

The Unnoticed Ones: Political Participation of Chin Women in Myanmar Spring Revolution

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Abstract

Between November and December of 2023, the Institute of Chin Affairs Inc. (ICA) carried out a study to look at the role that Chin women played in participating in politics during the Spring Revolution since February 2021. This study highlights the difficulties they encountered in their community and the contributions made by Chin women to public life and political engagement during this crucial time. While Chin women played a key role in the Spring Revolution, their current influence is limited due to low representation and traditional attitudes. The study aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers and activists interested in promoting gender equality and inclusivity in political participation as well as serve as a resource for further research on gender and politics in Myanmar.

Keywords: Politics, Chin Women, Gender Equality.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to gather data and insights. Qualitative data was obtained through interviews with Chin women and men who actively participated in the Spring Revolution (i.e. Parliamentarian, CDM, and leaders of governing bodies and Chin ethnic resistance organizations). A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted (6 women and 6 men). Although Chin women were the focus of this research, men were also included for a comparative analysis of pathways as well as to assess their level of support or lack thereof for women in politics generally and for their female colleagues more specifically. Quantitative data was also collected through surveys (62 responses), which aimed to gauge the extent of Chin women's involvement and their perceptions of their own impact.

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Introduction

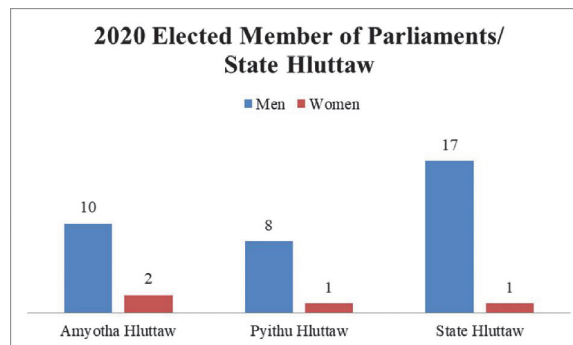
The 2021 Spring Revolution in Myanmar saw extensive involvement of women in the resistance movement against the military junta. During a study of gender roles in Myanmar's political leadership, it was discovered that 30 men were in 17 Ministries in the National Unity Government (NUG), while a total of 7 female members were present, including the State Counselor, 3 Union Ministers, and 3 Deputy Ministers. At the Ministry level, the rate of women's representation was more than 20%. However, the rate of Chin women's representation was low in Chin State. Chin women still face significant challenges when it comes to representation and decision-making within organizations. The low rate of women's representation in Chin State is a concerning issue that warrants attention and action. The study will primarily examine the participation of Chin women in the 2020 General Election, Chin women's roles in the Spring Revolution, and the challenges they continued to face in terms of political participation moving forward.

The Participation of Chin Women in the 2020 General Election

In the 2020 General Election, there was a significant increase in women's representation, with women representatives elected to all state/region Hluttaws for the first time. Eighteen percent of elected state/region Hluttaw representatives were women, compared with thirteen percent in 2015, and four percent in 2010 (Ling & Batcheler, 2020).

A total of 211 candidates from 12 political parties including independent candidates registered to run for the parliamentary seats in the November 8, 2020 General Elections, according to the Chin State Election Sub-Commission. Eighteen of these candidates were women. This was slightly less than the 22 candidates in the 2015 election. The 18 female candidates were: five for the lower house parliament, six for the upper house parliament and seven for the Chin State parliament. Two of them contested the election as independent candidates (Salai, 2020).

Each of the three Hluttaws (State Hluttaw, Pyithu Hluttaw, and Amyotha Hluttaw) in Chin State had a total of 39 representatives. The State Hluttaw was composed of 24 delegates, including 18 elected members, two each from the nine townships in Chin State and 6 delegates from Tattmadaw. Nine representatives from each of the nine townships consisted of the Pyithu Hluttaw. Twelve people were included at the Amyotha Hluttaw, one each from six townships and two each from more densely populated townships of Paletwa, Tedim, and Hakha. According to the results of the 2020 election, the number of men and women representatives in Chin State was as follows;



As the above figure shows, in the 2020 General Elections in Chin State, 11.43% of representatives were women (4 out of 39), while 88.57% were men (35 out of 39). This indicates a significant gender imbalance in political representation in Chin State.

According to one of the female Chin candidates for the 2015 and 2020 elections:

“The conservative belief that women are utterly powerless and that it is hard for them to get support from other women may be the reason for the low representation of Chin women in Hluttaws. Some male candidates only emphasize how helpless women are. There are some women who have the confidence to participate in politics, but their family most likely do not support them to contest in the election.”

A male member of parliament who was elected in the 2020 election had provided an analysis as follows:

“The low representation rate of Chin women in Hluttaw could be linked to cultural norms or lack of confidence among Chin women that they are not qualified or capable of serving in political positions. They have traditionally been expected to prioritize domestic duties and family responsibilities over pursuing political careers.”

The low representation of Chin women in Hluttaws was perpetuated by traditional gender roles and a lack of confidence among women. The belief that women cannot hold political positions or make decisions perpetuated gender inequality and limited opportunities for Chin women’s participation in decision-making processes.

The Chin Women’s Participation in Interim Period

The Interim Chin National Consultative Council - ICNCC was formed in April 2021 as a political platform for Chin people during this revolution period. The ICNCC was formed by the Chin National Front (CNF), elected candidates from the 2020 Election, political parties which did not cooperate with the military council, political parties based in Chin State, and the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) which were involved

in protesting movement (CDM, Youth, Women). The ICNCC was set up to manage political matters in Chin State and had a group of 12 executive members. Among them, only one was a woman, and the remaining 11 were men. The council followed a rotation system where three members switched out every three months, allowing for new perspectives and contributions to decision-making processes from all members.

Regarding women's representation in ICNCC, a woman active in CSO said the following;

“ICNCC is made up of four groups. There is a woman among the members of the rotating committee. Moreover, the overall number of women in the council's membership is also relatively small. We can say that this highlights a potential gender imbalance within the organization and may indicate a need for greater efforts to promote gender equality and increase the participation of women in decision-making roles.”

During the Spring Revolution in Myanmar, which began in February 2021, resistance forces emerged in the Chin State as well. These forces were formed based on both tribal and township affiliations. In September 2021, the 18 groups of Chin resistance forces including the Chin National Army (EAO) came together to form the Chinland Joint Defense Committee. The Committee was made up of two representatives from each of the nine townships-based resistance groups and one representative from each of the seven tribal-based resistance forces, as well as the representatives from the Chin National Army. The total number of representatives in the Committee was estimated to be 27. The Committee took military command of the Chin armed forces and was responsible for coordinating and executing military operations against the Myanmar military in the Chin region.

Regarding the gender representation in CJDC, the General Secretary of CJDC commented as follows:

“Among the representatives sent by 18 resistance forces were only men, women could only participate as observers in the CJDC working committee. This is because CJDC is a military cooperation platform and historically, military organizations have been predominantly male-dominated and it's not that we don't want women to participate. We already respect the courage of the women who took up arms in the revolutionary forces. For women to be included in the decision-making levels (from the local governance level), it should be included in the structure of various organizations.”

The revolution participants were trained in physical fitness by a woman from CDM, who described the following:

“Women are depicted as fighting against the coup from a variety of sectors during the revolution. The lack of female leaders in the resistance forces could be due to two factors: either the women themselves don’t want to or the men don’t give the women the opportunity. It is imperative to provide women with opportunities to engage in diverse decision-making processes.”

During a recent interview, a prominent Chin women’s rights activist discussed the following about the leading role of Chin women from the time of peaceful protests to the armed struggle.

“During the protests against the Burmese military regime in Chin state in 2021, although most of the Chin women participated, the leaders were men. On the 2021 International Women’s Day, women’s organizations led by Kanpetlet and Mindat celebrated the Sarong Revolution in Kanpetlet and Mindat, respectively (I think it would have in Hakha, but I don’t know for sure). Through this, women can only participate in roles such as fundraisers or support troops, and there are hardly any women in leadership roles”.

Based on the survey results, most of the respondents accepted the fact that Chin women actively participated in the revolution against the military coup, as well as Chin men, and that they had the right to participate in leadership roles or key positions in various groups. This was a positive development for the Chin community and reflected a shift towards greater gender equality in their society.

However, according to the statements of the interviewees, it can be found that the participation rate of women in various political groups was numerically low. It also highlighted the importance of promoting gender equality and empowering women in all aspects of society.

Challenges for Women in Decision-Making Process

Despite the significant contributions of Chin women during the revolution period, there were still issues that hindered their representation in political roles. The following interviews showed that Chin women still faced numerous challenges in their political participation, including gender-based discrimination, limited access to resources, and social expectations regarding their traditional roles. One major challenge was the traditional gender roles that placed women in subordinate positions. According to the survey, the majority of respondents (80.6%) believed that the conservative ideology, which prioritizes men, hindered the participation of Chin women in different sectors.

One of the male Members of Parliament made the following comment regarding the traditional gender roles;

“In our Chin society, I accept that it is really necessary to amend the customs related to inheritance. And it is also necessary for both men and women to participate in the decision-making process. According to our customs, men are given priority by women themselves. In certain leadership roles, men may take seats themselves and women may provide seats to men.”

This comment implied that women were expected to defer to men’s leadership and authority, perpetuating a power imbalance.

A woman involved in the CDM movement shared her experience as follows;

“In this revolution period, even though our women have been placed in the leadership position, some of our male colleagues do not like the leadership of our women. To be honest, I think that men’s mindset is still influenced by the traditions of our past and it’s imperative to alter their attitudes.”

The following are some of the experiences of a woman who was actively involved in the current political group.

“I believe that women are not fully able to participate in the decision-making process. Some male colleagues have spoken out against discussing politics with women and warning each other with immature ideas. Men also tend to act in ways that do not matter to a woman’s role. Women’s participation is frequently emphasized during the meeting, but only a few people agree with their discussion when they participate in road map and policy meetings. Women in Chin State are entitled to the opportunity, but men only give themselves space. They have to do housework and take care of their children. That is why men need to accept and understand the difficulties of women who join and give space to those women’s talents as much as they have. There is a need to change a lot of men’s thinking, and women themselves need to take an interest and be active if they want to benefit from a sector.”

According to the experiences of women, it is evident that there were still attitudes that perpetuate the belief that political issues are the domain of men and that women could be effective leaders during the revolution. This could create a significant barrier to women’s participation in leadership roles and limit their opportunities for success.

Moreover, the survey also revealed that more than half of the respondents (53.1%) identified educational qualifications, social life, living standards, and respect for culture as challenges for promoting women’s participation in various sectors.

Pathway of Chin Women in Future Federal Union

In building a federal democratic union, the principle of inclusiveness is accepted as the most important policy, so only with the participation of women can a true federal union be established. According to Article 48 of the Federal Democracy Charter, Part I, in order to realize equality in the Federal Democratic Union, a quota system of at least 30 percent of women in different levels of decision-making mechanisms shall be practiced.

Under the provision of the Charter, a policy maker (man) made the following comments regarding the inclusion of gender equality in the future Chin State Constitution.

“There is a need for groups to ask questions about how to implement the provisions of the FDC at the Chin State level. I don’t think men will talk much, I think it depends on the women. I see that there are hardly any efforts to gather such a group of women and reflect the voices of women. Opportunities don’t come by themselves; we have to beg for them, we need women leaders who will take the initiatives, whether it’s one or two.”

A prominent Chin women’s rights activist revealed her experiences and opinions as follows:

“It is very important for women to be able to participate in various decision-making levels, such as social issues and political issues. Not all women accept gender equality, and some men do accept it. Therefore, it’s not just about having a gender policy, but also about having people who will implement it. It’s also important to change the patriarchal mindset and behavior of Chin people (both men and women) and male leaders. To achieve gender equality, women need to speak out, and men must support them. Without women’s voices, there can be no gender equality. I hope to start with the minimum 30% of women in decision-making positions as recommended by the Female Democracy Charter (FDC) and increase the percentage.”

A woman who is actively involved in the current political group discussed as follows;

“It can’t be because it’s only in the Charter. It’s not like only women are asking for opportunities for women, but men themselves need to create opportunities. If men don’t create opportunities, no matter how much women demand, they won’t be able to reach the minimum percentage. For that, women themselves need to be qualified.”

A male participant who is actively involved in the current political group shared his perspectives as follows;

“If the representation of women in decision-making roles exceeds 30%, they should willingly accept this participation level. Men, on the other hand, should be encouraged to study more about gender studies. Traditional gender norms often lead men to view women in a lower light. To address this, men themselves need to change their mindset significantly and support women’s participation in decision-making processes.”

Overall, the answers of the interview highlighted the importance of women’s participation in building a federal democratic union and achieving gender equality, while also acknowledging the challenges and barriers that still existed.

The survey results showed that a significant majority of respondents (88.7%) believed that the role of women in politics and public activities is related to the country’s policies. This indicated that there was recognition among the respondents that women’s participation in decision-making processes is not only important for gender equality but also for the overall development and progress of the country.

It is evident that although gender equality was included in the Federal Democracy Charter, men and women must work together to implement it at the Chin State level. Women primarily need to speak up and demand their rights at all levels of decision-making. Women themselves must possess strength and confidence in themselves. In order to boost the participation rate of women, men who are involved in decision-making must also make a lot of opportunities. This emphasized that men and women must collaborate in order to question established gender stereotypes and advance to a more inclusive and equitable political system.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that this study revealed the critical role that Chin women play in many aspects of political engagement during the Spring Revolution. Women’s participation and influence in decision-making processes are hindered in Chin State, by the low representation of women in leadership positions and the enduring patriarchal attitudes of men in positions of authority, according to an analysis of the representation of women in various political groups in the state. To achieve at least 30% representation of women at various decision-making levels, state-level gender awareness training, community dialogues and capacity-building programs for women are necessary. These initiatives can help to empower women, challenge traditional gender norms, and promote a more inclusive and equitable political system. Additionally, men involved in decision-making roles must be held accountable for promoting gender equality and creating space for women’s participation. The implementation of gender awareness training, community dialogues, and capacity-building programmes for women in Chin

State will increase their visibility and participation in political groups. This will result in the inclusion of gender policies in these groups, promoting gender equality and increasing women’s involvement in shaping the future federal system. By incorporating women’s perspectives and experiences into decision-making processes, it will lead to a more inclusive and equitable political system that caters to the needs and priorities of all members of society.

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Books

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Interview List

No	Gender	Organization
1	Female	Member of Parliament
2	Male	Member of Parliament
3	Male	Member of Parliament
4	Female	Civil Society Organization
5	Male	Chinland Joint Defense Committee
6	Female	Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)
7	Female	Chin Women’s Rights Activist
8	Male	Member of Parliament
9	Female	Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)
10	Male	Member of policy maker
11	Female	Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)
12	Male	Member of Chin Resistance Force

*Names and organizations of participating respondents are kept confidential to protect their identities.