

# Post-Colonial Debates on Women's Education in Malaysia and Myanmar: A Comparative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the polemics surrounding the role and direction of women's education in the post-colonial era in Malaysia and Myanmar through a comparative analytical approach. In both contexts, women's education has often been presented as an instrument of social progress and national development; however, it has simultaneously been constrained by colonial legacies, patriarchal structures, and post-independence political interests. This study aims to explore how educational policies, state discourse, and social transformations have shaped the opportunities and limitations of women's education in both countries since independence. Using a qualitative approach based on the analysis of historical documents, educational policies, institutional reports, and academic literature, this article traces the similarities and differences in the trajectories of women's education in Malaysia and Myanmar. The findings indicate that although both countries share colonial experiences and nation-building agendas, their approaches to women's education have evolved differently. In Malaysia, women's education has been more integrated into the framework of national development and social mobility, whereas in Myanmar, political instability and authoritarian rule have constrained the potential of education as a tool for women's emancipation. This article argues that women's education in the post-colonial context is not merely a space of liberation, but also a site of power negotiation among the state, cultural norms, and women's own aspirations. The study contributes to academic discussions on education and gender in Southeast Asia by highlighting the importance of comparative analysis in understanding the complex dynamics of post-colonial societies.

**Keywords:** Women's Education; Postcolonial Feminism; Nation-Building; Gender and Power; Malaysia; Myanmar

## INTRODUCTION

In the postcolonial context, women's education emerges as an important arena that reflects both the continuity and transformation of colonial power structures within newly independent societies. In many former colonies, inherited educational systems function not only as mechanisms for the transmission of knowledge but also as instruments that reproduce the social, ethnic, and gender hierarchies established during the colonial period. Women were often positioned within educational frameworks that were domestic, moralistic, and instrumental in nature, in line with traditional gender roles considered compatible with the development agendas of post-independence states. Within the discourse of nation-building, women were frequently defined as the "mothers of the nation" or guardians of social morality; consequently, the education provided to them was often oriented toward cultivating familial values, modesty, and domestic responsibility. This emphasis illustrates how postcolonial states interpreted women's roles not merely as individuals entitled to equal educational rights, but as social agents whose functions were closely linked to maintaining social stability and constructing national identity.

In this regard, the concept of national education in many postcolonial countries often combines the objectives of national development with the formation of a unified national identity. Within this framework, women are regarded as key components in the socialization of new generations through their roles as mothers, early educators, and custodians of cultural values. As a result, women's access to education has often been encouraged, yet simultaneously regulated through curricula and institutional structures that maintain traditional gender divisions. Educational programs for women, for instance, frequently emphasize skills such as household management, family health, and moral education, which are perceived as indirectly contributing to societal development. Although women's access to educational institutions increased after independence, this approach indicates that women's education in the postcolonial context is not entirely free from the influence of colonial and patriarchal structures. Rather, it reflects a process of negotiation between aspirations for gender equality and the state's need to preserve social stability and national identity within the framework of nation-building.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the discussion of the literature and the postcolonial context in Southeast Asia, the central question underlying this study concerns how the role and direction of women's education have been shaped and determined within differing political, social, and cultural frameworks in Malaysia and Myanmar after independence. Although both countries share a colonial experience, the trajectory of women's educational development demonstrates notable variations, reflecting differences in state ideology, political stability, and approaches to nation-building.

Accordingly, this study also asks what the key similarities and differences are in the policies, discourses, and implementation of women's education in Malaysia and Myanmar during the postcolonial era, and how these contextual differences influence women's access to education, opportunities, and societal roles. In addition, the study examines the extent to which women's education functions as a tool of emancipation that enables social mobility and autonomy, as opposed to serving as an instrument of state instrumentalization that reinforces patriarchal structures and particular political interests.

Through a comparative analytical approach, these questions aim to clarify the power dynamics that shape women's education in both postcolonial contexts, while contributing to a more critical understanding of the relationship between education, gender, and the state in Southeast Asia.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

- **Analyse** the role and direction of women's education in the postcolonial contexts of Malaysia and Myanmar.
- **Identify** the similarities and differences in the policies, discourses, and implementation of women's education in both countries.
- **Evaluate** the extent to which women's education functions as a tool of emancipation in contrast to its role as an instrument of instrumentalization within postcolonial political and social frameworks.
- **Contribute** to academic discussions on the relationship between education, gender, and the state through a comparative analytical approach among countries in Southeast Asia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study focuses on three main strands of discourse: women's education in the postcolonial context, educational development and gender policies in Southeast Asia, and comparative studies between Malaysia and Myanmar. Postcolonial scholarship emphasizes that educational systems in former colonial societies function not only as instruments of modernization, but also as mechanisms for identity formation, social control, and the reproduction of gender hierarchies that persist after independence.

The principle that every individual has the right to equitable educational opportunities was articulated in the Constitution of the UNESCO in 1945 and reaffirmed in the World Declaration on Education for All held in Jomtien in 1990, which emphasized the importance of providing basic education to all children, youth, and adults (Education for All: The Year 2000 Assessment, 1999). Based on the universal principles of human rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women often regarded as an international bill of rights for women serves as a key instrument for the protection and promotion of women's human rights (Kanalic et al., 2013). In line with Article 18 of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, it is affirmed that the human rights of women and girls are an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of universal human rights.



Figure 1: Infographic Illustrating the Key Themes of the Literature Review

Therefore, it is evident that education plays a significant role in empowering women across sociocultural, economic, interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological dimensions. Education is not only a valuable investment for individuals, but it also contributes positively to the development and progress of a nation (Aslam, 2013). Through access to education, women have greater opportunities to enhance their social mobility, expand their participation in the economic sector, and develop a deeper awareness of their rights and position within society. Within the framework of modern development, education is often regarded as a key mechanism for reducing gender inequality by creating opportunities for women to participate more actively in decision-making processes, community leadership, and the formulation of public policies.

Moreover, education contributes to the development of self-confidence, personal autonomy, and women's capacity to challenge patriarchal norms that have traditionally confined their roles to the domestic sphere. Consequently, expanding women's access to education not only improves individual well-being but also strengthens more inclusive and balanced social development.

In the context of Myanmar, education has played a significant role in shaping political power and the social identity of society. During the period of British colonial rule in Burma, the modern education system introduced innovative ideas such as the concept of the nation-state, nationalism, and political awareness among the local population. At the same time, the colonial education system reinforced racial and ethnic hierarchies by privileging certain groups in their access to educational and employment opportunities. The "divide and rule"

policy implemented by the colonial administration not only fostered competition among ethnic groups but also left a legacy of prolonged conflict within Myanmar's social structure.

After independence in 1948, the government sought to expand access to education as part of its agenda for national development and the construction of a national identity. However, this situation changed significantly when the military regime seized power in the 1962 Burmese coup d'état. During the period of military rule (1962–2011), the education system was used as a political instrument to maintain state legitimacy and control. The educational curriculum emphasized rote learning and obedience to authority, thereby limiting the development of critical thinking among students. At the same time, the state promoted a national identity centered on Burman culture, while the languages, histories, and cultures of other ethnic groups were often marginalized within the formal education system (Education in Post-Coup Myanmar: A Shattered Landscape with Resilient Actors, 2024). This situation demonstrates that education in Myanmar is not merely a social institution, but also an important arena that reflects the relationship between political power, national identity, and ethnic dynamics in the country's historical development.

Before colonial rule, the education system in Myanmar was largely based on monastic education, which was predominantly male-dominated, while women's education was generally considered secondary. The introduction of secular education by the colonial administration from 1868 increased women's participation, and by the mid-twentieth century Myanmar was recognized as having one of the most advanced education systems in Southeast Asia (Crisp & Clementi, 2020). Rooted in the tradition of monastic learning, Myanmar has long possessed a deeply embedded culture of literacy. In connection with the implementation of the experimental UNESCO World Literacy Programme in 1964, Myanmar launched a nationwide mass literacy campaign, which subsequently received international recognition through the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Literacy Prize awarded by UNESCO in 1971 and the Noma Prize in 1983 (Education for All: The Year 2000 Assessment, 1999).

However, military rule since 1962 led to a decline in the quality of education due to limited resources, a curriculum heavily based on rote learning, and the use of education as an instrument of social control, which in turn restricted girls' access to education. Reform efforts following the adoption of the Constitution of Myanmar increased educational expenditure and women's participation in education, yet their impact on women's empowerment remained limited. Women continued to be marginalized in economic and political spheres, with low levels of labour force participation, leadership representation, and parliamentary representation. As a result, Myanmar remained ranked low on the Gender Inequality Index, placing 148th out of 189 countries (Crisp & Clementi, 2020). More than five decades of military rule have rendered Myanmar one of the poorest countries in the world, with an education system in a critical state. Weak infrastructure, outdated teaching methods, and limited opportunities for teachers' professional development have collectively undermined the overall quality of education, in contrast to the pre-military era when Myanmar had one of the best education systems in Southeast Asia. The recovery of the education system now requires a long-term and challenging process (Hayden & Martin, 2013).

The British Parliament debate on Burma in April 2000, when considered alongside the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, illustrates that political repression and armed conflict have systematically denied women's right to education. Although women's education is guaranteed under Article 10 of CEDAW and affirmed as a universal human right in Article 18 of the Vienna Declaration, the reality in Burma shows a stark gap between international norms and domestic implementation. In this context, women's education has not only been marginalized but has also become a direct victim of military authoritarianism (United Nations (CEDAW), 1979; United Nations, 1993; UK Parliament, 2000). Women are a crucial component of social structures, and education functions as a primary mechanism of empowerment capable of fostering positive changes in attitudes and social capacities. Empowerment refers to a process that enables individuals to develop the ability to think critically, make decisions, act, and exercise autonomous control over their work and lives (Bhat, 2015; Kaur, 2018, as cited in Jaysawal & Saha, 2023).

According to Muhammad Ridzuan and Arba'iyah (2014), education in Malaya was initially divided into two forms: formal and non-formal education. In the early stages, non-formal education served as a medium for the transmission and inheritance of knowledge and skills from parents to children. They further explained that the

educational process in Malaya underwent significant changes when Islamic-based learning received greater emphasis, leading to the establishment of religious educational institutions such as suraus, mosques, pondoks, and madrasahs. Secular education, meanwhile, developed in the 19th century in the Straits Settlements, particularly in Penang, Singapore, and Malacca, which led to the founding of vernacular schools in English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil.

The establishment of the Maktab Perguruan Perempuan Melayu Melaka (MPMM) on 31 January 1935 marked a peak in the development of women's education in Malaya, reflecting growing awareness of the importance of providing quality education and trained teachers for Malay girls' primary schools. The first cohort consisted of 24 students who began their studies on 1 February 1935 (Arkib Negara Malaysia, 2024). In her article Tan Sri Dr Hajah Aishah Ghani: Penggerak Kemajuan Wanita UMNO, Arba'iyah Mohd Noor (2010) chronicles the life of Tan Sri Dr Hajah Aishah Ghani, who came to be recognized as a national women's icon. During her childhood, awareness of the importance of education for girls remained low, with greater emphasis placed on domestic skills in preparation for their roles as housewives. Hasnah (2014) further explains that, besides perceiving formal education as unnecessary for daughters, some parents were also concerned about their daughters' exposure to mixed-gender interactions at school, which was seen as conflicting with Malay customs and Islamic values.

A study by the UCSI Research Centre (2022) involving 544 respondents found that 53% agreed that men and women have equal rights and fair opportunities, yet 58% acknowledged the existence of gender inequality at home, in schools, and in the workplace. Furthermore, 72% of respondents reported experiencing such inequality, indicating a growing awareness of gender equality issues among women (Muhammad Amnan Ibrahim, 2022). Women's achievements can be measured through the Global Gender Gap Index and the Malaysia Gender Gap Index. In 2020, Malaysia recorded a Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) score of 0.68 (where 1 = full equality, 0 = complete inequality), demonstrating that significant gender gaps remain in the Southeast Asian context. In terms of education, Malaysian women have shown impressive achievements, with higher enrolment rates compared to men and a literacy rate of 96.3% (slightly lower than men at 97%) (Berma, 2020).

Since independence in 1957, educational opportunities for women in Malaysia have increasingly expanded, supported by growing awareness of the importance of education in improving living standards. Female enrolment at the primary level more than tripled, from approximately 390,000 in 1957 to 1.43 million in 2001, while the female-to-male student ratio increased from 41:59 to 49:51 (Fernandez, 2001). This growth demonstrates that women have made substantial progress in the field of education.

In summary, women's education in Malaysia and Myanmar shows differing trajectories depending on the political context of each country. In Malaysia, the expansion of educational access has contributed to women's empowerment, although challenges in political representation persist. In contrast, in Myanmar, political instability and authoritarian governance have constrained the role of education as a tool for women's emancipation. In conclusion, education can only serve effectively as a catalyst for women's empowerment when supported by inclusive and stable political structures.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a comparative study design to examine the role and direction of women's education in Malaysia and Myanmar during the postcolonial era. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts that have shaped the trajectory of women's education in both countries.

Specifically, the study integrates three main data collection methods. First, document analysis was employed to examine primary and secondary sources, including educational policy documents, government reports, selected colonial records, reports from international organizations, and academic literature related to education and gender. This analysis aimed to identify policy patterns, official discourses, and changes in the structure of women's education from the postcolonial period to the contemporary era.

Second, a systematic literature review was conducted to build the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study, particularly in relation to women's education, postcolonialism, and gender analysis. Literature from the

Southeast Asian context and regional comparative studies was also consulted to strengthen the academic justification of the research.

Third, in-depth interviews were carried out with purposively selected informants. The participants included a female informant who was among the earliest generation of female students following the formation of Malaysia in 1963 from Ranau (Datin Dr Lungkiam Dambul), also an academic professional serving as a lecturer originally from Yangon, and an activist which now currently seeking protection in Malaysia (Dr Nora Hnin). These interviews aimed to obtain empirical perspectives on policy implementation, field-level challenges, and women’s educational experiences within the socio-political context.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, where key themes were identified, categorized, and compared between the two countries. Data triangulation was also employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Overall, this methodological approach is expected to provide a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the polemics surrounding women’s education in the postcolonial context.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a postcolonial feminist framework as articulated by scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who critique the tendency of Western feminist discourse to homogenize the experiences of women in the Global South as passive, oppressed, and uniform (see Figure 2). Mohanty (2003) emphasizes that postcolonial women must be understood within their specific historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts, rather than through the universal lens of Western liberal feminism.

Spivak (1988), through her seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, highlights how the voices of postcolonial women are often marginalized within both colonial and postcolonial power structures, including in education systems inherited from colonial rulers. This framework allows the study to examine women’s education not merely as a modernization project, but as a site of contestation among the state, nationalist ideologies, and women’s own agency.

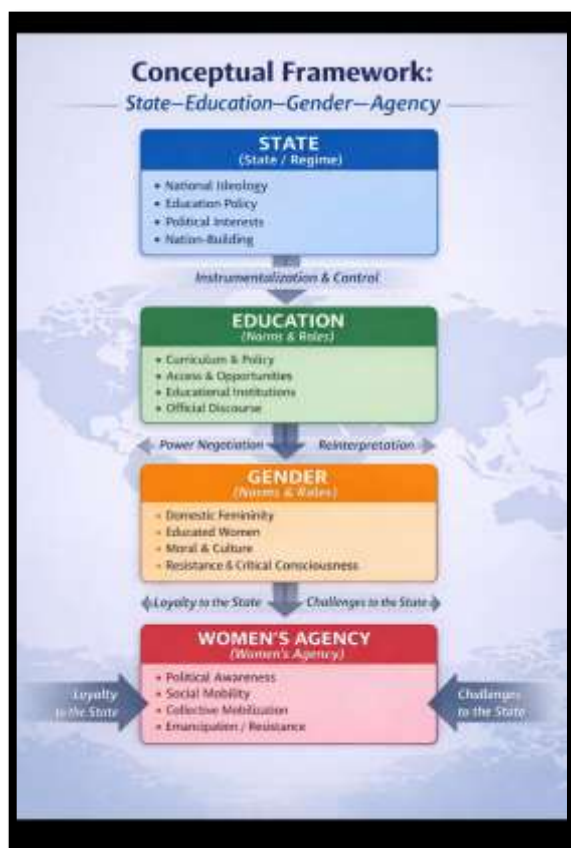


Figure 2: Adapted conceptual framework of postcolonial feminism.

Source: Adapted from Mohanty & Spivak.

The conceptual framework differentiates between women's educational emancipation and instrumentalization of women's education. Emancipation refers to processes in which education opens spaces for critical consciousness, intellectual autonomy, social mobility, and women's political participation. In contrast, instrumentalization occurs when women's education is utilized by the state or elite groups as a tool to serve economic needs, social stability, or political legitimacy without challenging existing patriarchal structures. This polarization is essential for assessing the extent to which policies and educational practices genuinely empower women, or merely adapt their roles to align with state agendas. In postcolonial contexts, these processes often occur simultaneously and in tension, rendering education a dynamic arena of power struggles.

A comparative analytical approach is employed to examine how women's educational experiences are shaped differently in two postcolonial contexts that share a colonial legacy but have divergent political and social trajectories. Comparative analysis allows the study to identify patterns of similarity and difference in policies, discourses, and implications of women's education, as well as to understand how factors such as state structures, national ideologies, and political conflict influence women's emancipation processes. Through this comparison, the study not only avoids overgeneralization about "postcolonial women" but also strengthens a critical analysis of education as a space for negotiation of power in diverse societal contexts.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of primary data, secondary sources, and conducted interviews, several key findings emerged that illustrate the polemics surrounding the role and direction of women's education in Malaysia and Myanmar during the postcolonial era.

First, the study found that women's education in Malaysia developed in a more structured and continuous manner due to relatively stable state policies since independence. National education policies, the expansion of access to basic education, and emphasis on secondary and higher education contributed to increased literacy rates and women's participation in the formal education system. However, the findings also indicate that women's education in Malaysia remains framed within a national development agenda that tends to reinforce normative gender roles, particularly in discourses related to family, labour markets, and social role division.

Second, findings for the context of Myanmar reveal an uneven trajectory of women's education, directly affected by political instability and prolonged conflict. Although women's education is normatively recognized as important, its implementation faces structural constraints, including limited educational infrastructure, security restrictions, and political interference in the education system. In Myanmar, women's education functions not only as a medium of learning but also as a space of state control and surveillance.

Third, a comparison between Malaysia and Myanmar highlights significant gaps in access, quality, and continuity of women's education. These disparities are influenced not only by economic factors but also by political structures, institutional stability, and state priorities regarding education and gender. The findings underscore that women's education in postcolonial contexts cannot be understood homogeneously; instead, it must be analysed within specific historical and political contexts.

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected female informants from Malaysia and Myanmar. Participants were purposively sampled to capture life narratives, educational journeys, and roles in social, professional, and political contexts. This approach enabled a more comprehensive comparative analysis of education and women's empowerment in both countries.

The findings indicate that education has played a significant role in empowering women in Malaysia, as exemplified by the experience of Datin Dr Lungkiam Dambul. As the first Dusun woman from Ranau to obtain a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), she reflects the success of expanded access to women's education in the post-independence period. Her academic journey began with secondary education at Maktab Sabah, continued at University of Malaya, and proceeded to graduate studies at Southern Illinois University, positioning her as a symbol of women's educational achievement within her local community. Beyond academic achievements,

Datin Dr Lungkiam Dambul's career experiences as an educator, management officer at the Yayasan Sabah, and later as an entrepreneur after retirement demonstrate how education has opened avenues for social and economic mobility for women. Her narrative emphasizes that education not only enables women to attain academic success but also serves as a mechanism of empowerment, fostering resilience, leadership, and the capacity to contribute to community development, particularly among Dusun women in Sabah, Malaysia.

In the context of Myanmar, findings indicate that education has cultivated political awareness and moral courage among professional women, as exemplified by the experience of Dr Nora Hnin (pseudonym). As a medical doctor and lecturer from Yangon, she and her colleagues chose to resign from public service in solidarity with the collapse of the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. This action reflects the role of higher education in developing critical understanding, professional ethics, and civic responsibility among women in an authoritarian context.

Dr Nora Hnin's decision also inspired broader participation among educated professionals across sectors including educators, civil servants, engineers, and financial institution workers who collectively boycotted the junta's administration through the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). This narrative illustrates that education in Myanmar functions not only as a tool for social mobility for women but also as a foundation for political resistance and collective struggle against oppression, particularly during the post-2021 coup period.

Overall, the findings reveal that women's education in both countries serves as a contested space between empowerment agendas, state interests, and local socio-cultural realities. These findings provide a crucial basis for further analysis in the next phase of research, particularly in critically evaluating the trajectory and direction of women's education within the postcolonial Southeast Asian context.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion highlights that women's education in the postcolonial contexts of Malaysia and Myanmar does not develop in a neutral space; rather, it is significantly shaped by colonial legacies, state ideologies, and persistent patriarchal structures. As argued by Altbach (1971) and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002), postcolonial education systems often inherit colonial functions as tools for social formation and ideological control, including the shaping of gender roles.

In Malaysia, post-independence women's education has increasingly been integrated into the national development agenda and human capital formation. Education policies emphasizing expanded access and female participation are often framed as efforts toward modernization and social progress (Rosnani, 1996; Maznah, 2001). However, women's education in this context is not entirely transformative. Instead, it is frequently instrumentalized to meet economic needs and maintain social stability, particularly by sustaining women's traditional roles as family caretakers and supporters of national development (Ong, 1990). This reflects the tension between discourses of emancipation and the reality of state control over gender roles.

In contrast, in Myanmar, women's education develops within a more repressive and unstable political context, particularly under prolonged military rule. As noted by Skidmore (2004) and South (2008), the education system in Myanmar is often used as a tool of political and ideological control, directly limiting intellectual freedom and social autonomy, including for women. Although women in Myanmar have achieved relatively high levels of educational participation at certain periods (Lall, 2020), institutional instability and ongoing political conflict have weakened the potential of education as a sustainable tool for emancipation.

Comparative analysis reveals that the main difference between Malaysia and Myanmar lies in the role of the state and the level of political stability in shaping the trajectory of women's education. However, a notable similarity is that women's education in both contexts remains constrained by patriarchal norms and postcolonial state interests. As Mohanty (2003) argues, women's education in postcolonial nations often serves as a site of power negotiation, where women's aspirations are negotiated within frameworks of nationalism, culture, and development.

Overall, this discussion underscores that women's education in the postcolonial era cannot be understood linearly

as a process of liberation alone. Instead, it represents a contested space where the ongoing struggle between emancipation and instrumentalization unfolds, varying according to the historical, political, and cultural context.



Figure 3: Adapted Conceptual Framework of Postcolonial Feminism in Malaysia and Myanmar.

This infographic presents a comparative conceptual framework examining the polemics surrounding the role and direction of women's education in postcolonial Malaysia and Myanmar. The framework is based on the dynamic relationship between the state, education, gender norms, and women's agency, positioning women's education as a central site of power negotiation between state structures and women's lived experiences.

In the top section, the postcolonial state contexts of Malaysia and Myanmar reveal contrasting political and social environments that shape women's education. Malaysia is depicted as a state guided by national development policies, efforts at ethnic integration, and a relatively stable nation-building agenda. Within this framework, women's education is framed as part of broader modernization initiatives and human capital development, contributing to both social progress and economic growth.

In contrast, Myanmar is characterized by military authoritarianism, prolonged ethnic conflicts, and a patriarchal nationalist ideology that directly influences educational policies and constrains women's access to learning opportunities. In the middle section, women's education is understood as a site of power negotiation. Education functions not only as a conduit for state ideology through curricula, institutions, and official discourses, but also as a space where women reinterpret and renegotiate their social roles. This dual positioning emphasizes that women's education is far from neutral; it is imbued with political, cultural, and ideological interests, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between state agendas and individual agency. Regarding the formation of gender norms, Malaysia demonstrates a pattern in which gender expectations are shaped by the intersection of culture, religion, and development discourse. Educated women are recognized as agents of national development, yet their roles often remain circumscribed within domestic and moral responsibilities. In Myanmar, gender norms are reinforced by military nationalist discourses and traditional values; however, experiences in formal, non-formal, and alternative educational spaces simultaneously create opportunities for women to challenge and transform these norms, revealing the contested nature of gender expectations.

At the bottom level, women's agency manifests differently in the two contexts. In Malaysia, agency is primarily expressed through social mobility, formal participation in professional and academic domains, and engagement within state-institutionalized structures. By contrast, in Myanmar, agency emerges more often through collective action, political activism, and direct challenges to state authority, particularly in contexts marked by oppression

and political instability. These contrasting expressions of agency illustrate how education intersects with both state structures and social dynamics to shape women's roles in society.

The infographic emphasizes that women's education functions differently depending on state structures and postcolonial power contexts. A comparative perspective demonstrates why education can serve as a tool for integration and stability in one context, yet become a site of tension and resistance in another. This framework visually situates women's education at the intersection of state policy, gender norms, and women's agency, highlighting its dual role as both an instrument of control and a mechanism for empowerment.

## **Recommendations For Improving The Role And Direction Of Women's Education In Malaysia And Myanmar**

### **Malaysia: Strengthening Emancipation While Respecting Cultural Contexts**

#### **a. Shift from Instrumental to Transformative Education**

Women's education in Malaysia should move beyond an instrumental framework that emphasizes women solely as human capital. Curricula and pedagogy need to prioritize critical thinking, gender awareness, and civic literacy so that education genuinely serves as a tool for emancipation rather than merely supporting the country's economic development agenda.

#### **b. Systematic Integration of Gender Education**

Elements of gender equality education should be incorporated progressively into school curricula and higher education programs, adopting approaches sensitive to local culture and religion. This strategy is not intended to confront societal values directly but to create constructive dialogue about women's roles in public life and leadership.

#### **c. Expand and Strengthen Leadership Pathways for Educated Women**

Efforts must be enhanced to ensure that educated women have real access to leadership positions in education, public administration, and policy-making. This is crucial to prevent "education without power," where high educational attainment does not translate into tangible influence within state structures.

### **Myanmar: Education as a Space for Protection and Ethical Resistance**

#### **a. Empower Alternative and Non-Formal Education**

In an authoritarian and conflict-affected context, women's education in Myanmar should be supported through alternative channels such as community education, digital learning, and non-formal education networks. These forms of education can provide intellectual and psychosocial protection, particularly for young women and ethnic minority groups.

#### **b. Protect Women's Education from Political Repression**

Women's education should not become a target of state control or oppression. Support from international actors, NGOs, and the diaspora is essential to ensure continuous access to education, especially in post-coup and politically unstable contexts.

#### **c. Recognize Education as a Foundation for Women's Political Agency**

Women's education in Myanmar should be acknowledged as a site for building political awareness and collective action, rather than as a threat to the state. This recognition ensures that education does not merely produce compliance but contributes to the formation of a more inclusive civil society, enabling progress even in the absence of structural change.

## **Cross-National Analysis: Beyond Postcolonial Legacies In The Context Of Malaysia And Myanmar**

### **Postcolonial Legacies as Enduring Power Structures**

Postcolonial legacies in Malaysia and Myanmar should not be understood merely as historical continuities, but as power structures that shape modern institutions and contemporary gender configurations. Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes that colonialism structured not only political and economic systems, but also gender relations through the codification of social norms and the formation of modern states (Mohanty, 1988; McClintock, 1995).

In the context of British Malaya and Burma, colonial education systems introduced bureaucratic hierarchies and gendered role divisions that were subsequently institutionalized within post-independence nation-building projects. Women's education was often framed as part of national development and domestic moral agendas, rather than as a project of structural emancipation (Jayawardena, 1986). As Kandiyoti (1988) argues, women in postcolonial societies often operate within a "patriarchal bargain", an adaptive strategy within patriarchal structures that were not fully dismantled after independence. This phenomenon is observable in both countries, where modern institutions maintain a more subtle but persistent form of patriarchy.

### **Political Divergence and Implications for Women's Emancipation**

Although Malaysia and Myanmar share a British colonial legacy, their political trajectories diverged significantly. Malaysia evolved within a semi-democratic framework with relatively stable institutions. This stability allowed increased access to higher education and expanded women's participation in professional and academic sectors (Ong, 1990). However, political representation and top leadership roles remain limited, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal structures in mainstream politics.

Myanmar, in contrast, experienced prolonged military rule from 1962 and a return to full authoritarianism after the 2021 coup (Steinberg, 2010; Thawngmung, 2022). Political repression generated more confrontational and symbolic feminist mobilization. Cultural symbols, such as the htamein, were used in pro-democracy movements to challenge not only military authority but also the hpon system, a traditional belief in male spiritual superiority (Harriden, 2012). This cross-national analysis highlights that institutional stability does not automatically yield radical gender transformation, whereas repressive contexts can trigger explicit, politicized forms of women's resistance. The comparison underscores the complex interplay between postcolonial legacies, state structures, and women's agency in shaping education and empowerment outcomes in Southeast Asia.

### **Education as a Site of Gender Ideological Struggle**

In postcolonial societies, education functions not only as a nation-building instrument but also as a mechanism for reproducing ideology (Freire, 1970). Across both Malaysia and Myanmar, women's education has expanded in terms of access; however, curriculum content and institutional structures frequently reinforce traditional gender narratives.

In Malaysia, national education policies emphasize human capital development and national integration, yet critical analysis reveals that gender dimensions are often absorbed into development discourse without challenging the deeper structures of patriarchy (Ariffin, 1999). While women gain access to education and professional pathways, the system largely maintains traditional expectations of women's social and domestic roles.

In Myanmar, political disruptions particularly post-coup interference in the education system have spurred the emergence of alternative education forms and informal learning networks. These spaces are more politically oriented and function as sites of resistance, enabling women to negotiate both intellectual and civic agency under authoritarian constraints (Thawngmung, 2022).

From a critical pedagogy perspective, education can function as a liberatory space when it fosters critical awareness of oppressive structures (Freire, 1970). However, without epistemological reform, education risks becoming a tool for the reproduction of entrenched postcolonial norms, reinforcing rather than challenging

gendered hierarchies.

### **Alternative Media and Transnational Feminism**

The rise of digital media has created spaces for cross-border solidarity. Transnational feminism challenges Western-centered frameworks of feminist thought and emphasizes the importance of contextualized global networks of solidarity (Mohanty, 2003; Alexander & Mohanty, 1997).

In the context of post-coup Myanmar (2021), social media became the primary medium for documenting state violence and mobilizing women. This form of resistance transcended national boundaries, linking local activism with the diaspora and international support networks.

In Malaysia, a comparatively open civil space provides a conducive environment for academic advocacy and gender-related policy engagement. A cross-national approach highlights the potential for synergy between Malaysia's institutional stability and the resistance experience of Myanmar's women. Such interactions allow the formation of structural solidarity that is not entirely bound by nation-state limits, enabling collaborative efforts in education, activism, and policy reform across borders.

### **Integrated Discussion: Education, Gender, And Transnational Feminist Resistance In Malaysia And Myanmar**

Education in postcolonial Malaysia and Myanmar functions as both a site of empowerment and a field of ideological struggle, reflecting the legacies of colonialism, political structures, and persistent patriarchy (Freire, 1970; Mohanty, 2003). While access to education has increased in both contexts, the content and institutional practices continue to reproduce gender norms, highlighting the tension between emancipation and instrumentality (Ariffin, 1999; Unterhalter, 2007).

In Malaysia, post-independence policies emphasized human capital development and national integration, expanding women's access to formal education and professional opportunities (Ong, 1990; Rosnani, 1996). However, critical analysis shows that these advances occur within a framework that largely maintains traditional gender roles, particularly in family structures and social expectations. Educational success is thus partially translated into mobilized agency in professional and academic domains but remains constrained in political representation and high-level leadership (Maznah, 2001).

Conversely, Myanmar's authoritarian political context has shaped education as a tool of control, with curricula emphasizing compliance and limiting critical thinking (Skidmore, 2004; South, 2008). Women's education in Myanmar, while increasing nominally, faces structural barriers, including restricted access, militarized oversight, and ethnic marginalization. Nevertheless, higher education has enabled women like Dr Nora Hnin (pseudonym) to develop critical consciousness, professional ethics, and civic responsibility, which catalysed participation in movements like the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) following the 2021 coup (Thawngmung, 2022).

Education in both countries, therefore, operates as a site of negotiation between state, culture, and female agency. In Malaysia, education primarily fosters incremental empowerment within institutional structures, whereas in Myanmar, education becomes a platform for collective resistance under conditions of repression. This contrast underscores Mohanty's (2003) argument that postcolonial women's experiences cannot be universalized; instead, they must be understood within specific historical, political, and cultural contexts. The digital media landscape further amplifies these dynamics by facilitating the formation of transnational feminist networks that transcend nation-state boundaries, a process consistent with the concept of transnational feminist solidarity discussed by Alexander and Mohanty (1997) and Mohanty (2003).

In Myanmar, social media served as the principal channel for documenting violence, mobilizing women, and connecting local resistance with diaspora and international actors. Under military rule, Myanmar continues to face systematic digital repression, characterized by widespread surveillance, doxxing, and severe security threats against activists and civilians. Despite these challenges, individuals and communities actively employ resistance

strategies, including the use of digital security tools, alternative communication methods, and community-based protective networks to reduce risks and maintain avenues for dissent (Gar Gar, 2024).

In Malaysia, relatively open civic spaces allow advocacy through research, policy engagement, and cross-border solidarity initiatives. These interactions highlight the potential of structural solidarity, combining stable institutional frameworks in one context (Malaysia) with grassroots resistance and alternative education in another (Myanmar) to support women's empowerment across borders.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, education can function as a liberatory space when it promotes critical awareness of oppressive structures, yet without epistemological reform, it risks reproducing entrenched postcolonial norms (Freire, 1970). In combination with digital media and transnational networks, education has the potential to challenge both local and global structures of patriarchy, creating avenues for feminist solidarity, empowerment, and transformative social change in Southeast Asia.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores that women's education in the postcolonial era in Malaysia and Myanmar constitutes a complex site of contestation, shaped by colonial legacies, state ideologies, and enduring patriarchal structures. Through a comparative analytical approach, the research demonstrates that, despite sharing colonial histories, the trajectories of women's education have diverged in line with each country's political context and institutional stability. These differences significantly influence the extent to which education functions as a tool of empowerment or, conversely, as an instrument of state instrumentalization.

The findings carry several important policy implications. First, the formulation of women's education policies must move beyond quantitative measures such as enrolment rates and attend to qualitative dimensions, including autonomy, critical thinking, and leadership opportunities for women. Second, postcolonial education policies should address entrenched patriarchal norms embedded within curricula, pedagogy, and gendered division of roles, ensuring that education is genuinely transformative. Third, the role of the state in shaping women's education needs to be balanced with the engagement of civil society, educational institutions, and women's voices themselves so that education does not merely serve as a tool to legitimize state ideologies.

In the Malaysian context, these policy implications call for a reassessment of how women's education is framed within national development agendas, particularly to ensure that gender equality translates into tangible opportunities in the labour market and public leadership. In Myanmar, improving women's education hinges on the restoration of independent, inclusive, and politically neutral educational institutions, which is a prerequisite for building a more equitable and democratic society.

Overall, this study contributes to the academic discourse on education and gender in Southeast Asia by emphasizing that reforms in women's education should be understood as an ongoing political and social process. Further research is recommended to explore women's experiences and agency in greater depth, including through field studies, media analyses, and interdisciplinary approaches, to strengthen understanding of women's education in the contemporary postcolonial landscape.

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## ORAL SOURCES

Interview with Datin Dr Lungkiam Dambul, the first Dusun woman from Ranau, Sabah, who holds a PhD. The interview was conducted at Grace Point Food Court on 8 February 2024.

Nora Hnin (in her 30s), who worked as a medical doctor in a government hospital in Myanmar

prior to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The CDM emerged among civil servants following the fall of the Aung San Suu Kyi government due to a military coup. At the time of the interview, she was seeking refuge in Malaysia and actively involved in humanitarian organizations. Interview conducted on 11 May 2024.

## WEBSITE

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