

Gender Rights in Transition: Navigating Burma's Evolving Political Landscape and the Path to Federalization

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Abstract

Burma's pursuit of gender equality has been deeply shaped by its complex political transitions, entrenched patriarchal norms, and ongoing struggles for democracy. This paper examines how Burma's evolving political landscape has affected the protection of gender rights and explores the prospects for advancing gender equality within the country's federalization process. Drawing on historical analysis, political developments, and federalism theory, the research highlights both long-standing structural barriers and emerging opportunities for reform.

Historically, deeply rooted cultural beliefs and patriarchal traditions have confined women to subordinate roles in both public and private life. Although constitutional guarantees, policy frameworks such as the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW), and international commitments like CEDAW have aimed to promote gender equality, implementation has remained limited. Political transitions—from colonial rule to military dominance and the quasi-democratic period—have produced uneven progress. The 2021 military coup significantly reversed earlier gains, restricting civic space and weakening women's rights movements. The paper further explores how federalism, if carefully designed, could offer new pathways for gender inclusion. Federal structures can create multiple access points for advocacy, encourage local experimentation, and enable ethnic states to develop gender-sensitive policies. However, without strong safeguards, decentralization risks reinforcing existing inequalities, especially in conservative or resource-constrained regions.

By analyzing current transitional mechanisms such as the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), the paper identifies opportunities to institutionalize gender equality within Burma's emerging federal framework. It concludes with practical recommendations, including gender quotas, constitutional protections, equitable resource-sharing, and stronger collaboration with ethnic women's organizations. Ultimately, the paper argues that Burma's federalization process represents both a challenge and a transformative opportunity to embed gender equality at the foundation of a future federal democratic union.