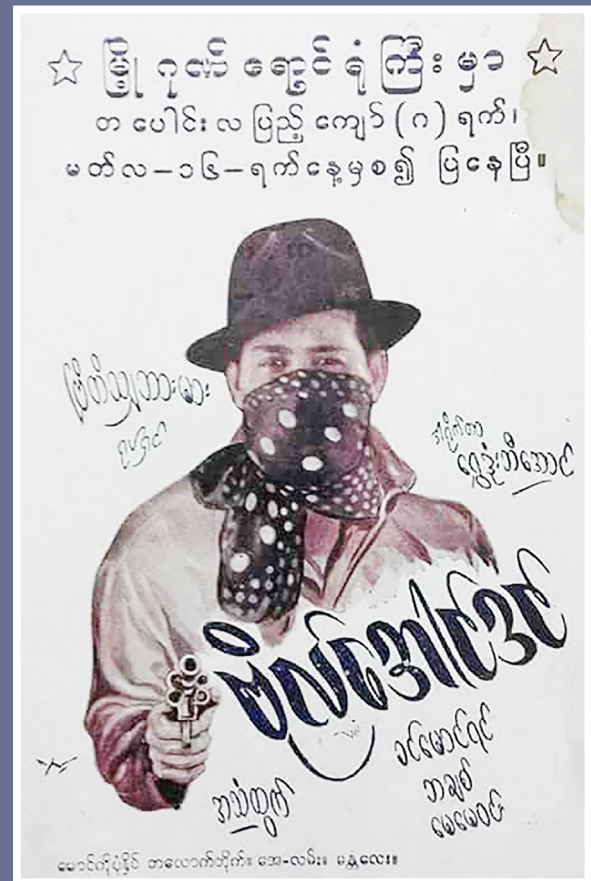




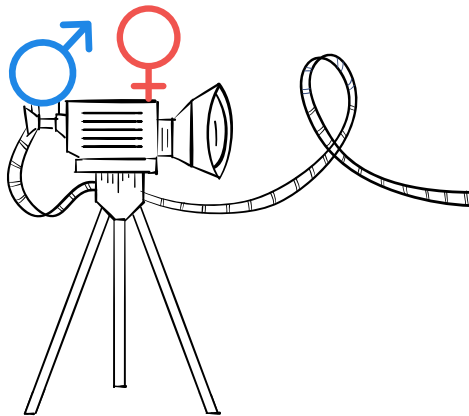
**EMReF**  
Enlightened Myanmar  
Research Foundation

# Gender Awareness in Myanmar's Film Industry



English

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## List of the participants in Key Informant Interview

*(Names are in alphabetical order.)*

- 1) Daw Grace Swe Zin Htike, Member of censor board
- 2) Daw Khine Hnin Wai, Actress
- 3) Daw Kyal Yi Lin Six, Director
- 4) Daw Kyaw Hnin Si, Director
- 5) U Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, Director
- 6) U Myat Noe, Director
- 7) U Nyein Chan Kyaw, Actor
- 8) U Nyo Min Lwin, Director
- 9) Daw Pwint Thit Cho, Script Writer
- 10) U Thaid Dhi, Director
- 11) Daw Thida Linn, Director
- 12) U Zagana @ U Thura, Actor/Director
- 13) U Zin Wyne, Actor/President of MMPO

## List of the participants in Focus Group Discussion

- 14) U Aung Zin Oo, Director
- 15) Daw Can Dal, Filmmaker
- 16) Daw Chaw Su San, Filmmaker
- 17) Daw Grace Soe Zar Htal, Filmmaker
- 18) U L Min Pyae Mon, Script Writer
- 19) U Min Nyo, Actor
- 20) Daw Mon Mon Thet Khin, Filmmaker
- 21) Daw Mya A Noe, Script Writer
- 22) Daw Saw Yu New, Script Writer
- 23) Daw Sharr, Actress
- 24) U Wai Yum, Filmmaker
- 25) U Win Kyaw Thu, Editor
- 26) 10 members of Censor Board

# Executive Summary

Myanmar films have been scrutinized by a strict censor board since the 1962 military coup d'état. Though political liberation was initiated in 2010, the movies including documentary/short films still have to pass through the censor board before screening. However, film production has been restored after being stagnant for over a decade. The number of films produced has increased gradually year by year. Along with the political transition, the changes of a creative industry need to be examined in terms of freedom of expression and introduction of new perspectives to the social world through movies. This also reflects the way of knowledge production of filmmakers to cultivate a democratic society.

The study about gender awareness in the Myanmar film's industry aims to investigate the knowledge of filmmakers regarding gender and its application; and to understand their challenges for creative work that challenges and transforms existing social values. The research included content analysis on 83 films which were released from 2016 to 2017, 13 key informant interviews, and three focus group discussions with members of the censor board and young filmmakers.

The content analysis was conducted for four areas: i) Gender discrimination; ii) Gender stereotypes; iii) Gender-based violence; and iv) Gender awareness/empowerment.

- In the film content analysis, when the characters are unequally treated on the basis of gender or sexuality in the workplace, in the community, or in the household, this condition is under the **"Gender discrimination"** theme. Myanmar mainstream films portray the discrimination towards men and women within society; particularly men for losing their masculinity, and women for being unmarried. Blaming, mocking, and defaming words were the most common forms of discrimination found in dialogue, often referring to the circumstances above.

Also, widespread perceptions about male infertility are often reflected in films, as men are criticized and people in society puts pressure upon a man about his infertility. Further, when a male character is very weak in leading their household, and his wife is more intelligent than him, then his nature is portrayed as an "idiot" in the movies. The community in the films is allowed to make jokes towards that male character for being influenced by his wife. The discriminatory practices in characters roles have not changed much, as they still tend to follow traditional patterns. Men are cast in the role of protectors, household/ward/village leaders, strong activists, fighters, and hunters of love, and women are portrayed as obedient daughters, lovely, and kind-hearted mothers, unintelligent girls, betrayed wives, and, in general, timid and dignified woman. Not only are LGBT characters mocked, but body shaming and racial discrimination are evident.

- **"Gender stereotypes"** are the root cause as well as symptoms of discrimination. In this light, proverbs are usually used in films to show the manly character. For example: "A good husband has a thousand concubines"; "Only stupid man follows/supports a woman"; "The unlucky moments for a man are by the time of being bitten by a dog, of drowning and of being loved by a woman"; and "Men are the ones who have the ability to pick up the stars in the sky". Phrases starting with "as you are a man" (for instance, "As you are a man, keep your promise", and "As you are a man, you should do that (or) you should not do that") are often heard in the films. In terms of physical appearance, tattoos are the most visible symbol used to show the male character's masculinity.
- For women characters, it was found that films convey the concepts of femininity found within Myanmar identity by referring to "how a Myanmar woman should be". They reinforced the norms that women are gentle, weak, and full of guile. Furthermore, the films have messages that encourage women to be good wives and clever daughters. The last stereotype that the movies have reinforced is encouraging women to hide their emotions, particularly their love for a man. Traditionally, Myanmar women are not allowed to admit their love before a man admits his love for her.
- Regarding the content analysis for **"Gender-based violence"**, the plot, action, words and semiotics relating to sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual and domestic violence were considered. In general, Myanmar films contain sex jokes in most comedy films. Cat calling, taunts of a sexual nature, and leering at a part of a woman's body (for instance; zooming in on the hips of women) can be obviously seen in the plots. Mostly, LGBT characters existed just to tell dirty jokes about different sexualities. Further, some films made jokes about the rivalry between a leading actor and a father-in-law-to-be for a leading actress. The actor tries to win the love of the actress while her father (a village/ward leader or the boss of the actor) intervenes. In such films, the woman's role tends to be passive, stuck in the middle of rivalry between men. The study also noticed the inclusion of many jokes of a sexual nature.

Sometimes, the films use sexual violence or harassment as a starting point of the main plot. For example, when a woman is sexually abused by a man, the consequences such as becoming pregnant or marrying that man become the big story. Likewise, in romance films, sexual harassment scenes are included to show how the heroic actor fights bad guys who have been disturbing or harassing the actress, and then saves the actress. Sometimes, sexual harassment or domestic violence scenes are used in one of the supporting scenes. The leading actress reports to the ward/village leader or the school principal that she gets harassed by the actor and his friend; and the responsible person calls those men and scolds them.. This kind of scene can be seen in romance films and is considered funny. In some films, the scenes which show a drunk man beating a woman are also shown in order to show the bad man's character.

- **“Gender awareness/empowerment”** enlightens viewers about the stereotypes to be deconstructed and is also a stimulus for social change. There are some action movies in which women are playing leading roles. However, most of the movies are mainly showing off women's fighting ability and it is men who play the role of master who teaches those women kung fu. Not only in the action movies, but some other movies about maternal love, also depict how women are powerful in cultivating their children. The study team noticed that there have been some films providing gender awareness about LGBT, and about sex workers – but they are few in number. Although only a few mainstream films have included gender awareness and empowerment messages or scenes in their plot, there are also many documentary films and short films that explored women's rights and gender equality. Those movies were screened at the Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival in Yangon or at Wattan Film Festival for the general public.

In focus group discussions and key informant interviews, the study investigated the film industry's challenges such as actor oriented market, lack of qualified human resources, knowledge gap, need of infrastructure, and censorship.

The influence of popular actors was one of the common responses from participants regarding the reason for changing trends in the movie market. As a result of the growth of video production and the decline of film production (1990-2010), the movie market has become an actor-based market. Based on the popularity of the actor, the returned profit is assured. This trend has resulted in the rise of actor-led film production. Creation of the stories based on actors supports a strong patriarchal system.

The production of quality movies has been in decline for many reasons, such as lack of human resources, knowledge gaps, and need of infrastructure, such as studios and adequate numbers of movie theatres. During the Focus Group Discussion with young filmmakers, or even in the key informant interviews, the respondents mostly highlighted the fact that there are not enough good script writers. This has impacted the process of producing quality content of movies. Professional script writers and film production teams cannot be recruited in each sector. Moreover, the study indicated the need for human rights awareness of the people working in the current film industry. As the military government banned words or plots related to human rights issues, later, the creators such as directors and script writers became ignorant about human rights. As a consequence they became unaware of the ethical issues related to human rights. Furthermore, insufficient film production equipment, lack of studio space, and a decline in the number of cinemas are the challenges raised by filmmakers in Myanmar.

Finally, censorship is a controversial issue discussed by filmmakers and the censor board. According to the filmmakers, the current censor board's practice has focused on preserving cultures, and protecting three main national causes: i) Non disintegration of the union; ii) Non disintegration of national solidarity; and iii) Consolidation of sovereignty. The censor board does not closely monitor scenes which include harassment towards women, child rights, and persons with disabilities; only movies including significant sex scenes are prohibited. On the other hand, the censor board members' view is that a decrease in the quality content is not concerned with “censorship”. Many high quality films were produced even under the close scrutiny of the censor board during the military regime before 1988. Mostly what the censor board pointed out was the filmmakers' inability to make strong plots and their lack of awareness. Yet, censor board members' understanding regarding sexual harassment and human rights awareness also needs to be examined, because obscene sex words and sex jokes are widely used in some films and some films have reinforced gender stereotypes and racial discrimination. Another thing is that for the films mainly intending to promote gender awareness, the term “culture” used in the censorship procedure is still an obstacle in raising awareness concerning the denial of traditional beliefs.

To sum up, the study indicated that the Myanmar's film industry still needs to be more aware of gender issues as the practices of gender stereotyping practices have not changed much since previous decades. Not only the film industry is responsible to fight against the traditional gender perspectives, but also the state's censor board should also have been aware that they need to accept the introduction of gender equality concept.





## (I)

# Introduction

Films are one of the most powerful communication tools because they can convey messages and images depicting social reality to audiences. Also, films shape culture, values within societies, as well as people's perspectives.<sup>1</sup> During periods of political transition or ideological conflicts, films are used as a propaganda tool. For example, Hitler used a variety of different mediums to disseminate propagandized messages to cultivate Germans' hatred of Jews. Different forms of art like films or literature influence knowledge construction and are a social construction tool. People's awareness regarding gender equality and people's tolerance for marginalized sexual orientations, such as gays and lesbians, have also been promoted through contemporary film.

It is still obvious that women are underrepresented in films. Also, racial minorities are least talked about in Hollywood movies, as white men are vastly overrepresented. The problem is not only about underrepresentation, but also how women are portrayed. In many Asian cultures, particularly the traditional communities, worshiping patriarchal systems and reinforcing femininity is deeply entrenched.

Women are mostly assigned to roles of respectful mother or obedient wife, and are passive with sexuality. For instance, the Chinese drama "We get married" is constructing femininity of "leftover" women. Other movies in Asia, like Bollywood movies, Korean drama, and Thai or Philippines TV series, have similar patriarchal values and misogynist characters.

This trend of stereotyping female characters has changed in the last decade, though the number of strong female characters still remains low. For example, female protagonists in the Korean movie (My wife is a gangster), in the Thai movie (Chocolate), and in the Bollywood movie (Ki & Ka) aim to eliminate stereotypical roles of men and women and have visibly shown how films have started changing gender norms. In Myanmar, traditional gender stereotypes are deeply rooted, and media freedom was lost over five decades. Hence, it was difficult to promote revolutionary ideologies via media. We therefore hypothesize that new Myanmar movies will continue traditional forms of representation that reinforce gender inequality.

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<sup>1</sup>McQuail 1994





In regard to women's role in most movies, it is debatable whether it is natural, reflecting the real world, or if it is reinforcing stereotypes or both. The characters in the real world could be reflected in movies, but then movies also mould people's perspectives – that can never be changed. On the other hand, there has been an argument about whether arts, including films, should be standing only for pure art, or for propaganda.<sup>2</sup> The first group insists that art is meant to entertain or for people to enjoy or evoke emotion, while the second group supports the idea that art is to educate or influence, or change something. This is also an issue in the Myanmar's film industry, with people debating about how to differentiate between stereotyping gender roles and showing the reality to raise awareness, since there is a fine line between these two strategies.

In Myanmar, statistics show that one-third of films shown at the cinemas from 2000 to 2018 are comedy, and the remaining films are horror, drama, and romance. Most of the comedy films have included

LGBT characters and have featured them as being hysterical, having low intelligence, being funny and/or idiotic. Sexist jokes and comments referring to a woman's body have been described in a lot in humorous scenes without noticing that characters are committing sexual harassment. Problems are not confined to plots, characters, and scripts, but also Myanmar's film industry, which faces challenges such as censorship, stars based production, lack of human resources, and the big issue: lack of awareness about ethics and human rights.

However, the number of film productions has gradually increased from 2015. This improvement has been the result of the release of censorship along with the political reforms in the country. Thus, it is questioning how the thriving Myanmar cinema makes changes in its content. This study would mainly focus on the role of gender in the films. The purpose of this study is (i) to examine gender awareness of the Myanmar's film industry; and (ii) to gain a deeper understanding about the challenges of the film industry for new creations with new ideas and challenges in shaking old traditional thinking about gender roles through movies. The study focused on qualitative data collection and researchers did content analysis on the movies released in 2016 and 2017. The research team conducted Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with film professionals, seniors of the Myanmar Motion Picture Organization, members of the Motion Picture Censor Board, and young filmmakers.

First, the study focused on content analysis of 83 films, videos, documentary films, and short films produced between 2016 and 2017 to investigate the gender norms portrayed in the films. The second part of the research examined the perspectives of filmmakers and experts from the film industry, as well as from the censorship board to comprehend the barriers they currently face and new directions in which they are now moving. EMReF also organized a workshop on "Inclusion of Gender Perspectives in Films" with young filmmakers to raise their awareness about gender and to brainstorm about strategies to reduce the number of scenes that are degrading to human values and dignity.

The paper continues by outlining the theoretical approach, before providing a historical background on Myanmar's film industry since 1920. It then provides results from both the content analysis, and interviews and focus groups with members of the industry. Overall, it finds that gender stereotypes and discrimination continue in recent films, and explores some of the structural and cultural reasons this is the case.

<sup>2</sup> Art and Social Life by G.V.Plekhanov, 1912



## (II) Theoretical Approach



### i) Two Faces of a Coin: Stereotyping or Raising Awareness

Stereotyping is over generalizing about a particular group of people and their characteristics based on an individual's strong beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Stereotypes are often negative; humans are inclined to have prejudicial attitudes towards others whom are assumed to be different. Such kind of prejudicial practices occur because of inadequate knowledge about others, the result of ignorance, information and education gaps, or limited exposure to members of other cultures.<sup>4</sup> The role of knowledge becomes crucial in defining whether a message is reinforcing stereotypes or raising awareness about reality in society.

Fundamentally, knowledge is defined as understanding something or someone through experiences or learning. According to Matusitz (2012), the concept of knowledge is related to four terms: familiarity, awareness, understanding, and cognition. In the process of knowledge production, knowledge is linked with culture, identity, experience and social practices. According to Foucault's discourses, knowledge is an exercise of power, and power is always a function of

<sup>3</sup> Gamble and Gamble (2002)

<sup>4</sup> Matusitz (2012)



knowledge. As noted by Foucault, power exists everywhere, and power/knowledge operates in two ways: it not only limits what we can do, but also opens up new ways of acting and reflecting on an individual's action. In this light, the knowledge produced and which is exercised via culture, identity, experience, and social practice, reinforces the old norms and/or constructs new ideas.

So, how is knowledge reinforced? Reinforcement is the process of shaping desired behavior and controlling unwanted behavior with a reward and/or punishment system. Reinforcement theory indicates that people seek out and remember information that provides cognitive support for their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. However, they would often feel uncomfortable when their beliefs are challenged. Joseph Klapper, the author of "The Effects of Mass Communication (1960)"<sup>5</sup>, asserted that "the media are more likely to reinforce than to change."

Stereotypes are reinforced when a set of traditional beliefs or perspectives have been strengthened by using familiar words, pictures, and narratives re-

peatedly. Messages including existing knowledge are considered true, whereas messages which are beyond existing knowledge would be considered wrong or deserving of punishment. This is a kind of negative reinforcement. In movies, words, semiotics, and acting have meanings that can tell a story. The nature of characters can leave an impression, or influence the audience's thought process, after the story. Thus, all attributes contained in a film have an impact on audiences in framing their knowledge.

Regarding the role of movies for ideological reinforcement, some people argue that films are just presenting the reality of what is actually happening outside; they are not strengthening negative stereotypes. It raises questions about where the standpoint of the viewer is to interpret something and whether it is stereotyping or giving a message about reality in order to initiate social change. Interpretation can be varied based on viewers' own knowledge, experiences, learned ideology, and personal interest.

In this regard, even in the stories reflecting reality, the content and the method of presentation is very

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<sup>5</sup> Klapper (1960)



important. That means it is necessary to verify whether the content is motivating or stimulating to produce new ideas and to construct new knowledge. The content of the film needs to contain messages that alert the audiences to change or give up their old perspectives by being aware of negative stereotyping practices. For instance, the obedient character of a woman or a character based on motherhood may reflect real types of most Asian women. However, when the movie captures scenes about those women's challenges and struggles in their daily life, as they are given the burdens of society's unfair treatment, the trend of the content is leading to introduce change.

In the content analysis of this study, the following four categories were used to define the meaning of the dialogue, plot, words, and semiotics contained in the studied films. Here, semiotics is important to be studied because it is mainly concerned with meaning and the way of representation. In particular, it examines how language, images and objects generate meanings or the processes by which we comprehend or attribute meaning.<sup>6</sup>

For the first category "Gender discrimination", the researchers scanned how the words and semiotics devalue the ability of female characters. Although "Gender discrimination" and "Gender Stereotypes" are linked to each other, "Stereotyping messages" were learned particularly as a second category by defining how the role of women is described in the films, as well as how other people in the movie are describing women's characters. The third category "Gender Based Violence" is examining how emotional violence, physical violence, mental and sexual violence are portrayed in the movies. Under this category, researchers verified the use of abusive words, sexist jokes, and violent actions against "weaker sexes". In this light, it is important to analyze that the violent or sexist scenes are framing a notion that such practices are common and nothing is wrong; or making a sense that this is unacceptable. Finally, the researchers also looked for encouraging messages or characters contained in the films under the category "Empowerment or Giving awareness". For instance, the words that are stimulating to change the view of audience on women, or the obvious female characters which are uncommon and different to traditional women.

## ii) Art for what?

A question about whether art is for public use or art for art's sake still remains debatable. An argument in defining art indicates that concepts of art should be developed based on the purposes they are serving as there is no philosophical consensus or no unitary

concept of art. So the various purposes of art could be historical, conventional, aesthetic, appreciative, or communicative.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly in Kant's definition, what he calls the art of genius is representational, formalist and expressivist elements with creations; "[art] is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication".<sup>8</sup> But it is certain that the artist has a purpose in creating artworks that act as an expression and extension of humanity and human experiences. Then art becomes the medium to promote products of political or religious ideology, humanistic view, and human experiences which the artist wants to focus upon.

Artistic value and its power for propagandizing, for instance, was recognized via the promotion of Marxism in Myanmar in the 1930s and particularly after the 1950s. So, today's criticism is whether the domain of art as a propaganda tool should still be applicable in the liberal era. Some artists raised the point that not all artists want to change anything politically about the world. Maybe they desire to reflect what is happening. They opposed the idea, saying that only artworks produced with the purpose of changing something are advantageous to human society. Enlightening the general public through arts should embrace freedom from any limitations and boundaries, in order to extend the sense of thinking and reflecting to horizon. Thus, those artists prefer the idea of art for art's sake, rather than limiting the audience's thinking with framing messages through artworks.

According to some propaganda artists, like Jonas Staal, as long as art is based on human experiences, those entities will inevitably relate to the changing trend of society, its needs, and other influencing factors, even though the artworks are mainly focusing on individual feeling or pleasure. Propaganda arts are not a problem; how to put propagandizing messages in an artistic form is a question. The real purpose of propaganda is to construct power, while the interest of art is to create a feeling or expression. The nature of art is soft, fluid, and borderless. Thus, propaganda art which is represented as a kind of "soft power" basically needs to put the propaganda messages into artistic forms in a sophisticated way.

"Gender Ideology" is related to political and sociological ideologies. Supporting the idea of propaganda art, studies about gender awareness in art products like films are concerned with examining how society adopts or transforms gender norms in the course of changing trends in political and sociological ideology; and how these trends are reflected in contemporary art.

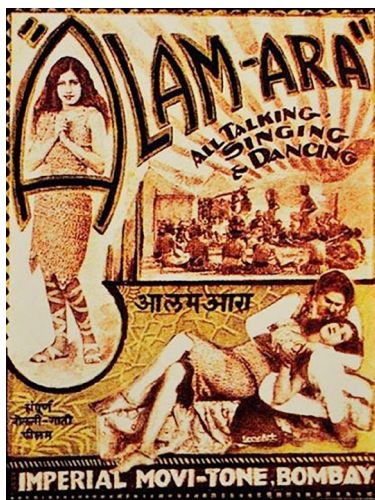
<sup>6</sup> Brian Curtin (2006)

<sup>7</sup> Uidhir and Magnus (2011)

<sup>8</sup> Kant (2000) Guyer translation

### (III)

# Gender Awareness in Films in the International Context



One of the strong feminist criticisms is that mass media is acting as an agent of male chauvinism, because it is systematically depicting and reinforcing male-dominated socio-cultural, political, and economic settings. Visual images in movies strengthen negative gender stereotypes of women, since they are mostly portraying women as people in need of protection. For instance, this is in evidence on the website “Filmsite”, created by the American Movie Classic listed Box-Office Top 100 Films of All-Time – in which most of the Top 10 movies are related to war, adventure, science fiction, and detectives. These movies favor the power of male characters.<sup>9</sup> This trend has not changed much for many decades: the success of James Bond movies, Superman and Spiderman are strong examples of this engrained trend within mainstream media.



The first reason that producers are less inclined to give the main role to women in movies is that the film industry is male dominated within society, as the majority of crew members are men. Women used to be limited in playing in movies in some communities, such as in India several decades ago; thus the industry used men and placed more emphasis on their roles. Secondly, most film communities are still perpetuating a cliché – that women's films usually deal with only women's spheres and interests. From the 1930s to the 1950s in Hollywood, women's films had limited audiences, as they were produced primarily for women.<sup>10</sup> In general, throughout history to date women's films have been created fairly easily because they have been produced at low cost but tend to make profit. In contrast, men's films need high technology, exploding buildings, and extensive outdoor mass scenes; those might be expensive.

Not only focusing on women's experiences and their stories to create women's films, women have been given the main character's role in non-ordinary films which they never used to be casted in before. For instance, the main characters are women in science fiction films like “Maleficent (2014)” and “Wonder Woman (2016)”; and those films attained a breakthrough achievement. The annual report of USC's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2017) indicated that only 12% out of the targeted 900 Hollywood movies between 2007 and 2016 had gender balanced casts. According to them, women were playing leading roles in 34 out of 100 top films.<sup>11</sup> Eight films used one woman (about 45-years-old) as a

<sup>9</sup> That top 100 films are determined by the list of the 100 top fictional films on Box Office Mojo

<sup>10</sup> Heidi, 2006

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-women-stereotyped-roles-20180316-story.html>



lead; there were three movies which used women from under-represented racial groups as a lead or co-lead. No doubt, female characters are still being portrayed in “sexy attire”, but the key findings from that study pointed out that sexualization of women has been mostly related to White women, while Asian female characters were least likely to be sexualized and most likely to be depicted as caregivers. Another interesting point that the study indicated is that 76 of 100 films in 2016 did not show LGBT characters, and 79% of the films talking about that issue were concerning White people.

In Asia, there have been some changes regarding women characters, although women are still being treated as a ‘weaker sex’ who needs protection from men in most of the films, such as Korean soap operas. The changes of women’s roles in Bollywood movies in India, where the fact that discrimination based upon class and gender is deeply rooted deserves acknowledgment, though small steps have been made so far. In the Indian film history, “Raja Harishchandra” was the first-ever film – produced in 1913 – in which male actors took the role of women characters. Womenfolk avoided being casted in the films in those times, because they did not dare to be involved in the film industry. Also, casting women in movies at that time was highly criticized before it even actually came on display. The first movie which cast women was “Alam Ara” produced in 1931. Interestingly, IBM research findings about Bollywood movies highlighted that Hindi movies are still crazily sexist. These findings came out from a study which analyzed 4000 Hindi movies which were produced from 1970 to 2017. On the other hand, the study also accepted that the number of female-centric films, such as “Neerja”, “Dear Zindagi”, and “Margarita with a Straw”, has risen in recent years. Though the percentage of Hindi female-centric movies was 7% in the 1970s, it increased to 11.9% from 2015 to 2017.

Then, the LGBT community is still being depicted as being funny, idiotic, and hysterical in most Asian films. There have been some improvements in the film industry because of gender awareness movements. For example, the Bangkok Gay and Lesbian Film Festival was firstly introduced to Thailand in 2015. Since then, producers have been highly encouraged to produce films about empowerment for the LGBT community. Some limitations still remain on LGBT films. In particular, the censorship board restrictively banned the sex scenes of homosexual characters. For example, Thailand’s Administrative Court banned the local gay-themed movie “Insects in the Backyard”, because its graphic sexual intercourse scene violates Section 287 which prohibits “content that has a negative impact on public morality and social decency”.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the East has to struggle more than the West in developing women-centric movies and LGBT movies because of strong traditional gender stereotypes and institutional barriers. Regardless, the changes have started.



<sup>12</sup> <http://www.filmjournal.com/columns/thai-court-reaffirms-ban-lgbt-film>

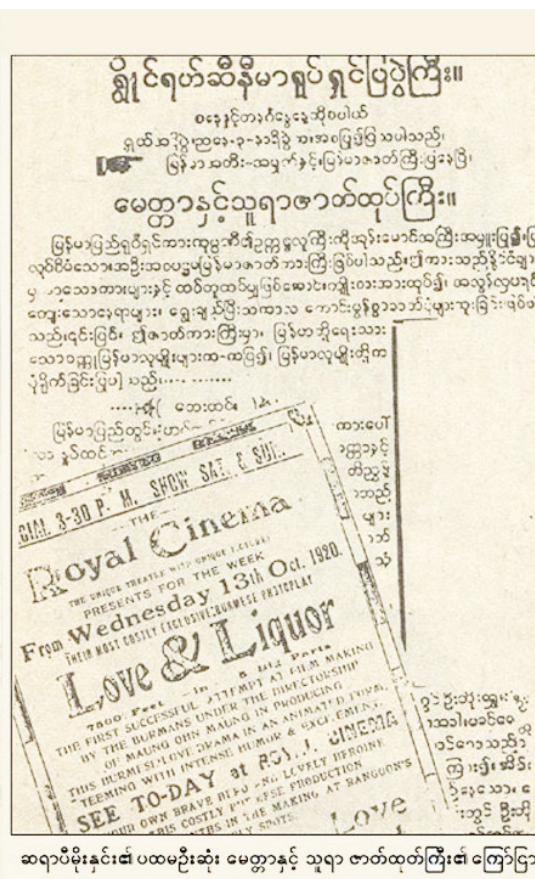


Photo-<http://rareknowing.blogspot.com/2015/01/love-and-liquor-ref-wikipedia.html>

## (IV) Women's Role in Myanmar films in past decades

Myanmar women received more opportunities to decide freely about performing in films compared to some neighboring countries like India. For Myanmar, the first ever women cast movie "Myittar Nae Thura" was produced in 1920. A woman named "Ma Aye Kyi" from Kyi Myin Daing market was selected to be part of the movie.

Likewise, the first ever woman director Daw Khin Nyunt (Mahar Dhot Film) and a woman led film production company called "Yangon Yoke Shin Daw Ma Ma" was established in the silver age of the Myanmar's film industry.<sup>13</sup> In 1952, the same year that the Myanmar Academy Award started, the Best Actress Academy Award was also presented. Notwithstanding, female film directors, producers, main actors, and supporting actor roles were acknowledged at a certain level at that time, but there was still a lack of female participation in script writing, camera crews, sound engineering, and editing. The main thing is that there is a need for analysis, not only in film production and creation, but also in the roles or space that women are asked to perform in the films as well.

<sup>13</sup> Soe (1998)



According to several research findings, Myanmar and the international film community mostly portray women as loving mothers, or show terrible life experiences that women go through in difficult periods, and women heroes in films which are entertainment oriented. When the meaning of terrible life experiences that women go through in certain difficult periods are talked about, the real incidents that happened are shown to the audiences. These scenes let the audience freely touch the sense of women's experiences.

Over the past decades, the trends in films of neighboring countries have slightly transformed from issue-based to films which are ideology oriented. For example, one of the Bollywood films called "Ki & Ka" is a case study. In this film, a husband stays at home doing household work, whereas his wife leads the business for the family. It exposes the idea that the parameters of women staying at home to do household work and men doing business for the family is contradictory.

In Myanmar, depictions of female characters have not changed much, as it is following the ordinary way used in the films in the previous decades. However, there is strong evidence that the stories of women from different classes were included in the films. Also, there have been many film titles that are related to female names.

### i) Myanmar Film in the Silver Age

Among many other women related films and titles that are linked to female names produced in Myanmar film during the Silver era (1920- 1945), the most popular ones are; (1) *Kyay Taw Thu Ma Nu (The Villager Ma Nu)* (2) *Khin Khin Mhar Daw Pone (Mistake of Khin Khin)* (3) *Kyarhit May (Female Leopard)* (4) *Yu Wattti (representation: Woman)* (5) *Mahay Thi (Great Wife)* (6) *B.A Ma (B.A Woman)* (7) *Main Ma (Woman)* (8) *Ma Ma (just a Burmese woman's name)* (9) *Kone Mar Yi (representation: Woman)* (10) *Eait Hti Ya (representation: Woman)* (11) *Apyo Lin (A Husband of A Vergin)* (12) *Thuza (just a Burmese woman's name)* (13) *Oaksar Sout Ma Lay (A Female Spirit)* and (14) *Khit San Thu (A Modern Girl)*<sup>14</sup>. Those films produced in the colonial era portrayed women as the supporters of political activism and patriotism; the character of theik nan shin [Lord of potency, very powerful and evil], is the character who depends on their husbands, or other men for social security, or those who are religious.

In the films "*Yadanarbone (A Treasure Trove)*" and "*Chit Ah Mhya (Shared Love)*", the bad ending of the women actors' lives revealed a lack of rationalism, and betrayal in marriage. In some of the popular films such as "*Chit Yay Sin (Lovely Poured Water)*"

and "*Chit Thet Wai (Lovely Thet Wai)*", they exposed conflicts happening with their husbands. Those stories talked about the lack of opportunity for women to resolve conflicts themselves if misunderstanding occurs, and also the power differences (and dynamics) between men and women in love affairs.

In one of the films "*Bo Aung Din (just a Burmese man's name)*" directed by Shwe Done B.Aung, the female actress Ma Mya Win's dialogue goes like this:

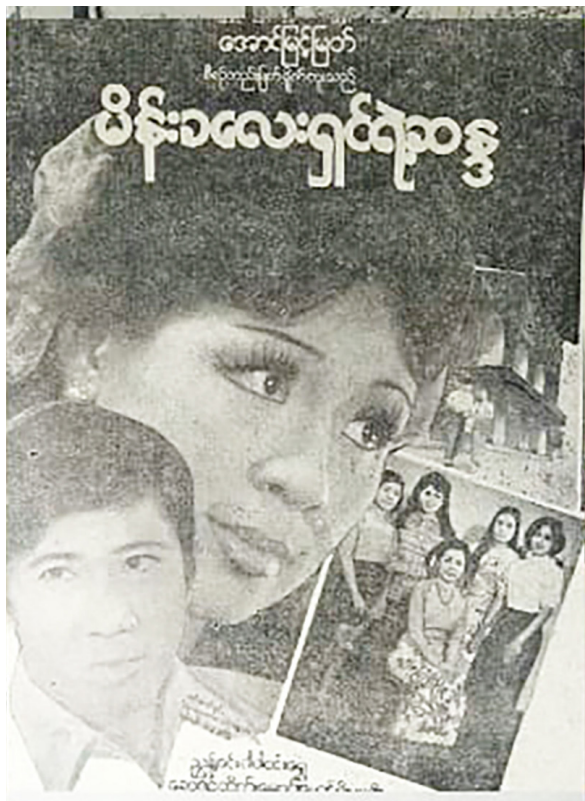
*"Since I already have a lover,  
I do not dare to say a word love you.  
While the other side [my lover] keeps loyal to me, I do not dare to break the loyalty to make myself become polyamorous or flirter.  
Even though I have a feeling for both of you, I cannot break the loyalty to my lover because I come from well-mannered family.  
It is more important to be loyal to my lover than having affair with you."*



It clearly shows that women have no freedom in love affairs. There is a traditional boundary which limits women from being free agents. They cannot choose whom they love most; love comes second for them, and loyalty is prioritized for choosing whom to love.

Surprisingly, female stunt actresses were used in the Myanmar's film industry since the Silver era. For example, in "*Win Theingi (just a Burmese woman's name)*" film, stunt action actress "Khin San" was cast together with a male actor, Kyaw Moe. Meanwhile, in "*Khit San Thu (A Modern Girl)*" films, the actress "Mya Mya (just a Burmese woman's name)" was asked to be cast as a female police officer; that was also unusual. In summary, the study recognized that there was no restriction upon women in the films by the film industry. The characters played by female actors sometimes acted as challenging stereotypical ideologies. However, in most cases, female actors' roles were shaped based on religion and cultural norms.

<sup>14</sup> The History of Myanmar's Film (1920-1945) by MMPO



## ii) Myanmar Film in the Golden Age

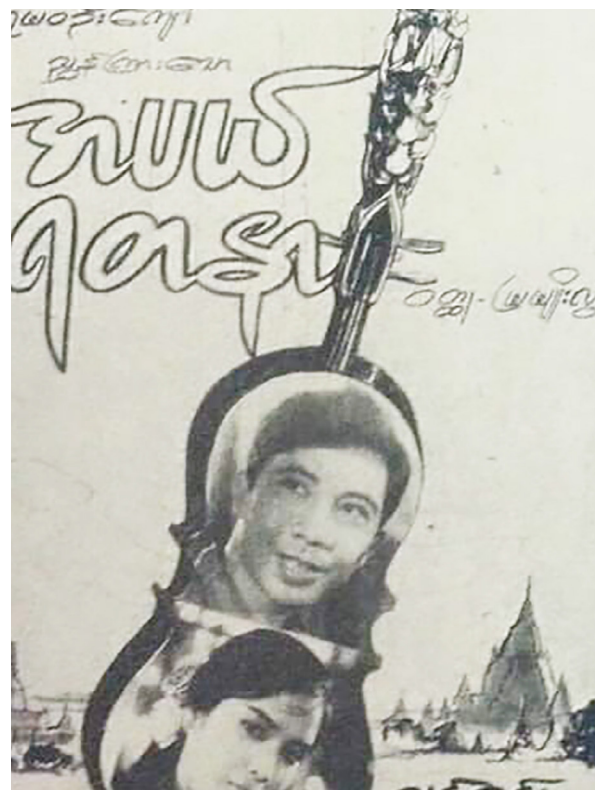
More films about women of different classes and resulting class issues were produced in the Myanmar's film industry in the Golden era (1946 – 1970).<sup>15</sup> At that time, the films such as "Sagar Pyaw Thaw Ah-Thae Nha Lone (*Speaking Heart*)" revealed that being punished means that women do not have a happy ending to their lives if they are not loyal in their marriage. Films also emphasized the importance of 'mother love'. The films called "Main Kalay Shin Yae Sanda (*Wish of The Guardians of a Girl*)" expressed how much difficulty women face in order to get remarried after their husband has passed away. It also showed that women are not given the freedom to decide. Also, there were some films cautioning women that losing their virginity causes difficulties in their lives.

In the dialogue from "Kyunma Mhar Mein Ma Thar (*I Am a Woman*)", a message is included saying: you can only be a valuable woman if your way of living is modest, regardless of a woman's high level of education. Permission from husbands is compulsory to be granted to wives before making any decision. Similarly, that film also showed that the different level of self-confidence among women (Daisy Kyaw Win and Tin Tin Nwet) from two different classes. It was learnt from that film that women would sacrifice their life for dignity when they are sexually violated.

Likewise, in "Arr Nwet Thu Par Shin (*A weaker one*)" the message is that difficult life experiences of a woman are caused by pregnancy before marriage. Thus, these films helped to reflect on cultural and traditional practices that influenced and impacted women at that time.

There are more women's issues included in films produced in the Golden era. For example, the film "Ah Pal Yadanar (just a Burmese woman's name)" highlighted the class problem. Similarly, "Ah Twae (*A Touch*)" and "Pan Pan Lyet Par (*Still Wearing a Flower*)" also emphasized dilemmas behind class differences. However, the female character in "Kyi Pyar (just a Burmese woman's name)" does not follow other typical female characters; it depicted the life of orphaned school girls. Meanwhile, there were some films such as "Naw Kuu Ma (just a Burmese woman's name)" that focuses on ethnic women as well. In "Chit Tha Nge Chin (*Dear Friends*)" characters were based on two female basketball players. The film "Thu Bone Ma (*A Revolutionist Woman*)" was based on a story of a woman revolutionist was also screened.

However, there were many films namely "Ma Yar Nay Sa, Kyaung Thay Mha (*Kill a Cat Since Getting a Wife*," "Chit Thu Yway Mae Chit Wei Lel (*Let's Choose a Lover*)" and "Opps.. Mein Ma...Mein Ma (*Opps.. Women.. Women*)" that revealed the message of women as gossipers or gambling lovers, whereby only their husbands



<sup>15</sup> The History of Myanmar's Films (Golden Age) by MMPO





can guide them to be good women. These films were made in a comedy-oriented sense, showing women's behaviors and these films contributed to a concrete perception grounded in societal norms. To summarize, women characters in films shown in the Myanmar's film industry in the Golden age were much more inclusive and colorful. Some of the films produced during the Socialist era emphasized more about class problems. It is evident that women's issues included in these films were also made in line with those class problems.

### iii) Myanmar Film in the Diamond Age and Beyond

In the Diamond era (1970 – 1995)<sup>16</sup> the inclusiveness of characters from different classes was considered. A film titled *Mon Tae Chain Mhar Nay Win The* (*Sunset Comes at the Time of Sunrise*) included a sex worker character. Meanwhile, another film called *Ma Sudhamma Sari* (just a Buddhist Nun's name) depicted the life struggle of a woman who became a Buddhist nun. A film titled *Thamee Nae Amay Myar* (Mothers and daughter) in which four women played leading roles, was produced. Moreover, there are more films that included a woman's name in the titles, for instance, *Pu Sue Ma* (just a Burmese woman's name), *Mal Mingyi Ma* (*The Great Woman*), *Main Malay Thein Kywel* (*Witty Thein Kywel*) and *Zat Lan Ka Ma Than* (*Ma Than's Story*). The female action films such as *Ma Aye Pwint*, *Myint Myint San*, *Lan Thone Sae* (*Ma Aye Pwint*, *Myint Myint San*, *30<sup>th</sup> Street*) were the most profitable films. In addition, *Chit Yee Sar* (*Beloved lover*) uncovered the emotion or feeling of a young girl during puberty.

Since the early 1990s, videos entered the arena of

the Myanmar's film industry. The female action videos were once very popular. In the 2000s, there were many Myanmar comedy video titles that ended with *Ma* [refers to women or female] such as *Motor Ma*, *Pan Kar Ma* and *Swar Si Ma*. These videos seemed to be focusing on women's issues, but they were performing for funny characters. No ideological change resulted; instead women were used to playing characters who were talkative, foul-mouthed, and messy.

In the late 2000s, female revolution films like *Thakhar Ka Ayeyawaddy Nya Myar* (*Once upon the nights of Ayeyarwaddy*) and also about the six pregnant women called *Sa Hta Gan* (*Hexagon*) were surprisingly produced. Currently, films such as *Khout Htee Lay Ma Lone Tha Lone* (*An Umbrella Covers and Uncovers*), *Shwe Kyar* (*Golden Lotus*) and *Yaung Pyan* (*Reflection*) have included sex workers or female homosexual characters. However, the effects have not been significant, because some of these films do not raise awareness, and some of them are weak in character development.



<sup>16</sup> The History of Diamond Age (1970-1995) by MMPO







## (V)

# How do Myanmar Films talk about “Gender” (2016-2017)?

Several critics of Myanmar mainstream movies maintained that racism, homophobia, and sexist jokes are contained in most films. Thus, this is the result of almost five decades of military rule which strengthened censorship and limited freedom of expression. On the other hand, some movies were seemed to suppress the other minorities' existences and their dignity.<sup>17</sup> After the pro-democracy party NLD (National League for Democracy) took power in March, 2016, people hoped for freedom of expression more than before. The number of film productions has also gradually increased. Not only the quantity, but also the quality of the content of Myanmar films should be considered. That condition became a reason to examine the changes of content of Myanmar films from a gender perspective.

For the content analysis, the research team investigated 29 films, videos, documentary films, and short films produced in 2016, and 54 films in 2017, to examine how gender knowledge was constructed. The research team decided to study double the number of films produced in 2017, in order to investigate if gender stereotyped knowledge was resisted or reversed after a lot of critics on the censorship came out. Further, the number of featured films also increased twice in 2017, more than in the previous year.

Regarding the film categories, these films were selected based on availability, because the objective of the study is qualitative. The aim is to explore the role of different genders in different movies. So, the team attempted to include a variety of movies in the study without identifying the number of movies for each category. The list of films watched can be categorized into seven groups: horror movie (2); detective and/or thriller movie (3); action (15); comedy (22); documentary/ short films (9); drama (30); and romance (2) – overall, there were 83 movies in total. Since the genre of featured films or videos were not defined in release, the research team referred to the definitions found on a well-known international website<sup>18</sup> to categorize the films studied. According to definitions on the website, horror movies are also considered ghost movies. Detective/thriller movies are exciting stories, which are related to crimes or terrifying subject matter, for example, as the consequences of psychological disorders. Action movies use high energy, physical stunts, and include battles, fights, rescue, or escape. Comedy films are composed of light-hearted plots to make the audience amused. Documentary films present true stories, and they always intend to convey a key message to the audience. Drama films are about serious stories depicting realistic characters in life. In contrast, romance movies tell about beautiful love stories.

In the content analysis, the study team mainly focused on investigating the role of characters (the main characters/casts and also main supporting characters) in the movies and words and semiotics relating to the following themes: (i) gender discrimination; (ii) gender stereotyping; (iii) gender based violence; and (iv) gender awareness and/or empowerment.

<sup>17</sup> <http://time.com/5374231/myanmar-cinema-film-movies/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.filmsite.org/genres.html>



### i) Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination means “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”.<sup>19</sup> In the film content analysis, when the characters (whether men or women and/or LGBT) are unequally treated in the workplace, in the community, or in the household, based on their gender or sexuality, and societal norms, this condition is included under the “Gender discrimination” theme. For example, a situation where a woman is not given a supervisor position in the film, simply because she is a woman, constitutes gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is also related to deep stereotypes regarding the process of identifying gender roles. Dialogue and semiotics show that discrimination stems from traditional gender prejudices. In this case, Myanmar mainstream films portrayed the role of men and women being discriminated in their society; particularly men for losing their masculinity, and women for being unmarried. Blaming, mocking, and defaming words were mostly used in dialogue to describe such circumstances. For instance, in “Kyee Kyee Kyal Kyal” comedy film (2017), the leading actress blamed and mocked the leading actor; “How can I get married such a person who doesn’t have true identity?” A dialogue with similar meanings was found in “Ma Gyi San and her lovers” (2016), and “Zoot Kyar” (2017). Also, the community’s perception of male infertility is reflected in films, as men are criticized and pressured about their ability to reproduce. The research team also learnt from the movies

about men’s belief based on reproduction. The leading actor from “Professor Dr. Seit Phwar” (2017) said in the movie; “Nature creates woman to be able to be pregnant; but not man. Thus, we [men] are noble”.

Further, when a male character is very weak in leading their household, and his wife is more intelligent than him, his nature is described as an “idiot” in the movies. The community in the films is allowed to make jokes towards that male character for being influenced by his wife. “Life is shattered by Facebook” (2016) and “Your mother and I” (2017) are significant examples. Moreover, the films also use discriminatory words, by using traditional beliefs regarding masculine characteristics. In the film “Kaung Kyoe Ko Nwhite Tee Zay Min”, released on DVD in 2017, the characters said: “We don’t want to talk to those who are not men” because they believed that only men can tell the truth.

Discriminatory practices regarding characters’ roles have not changed much, as this is following the traditional way. Men are put in the role of protectors, household/ward/village leaders, strong activists, fighters, and hunter of love, whereas women are portrayed as obedient daughters, lovely and kind-hearted mothers, un-intelligent girls, betrayed wives, and timid and dignified women. Not only were the LGBT characters mocked, but also racial discrimination and body shaming plots can also be found. In the academy award film “Khoe-Soe-Lu-Nwhite” (2016) some dialogue showed racial discrimination concerning the rival male characters of the actors. “Ko Gyi” (2017) is significant evidence regarding body shaming: the supporting actress “Pwint” was mocked because of her body.

<sup>19</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality: <https://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1161>

Regarding the community's perspectives on women, the films mostly depicted the inferior status of single woman. First of all, Myanmar films tried to reinforce the stereotypes of the community towards old unmarried women, as their characters are described as talkative, naïve, hysterical, miserly, fussy, and inflexible. As a result, those women are cast as funny characters in the movies, and they are allowed to be seen as useless or entertaining people by the audience. Second, divorced women and widows are mostly treated unequally in the films. Not only can you find disparaging messages about those divorced women and widows, but also the mistreatment of women's children by the community is included in the plots. "Ma Aye's Son is so rude" (2017) and "Let Yin Det Yin Let" (2017) are examples of this trend. On the other hand, that is the real situation which is happening in reality in communities in Myanmar. However, the films have framed this belief by highlighting the importance of the role of husbands. The proverb "Despite having ten brothers, a woman with no husband is not respectable" is widely used in dialogue passages that are referring to the female characters, who are encouraged to get married to someone.

Moreover, sometimes Myanmar films show marginalized women as being much weaker. In "Saturday born Girl" (2017), the character "Daung Ma Lay" is a woman with a visual impairment. She said that she will never be a responsible wife for a man. Even in the words of the male character, he highlights how difficult it is to get married to a woman with a visual impairment. Furthermore, the researchers noticed the community's preference for males, and the parent's preference for sons through the films. Then the films introduced the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality explains levels and conditions of discrimination against women based upon age, education, and occupation. The rivalry between daughter-in-laws and mother-in-laws, and suppression of daughter-in-laws, are popular plots in some films.

## ii) Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are the root cause of discrimination. Gender stereotypes refer to pre-setting men's and women's behavior, and their ability and capacity, based on traditional beliefs about someone's gender or sexuality. Primarily, Myanmar films applied traditional methods to reinforce gender stereotypes – men are described as being brave, dutiful, aggressive, persistent, and independent; while women are assumed to be kind, tender, unpredictable, weak, and dependent.

The study indicated that 36 out of 83 films used discriminatory proverbs in defining the role of men and women. In this light, proverbs are usually used in the films to show the manly character. "A good husband has a thousand of concubines"; "Only stupid man follows/supports a woman"; "The unlucky moments



for a man are by the time of being bitten by a dog, of drowning and being loved by a woman"; and "Men are the ones who have the ability to pick up the stars in the sky" are the significant examples. The words starting with "as you are a man" (for instance, "As you are a man, keep your promise", and "As you are a man, you should do that (or) you should not do that") are often heard in the films as the supporting dialogue in describing a typical man's character. Sticking to the stereotype, the male characters are rarely encouraged or allowed to cry out, rather they hide their sadness. "As you are a man, be calm down and strong – don't cry" is the phrase mostly used in the dialogue. In "An attachment being made of blood" (2017) DVD movie uses such terms. In Myanmar, men are assumed to have a superior power [Bhone]. Such superior power of men is praised in some movies ("Don't wash women's clothes if you don't want to lose your superior power").

Tattoos are the most visible symbol used to show how manly the male character is. "You see! He is the straight man because of the tattoos on his body" are the words that the study team learnt from "Arranged by Khin Mar Kyi" (2016). On the other side, women are represented with "flowers" in the movies. LGBT characters are invited to engage in over-acting with excessive make-up. Such stereotypes create another stereotype for LGBT: to be seen as different people who are abnormal and hysterical. The study found that LGBT characters were put in the leading or supporting role in one-third of the films released in 2016 and 2017.

For women characters, the films tried to attach femininity and gender roles with Myanmar identity by referring to "how a Myanmar woman should be". In the movie "Let Yin Det Yin Let" (2016), the leading actress was told by her friend; "For being a Myanmar woman, you should not go to a man's home alone". Similarly, the film "Servant of Cupid" (2016) also says,



"As you are a Myanmar woman, you should not smoke". Another thing is that the films have reinforced the cultural norms which mandate that women are gentle, weak, and full of guile. The words, "As you are a woman, please behave politely and gently"; "You are dare to commit this case against such a fragile woman,..."; and "If we (women) use guile that we have as a strategy, men cannot resist" are common phrases/proverbs included in the films studied.

Further, the films have also encouraged women to be good wives and clever daughters. Significantly, these trends can be seen in the following movies: "The village girl tends to be a good wife" in "Ko Gyi" (2017); "As a woman, you need to know how to do housework" in "Shwe Moh Sar Det Shwe Min Thar" (2017); "Being betrayed by the husband is the common thing that can be experienced by most wives. It has happened because of the weakness of the wife, as she does not know how to handle a man" in "Ga Yet" (2017). The last stereotype that the movies have reinforced is letting women hide their emotions, particularly their love for a man. Traditionally, Myanmar women are not allowed to start to admit their love before a man does. The leading actress in the movie "A Pel Khan" (2017) said, "As a woman, we don't have a chance to create love on our own"; and "It's a shame for a woman for asking a man to get married to her".

### iii) Gender based violence

In this category, the plot, action, words and semiotics relating to sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual and domestic violence are considered. In general, Myanmar films put sex jokes in most of the comedy films. Cat calling, taunts of a sexual nature, and leering at a part of a woman's body (for instance, zooming in on the hips of women) can be obviously seen in the plots. Mostly, the role of LGBT characters are used just to tell dirty jokes about sexualities. Further, some films made jokes about the rivalry between a leading actor and a father-in-law-to-be for a leading actress – the actor tries to win the love of the actress while her father (a village/ward leader or the boss of the actor) intervenes. In these films, the women tend to be passive in the middle of men's rivalry; then the study also noticed the inclusion of many sex jokes in the plots.

Sometimes, the films use sexual violence or harassment as a beginning point of the main plot. For example, when a woman is sexually abused by a man, the consequences such as becoming pregnant, or being married to that man, become the big story ("Dear Ah Mhone" film in 2016). Likewise in the romance films, sexual harassment scenes are included because this is to show how the actor fights bad guys who are disturbing or harassing the actress. With gratitude towards the actor, a love story begins between the actor and the actress in the movie ("Ma Aye Pwint,

Myint Myint San and 30th Street" in 2016). In addition, the study also found that the films portray sexual violence as a weapon for revenge. In "Net Khet Mhar Det Teit Pwe" (2016), the actor raped a woman in order to seek revenge for being told he was gay. Sometimes, sexual harassment or domestic violence scenes are used as one of the supporting scenes. The leading actress reports to the ward/village leader or the school principal, stating that the actor or his friend intervened; the responsible person calls those men and scolds them. These scenes can be seen in romance films and are considered to be funny. In some films, the scenes including drunk men beating women are also shown to show the bad man's character.

Proverbs encouraging sexual violence are also used in films. "Kill a cat since you get married to a woman" means that to control a wife you need to kill a cat, since in the beginning of the marriage their nature is like a woman. "To be loved by a woman heartily, beat her until her bones to be broken" is another example which can be heard quite often in dialogue. Regarding representation, women are still represented with flowers. As a result, a metaphor "like a bee or a butterfly sits on a flower" is used to show sex scenes. When a woman is sexually violated, the condition is represented with the noise of a thunderstorm, a broken glass, or fallen flower petals.

### iv) Gender awareness and empowerment

Gender awareness deconstructs stereotypes with the aim to initiate change in society. Gender empowerment is something that can increase someone's capacity and ability. On the other hand, gender awareness and empowerment are related to gender discrimination, stereotypes, and violence committed. Hence, the audience receives messages about empowerment or awareness from those movies, after realizing inequality.

For instance, the video "Woman village's leader" (2016) showed how a woman tried hard to deserve this position despite being discriminated against by the community. The family inherited the village's leadership position from their ancestors. However, they were asked by the villagers to leave this position if they could not deliver a son. So, the parents hid the truth and let their daughter pretend to be a boy; then they built up her capacity. The villagers became aware of the truth some years later that she took the village's leadership position. As they trusted her ability, the village community accepted it.

Similarly, the study included two LGBT films including LGBT characters that have not been seen before. They are drama films and they did not mock LGBT characters. "Gemini" (2016) is about the love story of homosexual men. One male character was sexually abused by other men, while his boyfriend got





married to a woman. However, their love story continued secretly. This film broke the stereotypes of Myanmar people, as most of them believe that homosexual men never get married to women, and that they are always behaving like women. At the end, the screen plays a text "Love has no gender". The academy award film "Tar Tay Gyi" (2017) tells the story of a transgender woman. She is socially repressed in her surroundings, and even killed. As a powerful ghost, she tried to seek revenge against all the guys who had tortured her. One noteworthy phrase she said: "We are also human beings". Such films still remain few, but a little progress or some small changes have been made in Myanmar films.

There are some action movies in which women are playing in a leading role. But in most of the movies, characters are mainly showing off women's fighting ability, and men are also playing the role of master who teaches those women kung fu ("Saturday born girl" in 2016, and "Ta Pwint Yine" in 2017), or the role of life saver ("Ma Aye Pwint, Myint Myint San and 30th street" in 2016). Not only these action movies, but some other movies telling about maternal love, also depict how women are powerful in cultivating their children. "Eternal Mother" (2017) shows the intelligence of a mother with a sharp mind, kindness, and a woman who makes sacrifices. Moreover, the study noticed the intersectionality through some films – about a female political activist and the leader of a labor group in "Kaung Kyoe Ko Nwhite Tee Zay Min" and about a sex worker character which enhances understanding about their life in "Khouit Htee Lay Ma Lont Ta Lon".



Although only a few mainstream films have put gender awareness and empowerment scenes in their plot, there are also many documentary films and short films that talked about women's rights and gender equality. Some documentary/ short films - "Miss or Miss" (2017) about a homosexual make-up artist; "She" (2017) about three religious women from three different religions talking about humanity; diversity and peace; "Woman with a gun" (2016) about a female soldier; "Woman and Win" (2016) about a female member of parliament; "In the air" (2016) about a female pilot; "On the way" (2016) about a female taxi driver; "The scoop" (2016) about a female reporter; "Reborn" (2016) about a sexual violence survivor; "Unsilent Potato" (2016) about the police case of a woman with disability who got sexual abused by her neighbor – are significant evidence which promotes women's voices. These films were shown at the Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival in Yangon or at Wattan Film Festival for the general public.

## (VI) The challenges of the recent film industry

Regarding making new content, the study investigated the challenges of the recent film industry, specifically why the producers and filmmakers have not initiated enough change. The research team conducted 13 Key Informant Interviews with mainstream or documentary film directors, scriptwriters, actors and actresses, the responsible persons from the Myanmar Motion Picture Association; one Focus Group Discussion with censorship board members and two Focus Group Discussions with young filmmakers. The main topics being discussed during the interviews explored the reasons why the number of films with female leads has remained low, the views on mushroomed films mocking LGBT characters, the needs and gaps of the film industry, and the censorship law.

### i) Actor oriented market

The influence of popular actors was one of the common responses from the participants regarding trends in the movie market. This trend is concerned with the country's economic condition and technological development. Since Myanmar was identified as the Least Development Country in 1987, the country's economy was stagnant and the film market decreased. The reason was that film production was demanding high investment. At that same time, video



tapes, or VCD/DVD in the late 1990s, often replaced films. Also, the video/CD/DVD player could be bought by families. In Myanmar, since video production focuses more on home-based entertainment, production requires only a small budget. As a result, the number of films declined from 70 in the 1970s to about a dozen in 2010. In contrast, the production of videos increased. It was estimated that 800 videos were produced in a year – that has been happening until 2012. After 2012, investors regained their interest in film production and the number of films has increased gradually year by year.

In the growth of video production, the movie market has become an actor-based market. The producers used to sell films with the name of the actor to the local distributor before the video tape/DVD came out. This is called the “pre” system. Based on the popularity of the actor, the returned profit is assured. This trend resulted in the rise of actor-led film production.

***“Actors are the king of the scene. The producers have to use only the directors and actresses whom are favored by the leading actors.”***

[A female script writer, 37]

Creation of the stories based on actors supports a strong patriarchal system. According to the findings from the interviews, the study indicated that this male-dominated industry has come to undermine the role of other genders, not only women's.

***“The creation of well-organized stories has been in decline. The script is sometimes written on the scene as it has not been well prepared beforehand. If the actor requested to revise the script, the writer has to rewrite it. If needed, LGBT characters have to be used to support the role of actor or to shake the plot with fun.”***

(A male director, 55)

LGBT characters are allowed to play not only in the supporting role, but also in leading roles, but in such a film where the actor is transgender, finally he falls in love with a girl and his character is turned into a straight man. Though such films are not realistic, most of them are box-office hits.

## ii) A pot with many holes

The production of quality movies has been in decline for many reasons, such as lack of human resource, knowledge gaps, and need of infrastructure, such as studios and adequate number of movie theatres.

### Lack of human resource

During the Focus Group Discussion with young male and female filmmakers or even in the key informant interviews, the respondents mostly highlighted that there are not enough good script writers. This

impacts the quality of content produced in movies. Professional script writers and production teams cannot be recruited in each sector. For example:

***“Generally in this industry, the production team does not have costume designer. Sometimes, they have to reduce the role of supporting actors, because the producers want to reduce the budget amount as much as they can.”***

(A male director/actor, 57)

The trend seems to favor the actor-based market. According to the respondents, the study noticed that the popular actors and actresses require about 10-14 days for shooting a film. In contrast, for the fresh generation, either new directors or actors, their effort is not easily recognized by the popular-based industry. Thus, the number of DVDs released in a year has been around 800 – so that the quality of a movie is in question. As long as the market and the production rely on popularity of the actors, the role of other people such as script writers and film directors have been fading. Some movie makers pointed out that this trend has developed due to the audience's favorite scenes and their applause. In contrast, some respondents claimed that the producers are too profit-oriented.

***“Based on the audience's preference, the producers just follow this trend and they are not willingness to change or they haven't tried anything for a change. Their interest is just a profit.”***

(A female filmmaker/script writer, 25)

As a result, the low-budget movies with low quality have been produced. In the process of creating content, it is difficult to consider ethical issues, such as “do no harm principles” pertaining to different gender and disabilities.

### Knowledge gap

Under the military regime, words such as “human rights”, “democracy” and “freedom of speech” were strictly banned from being used in films or other art works. Similarly, the contents somehow related to those rights-based issues were not allowed to be screened. Avoidance of risky issues and producing only the films that were permitted by the censorship board strictly limited freedom of expression. Later, the creators, such as directors and script writers, became ignorant about human rights. Consequently, they became unaware of the ethical issues related to the rights.

Another problem is the understanding of the people from the Myanmar's film industry. They believe that only the movies related to the revolution of dictatorship would be concerned with human rights and democracy. They do not know that a human rights based approach should be applied as a mainstreaming





approach to every issue – this is not only related to the oppression by the military. The research findings indicated that the film industry needs to provide awareness about human rights and how they could create rights-based films without saying the words “human rights” aloud.

***“To say the truth, it is concerned with the level of education of the whole population in our country. The audiences as well as the filmmakers have lost critical thinking skill and ethical consideration as they did not learn about civic education.”***

(A male film director, 42]

On the other hand, some film festivals focusing on awareness raising about human rights have been organized after 2010. Wathann Film Festival selected around 20 short/documentary/new vision films every year since 2011 – thus, the filmmakers have an opportunity to show their creativity as they wish through films. Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival screened 177 local short/documentary films and 139 international short/documentary films from 2013 to 2017. Most of them featured themes including women's rights and women's empowerment, LGBT's rights, child's rights, peace, and the rights of people with disabilities. LGBT's Film Festival was also organized since 2014 at the French Institute for the LGBT community's empowerment.

However, some filmmakers thought that these festivals did not have much impact on the mainstream film industry to make a change, as the nature of mainstream films and short/documentary films are different. Short/documentary films may have an intention to raise awareness, or their films are more likely to use expressionism; while mainstream films are produced for art's value and a commercial success. In contrast, some filmmakers expected that short/documentary films can indirectly make a difference in the recent film industry. They assumed that if the audience receives awareness about human rights and knows more about gender awareness through some short/documentary films, their response to unethical films will change gradually.

However, one of the members of the censorship board claimed that most of the filmmakers are already aware of ethical issues and human rights, particularly not to put scenes related to sexual harassment or scenes which are degrading the dignity of people with disabilities. But those people have committed the abuses through their films, particularly comedy, as they could not give up their belief that those comedy films including sex jokes could possess the biggest market share. In this light, it is evident that people from the Myanmar's film industry need human rights awareness programs when engaging with the production of quality films. Not



only in the content, but the filmmakers also need to know that a rights-based approach should be applied in all (pre- and post-) production stages.

#### **Need of infrastructure**

Insufficient film production equipment and lack of studio space is one of the challenges raised by the filmmakers in Myanmar. It is probably less important in production of quality films if compared to the need of good scripts. Regardless, this challenge should be considered as well, since this is an issue for the development of the creative industry.

Again, a decline in the number of cinemas is also a problem in post-production. Within three decades, the peak of 244 cinemas has declined to 71 cinemas recently around the country, and the development of cinemas has been an ongoing project led by the responsible people from MMPO and interested business people.. The current practiced system is that the films which please the cinema's owner can be shown first to the audience. As film production has been booming again after 2012, about 80 films have been produced a year. The inadequate number of cinemas creates a challenge in screening all movies. Up to August 2018, there were over 300 films that have been on the waiting list. In this case, the producers want to produce only the films (particularly comedy) which can make a profit and

can be accepted by cinema owners. These barriers have negative impacts on the quality of content creation in an indirect way.

#### **iii) Censorship – A controversial issue**

Soon after the Myanmar's film industry began in 1920, the first censor board was formed with ten British officials, including the Commissioner of Police in Yangon, to check for scenes which were inappropriate for families to watch together, or were not appropriate to show to the public, as those scenes were likely to encourage sexual desire. Myanmar films at that time were checked or inspected according to the Indian parliament's amended law. Specifically, they used a straightforward censorship system such as banning scenes: cutting scenes as necessary in films that encouraged national spirit for the independence movement. After 1926 and after WW II from 1947 to 1949, Myanmar officials were recruited to the censor board, but the idea was more about sustainability of the power of the ruling government.

In the reform process of the censor board in the revolutionary led government era in 1964, officials from the Ministry of Information, Myanmar Socialist Party members, Military Intelligence, and officers from the Central Security Department and Administration Committee were board members. The central police department and the military air force gained membership roles on the censor board in 1968. The current censor board is comprised of five film professional experts and five government personnel from culture, police, and religious departments.

As in the British era, the censor board is more concentrated on sustaining the power of the ruling party. The current censor board's practice has been more focused on preserving culture, and protecting the nation's three main causes: (i) Non disintegration of the union; (ii) Non disintegration of national solidarity; and (iii) Consolidation of sovereignty. It is giving less attention to the scenes which include harassment towards women, child rights, and people with disabilities. Only significant sex scenes are prohibited. As there is a slogan which states "Myanmar



films shall represent Myanmar culture”, the Myanmar’s film industry’s Diamond jubilee ceremony was also celebrated in with six causes based on Myanmar traditional cultures. When discussing “culture”, there is not a definitive definition. For women in most cases, people are defined by dress or clothing, and the way of living (smoking or drinking) scenes in the films.

***“The slogan of the Ministry of Information is “to inform, to educate, and to entertain”. But “educating” seems to be talking about the ruling government’s agenda.”***

(A male filmmaker, 38)

***“A film whether it can pass the censorship or not depends on the recent mood of censor board. Sometimes, they make remarks like “inappropriate scenes for Myanmar’s culture” and “unrealistic plots”. We don’t even know what it means.”***

(An actor, 55)

***“The censor board did not allow the LGBT persons for the main characters. Even if they were given the main role, it could be only in the comedy. Otherwise in the drama film, one of the characters has to say something like homosexual or man-to-man’s love is abnormal; for example, “Gemini”.***

(A male filmmaker, 40)

From the perspective of the censor board, many high quality films were produced even under close scrutiny of the censor board under the military regime before 1988. Later, the number of low quality movies has increased – which depends on the film producers and directors, as they want to make a profit easily. The censor board members opinion is that a decrease in the quality of content is not concerned with “censorship”. Mostly, the censor board referred to the filmmakers’ weakness in making strong plots and their lack of awareness.

***“Censor board is not screwing the filmmakers; we are just helping them. Sometimes in the film, the director may put a scene on the court. At this moment, the court in the film is different with the real one outside. So, we have to call the responsible person and ask to correct it. Here some filmmakers are very careless in what they are doing.”***

(One of the censor board members)

***“Though censor board was formed, we rarely give a punishment to someone who violates the law. We just call and discuss; and encourage to change the inappropriate scenes – that is what we have practiced. Sometimes, we have seen that some movies are put sex scenes in order to attract the movie-goers – this is not the right way.”***

(One of the censor board members)



On the side of filmmakers, they have also raised many questions for the censor board. For instance, in the case of a LGBT short film “A Simple Love Story” was banned at the Watthan Film Festival in 2017. In the film, there is no sex scene, it just tells a story about homosexual’s love. Similarly, there has been an unusual case which happened in “Gemini” film – as the censor board had a concern about whether the title of the movie was acceptable for the Myanmar Astrologist Association or not.

Under U Thein Sein’s administration, the 1997 Censorship Law was amended by reducing 10 facts to six. According to the new censorship law, though the films related to the supernatural world were allowed, restrictions still remain on some topics related to politics, unity of ethics, culture, crimes, and drugs.

***“The films have to reflect the real things happening outside. But according to the censorship, it seems we, the filmmakers, are supposed to be responsible for reducing the crime rate.”***

(An actor, 55)

However, the understanding of sexual harassment and awareness of human rights by the censor board members also needs to be examined. The human rights awareness of the censor board is always questioned when women, children, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities’ rights are ignored in the screened films. Lack of awareness, and the failure of the censorship process, is indicated when you consider that obscene sex words and sex jokes are widely used in some films. Also, even for the films mainly intending to promote gender awareness, the term “culture” used in the censorship procedure is still an obstacle in raising awareness concerning the denial of traditional beliefs. Recently in 2018, the censor board has started to make more of an effort to scrutinize the scenes related to GBV, sex jokes, and making jokes about people with disabilities, and diverse ethnicities and cultures in Myanmar.

## (VII)

# Conclusion

According to the findings from the analysis of the videos/films/documentary from 2016 and 2017, the Myanmar's film industry was not able to construct new knowledge that could encourage society to initiate change. Reflecting realities in films also has limitations, as the risks related to political sensitivity need to be avoided. On the other hand, the profit-oriented film market produced more comedy films using slapstick. No matter whether the movies are reflecting realities or making exaggerated jokes, the other important question is to examine its artistic value. It is unfortunate that the recent film industry has produced low quality films without adequate preparation for pre-production stage, without recruiting the experts, and without good plots.

Gender discrimination and stereotyping practices have not changed much in recent films, as they mirror the discriminatory practices in the real world. Yet, sometimes Myanmar films, particularly comedy films, seem to be reinforcing gender stereotypes. To answer whether it is reinforcing gender stereotyping or raising awareness by reflecting realities, our analysis indicates that recent films tend to portray traditional gender roles. For example, regarding the role of female characters and representation, recent films are using similar plots and similar metaphors again and again, which were repeatedly used old films. Also, films are giving messages that the traditional beliefs and assumptions about women are correct, and if a woman does not follow or conform to these beliefs, she will get in trouble. These messages are conveyed through dialogue or using proverbs. In this case, those films are stereotyping, rather than raising awareness about realities in society, since new thinking has not been introduced, or new ideology has been blocked from evolving.

In terms of gender-based violence, sexual harassment behavior is mostly seen the films. In the Key Informant Interviews, some filmmakers explained that some changes in characters' development are likely to be seen in some of the films released in the future. This is because some film directors are planning to create stories about women with disabilities in the leading role, or female homosexual love. This is likely to be the beginning of a new wave overcoming traditional gender stereotypes. The censor board has started educating producers about the fact that using LGBT characters to tell only dirty jokes is inappropriate.

Art for what? This still remains a question when filmmakers are encouraged to promote gender awareness through their films. Art may be for the public, or art may exist solely for art's sake. Anything is acceptable, as it depends on individual perspective. However, even the creation based on personal experiences, may somehow be related to their surroundings, tradition/culture, or political/ economy conditions within their society. As long as the art creation is connected with human society, it might impact on relationships within the artist's environment. In this light, the artist becomes responsible for what he/she creates.

In the case of Myanmar as a developing country, the film industry is not standing separately from the development process of the country. The film industry was initiated by the documentary of the funeral of U Tun Shein (one of the political activists for independence) in 1920. Most of the people involved in that industry were involved in the independence movement during the British Colonial period. Such inputs and collaboration within the film industry have been seen recently in the voter education campaign in 2010 and 2015 during the democratic transition period. Then there has been evidence led by the filmmakers regarding donations for survivors of the civil war, huge floods, and fire to earn people's admiration. Owing to these reasons, it is obvious that filmmakers are given a higher social rank by the people in order to lead a change for the country.

To conclude, this study promoted the principle that Myanmar films should be ethical and responsible by respecting the dignity of other people, regardless of gender. Gender mainstreaming is an approach to be applied in the development process of every project. That means ethical consideration about gender should be a component of any film project from the pre-production phase. This is the primary strategy which needs to be followed. Creating more women empowerment films is also encouraged; this would be the second priority, since it as an advantage.

Who is responsible? Not only the filmmakers, producers, and leading/supporting actors, script writers, but the members of the censor board are also responsible. Even the audience is also responsible for initiating change. As film is a powerful medium to construct new ideologies, the film industry is highly encouraged to change in order to be a gender transformative tool within Myanmar society.

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