

# Gathering Strength

Women from Burma on their Rights

Brenda Belak

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*Gathering Strength: Women from Burma on their Rights*

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Cover Photograph: Detail of the face of a Burmese woman wearing *Thanakha*.

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Men or women, we don't discriminate for equality in anything.  
We support this request; we all will help eagerly.

The Philippines has changed, and the power is in the hands of a woman.  
The same in Indonesia; the power is likely to go into a woman's hands.  
Soon in our country, the power will be in a woman's hands.  
They say the hand that rocks the cradle will rule the world.  
Hearing these words really make us happy.

We would like to praise the right things but condemn the wrong things.  
Nothing will happen because of fear, let's breed courage.  
If you are going to arrest us for speaking the truth, you'll just have to enclose Burma in a dungeon.

Come up with new ideas, but don't expose your breasts.  
They say that having sex with anyone you please is one's right.  
Bring about a multi-party system, but we shouldn't request the multi-husband system.

Please walk toward the parliament, don't occupy the brothels.  
It's not a right to keep women's underwear together with men's towels.  
If you are requesting this as a right, why don't you try and ask your father?  
We don't have the heart to put our underwear on your heads.  
You should know better than to keep dirty things with clean things.

Please try to be like people who go to the moon, but don't imitate those who commit adultery.  
Having sex in the presence of others, don't bring back that kind of behavior.  
Can't you even wait to be away from your father and brothers' presence? Don't get weird and kiss in front of them.  
If you have a strong hatred toward men, we're worried that you'll turn out to be a spinster.

**- a *thangyat* (verse written to be chanted during water festival festivities) sent to the Democratic Voice of Burma in 2001**

Feminists might be interested to know that Burmese women consider a "Lib Movement" unnecessary because for centuries they have enjoyed, in sound old traditions, most of the rights won by such movements elsewhere in recent times. At the same time they have no doubt, even when highly placed in their professions, of their total responsibility for cooking, serving, and cleaning up without help from the men, and with, instead, the extra work entailed by the rough nature of food supplies as well as lack of refrigeration or cheap electric power....

[L]et me say that it is every Burmese women's acknowledged aim to become a wife.... A woman has the deepest pleasure of bearing a child and suckling it with love. She can never equal a man's potentiality to achieve detachment [as Buddhism dictates]. Spiritually, therefore, he is her senior and tradition tells her to give recognition to this fact. Cook, wash, and clean house for him. Serve him first with food, speak to him in pliant ways, keep him high in family and public esteem, enjoy the prestige of his eminence and the fruits from his office, instead of seeking to cut him down in competition.

A man has this, but a woman has more worldly satisfactions: management of house, control of budget and diversion of savings to jewelry, closeness to children, awareness of details, close living with one's own blood relations after marriage.  
**- Daw Mi Mi Khaing, from her popular cookbook, Cook and Entertain the Burmese Way**

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