

# Militarized masculinity

Gender narratives among armed  
resistance groups in Myanmar

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# Acknowledgment

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K4DM was launched in 2017 by Global Affairs Canada and IDRC. It nurtures a new generation of young actors to promote inclusion, gender equality, respect for diversity, and prosperity for all in Myanmar. Making use of online courses, fellowships and research on digital spaces, the initiative supports diverse students and researchers primarily in the Myanmar diaspora and research institutions outside the country.



# Executive summary

This research explores gender narratives and militarized masculinity in resistance groups emerging in Myanmar in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. “Militarized masculinity” in this paper refers to “gender-negative discourses and behaviors” that reinforce discriminative gender and social norms and uphold the culturally and socially constructed images of being a man or a woman. These norms and images usually exclude marginalized gender identities, prioritize men in active roles, and accept warfare as the first priority. They are often associated with notions of dominance, power, and control that saturate propaganda and information flows during times of conflict.

The Spring Revolution following the 2021 military coup is portrayed as a transformative revolution in gender relations, unlike any previous moment in Myanmar's history. And in this gender-transformative moment, the newly emerged armed resistance groups, also known as “People’s Defense Forces (PDFs),” take a critical role. But months after the revolution began, the military junta’s evident toxic masculinity—aggressive gender narratives, sexualized acts, and reinforcement of discriminatory gender norms—was unfortunately also seen among stakeholders within the Spring Revolution. This raises questions about whether the newly-emerged armed resistance groups will remain committed to the Spring Revolution’s stated objectives of deconstructing all militarized behaviors that drive oppression, inequality, and injustice.

This research study centres on findings derived from a comprehensive analysis of 16,444 Facebook posts from both individual and group pages, along with insights from interviews conducted with various PDF leaders and gender experts. It does provide a glimpse of positive gender narratives, together with strategies employed by some resistance groups to promote gender-inclusive activism and challenge the dominant narratives of masculinity within their battalions. However, the study reveals critical concerns about militarized masculinity deeply embedded in the online and offline narratives of PDFs—through their absence of gender-inclusion efforts in their daily narratives and behaviors, and serious acts of threats, doxing, sexism, and gender discrimination.

Identifying the impacts of militarized masculinity among PDF members, the study highlights significant gaps and the need for institutional accountability in shifting from negative to positive gender narratives and in deconstructing discriminative social norms. Finally, the authors provide recommendations for the NUG and other stakeholders within the Spring Revolution.

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# Introduction

## Background

Myanmar is widely recognized as the longest-running civil war in the world (Warren, R. et al, 2018) and is also known as a country that has suffered decades of repressive military rule, widespread poverty, and civil war with ethnic minority armed groups (Maizland, 2022). However, the military coup in Myanmar in 2021 unraveled years of progress in the transition to democracy, by tumbling the country into a renewed era of authoritarian rule. The coup by General Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the Myanmar military junta, was claimed to be in response to alleged electoral fraud in the November 2020 election, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide victory. A day after the coup, the Senior General formed the State Administration Council (SAC) to maintain his political power (Tun, 2022). However, the coup is broadly understood as the military attempting to maintain its grip on power.

Following the 2021 coup, widespread peaceful protests of people from all backgrounds throughout the country were led by youths, and civilians from all sectors including teachers, students, healthcare providers, human rights activists, workers, and government servants. It was called the “Spring Revolution” and it sparked the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) from both the government and private sectors refusing to work under the military dictatorship. The revolution is also identified as a leaderless “Gen Z” youth movement where the majority of leading drivers were young people (Jordt, Ingrid. et al, 2021). It is also recognized as a movement finding new and creative ways to demand an end to both the military dictatorship and patriarchy (Marlar, Chambers & Elena, 2023).

Weeks after the peaceful protests throughout the country, Myanmar entered a violent new chapter, with the military’s brutal crackdown on peaceful protests and bloody violence targeting civilians (Nadi, 2024). According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), by July 2024, a total of 5,440 people, including pro-democracy activists and civilians, had been killed, a total of 27,099 people had been arrested by the junta and pro-military groups, along with the burning of more than 78,000 civilian houses, all combining to increase the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) to nearly 3 million nationwide (AAPP, 2024). Despite the torture, arbitrary arrest, seizing of properties, and killings that were carried out day and night by the junta and its associated forces, civilians from across the country took to the streets and demanded the restoration of civilian rule. Following the brutal crackdown, thousands of youths fled their homes and families to take up arms by forming and joining the local resistance groups known as People’s Defense Forces (PDFs).

## The emergence of the People Resistance Groups (PDFs)

On 14 March 2021, the CRPH<sup>1</sup> released an announcement informing the people of their rights to self-defense according to the law.<sup>2</sup> Just after the announcement, thousands of people, the majority youths, fled to various parts of the country to organize themselves into local defense groups aiming to protect the people and resist the military junta. The youth, both men and women, quickly formed ad-hoc defense teams across the country, while others fled into areas controlled by the established Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), where they received military training and equipment (Hein, 2022). On 5 May 2021, the National Unity Government (NUG)<sup>3</sup> released a statement on forming the People's Defense Force claiming to "make effective reforms in the security sector to terminate the 70-year-long civil war" (Strangio, 2021). According to scholar Ye Myo Hein in his analysis in the U.S. Institute of Peace (2022), 'People's Defense Force' is an umbrella term for three types of armed groups that have emerged since the coup: PDFs, Local Defense Forces (LDFs) and People's Defense Teams (PaKhaPha/PDTs) in which PDFs are generally larger armed units. In his book "One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar's Armed Rebellion," he divided the PDFs into two categories: autonomous local PDFs termed "local defense forces (LDFs) and those linked with the NUG's Ministry of Defense (MOD) as proper "PDFs." U Yee Mon, NUG's Minister of Defense (MOD) said in April 2022 there are more than 400 LDFs that NUG had linked with and about 259 PDF units which number some 50,000-100,000 forces (Soe, 2022). Within a short period, the newly emerged armed resistance groups have become significant new armed actors in the changing security landscape of post-coup Myanmar (Hein, 2022). Along with the emergence of local PDFs, the military junta has declared these groups as "terrorists" and "illegal" (The Irrawaddy, 2021) so that anyone who supports them has been subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, extrajudicial killings, and seized properties. The junta has also targeted and launched widespread crackdowns on these local PDF groups or anyone perceived to be supporting the groups.

However, there is no doubt that the armed revolution in Myanmar gained popular support from its people (Thang, 2023). The collaborative armed resistance among Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and People's Defense Forces (PDFs) across the country is achieving unprecedented victories against the military junta, marking a significant milestone in Myanmar's history. The National Unity Government (NUG) asserts that it, along with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), collectively controls over 60% of Myanmar's total area. NUG factions of the People's Defense Force (PDF) and People's Defense Team (PDT) are ensuring public security, while the People's Administrative Teams (PATs) manage administration and law enforcement on its controlled townships (BNI, 2024). Regardless of the different status of institutionalization among different armed groups, all armed resistance groups in the Spring Revolution share the common goal of ending military rule (Thant, 2021). However, just a year after several reports and analyses on gender exclusion and sexual violence in the revolution came out, it remains unclear

<sup>1</sup> Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) was formed by politicians purporting to represent the elected members of the government in the 2020 election.

<sup>2</sup> Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, (2021), Declaration 13/2021: Informing the people of their rights to Self-Defense according to the law as civilian population in case of violence. [CRPH Myanmar on X: "Declaration 13/2021 Informing the people of their Right to Self-defense according to the law as civilian population in case of violence #SupportCRPH #RejectMyanmarMilitaryCoup https://t.co/XWo7J44hQZ" / X](https://t.co/XWo7J44hQZ)

<sup>3</sup> National Unity Government (NUG) was formed by approval from the CRPH in April 2021.

whether all armed resistance groups are advancing their revolution in conjunction with efforts to deconstruct the destructive social norms that reinforce militarism and patriarchal behaviors, which have been highlighted as symbolic trademarks of the Spring Revolution since the beginning.

## Gender narratives and masculinity in the Spring Revolution

Myanmar women have historically been at the forefront of the revolutions against military dictatorship. However, the Spring Revolution following the 2021 military coup is notably portrayed as a significant gender-transformative revolution, unlike any in Myanmar's history. Many young women have taken prominent roles in the revolution fighting against both the military dictatorship and the patriarchy (Marlar, Chambers & Elena, 2023). Dr. Mie Mie Win Byrd, a former US military officer, remarked that Myanmar women's participation in the Spring Revolution is among the strongest of all in history despite the high levels of repression. One of the significant revolutionary movements, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), was led predominantly by women, with over 60% of participants being women who actively protested at the forefront (Byrd, 2021). These protests prominently featured women's hamein as flags and women's monthly pads as symbols, and were primarily led by women, although men also participated. These methods defied the patriarchal and misogynist ideologies of the military (Ferguson, 2023). The active and public participation of the LGBTQ+ community in the Spring Revolution also reveals a determination to reshape Myanmar into a society where equality is achieved for all, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. These symbolic acts during the Spring Revolution highlighted significant shifts in gendered and generational roles and identities (Progressive Voice, 2023) in Myanmar's revolutionary history.

After the peaceful protests against the 2021 military coup were brutally suppressed by the military junta, many women and other marginalized gender identities actively joined armed resistance groups. Similar to male protesters, some joined established ethnic resistance groups, while others took up arms in newly emerged People's Defense Forces (PDFs). Some PDFs have specific battalions for women, such as the Karenni National Defense Force (KNDF) in the Karenni area and the Myaung Women Warriors in the Sagaing Region, which is a prominent female armed resistance group. Women's participation in armed resistance movements in Myanmar is not new (Lusan & Fishbein, 2021), but the visibility and leadership of women in post-coup resistance groups are seen as the result of the growth and increased diversity of women's activism over the past decade (Hedström, Olivius, & Soe, K., 2024).

The strong activism of women and other gender identities also became one of the main targets for the military junta. According to AAPP, a total of 3,979 women were still detained and 1,520 among them were already sentenced for their political actions (AAPP, 2024) since the 2021 military coup. According to the Burmese Women's Union, 392 women were killed of which 3 women were raped in 2023 (BWU, 2024). Including a few cases on men (Frontier, 2022), the high rate of sexual violence targeting Women and LGBTQIA+ activists, and human rights defenders by the military junta and its backup forces, became a headline during the Spring Revolution. The National Unity Government's Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs (MoWYCA) released a statement in June 2023, highlighting a total of 117 cases related to sexual violence since the coup (Progressive Voice 2023b). According to the Myanmar LGBTIQ Human Rights Watch Forum (MLHRWF), in October 2022, the LGBTQIA+ community faces different types of targeted violence including a wide range of sexual violence (Progressive Voice, 2023). Several reports and studies

have demonstrated that aggressive gender discrimination and sexualized abuse, both online and offline, are among the primary tactics employed by the military junta to counter anti-military activism. In 2023, Myanmar Witness, a human rights group, released a report on politically motivated abuse of Myanmar women online, where the majority of abusive acts were committed by SAC and SAC supporters. The report stated that sexualized disinformation narratives are used to undermine politically active women, consistent with narratives perpetuated by the official SAC media that such women are morally corrupt and racially impure (Myanmar Witness, 2023). Politically active women and LGBTQIA+ are targeted by the junta forces with sexual abuse that includes sexist narratives or acts, doxing, and reinforcing gender norms which are also known as aggressive or toxic masculinity behaviours (Amy Morin, 2024).

Unfortunately, these acts are seen solely as the acts of the military junta and its allied forces. Even though some studies pointed out that these acts are seen less frequently in the resistance movement (Root, 2024), they have also been present in parallel within the Spring Revolution since the beginning, together with the calls for deconstructing social and gender norms. Some activists used sexist ideologies as part of their strategies to shame the military junta, their families and associates (Tun, 2023). Many women activists and women organizations also raised the issues of masculinity and sexist acts and posts on social media by anti-dictatorship supporters through their personal Facebook accounts after the coup. For instance, a cartoonist became popular on social media during the Spring Revolution with his mocking cartoons of the military regime—many of which showed Burmese generals dressed in women's clothes and other sexist cartoons to mock the army's brutality. And the counter-doxing targeting female SAC supporters and wives and daughters of SAC supporters was widespread early in the counter-coup phase.

The Myanmar Witness report in 2023 explicitly looks at the same practices committed by pro-democracy supporters during the revolution against pro-SAC women, who received proportionately less abuse than pro-democracy women (Myanmar Witness, 2023). According to the Burmese Women's Union, at least 13 cases committed by resistance groups were reported and were under investigation. The survivors of sexual violence by the armed resistance groups did not receive justice and fair punishment, with the local resistance authorities citing active armed conflict as the main reason (BWU, 2023). Additionally, Frontier Myanmar claimed in a news article that armed groups remain the main arbiters of justice, despite NUG's efforts to establish a functioning judiciary (Frontier, 2023). Some resistance groups are allegedly committing abuses in their push for progress, while reports of military violations are also mounting.

The Spring Revolution has demonstrated its adaptive and innovative approach to activism from the mass street protests and the civil disobedience campaigns. Despite the involvement and participation of all genders in the Spring Revolution, including local resistance groups, the roles of women and other gender minorities are still underrecognized. Months after the armed resistance movement started in 2021, inequalities in gender roles in the armed resistance groups sparked out (Crisis Group, 2023). Usually, women are portrayed as being weak and as supporters in the backlines, while men are portrayed as being stronger and as fighters in the frontlines. The military junta's masculinity behaviors—all these aggressive gender narratives, sexualized acts, and reinforcement of discriminatory gender norms—were, unfortunately, also seen in the Spring Revolution. This raises questions about whether the newly emerged armed resistance groups, one of the main drivers of the Spring revolution, and which allegedly advocate for the deconstruction of all militarized behaviors that drive oppression, inequality, and injustice, remain truly committed to their stated objectives alongside their armed struggle.



## Armed revolution, masculinity, and social change

Even though the use of armed resistance is often not acknowledged by scholars and the mass media (Umoja A.O 1999), in many revolutions, armed struggles have been crucial in many historical contexts to overthrow entrenched regimes. For instance, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution that established Soviet rule involved an armed struggle. Another example is the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro that overthrew Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship using guerrilla tactics (Britannica, 2024). These examples show that armed struggle plays a crucial role in many revolutionary movements, being a powerful force for change by overthrowing oppressive regimes and establishing a new political order. However, it also carries risks like severe social disruption and the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism as well as violence which in itself is a huge risk. Therefore, several scholars who study revolutions and social movements share a common argument that while revolutions may dismantle authoritarian governments, the underlying dictatorship system often remains intact (Sai Latt, 2023).

Dr. Sai Latt, a critical scholar of Myanmar, emphasized in his essay published on Doh Ayay/Our Cause the importance of a profound understanding of the revolution's mission. He highlights the necessity of questioning the nature of the revolution, its objectives, the adversaries it seeks to confront, and the desired outcomes (Sai Latt, 2023).

The success of armed struggles depends on factors like popular support, revolutionary leadership and socio-political context (Fanon, 1962; Bayat, 2013). Theda Skocpol, an American sociologist and political scientist, has emphasized the importance of integrating social change with armed revolution to achieve peace and stability (Skocpol, 2015). Moreover, Tilly (2003) underscores the need for revolutions to focus not only on seizing power but also on reconstructing social relations and fostering new cultural narratives. Revolutions aiming for profound political shifts must address underlying social inequities and cultural dynamics to sustain their impacts. This includes confronting gendered dynamics such as negative masculinities and other discriminative gender narratives that contribute to or reinforce violence and social inequality.

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of deconstructing masculinity in revolutions and conflicts in the struggle for constructive societal change. According to Dr. Sai Latt, masculinity encompasses norms such as courage, strength, decisiveness, the ability to defeat the enemy, and the capacity to fight and kill (Sai Latt, 2023). He further describes masculine behaviors as including bravery and leadership within the family and community, a willingness to use force if necessary to overcome opponents, avoiding humiliation, not being followers of women, not being LGBT identities, refraining from showing tears, and avoiding any appearance of weakness.

In some studies, masculinity is even found as the main source of violence and conflict in society. David Duriesmith, who examined the role of masculinities through case studies of the Sierra Leone and Second Sudanese civil wars, identifies the root cause of the conflicts as power clashes between the masculinities of government forces and armed groups (Duriesmith, 2019). Scholars Ann-Dorte Christensen and Palle Rasmussen from Aalborg University in Denmark emphasized that military violence and the principles of military organization and discipline are both strongly linked to masculinity, considering that war has historically almost exclusively been undertaken by men (Christensen A.D & Rasmussen P. 2028).

A feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe refers to “militarized masculinity” as “the culturally dominant, socially constructed image of ‘what it means to be a man’ within military institutions, a definition that glorifies strength, aggression, and violence” (Enloe, 2000). The violence targeting civilians and women during the conflicts is exactly an expression of militarized masculinities that existed even before the conflict (Duriesmith, 2019). Masculinity-focused armed revolutions often marginalize women and LGBTQ+ individuals, reinforcing gender hierarchies, and this marginalization sidelines the contributions of these groups (Kerber, 1991; Sjoberg & Via, 2020). Additionally, Lwambo (2011) expanded on Lopes' (2012) concept of militarized masculinity, arguing that militarization influences not only the masculinity of military personnel but also that of civilian men living in conflict-affected areas.

Revolutionaries make promises for a just and fair society, but this requires deep-level behavioral changes (Moghaddam FM, 2023). The extensive literature on gender and conflict underscores that an armed revolution focused solely on military success is insufficient for rebuilding a just and equitable society. According to scholars Cynthia Enloe (2000), Laura Sjoberg and Sandra E. Via (2010), consensus emphasizes that military victory alone in armed revolutions is insufficient for rebuilding societies without considering gender inclusivity. Thus, along with the armed revolution, the militarized masculine behaviors that contribute to the cause of violence and inequality should be deconstructed.

The current context of the armed resistance movement in Myanmar also highlights the need to frame its revolution in a way that effectively calls for an end to all forms of militarism and dictatorship practices, including militarized masculinity behaviors, which is crucial to building a sustainable, just, and peaceful society reflecting gender equality.

Three years after the military coup on 1 February 2021, the collaborative armed resistance involving both newly emerged armed groups and long-standing ethnic resistance groups during the Myanmar Spring Revolution have demonstrated an unprecedented scale of success against the military junta. They claim to have a clear mission in overturning Myanmar’s military-dominated political system and establishing a federal democracy (Fishbein, Hkawng, & Brang, 2024). Many critics and authors highlight the need to deconstruct and resist the patriarchal gender norms which include masculinities within the Spring Revolution (International Crisis Group, 2022; Hedstrom, Olivius & Soe, 2024; Ferguson, 2023). The author Saw Kapi, a long-time Burma political analyst, sees the Spring Revolution in Myanmar as more than a political movement but a kind of *revolution of thought* (Kapi, 2022). On the other hand, the Myanmar Spring Revolution has also faced significant criticism due to greater gender exclusion at decision-making levels (Crisis Group Asia Briefing, 2023) and widespread reports of sexual violence within the movement (BWU, 2023). These issues have raised questions about whether the revolution is readopting the practices which include militarized masculinity that it aims to overthrow. In particular, it is important to examine the newly emerged armed resistance, one of the main drivers of the Spring Revolution which is claiming to confront the militarized patriarchal state power (Jordt, Ingrid, Than, Tharaphi and Sue, Ye Lin, 2021), embedding the militarized practices that it aims to revolutionize. Merely overthrowing the military junta and establishing a new civilian government is insufficient; it is crucial to reform and revolutionize the foundations of society such as militarized attitudes and behaviors including masculinities (Sai Latt, 2023). This paper will now explore whether the armed resistance in the Spring Revolution is embedded with militarized masculinity and how its gender narratives are reflected in the revolution, with the aim to identify gaps and improve policies and practices to deconstruct gender behaviors that harm the development of a just society.

## Methodology

This research used a qualitative approach and mixed methods of analysis, through media monitoring the Facebook posts of PDFs, and online interviews with leaders from newly emerged People Defense Forces (PDFs) and gender experts. The PDFs<sup>4</sup> who were monitored and interviewed in this study are mainly from the Karenni, Karen, Sagaing and Tavoy areas.

For media monitoring, the study focused on the daily public posts of both PDF individual and group Facebook pages. This media monitoring is aimed at observing the actual behaviors and gender narratives of PDFs individually and institutionally. Facebook had 19.25 million users in Myanmar in early 2022 (Simon, 2022) and social media has played a visible and critical role in Myanmar's domestic politics since the coup (Anuradha & Archana, 2021). People from Myanmar nowadays often show what is really inside their minds by sharing content and posting their insights on Facebook. Therefore, the method of media monitoring provides honest information on what the actual gender narratives of PDFs are and to what extent their narratives reflect the culture of the Spring Revolution in Myanmar.

The individual lists were selected based on the accuracy of their identification of being PDF members, their regular internet access, and unlocked profiles. Gender and PDF identification were strictly examined based on specific information: Individuals were identified as PDFs if they appeared in photos or activities of their PDF groups, including wearing PDF uniforms with group logo labels. Additionally, comments and conversations in their related posts were reviewed to confirm their identities and roles within the group. The validity of the groups' official Facebook pages was also verified by the leadership of those groups.

Based on the identified individual lists of PDFs, their related PDF group pages were automatically selected. Daily Facebook posts of a total of 31 individual PDF members' Facebook accounts, comprising 15 female and 16 male members, along with 20 of their related official PDF group pages, were monitored from 1 February 2021 to 31 December 2023.

A comprehensive analysis of Facebook posts (including original posts, shared posts, and comments under the posts) has been undertaken to explore the gender narratives of PDFs individually and institutionally, and how militarized masculinity is constructed and represented within the narratives of PDFs members and groups.

For the online interviews with PDF members from selected groups and gender experts, this method is aimed at observing the individual and institutional perspectives on gender narratives and militarized masculinity in the Spring Revolution, and the roles of PDF members and groups in this dynamic. The interviews were conducted with a total of 10 individuals (5 men and 5 women, including one person identifying as LGBT) who are PDF leaders and gender experts.

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<sup>4</sup> According to interviews, the PDFs are generally under different chains of command. Some PDF groups operate under the National Unity Government (NUG) or receive support from the NUG, others collaborate with Ethnic Resistance Groups, and some function independently. Additionally, some groups do not provide clear information on whether they are under the NUG or merely collaborating with it. Therefore, this study does not focus on identifying specific PDF groups but considers PDFs in general.

## Challenges and limitations

Security presented a significant challenge in conducting this research. Due to security concerns, the majority of PDF members frequently change their names or accounts and maintain a low profile online. As a result, this research encountered limitations in identifying members and their associated groups, as well as challenges in selecting participants from different levels and areas, focusing on those more active in internet access.

Another major limitation is the internet accessibility of the majority of PDF members. According to many PDF members, internet use is prohibited while they are at the frontlines. They can only access the internet when stationed in backline areas, provided their military camps are close to cities or neighboring countries. Most PDF groups are stationed in remote areas where phone lines and internet connections are unreliable. Interviews from various PDF groups indicated that considerable time is required to find suitable locations for internet access, often necessitating journeys to mountains or higher-up places. Generally, only members responsible for fundraising, information, and communication, or those who have returned to the backlines, have regular or reliable internet access. This situation highlights that the limited internet accessibility of both groups and individual members hinders a comprehensive observation of their actual behaviors and gender narratives throughout the digital space.

Furthermore, the research was constrained by the fact that the majority of selected individual members' accounts were only identified as active in late 2022. Therefore, the study could not observe their behaviors in 2021, and some of their shared posts were unavailable for review at the time of observation.

Another challenge arose from the limitation in tracing all online messages, focusing primarily on posts made on members' main profiles. Facebook users have control over their audience, restricting access to messages and posts limited to friends only. Consequently, the observation mainly focused on the most public posts on members' main profiles, potentially overlooking their overall behaviors in daily communications.

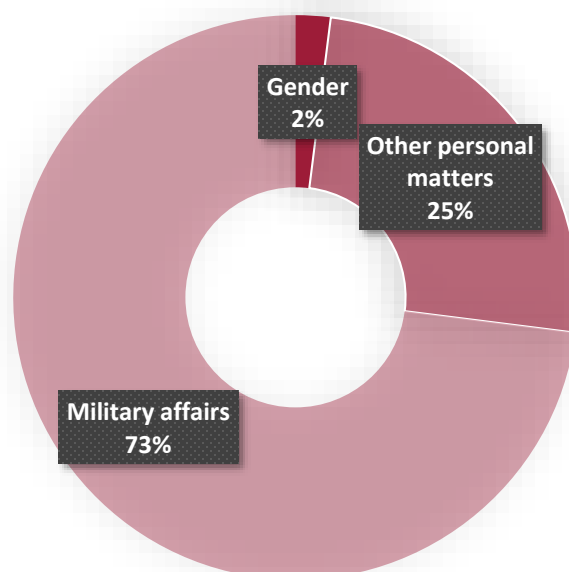
## Online gender narratives and militarized masculinity

The analysis of this study is primarily based on feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe's definition of “militarized masculinity,” which she describes as “the culturally dominant, socially constructed image of ‘what it means to be a man’ within military institutions, a definition that glorifies strength, aggression, and violence” (Enloe, 2000). This study examines how PDF members and groups portray and construct gender roles within their daily communication and their revolutionary activities. By analyzing their gender narratives in both their personal and revolutionary lives, this study aims to determine whether their narratives are characterized by militarized masculinity.

During the study, 16,444 Facebook posts from 31 individual PDF members’ accounts and 20 PDF groups’ official pages from 1 February 2021 to 31 December 2023 were analyzed, and 10 PDF leaders and gender experts were interviewed. This section will primarily focus on the findings from Facebook monitoring. The subsequent sections, “Impact of Militarized Masculinity in the Revolution” and “Institutional Accountability on Militarized Masculinity,” will mainly address the findings from the interviews.

In this section, the findings from monitoring individual PDF members’ Facebook accounts aims to examine personal gender narratives and behaviors, which will be explained in more detail in session 4.1. Meanwhile, the findings from monitoring PDF groups’ official pages seeks to explore institutionalized gender narratives and behaviors which will be explored in more detail in section 4.2.

FIGURE 1: MEDIA MONITORING ON THE GENDER NARRATIVES OF PDF MEMBERS AND GROUPS ON FACEBOOK



Among the 16,444 posts monitored during the study, the posts were divided into three broad categories based on different narratives. Only 326 posts were identified as gender-related narratives and behaviors, which only accounted for 2% of the total posts. In the media monitoring, the dissemination of military information and updates in both individual PDF members and PDF groups' pages accounted for more than 72% of the total posts. These were also considered as part of the negative gender narratives in this analysis which will be explained in the analysis. Since narratives on other personal matters will not be counted in this analysis, we will primarily focus on the narratives related to Gender and Military Affairs.

According to findings derived from the monitoring group and individual Facebook pages of PDFs, the observation identifies two primary findings. The first one manifests positive narratives characterized as gender-supportive discourses and behaviors. The second one identifies negative narratives characterized as gender-aggressive discourses and behaviors.

## Positive narratives

"Positive narratives" refer to gender-supportive discourses and behaviors that were seen in the posts of both individual PDF members and their related groups' official pages. "Gender-supportive discourses and behaviors" are characterized by any discourse or act that promotes gender equality and the rights of marginalized groups, and that deconstructs discriminatory gender and social norms. Examples of phrases supporting such narratives include 'gender equality,' 'no discrimination regardless of gender,' 'respect for LGBTQ+ individuals,' 'rights for sex workers,' 'value of diversity,' and 'women's participation.' Content shared or posted in this context includes cheering on women's and LGBTQ+ participation in the revolution, joining the Htamein campaign, participating in 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, sharing photos of men cooking or washing as their responsibilities, and other similar activities.

According to the finding, among the 2% of posts with gender-related narratives and behaviors, the positive narratives shared about half—which is 171 posts out of 326 (52.4%). With only 1% of total posts having gender positive narratives, this indicates a serious absence on this issue in PDFs' online narratives. However, it is also significant to acknowledge the positive narratives as a small contribution to the Spring Revolution toward a sustainable, equal, just, and peaceful society.

## Recognize diversity

Among both female and male PDF members, the majority posted and shared content which gave recognition to diversity regarding race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. On 10 June 2023, a female PDF member posted on her account, "Please do not listen to divisive and abusive words against religion and ethnicities." Similarly, a male PDF member from the Karen area stated in one of his posts in 2023, "What we want is democracy and anti-dictatorship in the country. There is no bias towards any specific party or ethnic group." Additionally, a young female PDF member from the Sagaing area posted in November 2023, "Youth have great ideas. They respect and value diversity." Similarly on the official pages of PDF groups, some pages repeatedly mentioned "regardless of race, gender, ethnicity and religion" in their narratives on Facebook. Although the group pages are monitored and updated by assigned administrators, this study considers all content posted and shared on these pages as the institutional narratives of specific PDF groups. This is because they are the official pages of the groups, run under the supervision of their

leadership, so all content reflects the narratives of these groups. Although the study provides limited information on their interpretations of ‘democracy,’ ‘diversity’ and ‘equality,’ these discourses are acknowledged as positive contributions to the concept of gender equality in general. However, the frequency of such posts remains relatively low compared to the total number of monitored posts.

## Anti-militarism and social justice

Narratives on anti-militarism and calls for social justice are prevalent among some individual and official group Facebook pages. For instance, one male PDF leader demonstrated his commitment to combating dictatorship practices, extending his opposition beyond the current Myanmar military junta to encompass any entity engaging in such behavior. In a 2023 post, he asserted, “I am dedicated to combating all forms of dictatorship and all instances of oppression.” Similarly, a female PDF member from the Karenni area emphasized her commitment to the ongoing Spring Revolution, stating, “I have chosen to join this armed revolution to combat not only this military dictatorship but also any other forms of dictatorship.” Additionally, some posts observed in this study expressed concerns among PDFs regarding the recurrence of military dictatorship practices. In October 2023, a male PDF leader from the Sagaing area cautioned his peers, advising, “We must avoid adopting dictatorship practices while fighting against them.” These discourses, emerging from both male and female PDF members, are notable on their individual Facebook accounts. Similarly, these narratives are notably seen on official group pages. A PDF group page in the Karenni area shared a post of its top leader’s speech which included the phrase “attack all the mechanisms of dictatorship and all dictatorship ideologies.” According to the finding, the majority showed their commitment to fighting the dictatorship until the end on their pages through using the phrases “end dictatorship” and “justice for all” in their narratives on Facebook, but it remains limited in frequency, both individually and institutionally.

## Support women’s participation

Encouraging “women’s participation” is a significant discourse among the gender-positive narratives found in both PDF group pages and individual accounts. This discourse is mostly demonstrated through the sharing of interviews and articles featuring PDF women, as well as photos of women protesters and women PDFs, often accompanied by positive reactions. For instance, one PDF leader from the Sagaing area expressed his respect for a female activist leader who led a motorbike protest in May 2023, stating, “I respect you, sister... take care of yourself for everything.” However, some posts aimed at promoting women’s participation inadvertently undermine those who choose to refrain from actively engaging in the revolution. This is exemplified by discourse such as, “This is for women who do not understand well about the revolution,” posted by a male PDF member from the Sagaing area in his account. Notably, several groups and individuals actively encourage women’s participation in the armed struggle by sharing photographs and videos of women’s activities within the PDF.

Notably, three PDF groups demonstrate active support for women within the organization by presenting the voices and activities of women within their battalions on their official group pages, with two of these groups even having specific women’s battalions. Among these three groups, one PDF group, currently based in Karen territory, devotes approximately 10% of its group page posts to promoting women’s participation within the PDF groups.

One PDF group's official Facebook page shared a post about the speech of a top PDF leader at the anniversary celebration of one of his women's battalions in October 2023. In his opening remarks, he emphasized his group's commitment to women's participation in the revolution stating, "The inclusion of women's participation in politics and revolution reflects a higher standard of political culture... In light of the violence, oppression, and discrimination endured by women, we must continue to advocate for their participation in political dialogues, consultations and policymaking processes toward the future establishment of a federal system." Another significant discourse emerged from the same group's Facebook page, emphasizing that, "Recognizing the lessons learned from past political and social justice movements, it is evident that success is unattainable without the active participation of women. In honoring the countless women of Myanmar who have sacrificed their lives, blood, and dedication to the cause of current political change, we urge everyone to change behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, and practices that perpetuate oppression and endanger the lives of women." This statement was issued on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2023. However, these positive discourses for women's participation remain significantly limited when compared to the overall discourse—comprising fewer than 50 out of 16,457 observed Facebook posts.

### Promote gender equality

Promoting gender equality and advocating for the rights of marginalized groups were identified in a critically limited number of posts. This observation primarily focuses on terms that explicitly refer to "gender equality" and the names of marginalized groups, such as 'LGBT', 'other gender identities,' 'sex worker,' and 'disability.' These initiatives primarily originated from a small number of individual PDF members and a few PDF group pages. In a narrative posted on Facebook in January 2023, a woman PDF member stated, "Leave all the stereotypes against women behind. The revolution is to resist not only the military junta but also the whole system." While the majority of posts observed about promoting gender equality, the inclusion of LGBTQI+ issues was notably absent. Nevertheless, very few posts acknowledged LGBTQI+ who are participating in various roles within the revolution. For instance, a male PDF member from the Sagaing area demonstrated recognition of LGBTQ+ participation during protests by sharing images with positive captions in his Facebook post from September 2021, stating, "We should not be conservative anymore, and we need to accept and recognize, particularly LGBT. They are sacrificing their lives for this revolution. Proud of you, all LGBT."

Notably, among the groups analyzed in this study, three PDF groups based in the Karen, Karenni, and Sagaing regions were actively engaged in disseminating information about promoting gender equality, particularly aimed at challenging traditional norms and stereotypes. Additionally, one PDF group produced a narrative highlighting the experience of a woman who identified as LGBT serving as a military trainer within the group, which was shared on its page. However, among the 20 groups monitored in this study, only one group was found to significantly promote the voices of LGBT individuals on their Facebook pages by explicitly using the term "LGBT or other identities."

Interestingly, a post emerged emphasizing the rights of sex workers among over 16,000 posts, underscored by a female PDF member in her post in August 2022. She called for advocacy, stating, "In this revolution, we need to be vocal for the basic human rights of sex workers. They are also human beings, and we must fight for them to be entitled to full rights." While several groups mentioned



‘diversity,’ this particular post was one of the few that clearly defined what was meant by ‘diversity,’ a distinction not observed elsewhere during this study. Similarly, one PDF group in the Karen area disseminated a post honoring the participation of a PDF member with a disability in the revolution, stating, “Disability with the movement but possessing other abilities for revolution.”

### Challenge gender norms and stereotypes

Posts challenging gender norms and stereotypes are observed in some of the individual accounts, although in limited numbers. This analysis emphasizes all discourses that resist traditional norms and gender roles—particularly between being a man and being a woman. For instance, a male PDF leader from the Sagaing area shared photos of himself and his members acting soft and shy, with the caption “Here are good men who are soft, kind, and gentle,” posted in June 2023 in his account. While this post was closely analyzed for potential mockery of other gender identities, it was identified as a positive discourse based on the reactions and responses to the comments. Similarly, a female PDF leader from the Sagaing area shared a photo of a male PDF leader cooking for the members on her account page in November 2023 in her account. This post is recognized as a positive discourse challenging gender norms and stereotypes, as evidenced by the photo caption stating, “Regardless of being busy, whenever you arrive back home late or tired, wish you could cook for the members with special food.” Traditionally in Myanmar, women are typically assigned the responsibility of cooking when both men and women are present in the same place.

Additionally, women’s longyi (sarong) is culturally and traditionally regarded as subordinate, especially for men to touch or use. However, one male PDF leader challenged these norms by participating in protests where women used their longyi as protest flags. He posted, “Bring your longyi tomorrow,” referring to preparations for a protest by sharing news about International Women’s Day in 2022. Furthermore, the same PDF leader shared a photo of himself using pads for his wounds, stating, “Pad which is monthly use for women and daily used for revolutionaries,” in his post in July 2021. Women’s monthly pads are traditionally considered taboo, particularly for men to use them publicly. In another example, a female PDF member from the Karenni area shared a photo of herself sitting on the roof while setting up the bamboo house in April 2023. Typically, men undertake the role of building the roof in Myanmar society, except for some exceptional cases. Additionally, there are posts highlighting men’s responsibilities in women’s rights development, which are typically identified as women’s duties in society. A male PDF leader emphasized in his post in October 2023, “For women to be entitled to their full rights, it is not only women themselves who are responsible for it but also we, men, must make efforts.” These examples of challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes are significant, but it is crucial to note that the numbers are significantly low compared to the total number of posts.

### Awareness-raising on gender-based violence

Awareness-raising on gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women (VAW) is primarily observed on the Facebook page of a women’s battalion in the Sagaing area. These advocacy efforts were particularly prominent during a 16-day campaign from November to December, where the women’s battalion consistently disseminated messages such as “End Impunity, End Violence Against Women” and “Stop Sexual Violence, Eliminate the Rapist Military.” Outside of this women’s battalion, other PDF groups

and individuals observed in this study seldom emphasized awareness-raising about violence against women, with only a few exceptions. A PDF group page also disseminated its military rules in a post from November 2023, which included directives to avoid physical, mental, and sexual violence, as well as threats. Additionally, a few male PDF members and group pages shared the National Unity Government's military ethics for PDF members, which included provisions to prevent sexual violence and violence against women and other gender identities, as well as providing special protection to vulnerable civilians. One male PDF leader in Sagaing stated in a 2023 post on his account that the revolution should not be associated with sexual exploitation, stating, "This revolutionary area is not a place for sexual activities with women." Additionally, another male leader highlighted his group's principle against rape during a video interview in 2023, stating, "In our principles, members must refrain from fighting each other and committing rape against civilians." Furthermore, a female PDF member urged both men and women Facebook users to share a photo message condemning rape, featuring an animation depicting a member of the security forces committing sexual violence against a woman.

Overall, these positive narratives studied on Facebook are primarily observed within a limited subset of individuals and groups, notably three groups—one in the Karenni area, another in Karen, and a third in Sagaing. Conversely, there are critically fewer narratives of gender-positive behaviours and acts among the remaining groups. Additionally, active emphasis on LGBT rights and their participation in the armed revolution was found in only one PDF group, while explicit advocacy for "the basic human rights of sex workers" was addressed in just one post by a female PDF member. Furthermore, it is challenging to conclude that even a few groups and individual PDF members consistently maintain gender-positive narratives. This is because many of those who express positive narratives also engage in negative ones. This overlap complicates the assessment of gender sensitivity within the PDFs, as the same individuals or groups may simultaneously perpetuate both positive and negative gender narratives. As a result, no specific individuals or groups can be consistently identified as being gender-sensitive.

### Negative narratives as militarized masculinity

"Negative narratives" refer to gender-aggressive discourses and behaviors mainly seen in individual PDF members' posts rather than PDF group official pages. However, the passive gender aggressive acts were significantly found on Groups' official pages. "Gender-negative discourses and behaviors" are characterized by any discourse or act that reinforces discriminative gender and social norms, and upholds the culturally and socially constructed image of being a man or a woman, which usually excludes marginalized gender identities and issues but prioritizes men as active roles or accept warfare as the first priority. These discourses and behaviors are identified as "militarized masculinity" in this paper. The examples of "militarized masculinity" analyzed in this paper include doxing; sexist words; discriminative discourses based on gender, race, and other identities; reconstructing or reinforcing gender and social norms; and ignorance of gender equality.

### Gender exclusion

Among the 2% of total posts that related gender narratives and behaviors, about half reflected negative narratives, or 155 posts out of 326 in total. This percentage should not be understood as a positive indication on the lack of negative narratives among the Facebook accounts of PDF members and groups.

The presence of only 1% of gender-positive narratives is a critical indication that there is a significant deficiency of gender inclusion in both individual and institutional narratives among PDFs. The overwhelming majority, comprising more than 72% of total posts, focused on military updates and campaigns for military supplies, serves as compelling evidence of the PDF's resolute opposition against the military junta. Conversely, the minimal presence of gender-positive narratives, comprising only 1%, constrains the identification of the PDF's broader revolutionary spirit against dictatorship systems that perpetuate oppressive, abusive, and unjust acts. This imbalance highlights the predominant focus solely on military objectives, overshadowing efforts to address and fight against deep-rooted gender discrimination and social injustice. Additionally, this finding reflects the narratives of militarized masculinity, which reinforce a culture that prioritizes warfare while neglecting the deconstruction of social injustice in the revolution.

### Sexism and sexual harassment

Sexism and sexual harassment are prevalent within gender-negative discourses, particularly targeting female supporters of the SAC and women who abstain from involvement in the revolution. These posts number 100 out of the 155 negative narratives. This figure also includes the use of inappropriate and disrespectful language, including derogatory terms related to their gender or sexuality, such as 'whores.' Such expressions typically stem from feelings of anger and disappointment toward individuals regarding the revolution and related social topics. These discourses are observed among both male and female PDF members, with few exceptions among individual members. Half of these discourses often manifest in overtly sexist and abusive language. The primary targets of such discourses are wives of SAC soldiers, female supporters of the SAC, and women not participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Examples include the dissemination of made-up images depicting women engaging in sexual activities with SAC members and the rephrasing of original statements using sexist language. A male PDF leader also shared an MTV song where the images of Daw Thet Thet Khaine, who used to be an NLD parliament member but openly changed her side to support the military junta after the coup, appeared like she was having sex or being together with SAC leaders. Such discourses are mainly exhibited by male PDF leaders, but a few young female members also engage in such conduct. Notably, the official Facebook pages of the PDF groups generally refrain from posting sexist content, with one group being an exception. One PDF group based in the Karen area shared on their official page three posts identified as containing sexist discourses. One of these posts suggested that wives of SAC captains should support the revolution by engaging in sexual affairs with other men behind their husbands' backs. Overall, these sexist discourses primarily target women and vary in their nature and focus. However, one instance involved the sexual harassment of a SAC male leader, wherein his image was digitally altered to depict him without pants, as shared by a young female PDF member on her social media account in July 2022.

### Doxing

Doxing was seen in the online discourses of the PDF members, but only in a very small number of three posts. These behaviors originated from one female and one male member of the PDF, respectively. The targets of these posts included family members of SAC informants, commonly referred to as 'Da Lan,' as well as female SAC supporters and women not associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). One female PDF member reshared a post in February 2021 concerning a female SAC supporter,

accompanied by a caption ‘If HD comes up,’ which meant asking for a sex video of the mentioned woman. In the same month and year, a male PDF leader also shared a post regarding a non-CDM woman allegedly engaged in a workplace affair with her boss. This post included captured CCTV images. Additionally, the same male PDF leader shared another post disclosing the address of the wife of a SAC informant who ran a beauty salon in Yangon. It is noteworthy that these actions primarily occurred in early 2021. Furthermore, a significant portion of individual PDF members exhibited no such activity, and some even displayed inactive accounts in 2021 and 2022. This circumstance may be attributed to members changing their Facebook accounts after affiliating with the PDF, giving some PDF members two accounts with different names. Notably, the PDF group pages did not provide any evidence of the act of doxing.

## Gender stereotypes and discrimination

Gender stereotypes and discrimination have emerged as significant discourses observed mainly in individual PDF members’ accounts during this study. Interestingly, these behaviors are demonstrated by the same PDF members who also participated in promoting gender-positive narratives. This includes a woman PDF leader who actively shared posts promoting women’s rights and gender equality. The discourses include terms and language used to subordinate women’s roles and other gender identities. Some PDF members exhibited a stereotypical mindset rooted in their daily practices. For instance, a male PDF leader from the Sagaing area expressed his feeling of missing home by stating, “I cried as if I were not a man whenever I think of the time I could go back home,” implying that crying is not acceptable for a man. Similarly, another PDF male leader stressed in his reply under his post, “I am an old man without a brain, and I am a man with a women’s mindset” in May 2023, reinforcing gender stereotypes against women by suggesting they are naturally weak or lacking some mental capacity. The acceptance of stereotypes about women’s characteristics was also observed among female PDF members. One woman PDF member shared her old photo wearing a longyi and long hair, stating, “I had been feminine once like this.” Additionally, some PDF members exhibited negative perceptions of other gender identities, particularly gay men. One female PDF member derogatorily commented, “You look like a gay,” suggesting weakness, and questioned their ability to defend themselves, referencing a shared post from an unavailable observation period. Moreover, some PDF members engaged in posts that reinforce violence against women. One female PDF member reshared a ‘funny’ video with her joking reaction. In the shared video, a woman hits her husband several times, and when the husband responds mildly, she pretends to be hurt and requests help for domestic violence.

Overall, the finding clearly shows both passive and active gender-negative narratives among PDFs individually and institutionally. Even though the groups’ official Facebook pages did not show any evidence of the acts of doxing, sexism, and gender discrimination, it already has enough evidence of the acts of militarized masculinity by looking at over 72% of narratives were solely about militarism. There is a notable PDF group based in the Karen region which did not have any negative narratives on its Facebook page and it posted significant gender-positive content which included promoting the rights of LGBTs and Women. However, its gender-positive narratives still shared less than 10% of its total narratives—where the rest was about military affairs. In addition, almost all of the individual PDFs engaged in these negative narratives are the same as those who engaged in the positive narratives. This significantly contributes to the conclusion that pervasive militarized masculinity behaviors are embedded among PDFs individually and institutionally.

## Offline gender narratives and militarized masculinity

This section focuses on the analysis of the interviews with PDF leaders and gender experts examining the individual and institutional reflections on gender behaviors among PDF members and PDF groups in the Spring Revolution.

The findings demonstrate that the revolutionary spirit among PDFs—claiming to combat militarism and dictatorship—somehow limits the presence of gender-negative narratives online. This analysis is based solely on the comparison of the percentage of negative narratives online and the percentage of the negative behaviors experienced or witnessed by the interviewees. The negative narratives, characterized as militarized masculinity, by individual PDF members are more notable in offline settings according to all interviewees.

One PDF leader confirmed the acts of doxing and sexism targeting women SAC supporters and non-CDMers by PDF members as not uncommon, but mentioned a greater presence on Telegram rather than Facebook. He stated, “Doxing on their personal information and on their sexual affairs are carried out online. But I have never seen physical abuses by PDFs.”

The findings highlight threats and harassment—totally absent in online narratives—targeting women activists for their activism against patriarchal practices among PDFs or the revolution. Two gender experts shared their own experiences of being harassed and threatened by PDF members for their political perspectives, particularly when these women challenged patriarchal practices. A prominent woman leader reported being threatened by a male PDF member through Facebook Messenger, stating, “He messaged me that if you really want to work on women’s rights, don’t just speak out from there, why don’t you come to the areas we are based, of course, we will collaborate with you. This is kind of threatening.” She continued, “PDFs are male-dominant politics with embedded patriarchal mindsets. These people, who do not have a good understanding of democracy, are holding guns. Therefore, it is very difficult to deal with.” Another woman and human rights advocate said she experienced threats from PDF members, including threats to dox her address for her criticism of the NLD and NUG.

According to all interviewees, gender discrimination and the reinforcement of existing discriminatory gender norms were significantly present among PDF communities. Victim blaming, undermining the roles of women, disrespecting LGBT identities, aggression towards gender and women’s rights activists, and other gender discrimination acts were commonly highlighted during the interviews.

Although the majority of interviewees emphasized that these militarized masculinity behaviors among PDFs are less frequent compared to those of the SAC, one male PDF member pointed out that “it is less than SAC acts in percentage, but the objectives of the acts are the same.” He also acknowledged that there are others from armed resistance groups who are fighting to build a civilized society, firmly opposing these behaviors.

## Impacts of militarized masculinity in PDFs

Findings on both online and offline gender narratives among PDFs clearly proved the militarized masculinity embedded among the majority of PDF groups in the Spring Revolution. Some interviews with gender experts and PDF leaders saw them raise great concern about the impact of the pervasive practice of militarized masculinity among PDF members.

One prominent male PDF leader emphasized during his interview for this study, “Once military leaders become popular, power comes along with it. Unlike civilian social influencers, the discourse of military leaders carries the weight of orders. Whether expressed online or on the ground, their discourse holds even greater danger. Depending on the discourse or behavior of these leaders, it influences the actions of all other members.”

Despite some positive behaviors regarding gender issues, the majority of interviewees pointed out the deep-rooted existence of masculinity behaviors among PDF members and groups, raising concerns not only for the current Spring Revolution but also for the future of federal democratic change. One male PDF leader interviewed emphasized, “It’s a sign of the impossibility of fully building a peaceful society. Consequently, it can also affect the unity among different identities fighting together against the military dictatorship.”

Several interviewees agreed on the prevalence of patriarchal practices within the PDF members and expressed concerns about the connection between masculinity behaviors and militarism. One interviewee said, “If militarism becomes powerful, patriarchy will automatically become stronger. Militarism, patriarchy, and capitalism are like the legs of a stove. If one is strong, the rest will be strong.”

Hence, some interviewees emphasized the crucial need to combat the practices of patriarchy alongside opposing the military dictatorship. One gender expert underscored, “The military is inherently structured on patriarchy, and we are all acutely aware of its patriarchal practices. However, suppose we, who are fighting against such a group, cannot break free from those practices ourselves. In that case, I believe the military dictatorship will persist even after this junta is removed.”

## Institutional accountability on militarized masculinity

This section explores how, or if, PDF groups are taking accountability for the narratives they claim to deconstruct. The PDF leaders expressed their political willingness to deconstruct militarized masculinity embedded within PDFs during interviews conducted, in conjunction with the goals of the Spring Revolution. However, the overall findings indicate that the accountability of all PDF groups interviewed in this study is critically lacking, with very few exceptions. Only one PDF group demonstrated a policy commitment to protecting people from sexual violence.

The majority of PDF interviewees acknowledged a notable lack of understanding of gender issues among both leadership and members of PDF groups. Many groups cited financial and time constraints in conflict settings as barriers to focusing on gender issues. One PDF group leader explicitly stated, “We do not have gender training in our group since we are busy with other matters, and we cannot allocate time for it.” More significantly, one male PDF leader openly expressed his limitations in understanding and practicing gender equality by stating, “Regarding gender, we do not allow women in our group because women need special facilities such as bathing, toilets and security, which might limit the freedom of movement of male soldiers.” He added, “This doesn’t mean we neglect women in this revolution. Women are leading in other sectors which are suitable for them.” These discourses clearly reinforce discriminatively constructed gender roles and show strong evidence of militarized masculinity in the leadership level.

According to interviews with all PDF groups and monitoring of posts on their Facebook groups, almost no groups have demonstrated a specific policy or regulation aimed at deconstructing gender-negative behaviors—militarized masculinity—online and offline among their members. Only one PDF group out of seven interviewed showed its commitment by developing a policy on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), which covered detailed acts of sexual harassment, including verbal and physical behaviors. Additionally, this group mandates gender courses as part of its military training. However, these actions still face significant challenges due to a pervasive mindset of masculinity among the majority of PDF members. The group’s leader stated, “When we provided gender training to the members, some perceived it as extraneous and unnecessary at present.” Despite having a policy on PSEA and gender training within the group, this group still perpetuates narratives of militarized masculinity, as evidenced by the fact that over 80% of the posts are directly related to military operations or affairs.

Another PDF group based in Karenni State mentioned that its manual includes some gender-related aspects but does not constitute a specific policy. This group’s approach to dealing with online negative narratives among its members raises concerns about the manual’s effectiveness in influencing individual members’ behaviors. The leader characterized online narratives unrelated to military information as personal social problems by stating, “We do not control the youth’s freedom. Nevertheless, we usually remind them they would understand more when they have daughters.” He added that his group does not allow any acts of doxing or personal attacks. But, there is no clear information on how his group would take accountability for survivors of his members’ negative behaviors.

For PDF groups under the leadership or collaborating with the National Unity Government (NUG), they primarily rely on the NUG's Code of Conduct, which includes ethical guidelines for soldiers to prevent violence against women and sexual violence. However, the majority of interviewees highlighted the insufficient or lack of awareness among PDF members about their adopted Code of Conduct and military ethics regarding women and other gender identities.

The findings revealed that no PDF groups monitored during this study have specific regulations or limitations on the use of digital platforms, except for military regulations pertaining to disseminating military news and information. One male PDF leader emphasized, "Regarding their opinions and emotions related to other social issues, we cannot limit them from posting on Facebook. Only when there is a discourse that is inappropriate or has a significant impact, we have to discuss with them to foster understanding as a social bond." However, the leader did not provide clarification on what he meant by 'inappropriate' or 'significant impact' during the interview.

Overall, the findings from interviews with PDFs and media monitoring of individual and group official Facebook pages of PDFs reveal a critically low level of accountability among PDF groups in deconstructing militarized masculinity embedded within their ranks. Rather, the majority of groups monitored and interviewed in this study even reinforced these behaviors under the guise of the Spring Revolution as a critical period.



## Conclusion

Despite many studies highlighting the Spring Revolution as a progressive and transformative movement that opposes social injustice, gender inequality and militarism, this study reveals significant gaps and the need for critical attention to shift narratives from gender-negative to gender-positive, and to implement these positive narratives in practice. The findings clearly show that militarized masculinity is still deeply embedded in the online and offline narratives of PDFs, targeting not only women who support the State Administration Council (SAC) but also anyone who challenges their patriarchal practices within the Spring Revolution.

The study identified aggressive narratives, including acts of sexism, doxing, and threats, as well as a pervasive narrative of indifference, unenthusiasm, apathy, and passive-aggressive rejection of gender equality among PDFs. Although the online findings indicate a low percentage of negative gender narratives, the overall evidence suggests these narratives are concealed under the political pressure of the revolutionary spirit of the Spring Revolution, which claims to pursue social transformation alongside armed resistance. However, when given the opportunity to express themselves, hidden militarized masculinity behaviors emerge in various forms, from individual to institutional levels.

This study underscores the urgency of addressing and transforming these gender-negative narratives into gender-positive ones and ensuring that these transformed narratives are effectively put into practice. The deep-rooted militarized masculinity within PDFs poses a significant challenge to achieving the social transformation envisioned by the Spring Revolution, highlighting the critical need for continuous efforts to promote gender equality and deconstruct patriarchal structures and gender norms within the movement.

One gender expert highlighted that “PDFs should take the next step by changing their political ideology. They need to move beyond just being satisfied with opposing Myanmar soldiers. As long as they cannot progress to the next step, we will not break out of the cycle of violence. The extent of violence also depends on the depth of their political thinking.” Considering the significant role of PDFs in this Spring Revolution as one of the key drivers, militarized masculinity among PDF members should be promptly addressed and taken into account. These gender narratives and militarized masculinity not only undermine efforts toward gender equality but also perpetuate a culture of violence and aggression. By confronting the culture of militarized masculinity, PDFs can contribute in creating a more inclusive and equitable revolutionary movement that would align their actions with the broader goals of social justice and transformation.

## Recommendations

### *The National Unity Government (NUG) should:*

- **Strengthen the Chain of Command:** It is imperative to ensure that PDF members and groups collaborating with or under the Chain of Command of the Minister of Defense (MOD) adhere to the military code of conduct and its ethics.
- **Include gender topics in military training:** Without implementation, the policy or regulations are just papers. Gender equality concepts must be integrated into PDF military training as mandatory components of its values. Soldiers opposing the military dictatorship should refrain from all acts and behaviors that discriminate against gender identities. Additionally, systematic gender awareness training should be provided to all military members.
- **Develop rules of military ethics for both online and offline behaviour:** Specific rules or regulations should be developed to prevent abuses and the manifestation of militarized masculinity behaviors. This includes establishing a reporting system to address such issues.

### *People Defence Forces (PDF) should:*

- **Include gender topics in military training:** Gender equality concepts must be integrated into PDF military training as mandatory components of its values. Soldiers opposing the military dictatorship should refrain from all acts and behaviors that discriminate against gender identities. Additionally, systematic gender awareness training should be provided to all military members.
- **Develop rules of military ethics for online and offline spaces:** Specific rules or regulations should be developed to prevent online and offline abuses and the manifestation of militarized masculinity behaviors. This includes establishing a reporting system to address such issues.
- **Collaborate with civil society organizations (CSOs):** Recognizing the resource and technical support challenges faced by PDFs, CSOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) represent valuable resources for raising awareness among members and developing gender-related rules and regulations.

### *CBOs and CSOs should:*

- **Extend engagement with PDFs:** CSOs should actively engage in raising awareness among PDFs to ensure the protection and prevention of gender-based violence and its consequences, both within PDF areas and in reducing online and offline militarized masculinity. This involves providing necessary technical support and conducting awareness programs among members.
- **Engage with the international community:** Awareness raising and capacity building is a process and can not be done at one time. CSOs should extend their international networks and collaboration for the needs of both financial and technical support.

### *The international community should:*

- **Support awareness raising among PDFs:** Awareness raising among PDFs plays a crucial role to address gender-based violence and reduce online and offline militarized masculinity. Collaboration with CSOs can serve as another avenue for empowering and raising awareness among PDF members. This needs international funding and technical support.
- **Provide consistent engagement:** Gender awareness is an ongoing process and requires long-term and consistent support. Therefore, the support provided should be sustained and continuous.

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