

Myanmar women object to proposed restrictions on interfaith marriage

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YANGON, Myanmar (RNS) Governments and religious leaders might control who marries whom in Myanmar, but laws can't restrict love and faith, say women of different races and religions in the country.

Late last month, Myanmar President U Thein Sein sent a controversial draft law to parliament that would restrict the ability of Buddhist women to marry non-Buddhist men. Supporters say the law, which lawmakers are expected to debate in January, would "protect race and religion."

Some opponents, however, say that rationale is nonsense.

"Love and marriage is a social issue—a clash between parents and partners," said a Muslim woman in Yangon who is married to a Hindu man. "It shouldn't be dictated by religion."

Like other women interviewed, she asked not to be identified in hopes of not showing disrespect to Buddhism and Buddhist leaders.

Despite social pressure from other Muslims and from her husband's family, the couple has been married for 25 years. The couple has three children, which has further complicated matters with their devout families.

"I don't want to restrict my children's religion; it is their choice," she said. "Now that they are young, we share our faiths with them now, but they can decide for themselves when they are older."

The draft marriage bill would govern unions between Buddhist women and men of other faiths. Under the provision, interfaith couples would need to apply to local authorities, gain the approval of the woman's parents if she is under age 20 and

post a public notice announcing the engagement.

The marriage could only then take place if no objections were raised. Non-Buddhist men who violate the proposed law would face up to three years' imprisonment, a \$50 fine and mandatory divorce, and they would forfeit their share of any property and guardianship of children born through the illegal union.

Theravada Buddhism, practiced by the majority of Myanmar's citizens, does not specifically restrict interfaith marriage. Local customs, cultures and differences among sects affect whether Hindus, Christians, Muslims, or Jews can marry individuals of other faiths.

Taboos on interfaith marriage permeate much of Myanmar society, not just Muslim and Hindu communities. Some question what new laws to restrict the practice will actually accomplish.

"We already have restrictions on marriage because we need to marry in the same faith and caste," said a Hindu woman from Yangon who also requested anonymity. "I'm curious how this law will actually protect Buddhist women."

It won't, said Daw Thin Thin Aung, a member of the Women's League of Burma. She told *The Myanmar Times* that the proposed law would infringe women's rights.

"If they intend to control interfaith marriage and monogamy, this law only covers women. What about Buddhist men, and others?" she asked.

Thin Thin Aung is a Christian who married a Buddhist man. She said she opposes the law not because of her own interfaith marriage but because she believes it places an unreasonable and unacceptable burden on women.

The law implies that "women are weak and need protection from husbands, family and society," Thin Thin Aung said. "Yet women are blamed when they are raped because of how they dress.

"All social norms and attitudes toward women are discriminatory," she added, speaking of the Myanmar context. "We need to change our old attitudes and put more priority on education so that women can make their own decisions and not always follow others."

Last May, more than 100 civil society organizations issued a statement denouncing the proposed legislation, calling it undemocratic and discriminatory. Some of those who spoke out received death threats via anonymous letters, phone calls, text messages and online messages.

“I will continue to raise awareness despite receiving death threats because I want all women to awaken and see reality,” Thin Thin Aung said.

The proposed law is one of four “protection laws” that would affect religious conversion, interfaith marriage, polygamy and population control. These bills, collectively known as the “protection of race and religion laws,” were proposed in 2013 by Ma Ba Tha, a group of nationalistic Buddhist monks.

Magway Sayadaw U Parmaukkha, a senior monk from Ma Ba Tha, told *The Myanmar Times* that his group plans to launch an advocacy campaign later this month to encourage understanding of and support for the proposed laws.

“Activists blindly oppose them, and some have little knowledge of the laws. We understand there are different attitudes, but we welcome discussion and are ready to explain the purpose of the text,” he said.

Ma Ba Tha members say the new marriage bill would protect women from pressure to convert to their husband’s religion, protection they say is not provided by an existing marriage law introduced in 1954.

“It will not discriminate against any race or religion, or infringe on democracy or international human rights standards,” Magway Sayadaw said.

Some women who have suffered domestic abuse applauded the bill, saying it would protect women who are too shy to speak out against such abuse for traditional or cultural reasons.

Religious and social issues are intermingled, complicated and controversial in Myanmar, said Buddhist women’s rights advocate Daw Phyu Ei Thein.

“Groups that proposed the law said its purpose is to preserve and purify Buddhism and that it protects Buddhist women, but I do not understand that clearly,” Phyu Ei Thein said. “If clergy wish to purify and preserve Buddhism, there are many subtle ways Buddha taught us to do so. Why tickle the sensitive issue of marriage?”

This story is part of a series on religious freedom and conflict in Myanmar, brought to you with support from Religion Newswriters and the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office.