

Burma: Police reforms expand women's roles

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Historically, women have not played a significant role in Myanmar's security forces. However, a master plan developed under president Thein Sein included a proposal to recruit more women into the MPF and expand the roles they perform. This has already made an impact inside and outside the country.

There was a time when there were very few women in Burma's national police force and they were practically invisible. Under an ambitious plan to enlarge, modernise and reform the MPF, however, that situation is rapidly changing. Not only are there now many more female police officers in Burma, but also their roles are expanding, both locally and internationally.

Burma had always prided itself on the fact that, compared with other Asian countries, its women enjoyed high social status.¹ They were not considered the equal of men (after all, one had to be born a man to become a Buddha), but under both custom and the law, they were accorded many rights denied to their sisters elsewhere. This picture changed after the 1962 military coup,² but women have played an important role in modern Burmese history, rising to senior positions in politics, the civil service and business.

1 Daw Mya Sein, 'The Women of Burma', *The Atlantic*, 1 February 1958, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/the-women-of-burma/306822/.

2 *The Gender Gap and Women's Political Power in Myanmar/Burma*, Report (New York: Global Justice Centre, 22 May 2013), www.globaljusticecenter.net/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=att_download&link_id=103&cf_id=34 [page discontinued] [now at www.globaljusticecenter.net/publications/advocacy-resources/267-the-gender-gap-and-women-s-political-power-in-myanmar-burma].

There were some occupations, however, for which women were seen as unsuitable, such as the armed forces and the police. In the latter case, this posed problems, as it was considered unacceptable for men to physically restrain women at demonstrations, at crime scenes or in custody. Women detained by the police could only be searched by other women—sometimes requiring the force to enlist the help of members of the public.

During the British colonial period, this problem became acute when women protested against the denial of female representation and voting rights (granted in 1929) and, during the 1930s, became more active in the nationalist movement. Occasionally, the wives of local police officers were recruited for temporary duty, but Burma remained well behind metropolitan Britain, where policewomen were on the beat from 1914.³

After Burma regained its independence in 1948, the new government faced similar problems. Yet it was not until 1959 that the then Burma Police established a women's division. In 1960, it accepted five female recruits.⁴ In 1964, the renamed People's Police Force recruited 25 women. Over the next 25 years, intakes of women were still infrequent, but class sizes began to number in the hundreds. In those days, female officers tended to be restricted to routine administrative and traffic duties.

At present, only about 4 per cent of the MPF are women. This compares with 3.5 per cent in Indonesia, 6 per cent in Thailand, 12 per cent in Malaysia and 16 per cent in Singapore. However, according to its latest master plan—under which the force will be expanded from 72,000 to 155,000 total personnel—the MPF hopes to increase its female component to 25 per cent. This is roughly comparable with countries such as Australia.⁵

If successful, this move would not only see the MPF reflect Burmese society more accurately (about 52 per cent of Burma's population is female),⁶ but also help it embrace a modern 'community policing' model.

3 'Some 95 Years of Women Police Officers', *Mirror*, [London], 20 September 2009, www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/some-95-years-of-women-police-officers-419827.

4 'Burma Policewomen Will Go Home with Fresh Ideas', *Singapore Free Press*, 22 September 1961, eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/freepress19610922-1.2.11.aspx.

5 Rachele Irving, *Career Trajectories of Women in Policing in Australia*, Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice No.370 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, February 2009), www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/tandi/361-380/tandi370.html [page discontinued].

6 *Republic of the Union of Myanmar, The Population and Housing Census of Myanmar, 2014: Summary of the Provisional Results* (Naypyidaw: Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, August 2014), unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010_phc/Myanmar/MMR-2014-08-28-provres.pdf [page discontinued] [now at myanmar.unfpa.org/en/publications/summary-provisional-results-0].

The MPF has already launched a vigorous recruitment program, the results of which are obvious to any visitor to Burma.⁷ Female police officers in smart new uniforms are now a common sight at airports and tourist venues. During the 2014 ASEAN summit meeting in Naypyidaw, policewomen played a prominent role directing traffic and providing security for the delegates.

Most female officers are based at MPF headquarters in Naypyidaw and in the forces of the 14 states and regions. However, they have also been posted to specialist units such as the Highway Police, the Tourist Police, the Aviation Police, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division and the Division Against Transnational Crime. They can also be found in the Criminal Investigation Department and Special Branch.

The highest-ranking female officer in the MPF is a police lieutenant colonel—a position she reached after 30 years in the force.⁸ Most other commissioned women are around the police captain level.

Women joining the MPF are required to undergo routine physical examinations, but they are not subject to the degrading virginity and beauty tests applied to female recruits in Indonesia.⁹ Other ranks are expected to remain unmarried for their first three years in the force but, after that, they can marry and have children. Female officers are entitled to 12 weeks' maternity leave. At present, about two-thirds of the women in the MPF are married.

As shown in a recent promotional video, Myanmar's 'police ladies' undergo the same training as male recruits, although some training sequences are performed separately.¹⁰ With a few exceptions, they are eligible to perform

7 Si Thu Lwin, 'Women Look to Join the Police Force', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 8 July 2013, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/7406-women-respond-to-police-force-training-call.html.

8 'Myanmar's Gender Status Analysis Gets the Go-Ahead', *News* (Yangon: United Nations Population Fund, 18 January 2015), countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/2015/01/18/11267/myanmar_rsquo_s_gender_status_analysis_gets_the_go_ahead/ [page discontinued] [now at myanmar.unfpa.org/en/news/myanmar%E2%80%99s-gender-status-analysis-gets-go-ahead].

9 Sharyn Graham Davies, 'Beautiful Virgins: The Hard Road to Becoming an Indonesian Policewoman', *Asian Currents*, 21 April 2015, asaablog.tumblr.com/post/116987426401/beautiful-virgins-the-hard-road-to-becoming-an [page discontinued] [now at asaa.asn.au/beautiful-virgins-the-hard-road-to-becoming-an/].

10 Myo Chit Ko Ko, 'Myanmar Special Police Woman', *You Tube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJjQldUMTUY [page discontinued].

the same duties as men, drive motor vehicles and carry weapons. As a rule, however, they do not work night shifts, out of concern for their safety and due to Burma's conservative social mores.

There are no female officers in the MPF's Security Command, which is responsible for area security, crowd control and the protection of diplomatic missions. However, during the confrontation between police and protesters at Letpadan in March, policewomen from Bago region were deployed in an apparent attempt to present a friendlier official face.¹¹ They employed basic crowd management techniques but were withdrawn before the security battalions were sent in to break up the protest.¹²

Policewomen are still necessary for the management of female protesters.¹³ They are also called upon in cases involving women and children and sexual violence. The latter crimes tend to be underreported in official statistics, as most are handled informally through social networks and community-based organisations.¹⁴ With a larger number of female police officers, however, the MPF should be able to improve its management of gender-based offences.

There are important international dimensions to this issue. In recent years, the MPF has participated in regional meetings—for example, at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation¹⁵—that relate to female policing in Asia and the impact on women of transnational crimes such as people and narcotics trafficking. Female police officers have also attended workshops or training courses in several European countries, most ASEAN member states, the US and Australia. Participation in future UN peacekeeping operations remains an option.

11 'Myanmar Students Defy Deadline to Disperse', *BBC News*, 3 March 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31716169.

12 'First Training of Mass-Handling to Over 60 Policewomen', *Burmese Classic*, 1 November 2014, www.burmeseclassic.org/news_detail.php?id=2866&ctype=3.

13 Nobel Zaw, 'Students, Activists Allege Violence in Rangoon Protest Crackdown', *The Irrawaddy*, 6 March 2015, www.irrawaddy.org/burma/students-activists-allege-violence-in-rangoon-protest-crack-down.html.

14 David Baulk, 'Burma's "Transition" Leaves Women's Rights Behind', *New Internationalist Blog*, 3 December 2014, newint.org/blog/2014/12/03/burma-womens-rights/.

15 'The 2nd Asia Region Women Police Conference', Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 5 June 2014, 222.124.21.46/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&cid=341&Itemid=2 [page discontinued].

Inside Burma, international organisations like the UN Office on Drugs and Crime are active in this area, albeit as part of broader initiatives. To date, little has been done through bilateral schemes. However, as in other areas of security sector reform in Burma, there is scope for foreign countries to develop assistance programs specifically tailored for female officers.¹⁶ On present indications, this would be warmly welcomed by the MPF's senior leadership.

16 ActionAid, '5 Ways We Are Tackling Violence against Women in Burma', *ReliefWeb*, 15 January 2015, reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/5-ways-were-tackling-violence-against-women-myanmar.

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