Women and Myanmar's "Religious Protection Laws"
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One of the most controversial political debates in Myanmar's transition has been the development and passage of a set of four "Laws for the Protection of Race & Religion." These laws, which were originally introduced by a group of monks and allied political parties in 2013, deal with interfaith marriage, religious conversion, population control, and polygamy. The international narrative surrounding these laws depicts, on the one side, a package of legislation that discriminates against women and against non-Buddhists being promoted by anti-Islamic nationalists led by Ma-Ba-Tha (the "Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion") and the 969 Movement. The legislation is opposed by civil society groups—led most vocally by women's and rights groups—who argue that the laws violate international norms and Myanmar's treaty obligations, and are likely to further inflame religious conflict. A quick review of international media coverage of the laws and domestic and international responses to them paints a picture of this opposition from civil society groups and women as widespread and coming from people of a variety of different backgrounds. Some representative titles of media articles that address the laws include "Myanmar women object to proposed restrictions on interfaith marriage" (Cherry Thein 2014), "Women's rights activists resist Myanmar's proposed 'Laws on Protection of Race & Religion'" (AWID 2014), and "Myanmar women's rights groups oppose Interfaith Marriage Act" (Thin Lei Win 2014).

Opposition from activists, led bravely by women's groups even in the face of harassment, vilification, and death threats, is an important part of this narrative and our intention in this article is not to criticize or undermine it. Yet this simplistic binary narrative of opposition ignores the appearance of widespread support for the laws not only among large swaths of the male population (including many MPs), but also among some women. How are we to explain the fact that some groups of women in Myanmar would back a set of laws that other groups of women claim will be bad for women? By taking seriously the reasoning behind broad-based societal support for the laws—including support from women—we highlight certain women's voices and concerns that are being ignored in the dominant narratives and identify ways in which those opposed to the laws can acknowledge and engage with those women's perspectives. Understanding women's support for the laws as a rational decision is an approach that women's rights groups ought to adopt for ideological reasons. But more than that, we argue that it will also assist in formulating more effective strategies for reaching those women and opposing the laws

and could generate insights for expanding paths to female opportunity and prestige within Myanmar society more generally.

Myanmar's "Laws for the Protection of Race & Religion"

The contemporary religious protection laws are not without precedent in Myanmar's modern history, especially the law pertaining to inter-religious marriage. Previous incarnations include the 1872 Special Marriage Act, the 1939 Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Succession Bill, and its 1954 update. The social, political, and economic contexts of these earlier laws have been well-described by previous scholars, including Chie Ikeya (2011) and Tharaphi Than (2014).

The laws' current incarnations entered the public discourse in June 2013, when U Wirathu, a prominent monk who was at the time rapidly becoming the face of the 969 Movement, introduced a draft of the law that would restrict inter-religious marriage at a monk's conference in Yangon (Lawi Weng 2013). This draft mandated that Buddhist women planning to marry a man of another faith had to seek official permission from local authorities. It also included a clause that a man wishing to marry a Buddhist woman was required to convert to Buddhism (Mahtani 2013). At the beginning of July, the National Democratic Force (NDF) party announced plans to develop and submit a similar law to Myanmar's Parliament, with a party leader explaining that their law would differ slightly from the 969 version and that they were introducing it with the intention of protecting poor Buddhist women from being exploited by men of other religions who would "take advantage" of their "impoverished circumstances" (Irrawaddy 2013).

Although initial reaction to U Wirathu's proposition of the law was mixed, monks and laypeople associated with the 969 Movement quickly launched a nationwide signature campaign in support of the legislation that claimed to have gathered 2.5 million signatures by the middle of July 2013 (Zarni Mann and Michaels 2013). By that time, three additional laws had been added (related to population control, religious conversion, and polygamy) and the entire package of four "Race and Religion Protection Laws" was submitted to Parliament that month along with the signatures.

The bills initially languished in Parliament but the first nationwide conference of Ma-Ba-Tha in early 2014 provided impetus for President Thein Sein to take action and he sent the bills to Speaker of Parliament Thura Shwe Mann in February 2014 (Eleven News 2014). After some procedural wrangling, the relevant ministries and government bodies were assigned the task of drafting new legislation dealing with these four subjects. An endorsement from senior monks of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (the highest religious body in the country) in June

2014 (Aung Kyaw Min 2014) added more momentum, and the revised bills were submitted to Parliament by the president in November 2014. The population control bill was the first to be passed by Parliament in May 2015, followed by the interfaith marriage bill in July and the remaining two bills in August.

Justifications for the laws have often argued that they are necessary in order to better protect women. Daw Khin Saw Wai, an MP from the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) has said that the laws would improve the circumstances of Muslim women in Rakhine State: "[Rohingyas][1] in Rakhine State have many wives. People who really lose human rights are these [Rohingya] women because they are afraid of telling their husbands what difficulties they are facing and what they feel" (Radio Free Asia 2014). U Dhammapiya, a monk who helped to write the original drafts of the laws, argued that "Many incidents [of forced conversion] happen, so this marriage law is to help the women do something" (Ferrie 2014). In one of the more blatantly dismissive comments on the need for the laws, U Aung Myaing, chairperson of the Theravada Dharma Network, stated that "our Buddhist women are not intelligent enough to protect themselves" from the predations of Muslim men seeking to marry and convert them (Democratic Voice of Burma 2013).

While the laws have been championed by prominent and influential monks and appear to have widespread support among Parliamentarians, opposition has come from several quarters. Within Myanmar, coalitions of civil society organizations (CSOs) have issued statements on multiple occasions, declaring the bills to be religiously discriminatory (especially towards Muslims), in violation of women's rights, in contravention of international treaties to which Myanmar is a signatory, and in violation of the freedom of religion that is guaranteed by Myanmar's 2008 Constitution. The first public opposition to the laws from CSOs came in May 2014, when a group of 130 issued a statement condemning the laws and declaring the issue to be a political smokescreen in advance of the 2015 elections (Shwe Aung and Solomon 2014).

In response, a statement from Ma-Ba-Tha called them "traitors on national affairs" and suggested that they were working on behalf of foreign organizations (Nyein Nyein 2014). After having been publicly demonized by the monastic-led organization, some members of these CSOs received death threats by phone, text, and on social media (Yen Snaing 2014). However, they continued their opposition, renewing the public campaign against the laws when they were introduced into Parliament in early 2015 by releasing a statement endorsed by 180 CSOs that contained a comprehensive critique of various aspects of all four laws and called on Myanmar's Parliament to drop them all from consideration (Radio Free Asia 2015).

International governments and organizations have been firm and persistent in their denunciations of the laws since they were first suggested by U Wirathu. Groups such as Human Rights Watch, the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, and Fortify Rights have made public statements against the proposed laws in the last two years. In March 2015, Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists issued a detailed legal analysis of the ways in which the proposed laws were either discriminatory or in contravention of various international conventions.[2] In a minor divergence from the dominant view among critical international organizations, these two groups called for complete rejection of the bills on inter-faith marriage and religious conversion but "significant revisions and the inclusion of adequate safeguards" on the two bills dealing with polygamy and population control. UN representatives (including Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt, and Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Rita Izsak) and individual country representatives (including the US and Canadian Ambassadors for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein and Andrew Bennett, respectively) have all made comments criticizing the bills, including as recently as May 2015, when the government passed the population control law (United Nations 2015).

There is, then, a dominant narrative visible in international media surrounding the laws, one that pits international organizations and some civil society groups in Myanmar against a coalition of monk-led nationalist groups pushing discriminatory laws that are accepted by a government that is either just as anti-Muslim as the laws' creators or scared to be seen opposing anything that claims to be "defending Buddhism" in an election year. While this certainly describes one set of important responses, it ignores or implicitly dismisses an equally important question: why does there appear to be so much support for these laws across a wide range of the Buddhist population in Myanmar? Similarly, if these laws are alleged to be "bad for women," why is there evidence that at least some groups of women are supporting the laws and even actively campaigning for them?

Women's Status in Myanmar: Past and Present

One of the more common explanations of widespread grassroots support for this legislation takes a political economy approach, considering the benefits for various actors either directly through the enactment of the legislation or simply through the expanded profile of an individual or a group in campaigning on behalf of the laws. There are multiple versions of this explanation.[3] One version considers the potential benefits to local Buddhist actors (business people or politicians in particular) that would come either from fomenting communal conflict or

from laws that restrict the rights of Muslims (even if these laws do not deal directly with economic matters). Another takes into account the contentious politicking over resource management, especially in resource-rich areas of Myanmar, again noting the utility of the laws in constraining Muslim (or non-Buddhist) actors seeking to assert a claim to resources. A third version looks at the somewhat shadowy role of military and political figures in encouraging or supporting violence, sometimes arguing that instability in areas of resource extraction or critical infrastructure (the Shwe Gas pipeline going through Rakhine State is a frequently-cited example) creates a justification for more direct state or military control over the resources and the income generated.

While these are compelling arguments to explain certain actors' advocacy for the laws, women's support for the package of proposed legislation problematizes political economy approaches, precisely because it is not clear what women stand to gain from the laws' enactment. Rather, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of Burmese ontological security (Giddens 1991), paths to prestige (Ortner & Whitehead 1981), and perceived and embodied vulnerability (Butler 2014), as they intersect and inform men and women's reasoned participation and agency. In what follows we draw on studies of gender and power in Myanmar as well as other literature from anthropology and gender studies to consider the most effective lenses for understanding women's support of these laws before turning to empirical data from inside Myanmar.

Historically, foreign (and indeed Burmese) scholars of Myanmar have tended to see women as relatively "high status" in comparison to the position of women in South or Eastern Asia (for an oft-cited example from Burma's post-independence period, see [Daw] Mya Sein 1958). Such assessments have been, in large part, drawn from women's relative public visibility, participation in trade and traditional role as business and family financial managers, and right to marry, divorce, and inherit property. Post-colonial gender scholars like Chie Ikeya (2006) and Tharaphi Than (2014), however, have convincingly demonstrated that though the perception of Burmese women's "high status" has been pervasive in academia, contemporary interpretations should reexamine this assumption. Than, for instance, notes that while women may have been treated as equal to men with regard to freedom of movement and issues of commerce and ownership, they were quite clearly distinguished from men at the level of prestige. A slightly different argument has been put forward by Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi that, although Burmese women did enjoy a comparatively remarkable position in Burmese society in previous eras (even compared to women in the West in certain ways), this position has gradually eroded and declined under the influence of prolonged colonialism, nationalism, and especially militarization (Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2013, 2014). Nonetheless, many—including nationally prominent or elite women—

continue to argue for the persistence of women's high status in current Burmese society. That the notion of Burmese women's high status persists, and is encouraged by various members of Burmese elite society, is itself of interest; however, it is also clear that such interpretations of gender relations have been greatly influenced by Western ideas about commerce and law.

While legally, women had and have rights and freedoms on par with men, focusing on the juridico-political domain alone tends to overlook if not ignore prevailing beliefs surrounding women's ritual impurity, which reveal the social and cultural limitations on the interpretation of those rights and freedoms. Women are spiritually inferior to men in Burmese cosmology, and the handling of money, and other objects in the secular realm, is thought to be spiritually polluting (Ikeya 2006). In Buddhist Myanmar, women are expected to abide by a series of routine interdictions that serve to prevent female bodies from occupying superior (above or to the right) spatial orientation to male bodies (Jordt 2007). Should a woman dry the garments she wears on the lower part of her body on lines above men's heads, sleep with her head higher than her husband's, or on his right side, she may reduce his *hpon*—the glory, power and influence accumulated by past meritorious deeds (Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2013). Though scholars debate the continued direct influence of *hpon* as a conceptual category in daily life, the behaviors live on in habitus (Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2015). Even Burmese nuns (*thilashin*) are subordinate to male monks, occupying a liminal position between the material and sacred worlds, simultaneously renouncing the profane and managing it, thus protecting monks from pollution vis-à-vis their handling of the food and money necessary to sustain the *sangha* (monastic community) (Kawanami 2013; Jordt 2007).

With regard to the current religious protection laws, that gender roles are being redefined through law would suggest a fundamental shift in the relations between people—but we cannot assume this to mean simply the relationship between men and women, extrapolating that the recent move toward openness and democracy has affected the position of women, which has in turn evoked a repressive reaction from men. Women's support, for one, makes this argument unlikely. Rather, it is helpful to look at changes in relations between various members of society, between society and the government, and between society and the region. For example, Myanmar's slow move toward democracy has opened space for the international community and a relatively small contingent of democratic activists within the country to press for a variety of legal and political recognitions that are perceived by some to have the potential to undermine the desire for a Myanmar governed by and for the Burmese people. Whilst international and progressive factions merely interpret this as a reasonably democratic call for universal participation, another unavoidable aspect of democratic association is of determining who exactly

has claims to be a part of the political community. To put it more directly, democracy has been equal parts driven by the desire for self-rule and the desire to maintain a degree of cultural and ethnic hegemony and to police political boundaries.

Not only does the push for universal liberal democracy in Myanmar unsettle the power dynamics between the Burman Buddhist majority and ethnic or religious minorities, it re-opens for debate the very notion of who is, and who should be, Myanmar, and what benefits and privileges those admitted to Myanmar national identity ought to have. The desire for access to global markets and flows of goods exists alongside a desire for the right of selective association. To further complicate the situation, intensive coverage in recent years of the insecurity and instability of the Middle East have compounded fears that Myanmar is losing its geographic insulation from the perceived threat of nearby non-Buddhist majority countries and from a rapidly-growing global Muslim population more generally. Burmese Buddhist perceptions of Muslim-dominated (or at least Muslim-sympathetic) international media, large flows of capital from oil-rich Muslim nations in the Middle East and Central and South Asia, and international sympathy towards the plight of the Rohingya all combine to bolster a threat narrative that sees the "legitimate" holders of national identity in Myanmar in danger of having their land, resources, religion, and sovereignty stripped from them (Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2015).

Explaining Women's Support for the Religious Protection Laws

Examined from this angle, evidence suggests these laws are not merely an expression or manipulation of a desire for power and control, but also a reaction to ontological insecurity—a fear of uncertainty that in turn threatens identity (Mitzen 2006)—and precarity, which is the anxiety-inducing realization that wellbeing is constituted by our being "socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (Butler 2004: 20). It is not unusual, as such, for the experience of ontological insecurity and precarity to generate social expressions of these anxieties, as well as culturally specific constructions of a dangerous and threatening "Other," which in turn serves to clarify expectations for moral behavior. In the case of Myanmar, the various constructions of Muslim "others" have been well-documented over the past few years (Walton and Hayward 2014; Kyaw San Wai 2014; Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2015; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2015). The social expressions (which include, but are not limited to the religious protection laws) can be usefully examined as localized examples of "moral panics" and "folk devils," the content of which offer insight into the fears and uncertainties that generate them.

Moral panics are generally understood to be episodes of exaggerated anxiety, fear, and anger over a perceived threat to social order (Cohen 2002). Alarming media stories, rather than personal experiences of threat or violence, often drive the social response to moral panics, and reactive laws and public policies often serve to reinforce them (Krinsky 2013). The four religious laws benefit from being examined as a response to a moral panic because in that way we understand them as having emerged from a social and cultural process, rather than having been purely the result of political machinations or manipulations. As Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994: 37-43) suggest, moral panics are defined by: a measurable increase in the level of anxiety arising from the conviction that a group's behaviors pose a substantial threat to society; hostility to the source of the alleged social menace, specifically a readily identifiable group; consensus or substantial agreement that a threat to society exists; a disproportionate sense of threat in comparison to the measurable or demonstrable level of danger posed; and volatility.

While it is possible to look at the post-2010 Burmese world as one experiencing a profound ontological rupture, this would deny the fact that Burmese society has experienced regular periods of anxiety and change, certainly over the past two centuries. For instance, fear of the inevitable decline and disappearance of the *sangha*, and the resulting need for politically-backed protection of the *sasana* (Buddhist religion and religious community)—the very fear that has enabled, in part, the role that Ma-Ba-Tha enjoys in contemporary politics—was also present at the core of the moral panic which appeared at the turn of the 20th century, during a period of pro-Buddhist activism and anti-colonial fervor (Turner 2014). The fall of the Konbaung dynasty in 1885 produced anxiety that Burma, tied administratively to India by the British, would be overwhelmed both demographically and culturally. These fears seemed to be confirmed by increased Indian immigration and the continued reliance of the British on Indian personnel in government, security and policing, and modern enterprise. As in the contemporary era, the focal point of concerns in the first few decades of the 20th century was Buddhism, especially the existential threat to Buddhism from a non-Buddhist colonial regime that either ignored or actively undermined Buddhist institutions in Burmese society.

There are obvious parallels to the narrative at play in contemporary Myanmar; the opening of the country to global trade and movement, as well as the aspirations of many for increased democratization, can be understood as unsettling identities, particularly those identities which are defined in relation to others. The inward turn toward Buddhism, as a means of addressing this precarity of identity, emerges in both instances. We can also see complementary impulses to champion and protect Buddhism, for example, in a renewed interest in religious education. In the case of turn-of-the-century Burma, the moral panic was tempered by a renewed

interest particularly in the religious education of men and boys (Turner 2014; Khammai Dhammasami 2004),[4] as the colonial government's stated policy of religious neutrality and the spread of Christian mission schools were seen as direct threats. Many organizations were established to revitalize the faith: a Buddhist school at Moulmein (Mawlamyine), the Buddhist Missionary Association in Mandalay, the Ashoka Society in Bassein (Pathein), branches of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), and Dhamma schools in many parts of Burma. These were in addition to the lay study and meditation groups that were popularized across the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly by the famous monk Ledi Sayadaw (Braun 2013). Today we also see a renewal of interest in Buddhist education to complement other avenues of protecting or strengthening the religion, reflected in the dramatic increase in the number of Dhamma schools taught by organizations across the country, including Ma-Ba-Tha (Walton 2014).

These two periods of moral panic share some similarities, notably the fear that Buddhism is threatened by an external actor and religious force. They also had an important focus on religious education, although during the colonial period this mostly applied to young men, as girls generally did not have the same schooling opportunities.[5] One of the more important differences in the respective focal points of the moral panic, however, is in the regulation of women's conduct. While marriage outside of race, nationality, and/or religion was also a concern during the colonial period, of particular concern in today's discourse is the degree to which the reproductive habits of women (and control over those habits) are central to processes designed to mitigate risk and threat.

What does this shift tell us about the changing nature of these anxieties? It is useful to approach this question through examining a key output of moral panics: "folk devils." Folk devils, a term popularized by Stanley Cohen (2002), can tell us a lot about expectations for individual moral behavior, serving quite effectively as a foil for ideas about what makes a good person in a particular time and place. It is then notable that, whereas the folk devil of the early nationalist period was an Indian or South Asian migrant of any religion (or a European government official, standing in as a representative of the exploitative colonial state), the contemporary folk devil is not just a Muslim man, but a wealthy, sexually rapacious one. This folk devil is not only portrayed as a threat to Buddhist women but may be read as a foil to the ideally austere and celibate Buddhist monk. Such a construction of threatening Muslim masculinity proves intensely problematic when paired with fears of a diminishing Buddhist majority.

The demographic fears are also exacerbated by the newly expanding liberal democratic context, in which economic power and numbers can generate political influence. We might suggest, from this evidence, that the anxiety that fuels the moral panic is at least in part derived from concerns over perceived changes or threats to Burmese Buddhist men's access to the commercial networks and political opportunities which can confer not only wealth but also prestige. Where previously, such anxieties over access might have been resolved by a turn to the monastery as a means of achieving this prestige, new avenues have become available, though they are not always clear, and competition is fierce. However, one pathway remains clear—raising Buddhist children and building strong and devout Buddhist families.

As Ortner and Whitehead (1981) have argued, exploring the basis of prestige in society helps to make visible the roles of women as well as the institutional impediments they face. They posit two avenues or modes of attaining prestige: ascription and achievement. Given that women do not hold the same inborn spiritual prestige as men, it is not women's participation in the study and practice of Buddhism, or even the religious education of children that is emphasized. Rather, a woman's prestige is based primarily on her reproductive value. Such prestige has to be granted, that is, recognized by others as achievement, and consequently one has to strive to retain it. Indeed, "prestige is … the outcome of interaction between one person, another, and significant third parties" (Goode 1978: 18). The perpetuation of the notion of women's high status in Myanmar has elided these forms of prestige under other avenues, such as education and wealth. However, these paths are not readily available to the majority of Burmese women, nor is turning to the monastery generally recognized socially as a means by which women can attain prestige and security (Kawanami 2013; Ei Cherry Aung 2015).[6]

Women must also navigate confining roles within marriages and families, producing additional fear, anxiety or unhappiness. While entering the monastery offers other ways of living in the world, it too falls short of enabling the majority of *thila shin* to freely pursue their spiritual and ethical objectives, as most women remain indelibly tied to familial obligations outside the monastery. In a highly restricted context like this, supporting 969, Ma-Ba-Tha or the religious protection laws can be a way for women to take a leading role in the protection of Buddhism — a central and well-regarded means of merit-making and one that moves beyond the socially allotted role of simply re-producing Buddhist babies. Prevented from obtaining traditional positions of religious authority, it's unsurprising that some women would embrace these avenues as a way of claiming or asserting a religious identity and achieving the religious objectives that are limited by their role within lay and monastic society.

However, there is another dimension to consider, one that appears to be even more influential in the Burmese case, at least for some groups of women. As argued previously, the tendency to see women as high status or to assume that they have relatively greater protections of their rights compared to women in other places overlooks the very real risks they face as victims of violence and abuse. Their lives are precarious in the other sense of the term—physically precarious. Very little has been done to address this precarity by previous military governments, the current government, or, for that matter, the international community. As Judith Butler points out, the visibility of vulnerability can be a powerful tool for group action and protest (Butler 2015). As such, there may be huge gains for women by using this platform to expose their vulnerability, even if the secondary effect is the passage of laws that are themselves restrictive of women's rights. Women fear violence and rape (as demonstrated through the interview data in the following section) but the government (and Myanmar society more generally) has continuously ignored these issues and the existing legal (and social) framework does little to protect women.

The leading voices of Ma-Ba-Tha and 969 use and play upon these fears and insecurities of the risk of rape even if their rendering of this discourse portrays the threat as coming solely from Islam and Muslim men. Following this line of analysis, although the Ma-Ba-Tha/969 narrative is ultimately reflective of anxieties that stem from fears of the eroding of Burmese Buddhist men's prestige, their enhanced attention to women's concerns regarding physical and sexual violence is at least still *something*, in the eyes of women. These dynamics are probably most clearly reflected through the views of Buddhist women in Rakhine State.

Women's Narratives of Insecurity in Rakhine State

In May 2012, Ma Thida Htwe, a 26-year-old woman of Thabye Chaung village in Rakhine state, was gang raped by three young Muslim men and later murdered.[7] Her mutilated body was found near a Muslim village in Rakhine state. According to Khin U Tha,[8] who lives in the same village, the breasts, earlobes and other female organs of Thida Htwe's body were cut off and displayed on her chest. Because of the condition of the remains, the authorities did not allow other women to see her body; she heard this from someone else who saw the body.[9] The incident sparked fear and anger among Rakhine and other groups in Myanmar, leading to the worst series of deadly communal clashes in Myanmar in decades, with riots in June and October 2012 leaving 200 dead and thousands displaced.

Both local and international media have taken an approach to reporting on these clashes that uses a "victimization" lens, albeit from starkly contrasting perspectives. While international

actors and media have portrayed the conflict as the Muslim Rohingya minority group being inhumanely treated by Buddhist Burmese, Burmese local media and domestic discourses on social media portrayed a different picture. To them, they have been good hosts but are now in danger of being swallowed up as a religious and national community by Muslims and face the additional challenge of being the victims of bias from the international community. Strikingly, although both global and local communities have used approaches to this issue based on sympathy to the concerns and suffering of specific communities, the security and safety of women (particularly Rakhine women, given that it was the case that sparked the riots) were not a significant part of their focus.

While much of the domestic and international coverage focuses on aspects of religion and race in the conflicts, many women in Rakhine state view Ma Thida Htwe's rape and murder as a reminder of the danger that Rakhine women are facing. Khin U Tha, a 38-year-old married woman, explained:

> We did not worry about our safety before, I mean before Thida Htwe. But the accident of Thida Htwe reminded us how dangerous our lives are in Rakhine state. Why should we worry about our safety in our land? Shouldn't we live in peace in our home? No because we have to live with these perpetrators. They pose a danger to us at any time, any day. We could face a similar fate to Thida Htwe. Who knows? Who protects us? Not our government, not the UN and not the international community. No one cares.[10]

As a minority group, Rakhines do not feel they have a true sense of equal citizenship and political equality compared to that of the majority of Burmans. But in addition to this sense of being a numerical minority nationwide, many also express a concern that their numerical majority in their own state is being threatened. In doing this, they make reference to their own memories and their elders', explaining how they witnessed the way in which the "Bengalis" came to live in Rakhine state. Even those who acknowledge that some groups of Muslims have lived in Rakhine state for many years are quick to point out that there were not as many Muslims as there are today. Daw Nyo Aye, chair of the Rakhine Women's Network, has expressed this fear succinctly, in a way that weaves together Rakhine identity, Myanmar national identity, and a collective Buddhist identity: "We Rakhines are strongly guarding Myanmar's western door. We are worried that this country will not remain Buddhist" (Belford 2014).

The case of Thida Htwe is an indicator of the worst form of fear that women have in Rakhine state. While they feel they cannot rely on either their own government or the

international community, Ma-Ba-Tha (along with the monks who are its public face) has at least provided a type of emotional support, has voiced these women's concerns ("our women are being raped") and has fought for laws to protect women. Many feel that this may be the only hope to protect them, despite the fact that—as noted earlier—none of the religious protection laws deal with physical or sexual violence against women, which is a primary concern of many women in Rakhine state and one of the reasons they give for supporting Ma-Ba-Tha. One woman explained her support for Ma-Ba-Tha as follows:

> I support U Wirathu. He was a voice for us. He said women are facing danger. Yes, we are. He is the only person who has sympathy for us. No one sees it. He highlights the danger that these Muslims bring to us women. So he knows. He is the only one who has tried to do something to protect us. We have to support him. I support him with all my heart. I signed his petition. We need protection. We will support whoever protects us.[11]

While many—particularly women's rights activists and civil society groups—feel that these law discriminate against women and violate women's rights, other women feel that there is nothing besides these laws that can protect women, especially women who are poor, vulnerable, and in desperate circumstances. Many prominent women—including some female MPs—justify their support of the laws by portraying the women's rights activists who are passionately opposing the laws as naïve, seeking only their own benefit and popularity. Mra Raza, a 32-year-old woman who lives in Yanbye Island in Rakhine State, explained why she supports the Ma-Ba-Tha movement and U Wirathu:

> We are the minority among minorities in Myanmar. We will not allow ourselves to be a minority in our own Rakhine state. Rakhine state used to be our state. This is where we were born and have grown up. When they [Rohingyas] came and stayed near the coast that was no problem. We live inland. So we did not feel threatened. We felt safe. We let them [live there]. They were no threat. But their population grew bigger and bigger, and now it is to the point where they outnumber us. It is frightening. It is scary. We feel we are now like guests in our own home. This [welcoming] is no longer the case. We no longer trust them.[12]

Many also feel that, even though both communities have been harmed by the clashes, the international community only protects Muslims and provides them with support and resources to

rebuild. Most Rakhine people feel that they are being overlooked. Many Rakhine feel that the international community and the UN are biased and that they are being discriminated against. Khine U Tha, a 45-year-old shop owner, noted that:

> From the outset we [Rakhines and Muslims] were friends. We [Rakhines] are not safe. Particularly young women do not feel they are safe. We can no longer feel free. There is no protection for us as women. They rape women. No one protects us. Not even the government. Not even the INGOs. We cannot go to school late. We cannot work overtime. We don't feel safe to go out alone.[13]

We can see, then, that there are several reasons why women would support the laws: because they address very real fears of sexualized danger, or at least, they purport to be a response to those fears, and because they protect and possibly expand established social and religious paths toward female prestige. We must acknowledge that such grassroots support may well be the very real expression of agentive action, in which men and women support legislation that they believe will help to improve their lives by decreasing (physical and psychological) precarity and ontological insecurity.

What conclusions can we draw from this analysis? If we want to counter these laws or support those opposing them, and more importantly, address the processes at work behind them that make them appealing, we must create real opportunities for prestige through other channels. Civil society focuses on things like education, which is important, but not always a viable option for many women. Women lack realistic alternatives. If there are limited available paths, women will make the best of little openings. These means of "flourishing," as Saba Mahmood describes them, may not cohere to Western feminist notions of agency because they do not explicitly resist patriarchal, or seemingly retrogressive structures, and yet they are entirely agentive (Mahmood 2004). Analysis of women's attitudes towards groups like Ma-Ba-Tha and initiatives like the religious protection laws must take these notions of agency seriously. There are additional practical benefits to recognizing these views and practices, as it is likely that the most effective means of countering the currently-dominant anti-Muslim discourse is to demonstrate viable, socially and culturally realistic alternatives that address women's fears and offer meaningful paths to social or religious prestige. This would further help to solidify and secure Burmese and Buddhist national and religious identities around becoming, rather than Othering.

Moreover, we must address the very real precarity of women's lives in regard to the embodied experience of risk and fear vis-a-via psychological, physical, and sexual violence. To

be sure, this is something that the women and women's organizations that have led opposition to the laws have advocated for consistently and persistently. In a 2014 interview, Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi asked how many women were facing domestic violence and sexual abuse at the hands of men from their own religion. Without empowerment of women, women will always be vulnerable, regardless of religion and will need support in generating financial security, acquiring knowledge and expanding autonomy in their lives (Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2014). May Sabai Phyu, a prominent Kachin women's rights activist, similarly argued in response to the claims of the laws' supporters that they would protect women, "Whether you marry a Muslim, a Buddhist or a Christian man, many women are forced to suffer violence in their home. Instead of having these laws, why not have a law to protect women against violence?" (Ferrie 2014). And Ma Khin Lay, founder of Triangle Women Support Group has stated, "What we would like to see are laws that will protect against all kinds of violence [for] all people living in our country, no matter what religion they believe in or what race they are" (Radio Free Asia 2015).

Conclusion

The political or economic explanations for the rise of Buddhist nationalist groups and their political initiatives are only part of the picture of this phenomenon. Explaining women's support requires taking seriously women's perspectives that express deep physical and psychological insecurity and frustration with most of Myanmar's political, religious, and civil society leaders for not addressing these insecurities. But it is important to emphasize that accepting the conclusions of this analysis is not incompatible with criticizing or resisting groups like Ma-Ba-Tha or initiatives like the religious protection laws. In fact, our purpose in highlighting the reasoning behind some women's support of the laws is to point to potentially necessary complementary actions that would effectively acknowledge and respond to the fears and concerns that these women are expressing and that form (at least in part) the basis of their support for the laws. Part of this effort must be to not only address the insecurities and conditions of precarity that are still part of many women's daily lives, but also to create viable alternative pathways to prestige for women within their religious and social communities. The additional advantage to approaching the problem in this way is that, rather than contributing to a divisive politics of Othering or reinforcing many Myanmar people's understandable frustrations with democracy and its inherent uncertainty, making women's perspectives and participation part of the process is a way of demonstrating that democracy, its practices, and its values are worthwhile.

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[1] Presumably she used the word "Bengali" rather than "Rohingya," as most of the population in Myanmar objects to the use of the term "Rohingya." "Bengali" (the use of which implies non-indigenous non-nationals) has even been used in official government publications, such as the reports by the Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, which can be found at http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine_Commission_Report-en-red.pdf. Accessed July 5 2015.

[2] The full text of their analysis can be found at: http://icj.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Myanmar-Reject-discriminatory-race-and-religion-draft-laws-Advocacy-2015-ENG.pdf. Accessed July 4 2015.

[3] While they have been developed in multiple media outlets, all three arguments, along with others, are explained in detail in Beauchamp 2013.

[4] While it is indeed the case that women's marriage habits in this era became a cause for concern, there were no laws passed to restrict women's freedom to marry European, or other foreign men. While this was often frowned upon, it could also be understood as a means of improving one's economic situation, albeit usually temporarily and only with regard to Europeans (Ikeya 2011).

[5] One notable exception to this was the study groups organized by Ledi Sayadaw, which opened up remarkable avenues for women to achieve social standing through activities such as the memorization and recitation of texts (Braun 2013).

[6] Kawanami's work suggests that those women who do enter the monastery may themselves view it this way, but prestige requires social recognition, and evidence suggests that social perceptions of *thilashin* are relatively negative or ambivalent, except in exceptional cases where the nun is

either especially well-educated or from a wealthy family – both situations that conflate modes of prestige.

[7] One of the accused later committed suicide in jail and the other two face the death penalty.

[8] The interviews cited in this section are all pseudonymous to protect sources.

[9] Personal interview by one of the authors; Sittwe, Rakhine State, Myanmar. January 30, 2015.

[10] Personal interview by one of the authors; Sittwe, Rakhine State, Myanmar; January 30, 2015.

[11] Personal interview by one of the authors; Sittwe, Rakhine State, Myanmar; January 30, 2015.

[12] Personal interview by one of the authors; Sittwe, Rakhine State, Myanmar; January 30, 2015.

[13] Personal interview by one of the authors; Sittwe, Rakhine State, Myanmar. January 30, 2015.