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Negotiating Social Norms and Relations in the Micromobilization of Human Rights: The Case of Burmese Lesbian Activism

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This article provides the first sociolegal analysis of lesbian rights activism in Myanmar. It elucidates the processes through which a group of lesbian activists navigate sexual and gender norms that oppress lesbians as sexual minorities and as women while they use human rights discourse to carry out micromobilization work, organizing constituents and building up grassroots participation in Myanmar. It analyzes how the collective deployment of human rights encompasses resistance against social norms that pose organizing obstacles for activists and the negotiations of social relations to counter them. These micromobilization processes shape whether and how activists adopt human-rights-based strategies and tactics. Bringing together law and society scholarship and social movement studies, the article highlights the importance of understanding human rights mobilization by marginalized populations who face multiple, overlapping forms of oppression and contend with plural sources of power.

INTRODUCTION

When states undergo democratic transitions, new political claims often emerge as activists find greater freedom to mobilize (Adam, Dyuvendak, and Krouwel 1999; McAdam 1999). In Myanmar,[1] after almost five decades of military rule, a civilian government came into power following the 2010 elections. Although the elections were orchestrated by the military regime,[2] the new government implemented reforms that relaxed restrictions on civil-political liberties and human rights discourse (Aspinall and Farrelly 2014). Activists are more openly advocating for legal

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1. While bearing in mind that "Myanmar" and "Burma" are contested terms, I use "Myanmar" to refer to the state, "Burmese" as the adjectival form for the state, society, and its citizens, and "Burman" to indicate the dominant ethnic group.
2. The military is constitutionally guaranteed 25 percent of the seats in Parliament.

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reform and the protection of human rights for ethnic and religious minorities, women, and other marginalized populations.

Nevertheless, under liberalized conditions, marginalized social groups still struggle with stiff obstacles. In Myanmar, political oppression continues despite the recent developments, and activists remain vulnerable to state repression (Human Rights Watch 2014). Moreover, changes to formal political institutions and official recognition of rights do not necessarily alter social norms that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. How, then, do Burmese activists negotiate prevailing social conditions as they mobilize and make claims based on human rights?

In this article, I draw from original, qualitative fieldwork to examine how lesbian activists organize and deploy human rights discourse in Myanmar to empower lesbians, raise their political consciousness, and gain social acceptance for them. In addition to circumventing legal and political restrictions that inhibit protest and rights activism in Myanmar, these activists have to confront additional challenges because of whom they represent and who they are. They not only have to contend with heteronormativity that oppresses lesbians as a sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) minority, but also have to resist deeply rooted gender norms that disadvantage lesbians as women in collective action. They persistently encounter difficulty with recruitment and retention. They are overshadowed by male counterparts of the SOGI minority rights movement (SOGI movement), from which their activism emerged, and disregarded by women's rights groups that focus on heteronormative women. To overcome these barriers, they turn to friendships and other social ties, increasing their cooperation with male SOGI minorities and making alliances with women's rights groups. Nevertheless, because of the entrenched nature of social norms, challenges remain.

Collective mobilization of human rights, therefore, involves surmounting organizing obstacles to micromobilization. In other words, human rights mobilization entails more than making claims based on the type of marginalization that forms the focus of their activism, such as lesbians as SOGI minorities. When carrying out recruitment and organizing grassroots participation, or micromobilization work, activists often encounter barriers created by interlocking forms of domination (Collins 1990). The interlocking domination is linked to overlapping sources of power (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008); in this article, it comprises not only the restrictive conditions faced by all activists in Myanmar but also multiple dimensions of oppressive social norms, such as the subjugation of lesbians as women. However, by cultivating and making use of social relations, activists may be able to overcome them to a certain degree.

As the first sociolegal analysis of lesbian activism in Myanmar, this article contributes to law and society research on the relationship between rights mobilization and nonofficial normative orders, calling attention to collective action by those who face intersecting forms of marginalization and to an understudied site by this scholarly field. It connects law and society with social movements scholarship to elucidate the micromobilization processes through which activists use human rights to organize and make claims. It emphasizes that the collective mobilization of human rights goes beyond challenging formal institutions and the targeted form of domination—it also encompasses resistance against multiple layers of oppressive social norms, particularly the negotiations of social relations to counter them.

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Situated more broadly, the article analyzes human rights as processes (Merry 2006; Chua 2015). Drawing out the social life of human rights (Wilson 2006; Hynes et al. 2011), it focuses on *how* they are collectively mobilized, instead of examining such effects as those associated with their ideological power (Santos 2015) or implementation (Allen 2013). The article thus reveals a different type of challenge for human rights, one that is not directly related to their substantive meanings or merits but to social norms that hinder activists from organizing collectively. The ways activists overcome such obstacles have great import for debates about the instrumental and cultural resources of human rights for collective action (McCann 2006), as well as for the aforementioned criticisms. If human rights could not even be mobilized or could be mobilized only in certain ways as a result of organizing obstacles, it would and should shape scholarly debates over their virtues, detriment, and power.

Notwithstanding the brutal history of human rights in their country, Burmese activists turn to this very discourse for collective action, and struggle with barriers to micromobilization rooted in social norms. For domestic activists and international actors who are channeling funds into Myanmar and other countries undergoing political transition, hoping to achieve a more equal and just society through human rights work, the findings of this article raise questions about human-rights-based strategies and alternatives to them. Following the discussions on my analytical approach and fieldwork, and the data analysis on micromobilization processes, I consider these questions when I evaluate the future course for Burmese lesbian rights activists. Consistent with my analysis of human rights as processes, my answer is not an either-or proposition for human rights but one concerned with "how" they are put to use within the given context and for what purposes.

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND MICROMOBILIZATION

By navigating social relations and creating strategic ties, Burmese lesbian activists are sometimes able to resist sexual and gender norms that constrain their collective mobilization of human rights. In this section, I situate my analysis in the broader law and society scholarship on human rights. I also draw insights from law and society as well as social movements research to inform the two features of my analysis: the multiple dimensions of oppression and the significance of social relations involved in micromobilization.

Effects and Processes of Human Rights

In the broad and diverse field of law and society, the effects of human rights on social change and political action occupy much of the attention of scholars interested in the international discourse. Critics point out a long list of flaws: construed as bearing Western origins, human rights are seen as hegemonic (Subramaniam 2009; Santos 2015). The discourse allegedly overpowers other ideologies and complex subjectivities, including sexuality and gender (Waites 2009), and reinforces unequal global distribution of power and resources (Merry 2006). Based on

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individualistic, legal claims (Wilson 1997; Englund 2004), human rights could displace visions of social change that are more transformative (Allen 2013), or community and responsibility based (Kennedy 2002), inhibiting collective action (Brown 2004; Massoud 2013). They not only lack cultural resonance (Engel 2012), but they could also attract backlash (Currier 2009; Kollman and Waites 2009) and jeopardize local activists. Engrossed in fulfilling donor conditions, human rights organizations eventually neglect local objectives (Massoud 2015) and fail to empower their target population (Swidler 2013), or lose legitimacy (Mutua 2009).

On the other hand, while human-rights-based strategies do not always achieve formal legal reform, other scholars argue that rights discourses generate cultural or extralegal effects (Leachman 2014) that benefit activists. They alter political discourse (McCann 2006) and reconstitute social meanings and social life (Engel and Munger 2003; Barclay, Bernstein, and Marshall 2009). Hence, activists use the promise and ideals of human rights to raise political consciousness, galvanize collective action (Mujica and Meza 2009; Rajaram and Zararia 2009; Merry et al. 2010), and construct a political community (Smith 1998). They also frame their claims as human rights violations to win over allies (Richards 2005) and funders (Bob 2009), using the resources and opportunities that come with human-rights-based strategies to build organizational capacity (Holzmeyer 2009).

In contrast to the focus on effects, my analytical approach centers on the *processes* of human rights mobilization. The latter are intimately related to the former and are crucial to understanding the relationship between human rights and social change. The effects of human rights depend on how they are employed, and whether they could even be implemented. Activists have to deal with political responses toward human rights and make the international discourse relatable to local constituents. Scholars who take this approach, therefore, analyze the social life of human rights (Wilson 2006)—the ways their meanings and practices are adapted (Merry 2006) and contested on the ground (Cowan 2006; Goodale 2007).

Micromobilization Processes

My grounded study of lesbian rights activism in Myanmar draws attention to one type of process, micromobilization. Specifically, it highlights the interactions that activists have with nonofficial normative orders or social norms when they carry out micromobilization work, that is, recruiting and organizing people to join their movement. These interactions, in turn, are shaped by who they are in relation to the normative orders and how they relate to others (Engel and Munger 2003).

With the above in mind, I draw out the first of two features of my analysis: micromobilization of human rights involves resisting multiple, intersecting dimensions of social norms that form organizing obstacles. Here, law and society's broader literature on the relationship between rights and nonofficial normative orders is instructive. According to this literature, social norms can exert strong influence on the processes of rights mobilization. Often, they manifest in power dynamics (Bumiller 1988; Quinn 2000; Marshall 2003) and constrain the use of rights, individually and collectively. For instance, women who have been sexually harassed

may conform to gendered expectations and not pursue their perpetrators aggressively to demand legal vindication (Morgan 1999). Men may hesitate to take advantage of newly recognized rights that go against societal expectations about their role as caregivers (Albiston 2010). Community norms about who is desirable (Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel 1994) also subtly control whether people seek redress through formal legal institutions; unwritten rules in a nonliberal regime influence the strategies and tactics that activists deploy to achieve rights recognition (Chua 2014).

In social movements scholarship, even though much of the work on lesbian activism does not explicitly focus on human rights mobilization, it offers relevant insights into oppressive sexual and gender norms. As *SOGI minorities* who transgress heteronormativity, lesbian activists have been shunned or neglected by feminists and women's rights activists. In societies such as the United States (Wolf 1979; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Esterberg 1994; Gilmore and Kaminski 2007), Indonesia (Blackwood 2007), Singapore (Lyons 2004), India (Dave 2011), and Peru (Jitsuya and Sevilla 2003), some women's rights groups avoided being publicly associated with lesbian politics for fear that their groups would lose legitimacy. Others harbored homophobia (Mogrovejo 1999; Park-Kim, Lee-Kim, and Kwon-Lee 2007; Cho 2008) or dismissed lesbians' grievances as distractions from their main agenda (Bessette 2013).

As *women* participating in the highly gendered activity of political protest (Taylor 1999; Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson 2000), lesbian activists have been discriminated against or ignored by their male counterparts in SOGI minority rights activism (Mogrovejo 1999; Ross and Landstrom 1999; Stockdill 2003; Park-Kim, Lee-Kim, and Kwon-Lee 2007). Their issues are marginalized in HIV/AIDS and other areas of sexual health (Winnow 1992; Harney 1999), antiviolence (Jenness and Broad 1994), and decriminalization (Ofreneo and De Vela 2010). In societies where women have significantly lower social status, lesbians lack the freedom of movement, education, and connections to gain access to national political discourse (Blackwood 2005).

In other words, the combination of different social norms forge interlocking dominations (Collins 1990) that become organizing obstacles for micromobilization, preventing a marginalized group from being recruited to a movement, staying with it, becoming leaders (Robnett 1996, 1997),[3] or integrating their issues into a movement's agenda (Speed 2009). The organizing obstacles could manifest in obvious discriminatory conduct among those occupying a movement's top echelons. They could also work more subtly through differences in self-perception among social groups, in societal expectations of behavior and roles, and in knowledge and opportunities (McAdam 1992) that are embedded in gender and other broader social institutions. In addition, they could hinder basic and oft-assumed aspects of micromobilization, such as finding time to meet, having the freedom of physical

3. These studies found that men who lacked formal education were also excluded, highlighting class as another intersecting layer of oppression. In the case of lesbians in Myanmar, other sources of power could include class as well as religion and ethnicity. Nevertheless, my data—which include data on ethnic and religious minorities—emphasize gender and sexuality.

movement to travel to the meeting place, and feeling confident or safe enough to speak up within the movement. By bringing attention to these dynamics, I highlight overlapping, plural sources of power in social movements (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). I emphasize the effects that intersecting forms of discrimination have on *collective* rights mobilization, departing from the usual focus on their impact on individuals (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990; Rosenblum 2009; Best et al. 2011; but see Richards 2005; Speed 2009).

Nevertheless, marginalized activists do successfully navigate social relations to overcome organizing obstacles and respond to the imbricating layers of power in social movements. This is the second feature of my analysis. According to the broader law and society literature, social interactions can alter one's rights consciousness (Osanloo 2009; Albiston 2010) and reshape decisions about what to do with one's problems (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1981). In social movement studies, such navigation of social relations includes constructing new communities that provide friendship and support to inspire and encourage participation despite the socially embedded constraints, and modifying methods of recruitment to better appeal to and persuade their targeted pool of recruits. It also includes building alliances with other social groups or movements. For example, lesbian activists join forces with feminist movements or male SOGI minorities (Thayer 1997; Harney 1999; Ross and Landstrom 1999; Van Dyke and Cress 2006; Blackwood 2010), or foster alternative political alliances (Brown 1999; Currier 2012; Duarte 2012).

Although the negotiations of relationships are often limited at resisting deeply entrenched norms, these micromobilization processes can produce strategic ties, such as associational or political bonds, that facilitate collective action (McCann 2012; Atuahene 2014). In some cases, when lesbian activists work with women's rights groups, they lose their lesbian-centric agenda but gain access to mainstream political institutions (Wolf 1979; Correa, Petchesky, and Parker 2008; Duarte 2012); when they collaborate with gay men, they risk being overshadowed by male-centric agenda but find a strong ally in advancing sexuality-based claims (Ross and Landstrom 1999; Wong 2007). When local activists build alliances with national or international organizations, they attract greater media attention and support (Merry and Stern 2005), though they may have to divert time and effort into fulfilling donor obligations. Activists, including the Burmese lesbians who are the subject of this article, will have to weigh the limitations and possibilities based on their strategic objectives and where they are socially and politically situated.

FIELDWORK

This article's study of Burmese lesbian rights activists grew out of a research project that I have been conducting since September 2012 on Myanmar's SOGI movement. As the larger project developed, I noticed the exceptional challenges of lesbian rights activism. I decided to explore them further and extended my fieldwork to add a focus on these challenges. Therefore, I draw from my broader set of data on the SOGI movement as well as data especially collected on lesbian rights

activism. The data comprise semistructured interviews with 112 informants, observations, organizational and legal documents, and photographs.

My focus, therefore, is on one particular coalition of lesbian rights activists, whose groups are associated with the SOGI movement. Although my informants do not know of other lesbian activists or groups unaffiliated with the SOGI movement, they could be in existence in Myanmar. There may be lesbians who organize their own communities away from formal politics and do not engage in rights mobilization.[4] As I point out below, some lesbian rights activists in my study come from informal social networks, which they merged to form a larger organization. Hence, my study does not claim to represent the experiences of all lesbian activists in Myanmar but uses one particular case to offer insights into lesbian organizing in contemporary Myanmar and collective mobilization of human rights.

By lesbian rights activism, I am referring to collective mobilization openly intended to challenge or improve the social, political, or legal conditions of lesbians in Myanmar. Correspondingly, "lesbian rights activists" or "lesbian activists" refers to people who are engaged in such collective action but does not necessarily reflect their sexuality (though most of them are lesbians). I exclude collective action that addresses women's issues at large, even though they benefit lesbians as women.

As for the term "lesbians," I use it to refer to women who desire same-sex romantic or sexual relations. In Myanmar, they include *tomboys*, who appear and act masculine, and *lesbians* (italicized) with whom *tomboys* have relationships. Unlike *tomboys*, *lesbians* do not consider masculine dressing and performance to be part of their sexuality. They appear gender conforming and typically have relationships with *tomboys* or other *lesbians*.[5]

Among the 112 informants, I interviewed twenty-three lesbian rights activists. Interviews with seventeen of them lasted sixty to ninety minutes, whereas the other six were shorter conversations of approximately twenty minutes each. Apart from questions related to the larger project, I asked about the social and legal conditions for lesbians in Myanmar, their struggles, whether and how lesbians come together to address their issues, and the challenges for lesbian rights activism. Seven of these informants left their organizations one to two years after my initial round of interviews, and so I followed up to learn about their experiences with activism and reasons for dropping out.

I additionally expanded the fieldwork to investigate whether lesbian activism exists in Myanmar apart from the case that I studied. Because lesbian activism can often be affiliated with feminist or women's rights movements, I interviewed six Burmese leaders of key domestic women's rights groups and Myanmar-based

4. For instance, there are social media groups that offer friendship and support to Burmese lesbians over the Internet.

5. Such relationship conventions among lesbians are also found in Myanmar's Southeast Asian neighbors, such as Thailand (Sinnott 2004), Indonesia (Blackwood 2010), and Malaysia (Wong 2012). Some informants in my study prefer *tomboy* or *lesbian* over *yaukkyalya*, a common Burmese term that means "those who 'act like a man.'" Although the term is less offensive than other crass references to lesbians' lack of male sexual organs, it is often used in the context of abuse and insults. Hence, these informants prefer the English loanwords to distance themselves from their unhappy experiences. Other informants choose *tomboy* or *lesbian* because those words—notwithstanding the foreign origin—capture their sense of identity more holistically beyond appearance and conduct.

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international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to find out if their associations work on lesbian issues, their views on female nonheternormativity, and whether they know of any other lesbian activism or community. I also reinterviewed other informants from the SOGI movement to find out if they know of lesbian activists or communities unaffiliated with them.

Among the remaining eighty-nine informants, sixty-nine are former and current leaders or participants of the SOGI movement. The other twenty interviewees are people who have provided assistance with the movement's recruitment or training workshops, or who otherwise are familiar with SOGI minority issues in Myanmar. Altogether, the informants, including lesbians, come from sixteen Burmese locations where the movement has so far established its presence. They also come from different ethnicities, including Burman, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Shan, Indian, and Chinese, religious backgrounds such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, and a range of income levels and occupations. I asked informants, including lesbian rights activists, how they first came into contact with the SOGI movement, what their goals and challenges are, what they do for the movement, and why and how they use human rights to achieve their goals.[6]

In addition to interviews, I conducted observations of activities by the SOGI movement and by lesbian rights activists specifically, and analyzed documents and photographs. The observed activities include workshops organized for potential recruits and new activists, strategy meetings that bring together activists, including lesbians, from around the country, and International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) events. The documents comprise organizations' reports, proposals, internal minutes and correspondence, training materials, and publications, as well as legislation, executive directives, and legal briefs that are relevant to SOGI minorities and activism in Myanmar. I also examined reports by domestic women's groups and international organizations.

Generally, informants were willing to talk to me and to grant access to their organizations, in contrast to the caution and fear that other scholars observed during the military dictatorship (Skidmore 2004; Dale 2011). Nevertheless, being an outsider who does not speak Burmese, I was concerned about gaining access and trust, especially with grassroots activists who do not communicate in English. Given the social prejudices against sexual minorities, I knew that a suitable language assistant was crucial to informants' safety and the project's success. I was also aware that certain expressions, in spite of translation, could have Burmese-specific connotations. Fortunately, through a colleague, I found M, an English-language teacher and experienced interpreter. M understood my research, and we had good rapport right away. Because M assisted on the project from the start, carrying on with field observations and following up with informants in between my stays, the informants came to trust her. This aspect was particularly helpful with lesbian informants, who felt more comfortable speaking to women whom they already knew. With M's help, I arranged field trips ranging from five days to one month. At Yangon, Mandalay,

6. To ensure confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for informants and their organizations. One-third of the interviews were conducted in English and the rest were in Burmese with the aid of interpretation. Where quoted, the latter interviews are indicated with an *.

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Dawei, Pyi, and Bago,[7] we met informants at movement activities and conducted interviews. After an interview or event we had just observed, we would discuss what each other thought of it and what I might not have comprehended. Over the years, I have thus benefited from M's insights during our long hours in the field together.

MICROMOBILIZATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND LESBIAN ACTIVISM IN MYANMAR

After becoming independent from the British in 1948, the Union of Burma descended quickly into civil war and ethnic strife within the first decade. The military seized control first as caretakers in 1958 and then by coup in 1962. It used draconian laws to suppress civil-political liberties, human rights discourse, and activism. Abuse of power and political repression were commonplace. Besides famous examples such as the violent crackdown on the 1988 student-led protests and the detention of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the regime imprisoned other political opponents, human rights activists, imposed forced labor, and displaced ethnic minorities by carrying out war, systemic rape, and forced relocation.

Even though the government of Myanmar since 2010 has implemented reforms that lessened activism's risks and restrictions, lesbian rights activists still have (and had) to contend not only with political and legal conditions that affect all kinds of activism in Myanmar, but also organizing obstacles that stem from oppressive sexual and gender norms.[8] Across the board, activists navigate an uncertain situation as crackdowns on protests, persecution, and abuse of power continue (Human Rights Watch 2014; Cheesman 2015). Additionally, far from being liberated, a stereotypical view that has been criticized by scholars (Ikeya 2005, 2011), Burmese women suffer from inferior social status compared to men (Harriden 2012; Than 2014) and the type of structural violence that marginalizes entire groups of people and their basic life chances (Peletz 2012, citing Skidmore 2004).

Despite these tough sociopolitical conditions, one coalition of lesbian rights activists did manage to coalesce and organize using human rights discourse. In the analysis below, I focus on their micromobilization processes, particularly how they encountered and tried to overcome organizing obstacles. I also examine their progress and ongoing challenges and consider their future direction, taking into account their goals and perceptions of human rights, as well as their ways of employing the discourse.

Early Obstacles: Invisibility and Social Inequality of Lesbians

The coalition of lesbian rights activists comes from organizations affiliated with a larger SOGI movement founded by Burmese male SOGI minorities based in

7. At the beginning of the larger project, I also went to Thai towns and cities to meet informants affiliated with the SOGI movement, when its movement's national organization, VIVID, was still based in Thailand (Chua 2015).

8. See note 3 on other possible axes of oppression for lesbians.

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Thailand in the mid-2000s.[9] At the time, because Myanmar was controlled by the military, these exiles and migrants organized from Thailand with the hope of relocating the movement to their home country one day. From 2007 to early 2013, they covertly recruited fellow Burmese inside Myanmar and invited them to Chiang Mai, Thailand, the movement's headquarters, to attend human rights advocacy workshops and strategy meetings. They introduced participants to basic human rights concepts and documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Yogyakarta Principles on the human rights of SOGI minorities. Drawing from equality, dignity, and other aspirational qualities of human rights, they affirmed participants' identities and encouraged them to join the movement. The new recruits then returned to their Burmese hometowns to organize local SOGI minorities and raise rights consciousness. In March 2013, leaders of the SOGI movement shifted their national organization, to which I refer as VIVID, from Chiang Mai to Yangon in response to the political transition. By then they had cultivated other movement organizations in various towns and cities across Myanmar.

These organizations eventually included groups with lesbian rights activists, but lesbians were initially excluded from the movement. Their invisibility as lesbians made it difficult under the country's repressive conditions for movement leaders to reach out to them. In Myanmar, lesbians are often shunned as deviant and abnormal for desiring same-sex relations and violating heteronormativity and gender norms that regulate the female body and behavior. Informants point to a popular Burmese Buddhist belief that one is reborn in this lifetime as a "deviant" because of sexual transgressions, such as adultery, committed in past lives.[10] According to this belief, the discrimination that lesbians and other SOGI minorities suffer in their present lives is to be expected and endured because "they have to pay back the sin by being homosexual" (Interview, Ma Aye, October 2014*).

Although male SOGI minorities are socially shunned for similar reasons and, in fact, are persecuted by police and criminalized for their sexual conduct (Chua and Gilbert 2015, forthcoming), they are relatively more visible to NGOs and the government, thus making initial recruitment by the SOGI movement easier. Even during military rule, NGOs working on HIV/AIDS enjoyed government sanction to operate around the country and conduct outreach through grassroots organizations under their auspices, including the ones by and for male SOGI minorities. Leaders of the SOGI movement, still based in Thailand at the time, were able to find their first recruits inside Myanmar through the HIV/AIDS NGOs and grassroots organizations. They could not do the same with lesbians, who were neglected by these organizations as a target population for HIV/AIDS outreach.

The movement's pioneers, who all identified as male SOGI minorities, intended the movement to include lesbians and recruited one lesbian in its early days. However, they could not retain her and largely failed to establish trust and rapport in their outreach efforts toward lesbians.

9. For analysis of the larger SOGI movement and its tactics, see Chua (2015). Male SOGI minorities' refers to those who are born male-bodied, who, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, maintain some degree of male privilege in Burmese society.

10. For a similar belief in Thailand, see Jackson (1998).

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> When I approached them, it seems like they're not interested … Maybe when they saw a man, they don't feel they trust them or might not understand (them) easily. (Interview, Seng Naw, April 2013)

Seng Naw and other male informants described lesbians with words such as "weak" and "isolated" (Interview, Maung Nyan, May 2013). They, of course, overlooked the possibility that lesbians could solve their problems in ways that elude male attention, such as working through informal social networks to help one another find employment, deal with family pressure, resolve relationship problems, and socialize.

Yet, while sexism among male movement pioneers impeded the recruitment of lesbians, their perceptions reveal the inferior status of women and social prejudices against lesbians.

> The society's norms, gender norms and the values system of society, religious norms, stop lesbians from coming out with their issues. They will just want to keep their identity secret and they will not openly raise their issues. (Interview, Ma Aye, October 2014*)

Regardless of gender or sexuality, my informants explain that lesbians usually keep to familiar social circles to avoid trouble and unwanted attention. Similar to lesbians elsewhere, Burmese lesbians are vulnerable to violence by family members and strangers. At school, those who refuse to wear gender-conforming uniforms are often bullied by peers and ostracized by their teachers. Generally, girls have fewer educational opportunities than boys, and discriminatory pay and hiring practices against women are pervasive (Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2014; Than 2014). Such socioeconomic inequality is exacerbated for lesbians who lack formal qualifications but cannot or do not want to appear "feminine" in lower-paying office, service, or manufacturing jobs. Although there are lesbians who enjoy tolerant families and social circles, their privilege embodies the same norms that control women. According to informants, some lesbians' parents are glad that they are lesbian because they would unlikely have sex with men and become pregnant outside of marriage—thus disgracing the family—and would take care of them in their old age as unmarried female children are expected to do. The unspoken understanding is that lesbians will not be chastised if they do not assert their sexuality and contribute to the parental household's income or care for its sick, young, and elderly. The privilege of lesbians who live in quiet toleration is exchanged for keeping lesbian sexuality invisible, inadvertently obscuring the subjugation of all lesbians and obstructing political action (Boellstorff 2009).

Lesbian activism's problems with invisibility, connected to gender and sexual norms, also manifested within women's rights groups. Before the lesbian rights coalition tried to engage these groups (elaborated below), the latter paid little attention to lesbians and did not address the oppressive conditions faced by them. Women's rights activists worried that social prejudices would taint their credibility and jeopardize their agenda, already an uphill battle in Burmese society. Some women's rights leaders harbored the same prejudices and considered lesbians to be

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"unnatural." Members who were sympathetic or lesbian stayed reticent to avoid conflict or protect themselves (Interview, Su Su, October 2014*). From time to time, they might allude to lesbians but maintained the moral legitimacy of representing heteronormative and "proper" women by concentrating on their organizations' broader agenda, such as domestic violence, reproductive rights, and sexual health. These agenda covered lesbians as women, but women's rights activists did not highlight the compounded plight of lesbians as SOGI minorities. To others in women's rights groups, lesbians were invisible. They were unaware of their grievances or, like some informants, believed that lesbians did not have problems particular to them.

Social Ties and Overcoming Organizing Obstacles

Nonetheless, lesbians and other women eventually stepped forward to become activists of the lesbian rights coalition. They want lesbians to feel empowered and confident enough to stand up for themselves, and to gain social acceptance and respect from their community and family. Hence, they aim at defying the invisibility that gender and sexual norms impose on lesbians, and challenging the negative perceptions of lesbians as deviants and their inferior status as women. They also desire lesbians to be free from abuse and discrimination at school and at work. Someday, they want to achieve legal reform, such as the passage of nondiscrimination laws, but their present goals focus on changes to self and society. Their goals and intended trajectory comport with those of the SOGI movement (except that the latter additionally includes decriminalization for male SOGI minorities).

To mobilize and overcome organizing obstacles, the coalition's leaders made use of existing relationships and forged ties to form new lesbian communities and groom activists. They bridged lesbians at the grassroots with the movement's human rights discourse, from which they were excluded by early barriers, and tried to reduce the constraints on lesbians' freedom of movement so that more could participate. They also built alliances to strengthen support for their cause.

Making New Lesbian Communities

Although Seng Naw and other pioneers of the SOGI movement failed to reach lesbians, those inside Myanmar soon heard about it. The first few lesbian rights activists formed groups that became new communities[11] through which others at the grassroots level connected to the SOGI movement's human rights discourse. From those communities, new activists emerged.

Shwe Wah found out from an old friend, Aung Aung, that he had gone to Thailand to attend a human rights workshop for SOGI minorities. The two were chatting while distributing food to people living with HIV/AIDS whom Aung

11. David Gilbert in his forthcoming doctoral thesis examines informal networks and communities among male SOGI minorities as kinship groups that extend beyond one's biological families in Myanmar. Also see Gilbert (2015).

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Aung's grassroots organization served in their community outside Yangon. She was curious, and Aung Aung put her in touch with the movement.

In 2009, Shwe Wah participated in a workshop by VIVID in Chiang Mai where she learned about human rights for SOGI minorities for the first time. Inspired, she set up BRIGHT, a group that brings lesbians together to reach out to people who need basic eye care and arranges for them to receive treatment at a local clinic at a discounted rate. Shwe Wah chose basic eye care simply because she knew the eye clinic that provided the discount. Her choice of ailment did not matter. Her goal was to encourage lesbians to interact with others without fear and gain acceptance by performing charity work, a show of moral conduct to counteract the stereotype of SOGI minorities as deviants.

> People can see that they are doing good things for society, and then they can deal with people, and then they can get acceptance from society. (Interview, Shwe Wah, May 2013*)

Despite the inspiration of human rights behind BRIGHT, unlike the male-dominated groups in the SOGI movement, Shwe Wah's group did not adopt the tactic of organizing formal human rights workshops. She thought it would not appeal to her members, who prefer less formalistic approaches, a common phenomenon found among women-centric organizations (Freeman 1973; Morris and Staggenborg 2004). She and other lesbians, who later attended the movement's workshops, shared what they had learned while carrying out BRIGHT's charity work and socializing over drinks, dinner, or sports.

Similarly, Thandar in the town of Pyi found out about the movement through male SOGI friends whose groups were already in contact with it. She attended a similar workshop and then pulled together informal networks of lesbians in her town to form GARUDA in 2012. The group collects a small membership fee to pay for its activities and to help members in need, but Thandar keeps it informal, raising rights consciousness and recruiting lesbians to become activists through casual interactions at social activities in which they would typically participate.

Shwe Wah, Thandar, and other pioneers of the lesbian rights coalition went to places popular with lesbians—local bars known as beer stations, karaoke lounges, and soccer games—to persuade lesbians to join their fledging groups or attend SOGI movement activities. They catered their recruitment and training tactics to lesbians, understanding that lesbians would be more likely to participate if their friends agreed to do so together. After tireless groundwork, they located enough participants for SOGI movement leaders to begin holding human rights and advocacy workshops specifically for lesbians. They gathered the participants and traveled together to Thailand and to major Burmese cities (after VIVID relocated in March 2013). Traveling together provided lesbians with safety in numbers and enabled them to overcome the social restrictions on their physical freedom, as it is generally inappropriate for unmarried women to be traveling alone. For example, in her late forties and known in her neighborhood for providing voluntary funeral services and for BRIGHT, Shwe Wah described herself as

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an "elder," somebody respected and trusted enough to accompany and "supervise" younger lesbians on overnight journeys.

More recently, lesbian rights activists who conduct outreach for the SOGI movement go on "advocacy trips" to small towns and cities in Myanmar where the movement has not yet established presence. The visits introduce lesbians to human rights activism and ask them to participate in the movement's workshops with the aim of encouraging them to found their own grassroots organizations. Ahead of their visits, these activists find out in advance through friends and acquaintances about any informal social networks and popular hangouts at their destinations. They try to arrive the day before their scheduled event and find lesbians at those places to invite them personally to the event. For remote small towns where residents have little or no access to the Internet, this method of outreach and recruitment is, in fact, the most effective way of publicizing their events.[12]

Creating Alliances

Lesbian rights activists also collaborate with male SOGI minorities in the movement to increase support. A prominent example is Cho Cho, a heterosexual woman who used to work for an international HIV/AIDS organization. Through her professional and personal contacts with male SOGI minorities, she noticed that they did not interact with lesbians. She decided to set up a Yangon-based group called REGAL and, making use of her contacts in HIV/AIDS, recruited both lesbians and male SOGI minorities. Since 2012, she has involved lesbians in REGAL's annual commemoration of IDAHOT. They participate in the event's organization and stage performances, activities that would otherwise be dominated by male SOGI minorities.

At the movement's workshops on rights advocacy, Cho Cho and other leaders try to foster a sense of community among lesbians and male SOGI minorities by uniting them with a shared identity. They introduce the English term of "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" (LGBT) and a term invented by their movement founder, *lein tu chit thu* ("those who love the same sex"), as the Burmese alternative to "LGBT." Unlike longstanding indigenous words, *lein tu chit thu* encompasses different SOGI minorities. Although "LGBT" and *lein tu chit thu* are not yet part of everyday Burmese, and movement leaders do not enforce their usage, these terms are intended to persuade lesbians and male SOGI minorities to come together under their banner of human rights.

Cooperation and alliance with male SOGI minorities in the movement are important to both parties. By demonstrating an expansive strategy that includes lesbians, the movement has better chances of attracting grants from international NGOs. In return, lesbian rights activists benefit from the movement's funding, which their small and informal groups would be unable to secure on their own.

12. The Internet and social media, though, are gradually becoming accessible and being used by Burmese lesbian activists and the SOGI movement to publicize their organizations and activities. Also see note 4.

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They have access to the movement's expertise and resources to develop their grassroots organizations, and have representation at its strategy meetings.

In addition to strengthening support within the SOGI movement, the lesbian rights coalition builds alliances with women's rights groups that had hitherto neglected them. Again using her NGO contacts, Cho Cho requested the national coordinating network for women's rights groups to let activists of the SOGI movement participate in their forums and other public events. For example, she and other REGAL members volunteered to organize a national women's rights convention. As the organizer, REGAL did not need to pay for its members' attendance fees. At the convention, Cho Cho and other activists highlighted lesbian discrimination publicly by asking questions about what could be done. Although they did not receive any direct answer, a problem revisited below, such events are opportunities for lesbians to remind women's rights groups of their existence and that they, too, demand equality.

Progress and Ongoing Challenges

By creatively navigating social ties to overcome oppressive norms that obstruct collective action, the lesbian rights coalition has achieved progress. New grassroots organizations that are lesbian focused or include lesbians have sprung up in cities and remote towns because of its concerted and sensitive efforts at outreach. Nowadays, lesbians regularly attend the movement's strategy meetings. Its leaders are increasingly aware of lesbians' challenges and are conscientiously trying to ameliorate them. The national organization's annual plans and budget allocation include lesbian-specific programs, and the organization has a lesbian representative on its outreach trips to new grassroots locations. Lesbians are part of the movement's delegation that meets with national politicians, policymakers, foreign diplomats, and international NGOs to discuss human rights violations and reforms. In addition, the coalition has gained some access to women's rights groups, thus finding opportunities to give voice to lesbians and to ask women's rights activists to understand their agenda through lesbians' experiences.

Nonetheless, lesbian rights activism in Myanmar remains fraught with challenges. Some are the same challenges that other human rights activists face in Myanmar. The judiciary is still weak, and abuse of power remains prevalent (Cheesman 2015). The government at best appears ambivalent about its commitment to human rights protection, enacting a human rights commission (Crouch 2013) and engaging activists on the one hand, while suppressing protests and refusing equal rights to women and ethnic minorities on the other.

The following challenges, however, are specific to lesbian rights activism. The problems with recruitment and retention and allies' continuing neglect of their interests are structural issues that impede its micromobilization efforts. As I explain below, they stem not from the suitability of human rights as a strategy per se, but from the interlocking norms regulating gender and sexuality.

Human Rights and Lesbian Organizing

At first glance, the obstacles perhaps suggest that human rights fail to resonate with the lesbians or serve the coalition's goals. By 2014, Shwe Wah had withdrawn

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BRIGHT from the coalition. Pa Dauk, a BRIGHT leader, disclosed that they were no longer interested and did not gain from it. Other informants also commonly describe lesbians as disinterested, preferring to focus on their relationships or livelihoods instead.

Closer examination of the data and follow-up interviews, however, identifies a more nuanced explanation that lies with interlocking structural problems. Lesbian rights activists, including Shwe Wah, Pa Dauk, and others who dropped out, do respond positively to human rights and believe that their realization would improve lives. They consistently describe their first encounters with human rights as empowering. Learning that human rights recognize the dignity and equality of SOGI minorities encouraged lesbians to reinterpret their ill treatment as experiences that used to be somehow acceptable or expected. "After the training, if someone mocks us or says something bad to us, we can respond back. We have courage to respond back" (Pa Dauk, Interview, May 2013*). Others, including Thandar, who founded GARUDA, felt inspired to become leaders: "I felt more energetic, more powerful and then, 'Oh, I have many things to do'" (Thandar, Interview, March 2013*).[13]

These perceptions of human rights correspond with the lesbian rights coalition's goals of changing self and society, namely, empowerment, consciousness raising, and social acceptance. The discourse, hence, is most directly relevant to lesbian rights activists for its extralegal and cultural power, rather than its instrumental capacity. These activists hope that the impact of human rights, especially the ideals of dignity and equality, on their own lives will extend to their society and families, setting aside prejudices and altering the way they are perceived and treated. With social acceptance, gained through activist work, they hope that legal reform will follow one day.

Instead, my analysis finds that the ongoing challenges relate more pertinently to how activists micromobilize and collectively organize to make human rights claims. Heteronormativity and gender norms impose stubborn constraints that manifest in various combinations of the following: lack of physical mobility, invisibility and quiet toleration, struggles with livelihood, financial and caregiver expectations in the parental household, and deficient educational and professional qualifications.

Recruitment and Retention

Although lesbian participation has improved, lesbians at most make up one-quarter of the movement's activists, and few of them occupy leadership positions. The coalition has difficulty with attracting lesbians to and maintaining their participation in strategy meetings and other movement events. Within grassroots organizations, the active ones are usually those who represent lesbians in the national organization. The rest "come and go" (Interview, Khin Kyine, February 2013*). The problems with recruitment and retention compound themselves. When lesbian rights activists quit, their activism loses people who could rise to and sustain

13. Even if informants speak positively of human rights only because it is the right thing to say, by doing so, they display awareness of their strategic value, a point addressed in the section of this article entitled "Future Course."

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leadership positions, which help maintain movement continuity and accumulate skills to attract funding, refine strategy and tactics, and further organize lesbians.

> They have the events in the evening … So the parents—they won't allow the girls to go out … Some people, the family, send someone to escort them. (Interview, Pa Dauk, May 2013*)

Social control over physical movement is one obstacle. Parents, elder brothers, or uncles frequently prohibit lesbians from going out or require them to be accompanied. They do not think the time is appropriate for women or worry about sexual assault, a common occurrence in Burmese society (Women's League of Burma 2014) where victim blaming and distrust of law enforcement are also widespread.[14] Lesbians risk being punished by elders, or revealing their sexuality or activism to their families when they are not prepared to do so.

Yet, movement events are usually scheduled based on the preferences of male activists, who dominate the movement's leadership, and fail to account for lesbians' needs and challenges. Statements such as Pa Dauk's came from our conversations about the number of lesbians involved in IDAHOT. When I brought up their concern to male informants, they genuinely seemed to realize for the first time that it was a problem. In response, they said they would offer "taxi vouchers" to lesbians. It was not apparent, though, if their solution could fully address the problem, since traveling in a taxi could still be unsafe (Kean, Toe Wai Aung, and Hammond 2015) and an alternative (free) mode of transportation might not change parents' minds about restricting their daughters' freedom.

Other lesbians give up lesbian rights activism because of financial or family pressure. Those who live independently with their partners struggle to make ends meet, whereas those who live with their parents are expected to contribute financially to or care for somebody in the parental household in unspoken bargain for quiet toleration. One informant, Wai Wai, was keen on becoming an activist when we first met. Two and a half years later, the thirty-year-old said she had to give up that ambition and "listen to the family" (Interview, June 2015*). These days, she devotes her time to selling traditional Burmese snacks at her mother's shop and taking care of her deceased sister's infant daughter.

When lesbians drop out to deal with difficulties in their romantic relationships, male activists of the SOGI movement typically write them off as having "personal problems." The stress of maintaining a relationship in the face of families' opposition and social prejudices is, of course, related to the oppressive gender and sexual norms. Some families pressure lesbians into heterosexual marriages. Others force them to break up with their partners under the threat of violence or expulsion from home. The gravity of choosing between one's partner and parental household must be understood in the context of Burmese society, where unmarried, adult women live with their parents and are expected to obey them. By leaving their parental

14. Informants have even documented cases of lesbians who were pressured into marrying their rapists out of "honor," especially if they become pregnant. Abortion is illegal in Myanmar, except when it is carried out in "good faith" to save the woman's life, and is socially unacceptable.

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homes in defiance, lesbians often are left to struggle financially. The coalition's activists understand the reasons for leaving, for they know the limited choices that confront lesbians.

When lesbians do take up human rights activism and join the movement, they report feeling marginalized. Shwe Wah vented her frustration about being asked by movement leaders to revise BRIGHT's grant proposal multiple times and volunteer at movement events. In my follow-up interview, Pa Dauk complained that BRIGHT members were expected to participate in local activist events without any daily allowance (which Burmese NGOs usually provide only for out-of-town participation).

The complaints may seem trivial and petty, but they signal structural disadvantages that lead to mismatching of expectations and conflicts between movement leaders and disgruntled lesbian activists. Lesbians interested in the coalition generally lack formal educational qualifications, which limit their professional experiences. Although Shwe Wah helps provide funeral services in her community, she works for the family business and the volunteer work is an activity she carries out on the side. She and most other lesbian activists in my study have little NGO background (whereas those who do and work for women's rights groups, social welfare, or other organizations stay silent about their sexuality); therefore, they are unfamiliar with the requirements and expectations concerning grant writing, budgeting, and advocacy. My conversations with Shwe Wah and Pa Dauk reveal a lack of appreciation for micromobilization work, much of which involves time-consuming and patient cultivation of grassroots support and does not immediately reap tangible results, unlike voluntary work for funeral services or BRIGHT's eye care charity. In contrast, male SOGI activists affiliated with HIV/AIDS organizations enter the movement with valuable working experience in NGOs and professional connections. They could also conveniently incorporate the movement's human rights agenda and their responsibilities into their paid NGO work, especially if the latter concerns the sexual health of male SOGI minorities, and so they feel less disadvantaged about expending time and effort for the movement.

Lesbians who do not quit due to dissatisfaction or conflict nevertheless feel alienated from activists who have NGO experience (and who are mostly male SOGI minorities). Their feelings corroborate those of male informants who left the movement; those participants, too, do not have NGO backgrounds. Hence, lesbians who were initially interested would stop showing up after a few appearances, as they felt that they do not fit in. Only a few lesbians persevere long enough to become leaders and help create a sense of belonging for new lesbian participants.

Continuing Neglect of Interests

Aside from the problems with recruitment and retention, lesbian interests remain neglected notwithstanding the alliances that the coalition has so far made with women's rights groups and male activists in the SOGI movement. Alliance building with women's rights groups has not conquered the obstacles that confronted the coalition earlier on—that is, the social norms that prevent women's rights activists from speaking out due to concerns with strategy, personal safety, or

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prejudices. The alliance has given lesbians physical presence at women's rights events and enabled them to raise questions about lesbians' grievances, but this arguably reflects lip service and tokenism. Women's rights groups have not directly addressed any of these grievances. Their reports to the United Nations on the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women regarding Myanmar's performance so far have made one passing mention of SOGI minorities, but not lesbians specifically. In fact, because of the problems with recruitment and retention, Cho Cho, who founded REGAL to reach out to lesbians, continues to take the lead, and only a few lesbians represent the coalition at women's rights events.

Conversely, partnering with male SOGI minorities brings attention to sexuality but risks being overwhelmed by a male-centric agenda, as lesbians elsewhere have found. So far, the SOGI movement channels most of its advocacy resources into police persecution and decriminalization, believing them to be immediate problems that stand in the way of broader change. Because these issues directly implicate male SOGI minorities and are the movement's most prominent face of advocacy, they obscure the nature of lesbian oppression (Ross and Landstrom 1999) that keeps them invisible from formal legal and political institutions.

Although decriminalization could remove the symbolic effects of a law that ends up stigmatizing all SOGI minorities, the efforts to achieve decriminalization have yet to sustain the participation of lesbian activists. The SOGI movement appears to be making strides with decriminalization as leaders attempt to engage parliamentarians and government officials. Meanwhile, despite surmounting early obstacles to organize lesbians at the grassroots, and strengthening collaboration with male SOGI minorities, the coalition has little to show lesbian constituents that its efforts have produced concrete gains for them. By 2014, BRIGHT representatives no longer attended the movement's regular strategy meetings. The group still exists, but Shwe Wah prefers to treat it as a mere charity. Her frustrations and lack of appreciation for activists' micromobilization work, described above, are exacerbated by such perceptions of absent outcomes.

Future Course

Should the lesbian rights coalition continue with a human-rights-based strategy? Should they pursue alternatives, given the criticisms directed at the effects and implementation of human rights? These are important questions for Burmese activists and civil society, as international funds and assistance targeted at various human rights issues flow into their country.

The coalition could turn to other discourses and methods to carry out its organizing work and achieve its goals of empowerment, consciousness raising, and social acceptance. Without relying on human rights, leaders could nevertheless bring together existing informal, scattered groups to coordinate social support and services to lesbian communities around the country. They could draw upon radical feminist or Asian-centric theories on non-normative sexuality and gender (see, e.g., Martin et al. 2008) to construct their own discourses and cultivate oppositional

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consciousness. Or, they could focus on charity work and community service to bolster lesbians' confidence in engaging people outside their social circles and to gain social acceptance.

However, at this juncture of its development, Burmese lesbian activism ought to maintain a human-rights-based strategy. My position does not call for an either-or rejection or embrace of human rights. It is a position that comes with a sobering understanding of the inadequacies of human rights. At the same time, it is informed by my fieldwork as well as the study of human rights as processes, a theoretical approach that emphasizes how activists relate their goals to human rights, and interpret and put them to use in a particular context.

As explained earlier, Burmese lesbian activists in the coalition perceive human rights in a positive light.[15] For them, human rights' potential lies not with foreseeable, instrumental gains, but with their extralegal effects of consciousness raising, galvanizing collective action, and building shared political identities. These are gains outside formal institutions that prepare an activist community for the right moment to step forward and make demands of the state (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Taylor and Rupp 1993), such as legal reform. Where dominant social groups insist on protecting traditional norms and conventions to maintain power and inequalities, human rights provide a counterdiscourse for the marginalized and minorities. At the very least, human rights aspire to transcend social divides that remain prevalent in a diverse society like Myanmar, and provide a common language for articulating the grievances of marginalized populations.

The reality is that Burmese lesbian activism is focused on micromobilization and addressing organizing obstacles, and is not yet concerned with ideological debates over human rights and other possible paths of reform. Its current leadership and membership are not well educated enough to ponder such issues. Internal contestations over human rights and alternatives need time, after their groups and participants have grown, accumulated experience, and become better informed about possible alternatives and consequences.

Through micromobilization, human rights offer strategic ties that give lesbian activists access to resources and allies, helping them groom needed leadership and grow grassroots support. The globalized discourse represents a common political currency in contemporary Myanmar. Foreign government agencies and international NGOs are funding and assisting a wide range of projects. Burmese NGOs that frame their issues around human rights, whether out of ideological or strategic reasons, offer a legitimate platform with which donors are familiar and comfortable (also see Bob 2009), compared to locally originated discourses or radical ideologies. With other domestic movements' adoption of human-rights-based strategies, lesbian rights activists share with them a common basis on which to expand their alliances. In recent years, the United Nations and international NGOs have also openly pushed for the recognition of SOGI claims as human rights (Thoreson 2014). Of course, that is why scholars have criticized human rights—for disproportionately attracting and redistributing resources. However, resources are what lesbians (and other)

15. See note 13.

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activists in Myanmar need. At this nascent stage, they have to be politically astute and strategic.

Furthermore, being open and contested processes, the meanings and practices of human rights, as well as the identities that emerge therein, have room to be molded and interpreted by local actors. The anxieties about human rights, raised by many critics, may or may not materialize for Burmese lesbian activism. Human rights could coexist with and not completely displace other discourses and modes of thinking (Merry 2006). Thus far, the tactics of mobilizing human rights and creating new political identities have demonstrated the agency and ability of Burmese lesbian rights activists and other SOGI movement leaders to do so.[16]

In less than ten years, Burmese lesbian activists have overcome barriers and defied the odds. Perhaps contestations over ideology and strategy may eventually emerge. These activists should be given the room and time to negotiate their own terms with human rights, including the place that human rights should continue to occupy. Their future course and the future of human rights will depend on how they respond to structural barriers, strategic considerations, and a shifting political context.

CONCLUSION

This article provided the first sociolegal analysis of lesbian rights activism in contemporary Myanmar as the country struggles with political transition from military rule. Drawing from original, qualitative fieldwork, I detailed the ways a coalition of lesbian rights activists experienced and responded to obstacles while they recruited and organized participation at the grassroots. In doing so, I theorized the processes of micromobilization involved in the collective deployment of human rights, especially by marginalized groups who contend with plural sources of power, both state and nonstate: the collective mobilization of human rights entails more than making claims targeted at the marginalization that forms the focus of one's activism (sexuality in this case). To make those claims, activists interact with and resist multiple, interlocking forms of domination, which manifest in actions, self-perceptions, societal expectations, knowledge, and opportunities that hamper movement recruitment, retention, and access to leadership. In response to such organizing obstacles, activists shape and renegotiate social relations to overcome them, constructing new communities and building alliances. These processes influence whether and how activists adopt, adapt, and implement human-rights-based strategies and tactics.

The micromobilization processes of human rights show that power and its various forms of domination that obstruct collective action are fluid. They coalesce in a particular manner at a particular time and place, shaping the sociolegal conditions that affect the lives of a group of people as well as the ways in which they can organize resistance. Nonetheless, that coalescence of power and domination can be reshaped, even if not eradicated. The coalition of Burmese lesbian rights activists

16. This is a finding in my larger study of the SOGI movement that I will address more fully in future work.

did so when it resisted some of the early organizing obstacles entrenched in gender and sexual norms.

The article's attention to micromobilization, therefore, lent different insights into law and society scholarship on human rights. Negotiations of agency with multiple sources of power and social relations highlighted a set of challenges for the collective mobilization of human rights distinct from the debates over their beneficial and detrimental effects. The processes drew out the social life of human rights—how actors interact with and make sense of human rights—and, the focus of this article, how activists organize collective action. Although studying their processes also exposed problems with human rights, the constant negotiations of social ties suggested room for both optimism and nuances in understanding their dynamics with social change and political action. The effects of rights, be they negative or positive, depend on whether and how they are put to use and claimed. Without the processes that give them social life, they remain idle (Marshall 2005) and offer only a dormant hope.

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