sup>3</sup>

The patriarchal concept of *phon* prevails in the patriarchal household which practises a hierarchical model of relationships: with the males such as father, husband, son and brother belonging to a higher order of society or superior group, and the females such as mother, wife, daughter, and sister, belonging to a lower order of society or subordinated group. Those in the superior group are regarded as good omen in both home and society while those in the inferior group are regarded as bad omen. This typical patriarchal household in Myanmar provides the background to understand the patriarchal system, which exercises domination over women at home and society.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, Myanmar culture is more related to Bama, the majority of the people in Myanmar who are mostly Buddhists. Other minority ethnic groups are mostly Christian but they are dominated by the Burmese Buddhist culture.

<sup>2</sup> Myanmar word which means power and glory of men.

<sup>3</sup> My niece, Ei Sin, my brother’s second daughter, disclosed her feeling to me and criticized the gender discrimination that she experienced at home.

In almost all households in Myanmar, the father or husband is the head of the house, with the right to rule and exercise authority over his wife and the whole household. Moreover, he is the legal representative of the family members and all its household affairs.<sup>4</sup> For example, when there is a census Myanmar, the family always registers the father's name first as the head of the family and the person with authority. The husband or father is usually called *Ain Oo Nat*, which means the spirit or the lord of the house, who lives in the front part of the house. This headship of men is approved by the concept of *phon*.<sup>5</sup>

According to Mi Mi Khaing, the term *phon* indicates the higher spiritual plane and superior status of men. Man is regarded as the master or lord of the household and is to be revered.<sup>6</sup> Ma Sein Sein, a Burmese Buddhist woman, clearly explained the Burmese concept of *phon* as that which stratifies women from men physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

*It has always been believed that men have a kind of in-born power of glory called phon, regarded as a distinctive feature of men, and which keeps them on a different plane from that of women. The women have not this phon. This phon, according to the belief, must in no way be harmed or weakened. A woman's skirt is supposed to be a dangerous article. As such, no man will touch the skirt of a woman, unless it is his mother's or grandmother's, once it has been worn. He will never bathe in water from the same jar or tub which the female members or the household use for themselves.*<sup>7</sup>

In her book, *Burmese Family*, Ma Sein Sein described *phon* as the glory and the holiness of a man. A woman not only lacks *phon*, but she has to protect her husband's *phon* by respecting her husband's manhood and also being careful not to wield brooms over his head, nor to throw a woman's *longi* on his pillow. The belief is that a wife's inappropriate manner toward her husband causes his *phon* to be lessened and makes him unable to succeed in his career.<sup>8</sup> As women's subordination is set up by the concept of absence of *phon*, women are not only inferior to men, but they also have to support and maintain men's domination by protecting, maintaining and sustaining men's *phon*.

The patriarchal family, therefore, legitimizes the headship of men and highlights women's subordinated role as housekeeper or housewife. A poem composed by a male poet for 3 July 1999 identified women with the home. Titled as "Lady of the Home," the poem appeared in a Myanmar national newspaper. The poem points out the status and roles of father and mother in a typical Myanmar family – mother as the lady of the home and father as the head.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> T.D. Roberts, et. al., "Family," in *Area Handbook for Burma* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1968), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Melford E. Spiro, "Gender hierarchy in Burma: cultural, social, and psychological dimensions," *Sex and Gender Hierarchies* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 322.

<sup>6</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women* (London: Zed, 1984), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ma Sein Sein, "The Position of Women in Hinayana Buddhist Countries," M.A. Thesis at University of London, 1958, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, *Burmese Family* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Kyaw Saw Han, "Lady of the Home," this poem first appeared in the July 4, 1999 issue of *The New Light of Myanmar*.

The patriarchal tradition expects women's contribution to be "inside the house," including caring for the children, taking responsibility for the general well-being of each family member and for the household chores. The husband's contribution is expected to be "outside the house," as the breadwinner of the family. The Burmese saying: "Husband is god and son is master"<sup>10</sup> shows that as the breadwinner, men's status is regarded as higher than women's. As a result, a boy is always preferred to a girl in the family. The son is regarded as the heir of the household who will carry on the father's name. The consequence of *phon* as social hierarchy is that women are mostly invisible in leadership roles. Women themselves and people in society generally consider that women do not have the credibility to take up leadership roles.

## 2. "Phon" as Men's Religious Hierarchy

*No male pastor would like to work in that church. One day a young male pastor came to serve in that church. Intelligent, with a theological degree, he did not want to immerse his life there. He left after serving for one year. The female minister who assisted that pastor was so dedicated that she took all his responsibilities. The church member became devoted to her and wanted her to be their pastor. Although, she had all qualifications to be the pastor, the association did not allow her to be the pastor, and for no clear reason. For me the reason is very simple: she is a woman.*<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, in the patriarchal religion in Myanmar, hierarchical structure is based on the patriarchal belief of men's *phon* or 'power,' or 'glory,' and 'holiness.' In the religious hierarchy of Myanmar, *phon* is not only the glory of a man but also the holiness of a man.<sup>12</sup> This traditional belief of *phon* as the holiness of men is the basis of the religious hierarchical structure in patriarchal Myanmar which excludes, restricts and marginalizes women from religious sphere.

The religious concept of holiness and sacredness between men and women is defined by *phon*. Religious institutions create restrictions for women because they are said to lack *phon* and so are not regarded as holy. In this sense, the absence of *phon* provides the concept of evil body and denigration of women, which disables women from developing their religious sacredness and holiness in high offices and places. Accordingly, the religious cultural ideology of dangerous females, as mentioned by Melford E. Spiro, that a woman's body is polluted, especially by menstrual blood<sup>13</sup> becomes one of the many reasons for women's restriction, exclusion and marginalization. Due to this cultural concept and belief, women are excluded from sacred places and religious ceremonies, including ordination. The concept of *phon* is the main concept behind the religious hierarchy that puts men and women on different planes and limits women's roles and involvement in the religious sphere.

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<sup>10</sup> Brenda Belak, *Gathering Strength: Women From Burma On Their Rights* (Image of Asia, 2002), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Aye Nwe, "Empowerment as Constructive Power for Gender," *CTC Bulletin* (6, 2, 2007), <http://www.cca.org.hk/resources/ctc/otc04-12m.htm> 3

<sup>12</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, *Burmese Family*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> Spiro, 329.

Due to the concept of *phon*, men are regarded as the essential persons in every circumstance of hierarchical religious offices. A monk who enters into Buddhist monastic order is called *phongyi*, which means he who possesses “great power” or “great glory.” In referring to monks, people use the name *Hpa-yah*, meaning god or lord. For that reason, in the religious hierarchy, *phon* places males in a superior status and women in an inferior status. As *phongyi*, monks are held in high esteem by the people and by the state.<sup>14</sup> Women who enter a religious order are called “*Thilashin*,” literally meaning “observer of the precepts”.<sup>15</sup> Their position and status in religion is totally different from that of monks.

*Although women are admitted into the Sangha, it would not be wrong to say that men are given greater veneration. This is not only because they are men doing so - men with the “pon” [phon] or potential glory residing in them. The male pon is given reorganization without rationalization in religious attitudes all over the world.*<sup>16</sup>

The exclusion of women from ordination and full participation in religious phenomenon is due to *phon*. Thus, *phon* is the cause of the religious hierarchy in Myanmar. *Phon* affirms male superiority in the religious phenomenon in both private and public. It does not only stratify religious roles, places and offices between men and women but it also stratifies their spirituality, authority and power.

### 3. Phon as Men’s Political Hierarchy

*Women’s qualities are not considered in politics. Women’s way of approaching democratic vision is through peaceful means and non-violence. Non-violent approach calls for peaceful change and criticizes misuse of power that cause violation of human rights and repression.*<sup>17</sup>

Just like in the social and religious hierarchies, the concept of *phon* is fundamental in the political hierarchy of Myanmar. It provides the concept of absolute authority, which engenders absolute authoritarianism and totalitarianism of the rulers and absolute submission of the ruled. Thus, *phon* as the political hierarchy is the source of political oppression.

In Myanmar, the king is regarded as *phon-shin-kan-shin*, which means that he possesses glorious power because of his good karma. The king’s *phon* not only gives him power and authority, but his *phon* also maintains his hierarchical status in the political order.<sup>18</sup> According to Buddhist cosmology, the ruler or the king possesses *phon*, royal glory or power, so the king is called lord of glory and lord of karma. The *phon* or power of the ruler or king is his prestigious status as a ruler of the universe. For this reason, the king’s power

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<sup>14</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Rawe Htun, *The Modern Buddhist Nun*, trans. San Lwin (Yangon: San Young Shein Sarpay, 2001), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 269-273.

<sup>18</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993), 15-16.

and glory legitimize him to be called *Hpa-Yah*, or god by the people.<sup>19</sup> The king who possesses royal power has to rule in accordance with his absolute power. Thus, the realm of monarchy is called *thet-oo-sanpin*, which means kings are the owners of everything and every life. Burmese kings proclaimed themselves as the arbiters of the universe and owners of everything.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in political sphere, the concept of *phon* leads to absolute authoritarianism. Maung Maung Gyi stated that the king's great and glorious power has kept him above his people: "The king is presented as not only the ruler of the people but as a being distinctively above them occupying the chief and central position in the country and wielding great power."<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the Myanmar concept of *phon*, men's "power", or holiness, plays a vital role in political institutions. The king's political power is related to his religious merit that can bring him *phon* or glory. On the other hand, the decline of political power is seen to be related to the decline of *phon*.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, to maintain their political power, the rulers or leaders of the independent Myanmar sought to adopt religious solutions,<sup>23</sup> like building pagodas, bridges, and roads.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the *phon* of men reflected in political ideology of Myanmar, together with the concept of absolute authoritarianism, not only excludes women but also makes women and also the people victims of its hierarchical patriarchal political system.

## II. Women's Emancipation and Gender Equality in Myanmar

Myanmar is unique because of its culture, people and country. The Myanmar people's communal based family, home and society are admirable as they maintain solidarity, unity, and oneness of family, church and society if they are not mingled with patriarchal and hierarchical domination. In order to retrieve Myanmar's authentic uniqueness of its communal building identity, it is necessary to demythologize the concept of "*phon*," which is used as an illusion for hierarchical family, home, church and society.

*"Lord Buddha, we please you for the Religious Order."*<sup>25</sup> [Mahapajapati Gotami]

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives* (Yangon: Association for Theological Education in Myanmar, 2005), 142.

<sup>20</sup> Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma: Prospects for Economic Development* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values: the Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Mya Maung describes, "There are many stories of Ne Win's performing traditional rituals to counter omens, yada-yah cha, and protect his political throne from a decline of power, phoan (*phon*) which began to circulate among the Burmese beginning in the 1970s."

<sup>23</sup> Mya Maung, 39.

<sup>24</sup> "Mahah Wizaya" is the pagoda built by U Ne Win and "Kabah Aye Hlaing Quarter" is the pagoda built by U Nu. The act of building a pagoda for a Burmese king was not only to earn merit but also to atone for sins committed against his subjects as well as to maintain "*phon*" or "political power." Thus, the concept of "*phon*" reflects and stands for political power not only for a leader or ruler; it also maintains hierarchical patriarchal order of a political institution. See Mya Maung, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Aung Thein Myant, *Renown Wisdom and Power Women in Buddha's Teaching* (Yangon: Pagan Press, 2004), 15.

Mahapajapati Gotami, in a quest for women's ordination in Buddhism, gives some evidence to recall women's emancipation. Buddhist women's roles and status were revealed by women's ordination. Ordained Buddhist nuns were Bikkhunis,<sup>26</sup> an order founded by Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt and surrogate mother. Some Buddhist literatures assert that women were not mere ordained nuns in the Buddhist monastic order but they were also renowned as excellent and outstanding women by their pre-eminence of wisdom and power,<sup>27</sup> which was "bestowed on a disciple by the Buddha."<sup>28</sup> Rawe Htun stated that ordination of Mahapajapati Gotami and women at that time signified their supreme sanctity.<sup>29</sup> These Buddhist Bikkhunis followed the Buddha, learned from him and involved in religious and social ceremonies as the Buddha's disciples. Their status in religious role was at the same level and equal as monks (who are *phon gyi* or possessing great glory or power), noted as the Sanghas. As the Sanghas belong to the three jewels of Buddhist, ranking Bikkhunis in the Sanghas reflect that discipleship of equals existed in Buddhism in the earliest Buddhist period. The disappearance of Bikkhunis in Myanmar Buddhism nowadays is a loss of women's religious history and their full identity and dignity. In Buddhist tradition, Buddha's teachings provide some sources to substantiate women's emancipation.

*Father: "My beloved daughter, are you feeling better?"*

*Daughter: "I am not feeling well, my brother"*

*Father: My beloved daughter, are you bewildered?"*

*Daughter: "I am not bewildered my brother."*

This dialogue between a father and daughter from a Buddhist Jataka mentioned by U Maung Maung Lay described an unordinary relationship of a father and a daughter through their dialogue. Daughter's usage of "brother" to refer to her father caused her father to think that his daughter was absent minded as she was serious ill. However, the Buddha's answer was that Thumana Dewi was in *dhagga gan*<sup>30</sup> state, which is the state of sainthood. The Buddha's answer meant that his daughter was in the spiritual stage of Nirvana, as she was in the higher spiritual stage than her father was, thus she addressed him as "brother."<sup>31</sup> Thumana Dewi's sainthood was quoted by many Buddhist writers in the reconstruction of Myanmar women's emancipatory story. Hence, Mahapajapati Gotami and Thumana Dewi can be seen as models for Myanmar women's struggles in search of their real identity and self-expression but it is suppressed by male hierarchical systems in religious, social and political aspects of Myanmar's history and also today.

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<sup>26</sup> Rawe Htun, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Aung Thein, 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Myanmar -English Dictionary* (Department of the Myanmar Language and Communication Ministry of Education, Union of Myanmar, 1993), 614.

<sup>29</sup> Rawe Htun, 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Myanmar -English Dictionary* explains "dhagga gan" as follows: "One who has attained the second of the four stages leading to ultimate sainthood and nirvana; one who has been reincarnated as a human being for the last time." See *Myanmar - English Dictionary* (Myanmar: Department of the Myanmar Language and Communication Ministry of Education, 1993), 485.

<sup>31</sup> Maung Maung Lay, *Admirable Women in the Time of Buddha* (Yangon: Pyi Lone Kyunt Pyat hi Yay, 1999), 235-237.

Myanmar Christian reading of the Bible from women's emancipation perspective is needed to realize Jesus' emancipatory movement<sup>32</sup> to bring a commonwealth vision of well-being, liberation and justice for women. Thus, the woman with a flowing blood was announced whole to restore her dignity in the society (Mark 5:25-34). The Samaritan woman disclosed women's theology and wisdom (John 8:3ff). Martha was encouraged to move beyond cultural norms of feminine characteristics to seek wisdom and intellectual potential (John 11:12). The poor woman who offered the little that she had was called the true model of discipleship (Mark 12:41ff). Jesus condemned unjust judgment on women but affirmed justice for them and their potential to mould themselves as new persons (Luke 13:10ff). The healing of the bent woman describes that Jesus not only made her straighten up but he announced her being within the covenant community (Luke 13:10ff).<sup>33</sup> Jesus allowed a woman to override his prejudice and exclusivism to claim God's life-giving power for the well-being of all regardless of race, sex and class. He liberated them from demon possession and made them whole (Matthew 15:21).<sup>34</sup> Jesus' community reveals a distinctive family, community and society where gender equality is affirmed and male hierarchical domination, oppression, discrimination and exclusion of women are denounced. The patriarchal culture should be criticized and reinterpreted to maintain Myanmar's unique and authentic community, family and society.

"The *phon* of women is mind or intelligence."<sup>35</sup>

The Myanmar concept of "*phon*", which reflects gender hierarchy, should be eliminated to reclaim gender equality. The quotation just cited describes that women are not without *phon*, the glory or power and it transcends patriarchal concept of "*phon*" and reaffirms women's self-identity and self-realization. The statement that "The *phon* of women is mind or intelligence" can be taken as reaffirming women's equal status with men and reconstructing Myanmar religious-cultural misinterpretation and misconceptualization of the absence of *phon* in women. As the Myanmar's patriarchal culture of *phon* has caused disgrace and indignity, humiliation and dishonor to women's bodies, demythologization of '*phon*' as gender hierarchy is essential to retrieve Myanmar's unique communal building identity.

## Conclusion

As Myanmar's patriarchal cultural concept of *phon* has been commonly practiced in family, ethnic communities, society and church, gender hierarchy has been prevalent. As a result, women's subordination to men is socially, politically, economically, and religiously accepted. Women's suffering from oppression, discrimination, sexual based violence, rape, exclusion in every sphere of church, family, and society is ignored or covered up. Thus, gender hierarchy has blinded people and the church as women's realities of

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 90, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Monica Melancton, "Christology and Women," *We Dare to Dream*, Virginia Fabella. M.M. and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds. (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Discipleship of Equals: Reality and Vision," *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology & Church and Leadership* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Zeyamin, *Holy Women Good Women* (Yangon: Kyaunt Sein Press, 1999), 140.

oppressions are not recognized. Moreover, the church also practices women's oppression by rejecting women's equality with men, and by marginalizing women's full participation in the ministry of God, including ordained ministry. Hence, "phon" is a threat to Myanmar's authentic family, community and church. To retrieve Myanmar's unique and authentic value for family, community and church, it is essential to eliminate phon's hierarchical concept because it causes oppression in family, church and society. Therefore, phon should be reconstructed to affirm gender equality.

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