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Georg Winterberger\*

# The Point of View Makes the Difference. Explaining the Position of Women in Myanmar

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**Abstract:** Right now, Myanmar is a fascinating place to do research on a society as it moves from isolation to openness. During the time I spent in Myanmar doing qualitative field research, I noticed a gap between the literature about the position of women in Myanmar and the situation I came across in the field. This paper will first examine the existing literature on women in Myanmar including recent contributions, publications from the colonial time and during the time after the country gained independence. Secondly, I will expound on my field data relating to women in society and the power held by women within families and households. Finally, I will highlight the gap that arose in comparing literature and the data gained from my field research. I conclude that there is a sharp distinction between the different points of views of authors. Claims and statements of different authors can only be compared if attention is paid to the differing perspectives and their respective methodologies.

**Keywords:** position of women, power relations, methodology, field research, Myanmar

The initial position of this paper came about from the confusion I faced during my field research in Myanmar. This country is right now a very good place to do research, not only because qualitative anthropological research was not possible for decades,<sup>1</sup> but also because right now is the time to explore a society as it moves from isolation to an openness in which people are increasingly influenced by the effects of globalization. The openness of people at present is very impressive. And consequently, I could be more involved in their lives during my field research. What I encountered was the power relations within families and the status of women in

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<sup>1</sup> Chit Hlaing 2008; Selth 2010.

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everyday life; I also discovered another situation that was not what I had expected, and which didn't match with the literature I had read beforehand. Of course, I knew the books of Spiro, who discussed the high position of women in Myanmar, but when reading more recent literature like Ikeya, Harriden, and Than, the situation appeared as something else. I questioned myself how it could happen that my data showed the contrary of what the three authors had mentioned.

Therefore, I want to discuss in this paper the lack of consensus between the situation described in recent literature and my field data. In the first part, I will present literature on the position of women in Myanmar. At that point, it would be interesting to look at how the position of women has been discussed in other contexts within Southeast Asia,<sup>2</sup> but because this paper's focus is not on the situation of women itself but how authors present their data and how they use literature on this topic, I need to limit myself to the Myanmar context. In exchange, I won't narrow the first part of my paper only to recent contributions on the position of women in Myanmar, since the idea about it has its roots in colonial times or even before this time. In the second step, I will present the field data I gathered on power relations in families, decision-making power in households, and on the position of women. Three examples will be given for this reasoning. I will follow the chronological line of the research process I encountered in developing this paper. This means that I will start with the literature, as that was the information I had before my field trip. Then, the field data will be presented, including some remarks and reflections which occurred during the data collection, even though the final analysis of the data has not been entirely completed as the field research was only recently concluded. Therefore, this paper allows me to present my data in relationship to the existing literature. The final part of my contribution will be a discussion on the literature and my field data. I want to conclude by showing the problems, which can evolve, if attention is not paid to the different points of view of various authors.

## 1 What literature tells us about the position of women in Myanmar

One of the first texts I read about the position of women in Myanmar was *The position of Women in Burma* by British schoolmaster J. George Scott, who

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<sup>2</sup> Brenner 1998 for example examines the power of Indonesian women at home and in the market, and Ortner/Whitehead 1982 argue that gender should be seen as a prestige system.

worked his way up to an administrator in colonial Burma.<sup>3</sup> I still remember his words: “There is no doubt that the women of Burma have a freer and happier position than the women of any Eastern country [...]. They go about everywhere as freely as the women of Japan, with whom they are often compared by globe-trotters.”<sup>4</sup> He continues in describing how women rule the household without giving their husbands the feeling of being in the inferior position. Even if she knows that her husband is not as business-like as she is. In Scott’s opinion, “[...] Burmese women are far ahead of their men-folk in resource and intelligence [...]”. Therefore, “[...] very few Burman [sic!] husbands [...] would close any deal or venture on any speculation without first consulting their wives.”<sup>5</sup> He explains it in terms of education: while the boys are sent to monastery schools the girls are set up in a stall in the bazar or the market. That is the place, where the girls learn plenty about the world and people and which allows them to get infinitely smarter at business matters than any boy. This superiority in worldly matters allows them later to take a good position in society.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Yi Yi Myint’s and Hinn Wai’s paper reiterates the same notions of Burmese women’s independent status saying that “[t]here is no job from which [women are] barred and no educational opportunities that discriminate women because of her sex [...] there are no social customs that are harmful to the female child or woman or that place a woman at a disadvantage within a marital union [...].” There seem to be “[...] no traditional and cultural barriers that prevent or put social pressure on women to stay home as wife, mother and home-maker.”<sup>7</sup>

I read about “the status of Myanmar women [which] is traditionally believed to be high and exemplary in Asia and beyond”<sup>8</sup> and that “Burmese women [...] enjoyed much greater freedom and equality with men than did western women.”<sup>9</sup> Now I was curious and wanted to learn more about it, because the position of women in Myanmar seemed exceptional to me. Spiro argued that women control the family economy and most retail trade and they are legally equal to men. Actually, women are superior to men in domestic matters and they enjoy high status in political matters.<sup>10</sup> But my curiousness gave way to

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3 Delap 2012: 391.

4 Scott 1913: 139–140.

5 Scott 1913: 145.

6 Scott 1913.

7 Yi Yi Myint/Hinn Wai 2012: 172, 175.

8 Yi Yi Myint/Hinn Wai 2012: 172.

9 Spiro 1977: 257.

10 Spiro 1977: 257–258.

confusion after reading about *hpoun* and *The Ideology of Male Superiority* as Spiro called it. According to Nash, *hpoun* – or *pon* as he spells it – is one of the three concepts about personal power<sup>11</sup> and allows the person who owns *pon* “[...] to bend others to one’s will [and] to move destiny to one’s advantage.”<sup>12</sup> It is an essence that can only be possessed by males. It’s often translated as “glory” or “charisma”. Because only men can possess *hpoun*, they are intellectually, morally, and spiritually higher of status than women.<sup>13</sup> This higher status also originates in the original belief that the possession of *hpoun* is the cumulative result of past meritorious deeds.<sup>14</sup> The superiority of men in spiritual matters<sup>15</sup> finds expression as well in non-religious customs such as social status. Women do not possess a social status of their own; they depend on the status of their father if unmarried and on the status of their husband if married. It seems that the husband takes the dominant part in a marriage. But this superiority is not supported without restrictions by all men. The other side of the concept of *hpoun* is the *Male Fear of Women*.<sup>16</sup> This is the case because women “[...] threaten, even unwittingly, the very basis for men’s superiority – their *hpoun*.”<sup>17</sup> A man’s *hpoun* can be reduced or even destroyed by a women sitting, sleeping, or walking on a man’s right side or if the lower part of her body – or even her skirt – is higher than he is.<sup>18</sup>

To sum up, there is the male’s superiority in the formal relationship between men and women, which is supported as well by female informants of Spiro. Interestingly, this inferiority of women is found in a country in which women are structurally and legally equal to men. Therefore, it’s not surprising that the actual relationship differs from the formal one.<sup>19</sup> According to Spiro, the wife is not only controlling the everyday life of her husband, but she is in charge of the household money as well, since “[...] the husband turns his earnings over to the wife, and must even ask her for spending money,

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11 See Houtman 1999: 157–176 for the relation between authority (*ana*) and influence (*awza*).

12 Nash 1965: 76.

13 Spiro 1993: 317.

14 Min Zin 2001.

15 If *hpoun* is mentioned in connection to religion, then Buddhism is meant. In other religion of Myanmar the inferior position is not given – the influence of women as nat kadaw (sprit medium) is quite high for example (Spiro 1993: 321; Harriden 2012: 32).

16 Spiro 1977: 264. Spiro dedicated a whole chapter to the topic of the *Sexually Dangerous Female* and the *Male Fear of Women* (Spiro 1992).

17 Spiro 1977: 265.

18 Spiro 1977: 265.

19 Spiro 1977: 262–263; 276–277; Spiro 1993: 322.

which she may or may not give him. [...] such control is an important measure of dominance [...].”<sup>20</sup> Therefore: “[...] it can be said that the wife is dominant in a majority of Burmese marriages.”<sup>21</sup> The dominance of women comprises the worldly matters, while men control things that really count – spiritual matters. Spiro concludes: “[...] the wife controls her husband within the family. Outside the family, in the domains of symbolic power, such as religion and village politics, the men control the women, for it is they who manipulate the symbols and control the tokens of power. But in the domain of real power, in the family and household, the men are manipulated and controlled by women.”<sup>22</sup>

The family life and the relationship between women and men seemed quite complicated to me. Fortunately, Chie Ikeya’s and Jessica Harriden’s contributions shed light on this matter by explaining the historical background of the discourse about the position of women in Myanmar. It drew attention to the traditionally high status of women, especially during colonial times. By disagreeing with the British colonial project and its goal of implementing needed social reforms, Burmese politicians wanted to strengthen their claims to independence.<sup>23</sup> The statement of the equality of Burmese women was repeated by politicians and scholars. Especially, the high status of women was pointed out during the military regime, since this was the official view.<sup>24</sup> Harriden does not disagree with the high status of women in Myanmar: “Women performed important and highly valued roles in the traditional household-oriented economy, where the sexual division of labour reflected popular beliefs about gender and power. [...] Women’s high economic value was enhanced by matrilineal residence patterns, where husbands resided with their wives’ parents for the first year (or more) after marriage. [...] These kinship support networks and economic incentives therefore enhanced women’s position within the household.”<sup>25</sup> But the economic power of women began to decline during the colonial period, when more and more businesses were taken over by colonial traders and businessmen. This power decline was not reversible during the male dominated period of military regime.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Spiro 1977: 278–279.

<sup>21</sup> Spiro 1977: 278.

<sup>22</sup> Spiro 1977: 280.

<sup>23</sup> Ikeya 2011: 71; Harriden 2012: 10.

<sup>24</sup> Harriden 2012: 11–12.

<sup>25</sup> Harriden 2012: 35–36.

<sup>26</sup> Harriden 2012: 38–42.



Tharaphi Than went further than Harriden, who didn't deny the high status of Myanmar women – at least in former times. Than wrote a book about *Women in Modern Burma*, in which she contested the powerful and high status of women. Throughout history, they have been represented as powerful with an equal status to men, she wrote, but actually only a few powerful women exist in Myanmar history, which “[...] help to construct the notion of Burmese women's high status, thereby inevitably silencing the majority of ‘unequal’ and disempowered women.”<sup>27</sup> Than's findings are supported by other scholars like Ditlevsen: “Elites who claim that women enjoy equal rights and high status ignore widespread evidence of socioeconomic inequality that disadvantages women.”<sup>28</sup> Or Zin Mar Aung: “[...] even the traditional roles of Burmese women are applauded comparatively; in many cases women are just followers, especially in religious, military and political organizations.”<sup>29</sup> Miedema et al. clarify the position of women as follow: “Since the colonial period, travelers, diplomats, and scholars have commented on the relative freedom and autonomy of Burmese women compared to their regional counterparts and concluded that gender equality prevailed throughout the country.”<sup>30</sup> In addition, many women contributed substantially to the economic situation of the family and they also maintained control over financial matters at home. After marriage, women keep their birth names and they inherit on an equal basis to men. However, Miedema et al. highlight that social practices like these do “[n]ot immediately transmute into women's full and equal participation in society.” Since “[t]he gender structures of Myanmar society contribute to an inequitable social environment [...]”<sup>31</sup> It seems that the status of women was often judged by women's ability to make money and on their property rights after marriage.<sup>32</sup> But having equal rights to property doesn't include an equal legal system, which for example offers little protection against discrimination of women: no specific law against domestic violence, illegal abortion, no legal protection against marital rape etc.<sup>33</sup> Ditlevsen adds the fact that women are infinitesimally represented in political positions and she mentions the *Myanmar Interfaith Marriage Bill*, which seeks to preserve the race and religion of (Buddhist) Myanmar by preventing Buddhist women from marrying non-Buddhist men.<sup>34</sup> Although, this idea was not new, as

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<sup>27</sup> Than 2014: 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ditlevsen 2014: 135.

<sup>29</sup> Zin Mar Aung 2015: 538

<sup>30</sup> Miedema et al. 2016: 675.

<sup>31</sup> Miedema et al. 2016: 676.

<sup>32</sup> Zin Mar Aung 2015: 537.

<sup>33</sup> Maber 2014: 144–145.

<sup>34</sup> Ditlevsen 2014: 136–137.

Ikeya identifies: “[...] the body of a Burmese woman became the basis on which colonialism might be fueled or resisted. The figure of the Burmese wife/mistress who racially and culturally degraded her people by getting into bed with a foreign man provided an outlet for a critique of the impact of colonial rule on Burmese society.”<sup>35</sup>

In summation, the position of women in Myanmar is not as straightforward as it might at first glance appear. Granted, there are notions of gender equality in Myanmar history and in the present times, and even statements of mighty women with power over financial matters. However, at the same time, scholars describe cultural concepts like *hpoun*, which is fortified by religious concepts, and which highlights the innate superiority of men. Finally, we can see in recent publications – starting from 2011 – that the high position of women in Myanmar has to be viewed in light of a discourse, which has its origins in colonial times. Myanmar cannot entirely be seen as a country that has few gender barriers. On the contrary: because of the perception that women already enjoy equality, there was no effort made by the government to improve their situation.<sup>36</sup> With this conclusion about the situation of women in mind, I went to Myanmar to start my field research.

## 2 What my empirical data tells about the position of women in Myanmar

I conducted field research from September 2015 to June 2016 in Myanmar. It was an investigation of livelihood strategies of common people in Mawlamyine, Mon State. I collected data concerning any activity that required actions by people to ensure or secure the basic necessities of life (e. g. food, water, shelter, clothing, and medicine). I concentrated my research on a small number of households and did case studies, as the household is the unit in which all important economic decisions are taken by people.<sup>37</sup> I had chosen Mawlamyine for this research, because this city offers a wide set of possibilities of generating income, such as fishing, cash cropping, industry, trading, migration, and tourism. Therefore it was predestined for this research project. The data would be more

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<sup>35</sup> Ikeya 2011: 141.

<sup>36</sup> Zin Mar Aung 2015: 542.

<sup>37</sup> Herbers 2002: 83–86.



numerous and fruitful due to these diverse possibilities of income generation, as since the means of living and the livelihood strategies vary it was assumed it would enable a more comprehensive conclusion.

My main research question was: How do people in Myanmar cope with the rapid economic opening and change of the country and how do they make a living? This included all kinds of economic activities, not only the one where money is physically involved, like earning and spending money. I was also interested in the influences of the economic macro level and the micro level including households and families as well. This included: law, governmental regulations, world market prices, and more. Another question was: What kind of dependencies on the macro level exist and are reflected in a household? And what are the reactions of a household on these dependencies? I was interested in the decision making process within a household too. Not only including what kinds of decisions are taken concerning money and living in households, but also I was interested on who decides and what the decision making process was. This focus on the decisions within households led me directly to power relations within the family, especially between husband and wife. And that's how the position of women in Myanmar came into focus.

A broad set of methodological approaches enabled me to conduct this research. One of the most relevant methods in this research was participant observation, because it was vital for this research to learn more about the emic view of the actors. Participant observation is the only method which allows observing directly the activities of actors – instead of the interpretations of their activities as in interviews for example. The researcher doing participant observation is neither an integrated part of the group that he or she observes, nor a passive observer outside the group. The researcher is constantly in dynamic interaction with the group.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, there were other methods used besides from participant observation, like semi-structured and problem-centred interviews, mapping, systematic observation, research in archives, and photographic interviews. I conducted a highly qualitative research, choosing only a few households for my case study. In doing so, I could collect detailed data about these households and I obtained a deep inside view of the families.

Now, I want to highlight the dynamics of decision making within these families, which will lead me to the power relation between the spouses and to the position of women – as I experienced within the households which were

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38 Hauser-Schäublin 2003.

researched. In presenting the examples,<sup>39</sup> I will set the focus mainly on income, the management of the household money, and on decisions, which are made in different aspects of life like work, health, children, and so on. The focus on monetary matters derives from my research topic.

Myo Aung is around fifty years old, married to Thandar, and the father of many children; three of them are already adults. He lives with his family – all children still live with the parents – in a house in the middle of the city. Myo Aung is originally from another city, he moved to his wife's parents' house after he got married. In the meantime, his wife's parents passed away; two brothers of hers live in the house as well. One of them is divorced – his family lives in another town – and the other one never married. The financial contributions of the (poor) family mainly come from Myo Aung's street business, from the eldest son's business, and from another son's income. Thandar and the daughters look after the household. One of Thandar's brothers is unable to work and the other one is unemployed and without any business. According to Myo Aung, he brings his own earnings home daily to his wife, if he didn't have to spend it for food and medicine for the family (three of the family members suffer from a genetic heart disease and another one had an accident some years ago). The two sons with income give their earnings to Thandar as well, but Myo Aung believes that they keep a portion of it for themselves. He doesn't know how much money Thandar gets from them daily, since it is she who manages the money of the household. From Myo Aung's point of view, the two brothers of Thandar are lazy and depend only on his and his sons' income. They burden the family's income, which is already very small. Myo Aung cannot do anything about it, because Thandar manages the household money, and she still gives money to her brothers if they ask – even if Myo Aung begs her not to do so. Myo Aung continues to give his earnings to his wife; the only thing he does is to continuously address his wife about the issue of giving money to her brothers – unfortunately without success. A dispute between him and his brothers-in-law breaks out from time to time. When asked about the decision making process in the household, I obtained information that Thandar is in charge of buying food, clothes, household goods, and items for the children. Medicine for the family is often bought by Myo Aung, but the decision on what has to be done in case of a disease or accident is made by Thandar. If the house requires (expensive) repairs, Myo Aung may advise Thandar, the decision maker.

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<sup>39</sup> The names are anonymized and all details were changed, which could be used to track down the informants.

The next family example is engaged in a local mattress business. They distribute and sell them to the local market. Their customers are small and big retail shops in Mawlamyine, along with direct sales to common households in the city. The business is run by a couple, who live together with their three school age children, together with the father of Hla Hla Win, the wife, and with a nanny, who looks after the children and does house work. Hla Hla Win and her three siblings will eventually inherit the house, where the family now lives and which lies a bit outside of the city of Mawlamyine. The siblings of Hla Hla Win live with their own families in another town. Sai Phyoe, the husband, has parents living in Mawlamyine and siblings living in the same town as Hla Hla Win's siblings. The relationship between Hla Hla Win and Sai Phyoe's mother is difficult – to put it mildly. Hla Hla Win and Sai Phyoe's business is doing well. Sai Phyoe is the one who travels around to make deliveries. Hla Hla Win processes the orders from their customers and she controls and manages the income and the cash flow. When Sai Phyoe goes to buy new mattresses, he gets the money in cash and an additional small amount for petrol and food. The big bulk of their income comes directly from the large retail shops who pay by bank transfer into their bank account; smaller orders are paid in cash. Hla Hla Win consequently keeps a record of all transactions – including both the orders and transfer of all money. If Sai Phyoe wants to spend money on himself, in particular on his hobby cockfighting for example, he has to request cash from his wife. As all kinds of needs for the household like food, clothing, and household goods are directly bought by Hla Hla Win and occasionally by the nanny. Decisions relating to their business are always made jointly between Hla Hla Win and Sai Phyoe. They combine their knowledge and experience (of buying and delivering the mattresses and managing the orders and the cash flow respectively). In the event they need to find a solution to a problem or to decide about the expansion of their business they do so jointly. How they started their present business also reflects their co-worker camaraderie: Sai Phyoe was previously in the delivery business for long time, but it was Hla Hla Win's idea to start a mattress business. All major decisions like house renovations or necessary changes are mutually agreed upon. But since the house belongs to Hla Hla Win's father – and will go to her and her siblings – Sai Phyoe is in an uncomfortable situation. Feeling he can never be sure, if his wife's siblings won't one day come to ask for their part of the house (inclusive of all the renovations). But he has no choice, as the house has to be maintained in good condition. With regards to health issues, Sai Phyoe makes this decision independently for himself and Hla Hla Win does so too for herself and also for their children. Other decisions relating to the children are mainly made by Hla Hla Win, who usually asks her husband, if he might disagree. In the event that Sai

Phyoe needs a large sum of money – as is the case when he wanted to support his aged parents – he cannot count on Hla Hla Win to give him money. Therefore, he needs to get it elsewhere. To do this he engages in additional business from time to time and tells his wife that he is going to visit a friend. The money he gains from these business deals he keeps in a separate bank account to support his parents.

In the third and final example, I would like to introduce Soe Win and Khin To To. They live with two daughters and their little son in the middle of Mawlamyine. Both of them grew up outside of the city in one of the surrounding villages. Before they were married, Soe Win, the husband, had saved some money and with this he bought land in the city of Mawlamyine. Shortly after they married, he was able to afford to build a small house, which they have subsequently built up on over time. Presently, he is employed at a factory on the outskirts of Mawlamyine and earns a medium sized salary. His wife, Khin To To, does work for the same factory in an administrative capacity ever since their son turned two years old; while she works a nanny looks after him. Both of them receive their salary in cash each week. While Khin To To deposits her salary in her bank account, Soe Win gives his salary directly to his wife, even though he has his own bank account which he never uses. When it comes to decisions, both are involved if it concerns house repairs or significant investments. Decisions relating to health or household goods are made by Khin To To while decisions on schooling or anything affecting their children are discussed by both – often controversial and without consensus eventually, Khin To To often asserts herself. Soe Win does decide for himself on all matters concerning his small side business in selling motorbike parts on the street. If he needs money for this, he waits for his salary, takes the money he needs and will give the remaining amount to his wife. His wife approves of his side business and his investments. If he needs more money or has to make a new investment, he will ask his wife for her approval.

To summarize the given examples, it is clear that women seem to have the power over money on a household level. Even though the examples comprise of different ethnic groups living within Myanmar, and different social classes found within the city of Mawlamyine, representing different socio-economic outlooks, none of the three examples were exceptional in any way. I only found one household in my field research, in which the money was not managed by a woman. In this family, the wife had already passed away. The husband worked together with his son in their own business; one daughter was married and lived at her husband's place, the other daughter was single and had her own business. While this daughter managed her own money, the son was managing the household money. It is legitimate to claim

that women have more decisive power over financial matters than men. As such decisions on health, children, household needs, or other matters related to the family or the household are made almost exclusively by women. Conclusively, women are the controllers of the household sphere. Men enjoy freedom outside of their home, but since they give their salary to their wives, their freedom concerning money is limited to the money they can syphon off their salary. And where this is not possible because the money is primarily paid directly into the wife's bank account or to her directly, husbands have to therefore be inventive.

I am aware that the presented examples and my summary have a focus on household economy and financial matters, yet the case that women enjoy a high status concerns not only finances. Mya Than, who did research on the role of women in rural Burma, argued that "[...] although males maintain their traditional leadership role in household affairs, since the male (husband/father) is regarded as the leader of the household as a social and economic unit, there is a rising trend in the decision-making role of females."<sup>40</sup> I would go even further than Mya Than, who wrote that women play an essential and very important role; their share in decision-making in areas such as health, education, and social activities is almost equal.<sup>41</sup> But my data indicated in conclusion that women have more decision making power in these fields. Was Scott right, when he wrote: "It is certain that the Burmese woman has a freedom and independence which no other women in the East and very few, if any, in the West have." and "The women of Burma are emphatically and without dispute from any quarter, the better half of the race."<sup>42</sup>

The examples represent the situation I found in my field research. Although I knew the books and papers of Scott and Spiro about the high position of women in Myanmar, I was still surprised about the situation I found in the field and the data I gathered during research. Harriden, Than, Ditlevsen, and Zin Mar Aung's contributions seemed more convincing to me, therefore, I expected to find a "[...] majority of 'unequal' and disempowered woman"<sup>43</sup> and the "[...] evidence of socioeconomic inequality that disadvantages women."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mya Than 1986: 101.

<sup>41</sup> Mya Than 1986: 104.

<sup>42</sup> Scott 1913: 145, 146.

<sup>43</sup> Than 2014: 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ditlevsen 2014: 135.



### 3 Discussion

Did something go wrong during my field research? Since I got contradictory findings to Than and Ditlevsen? Or was my setting similar to that of Spiro and Scott, rather than that of Harriden and Zin Mar Aung? To find answers to these questions, I wanted to have a closer look at these authors' methodologies. Spiro did anthropological field research for fourteen months from 1961 to 1962 by living in a village called "Yeigy" and in the city nearby, namely Mandalay. He did research up to the date that the army staged a coup, which forced him to leave the country immediately. Beside other anthropological methods, he used participant observation, interview, and household census to gather the data.<sup>45</sup> The methodology of Scott he did not disclose. We can assume though that he got his information mainly by living in Myanmar as a British schoolmaster and colonial administrator learning about the local's lives (probably not using standardised methods). On the contrary, Harriden relied mainly "[...] on the works of established scholars of classical and pre-modern Burmese history who are well versed in the material of these earlier periods."<sup>46</sup> She has, as a modern historian, a completely different approach than an anthropologist, similar to Spiro. The same lack of anthropological approach also applies to Than, who "[...] attempts to delineate the real status that contemporary Burmese women enjoy in society [...]"<sup>47</sup> by "[c]ombining historical archives with statistical data published by UN agencies [...]"<sup>48</sup> As a matter of fact, the point of view of Harriden and Than is different than that of Spiro or Scott. For Harriden, the number of powerful women in history meaning women in powerful political positions – is one important factor for the status of women. And for Than, the status of women is measured on their influence within the family, the household, and in routine everyday life. With such divergent points of view which is the correct one? The answer is both, as one point of view sets the focus at the level of individuals, family and household life, while the other sets it at the level of society as a whole. I suggest that these two perspectives can be combined only if contextualised. The results cannot be accurate without contextualisation and thereby useful. An example of this lack of separation of the perspective and context is shown when the government of Myanmar did not

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45 Spiro 1977: xv–xviii.

46 Harriden 2012: vii.

47 Than 2014: 1.

48 Than 2014: iii.



make any effort to improve the situation of women because of the prevailing perception that women already enjoyed equality. Consequently, the government didn't recognise the inequality and disempowerment which women face in Myanmar society as a whole, because of the powerful status they hold within their families. Another example is from Than, who wrote in the beginning of her introduction: "The official and popular narrative concerning the status of Burmese women in the twentieth century was that they were granted equal status to that of men." And further down: "[...] this is a book about why very few powerful Burmese women exist and how the few there are help to construct the notion of Burmese women's high status, thereby inevitably silencing the majority of 'unequal' and disempowered women."<sup>49</sup> The narrative of women's high status not only derived from the few powerful women in history or from the equal property rights in Myanmar, but mainly from the many powerful women, who are found in families throughout the country. Comparing this narrative, which was derived from a focus on women within the level of a family, to the status of women in society, by focusing on the number of powerful women in Myanmar history, is mixing the two distinct social domains of women's power without adhering to the context. Discovering only a few papers that had the accurate distinction of the two different perspectives that were not combined but rather compared as two divergent perspectives include Myat Mon's example which explains that:

Burmese women are generally the decision-makers in their families, even in cases where they are financially dependent on their husbands. They are the main arbiters in the use of health care service, often in control of household expenditure and family researches, and their opinions are usually asked and respected in matters of their children's education. Nevertheless, there is a limit to their influence. Beyond these areas, in matters relating to the community, the village and the society at large they are effectively ignored [...].<sup>50</sup>

Spiro made a distinction of the different levels too: "[...] the wife controls her husband within the family. Outside the family, in the domains of symbolic power, such as religion and village politics, the men control the women [...],"<sup>51</sup> because "[...] any status that is endowed with authority is, by cultural ascription, a male monopoly. Thus, in the macro-social system, all political offices, from chief of state to village headman, are typically open only to males."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Than 2014: 1.

<sup>50</sup> Myat Mon 2000: 247–248.

<sup>51</sup> Spiro 1977: 280.

<sup>52</sup> Spiro 1993: 320.

Keeping the different levels strictly apart helps producing useful data for analysis. Unfortunately, authors are not consistently revealing about their methods and the focus of their research. As a result, especially young researchers are confused and find it difficult to make a reasonable analysis. For my own data, for example, it's essential to keep in mind that it was gathered on the household level with a focus on the family. Therefore, I found many powerful women – actually, I found women more powerful than men. A straight comparison between my findings and Than's "unequal and disempowered women" cannot be done, because of the different levels which apply. My given examples do not touch the society level, because it happened that my research didn't include women, who fell out of the family network and who were dependent on the help of the society – for example women with an illegitimate child, divorced women, or sometimes unmarried women as well.

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