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## Exploring Gender through Art in Myanmar

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## Exploring Gender through Art in Myanmar

Allison Joseph<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1: Selected photos from The Odeal Woman exhibit featuring Burmese women and girls.  
Photo Credits: Allison Joseph

*The Ideal Woman: An Exploration of the Women's Movement in Myanmar*, a photographic exhibition that I organized, designed, and curated held on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018 at the Hive, explored the nuances and layers that comprise the lived experiences of Myanmar's women and girls. It also complemented my larger research project entitled, *An Exploration of "The Ideal Woman": A Contemporary Ethnography and Empowerment Project for Women in Thailand and Myanmar*. Together, these projects explore various perceptions of "the ideal woman" among the girls and women of different socioeconomic and environmental circumstances primarily in the countries of Thailand and Myanmar, with the aspiration of helping to empower, inspire and challenge women in Myanmar to examine, express, document and create their own feminine identity.

The exhibit provides visual documentation of the embodied<sup>2</sup> and ethnographic research, as well as the participatory action methods that were utilized by myself and the community members as an effective means for

<sup>1</sup> Allison Joseph is a senior at Scripps College majoring in Environmental Analysis and Psychology. Her work in Myanmar and Thailand, and her exhibit in Claremont CA, received generous funding from Envirolab Asia (Henry Luce Foundation) and the LASPA Center for Women's Leadership.

<sup>2</sup> Embodiment is the human experience of having and simultaneously being a body. The term conceptualizes the body as a dynamic, organic site of meaningful experience rather than a physical object distinct from the self or mind. In embodied research, qualitative data is collected through a focus on the role of the body in the formation of a sense of self and identity. The method is designed to

exploring gender constructs within Myanmar. The formation of this exhibit and the development of my project began during my time as a 2018 EnviroLab Asia Fellow. It was through EnviroLab that I met my mentor Ruth Pongstaphone, a director, theater artist, and activist. With Ruth's support and guidance, I created the "Ideal Woman" project as part of her larger Image of Women (SEA) initiative<sup>3</sup>.

My commitment to these projects came from a deeply personal place, as I too have had to challenge, redefine, and ultimately recreate my notions of the "Ideal Woman." Ruth encouraged me to find a topic which held both personal meaning and sparked my intellectual curiosity. Initially, I was uncomfortable to reflect on my challenges and to allow my vulnerabilities to permeate into my academic life. However, when I gave myself the space to reflect, I realized that my academic life and my personal journey have always been intimately connected.

I began my undergraduate education at the University of California Berkeley, where I was awarded a scholarship to attend Exeter College at Oxford University. However, health challenges would force me to take a medical leave from school to recover from anorexia and bulimia. After six years of healing, in which I worked to challenge dominant social and cultural ideals of femininity, I would eventually return to school, enrolling at Scripps College. Just as I was supported in my own journey, I hoped that through this project I too could create a safe space for women and girls to discover their voices and gain some measure of agency in creating their own definition of self.

My approach and methods were deeply inspired by Ruth's work, in which her use of participatory action research redefined my notion of "research" and "results." Participatory action research facilitates a cyclical process of inquiry, reflection, and action between the community and the researcher.<sup>4</sup> A unique feature of this methodology is the recognition of the capacity of the people living and working in a particular area to participate actively in all aspects of the research process. This approach allows participants to be their own source of self-determined and sustainable change. I believe that one of the best outcomes of participatory action research is that it encourages dialogue and communication within the community. The dialogue that resulted among the women and girls I worked with was organic, not controlled or initiated by myself as an outsider. Rather, these powerful females exerted their agency in deciding what to share and what they believed needed to be heard.

This innovative form of research was challenging at times, for although I engaged in a thorough literature review and interviewed local individuals, the central work needed to happen organically and in the moment. I could not bring preconceived notions or ideas regarding what I hoped to find. Rather, participatory action research required one to be constantly open, present, and self-reflective. The research itself required an awareness of one's positionality and a questioning of one's own perspective. I felt that as an American student and *farang* (foreigner), it was essential for me to understand my own ideas of feminism and equality, while simultaneously acknowledging that "feminism" within Southeast Asia exists in a unique and complex way. It was not my goal to define or create an idea of feminism for the girls or women that I worked with. Rather, I wanted to hear their thoughts, viewpoints, struggles and victories during their journey in discovering their own

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access how a situation was experienced rather than how it was explained or accounted for by its participants. Source: Vacchelli, Elena. *Embodied research in migration studies: Using creative and participatory approaches*. Policy Press, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The Image of Woman SEA (Southeast Asia) project is an evolution and an extension of the Image of Woman (Myanmar) event, which was curated by Director Ruth Pongstaphone as a celebration of International Women's Day produced by the Institut Francais de Birmanie (Yangon) in March 2014 and 2015. The Image of Woman Project has expanded to include women in the region of Southeast Asia and to become a continual effort to develop an ongoing dialogue for women, about women. Thus the project is now structured as an ongoing series of events, performances, workshops, and focus groups all of which are designed as participatory social / action research projects that are designed to contribute to a larger process of creating a progressive contemporary arts-based ethnography that focuses on how women are perceived, how they perceive themselves, the various factors that affect these perceptions, how women want to be perceived as individuals in localized and globalized contexts, and the challenges that oppose their ideal visions. Source: <http://imageofwoman.weebly.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Kaptani, Erene and Nira Yuval-Davis, 2008. "Participatory Theatre as a Research Methodology: Identity, Performance and Social Action among Refugees," Sociological Research Online, Sociological Research Online, vol. 13(5), pages 1-2.

definitions of what it means to be a woman.



Figure 2: Allison engages migrant girls in the embodiment of emotions (left) and explores movement with migrant laborers (right). Photo Credits: Pawaluk Suraswadi

Ruth also demonstrated how artistic exploration and embodied research can serve as effective methodologies when working with vulnerable and marginalized communities. With her guidance, I learned how such forms of research could serve as powerful and approachable vehicles for the sharing of personal and difficult experiences. I found that these artistic forms of expression work to create a non-threatening environment for confronting sensitive social issues. For example, through theater exercises, women and girls explored concepts that are traditionally considered to be taboo or dangerous. They expressed and shared aspects of their experiences which may have previously been hidden or repressed.<sup>5</sup> When I asked the girls to create a scene in which they felt it was challenging to be a “female,” they developed characters with deep meaning and complex layers. The beauty of theater and other embodied methods is that the research comes directly from the participants’ beings. Thus, it can be challenging and empowering for the participants as they attempt to express themselves in ways they may never have been able to.<sup>6</sup> Upon completion of my three months of research in Myanmar, I knew that it was essential that I begin to share the unique experiences of the women and girls that I had worked with in Southeast Asia.

Although many individuals, myself included, both at my university and within the larger Western world, hold strong ideas about feminism and gender equality, I wished to encourage a deeper conversation and engage individuals in critical reflection regarding such ideas. Through my photographic exhibition, I wanted to reveal that the experiences of women in Southeast Asia are woven within a unique tapestry of cultural values, social norms, and political history. As gender equality and women’s rights gain increasing attention within that region, it is vital to acknowledge the distinctive features of their women’s movements. The background and dimensions of each country’s gender roles are multifaceted, not easily discussed nor simply defined.<sup>7</sup> Thus, through the exhibit and the larger “Ideal Woman” project, I hope to facilitate greater inter-cultural understanding and dialogue regarding the nuances and layers of women’s lived experiences. Ultimately, the women in Southeast Asia need room to create their own narratives, and I feel privileged to help provide them with the space they deserve.

I could not have predicted becoming so deeply connected to this work when I began the Envirolab Asia program. Its interdisciplinary nature allowed me to maintain my passion for the physical environment, while also exploring alternative methods of understanding the social and cultural landscape that it impacts. I returned

<sup>5</sup> Guhathakurta, M. (2008). Theatre in participatory action research: experiences from Bangladesh. In Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. *The SAGE handbook of action research* (pp. 510-521). : SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: 10.4135/9781848607934

<sup>6</sup> I was greatly inspired by Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed*, in which theater can be used as a tool in liberation, allowing participants to discover personal agency on the stage. Source: Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>Ikeya, Chie. (2011). *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*. University of Hawai‘i Press.

to Thailand in the winter of 2019, after receiving a grant from The Laspa Center for Leadership at Scripps, which also sponsored a continuation and expansion of the “Ideal Woman” project. I would choose to focus my research on a community I had become close with during my first trip. I would work with the migrant Burmese youth living in Mahachai, Thailand, a fishing community located a few hours outside of Bangkok.<sup>8</sup>

Under the guidance of Ruth and another mentor, Pawaluk Surawswadi, a theater teacher at Mahidol University, we created a two-part participatory action research project that would reflect the voices of Mahachai’s youth and serve as embodied, ethnographic evidence regarding those in their community. I was directly inspired by the Burmese youth’s desire to be treated as human beings, and together we began to create *The Good Person of Mahachai*, a contemporary adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s play *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941). The goal of this project is to explore and transform the youth’s feelings of disempowerment and inferiority through the creation of *The Good Person of Mahachai*.



Figure 3. Photos of Mahachai’s migrant youth engaging in exercises to explore human nature. Photo Credits: Allison Joseph

In the first half of this project, the youth worked together to unravel the notion of what it means to be a human. Who constructs the ideal of a human? Who is human and who is not? Can anyone truly live up to the social construction of a human? Through participatory social action research methods, in particular theater and

<sup>8</sup>An estimated 200,000 Burmese migrants fuel Thailand’s billion dollar fishing industry in Mahachai, also known as “Little Burma.” The majority of workers come to Thailand with the hope of escaping a legacy of political and economic oppression under the Burmese military government. Source: Yuan Fu Yang, B. (2006). Life and death away from the golden land: The plight of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. *APLPJ*, 8, 485.

movement, the youth explored these questions. A series of workshops were carefully designed with the goal of developing a safe space for them to critically and creatively evaluate their own notions regarding what it means to be treated as a "human being." By the end of phase one, the participants developed a deeper understanding of their unique beliefs and values, the various viewpoints of their local community, the power structures that exist within, and other factors that ultimately affect their perceptions of self.

That workshop yielded essential information that will provide a foundation for which to develop *The Good Person of Mahachai*, which constitutes phase two of this larger project. The goal of phase two is to provide a wider canvas for the youth to expand their voices and perspectives, ultimately facilitating a greater understanding and sense of compassion for the lives of migrant laborers and their children. The play will also encourage social dialogue and inquiry regarding the relationships between communities and individuals within Southeast Asian society. This work will be utilized as a case study in my senior thesis during fall 2019, and will illustrate the ways in which embodied methodologies through a participatory action framework can be used to examine the physical, social and cultural environment. I intend to complete the adaptation of the play over the winter of 2020 and to facilitate its performance in Mahachai and throughout Thailand.