

Reviews

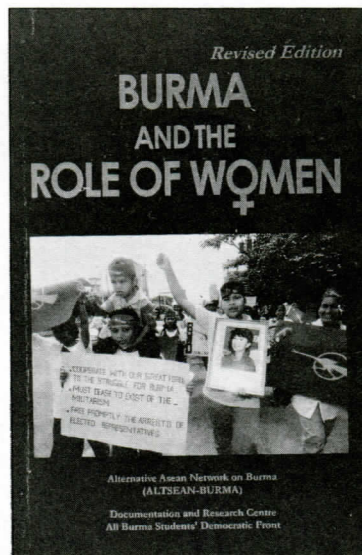
BURMA AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Review by Joanne Higa-Cole

The revised edition of the original *Burma and the Role of Women*, published in March 1997 by the Alternative Asean Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma) and the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) imparts an understanding of the plight of women in Burma today.

Section One, of the book is a brief overview of the situation of Burmese women detailing numerous important events in Burmese history. The author discusses historical events during the periods of anti-colonialism and after independence, then proceeds to the very difficult current political, economic, social and educational conditions created by Burma's ruling military junta, the State, Law and Order Restoration Committee or SLORC. Examples of SLORC's forced conscription of labor without pay, forced prostitution, rape, murder and the suicide of Burmese women is pervasive throughout this section.

Section Two is the opening keynote address of Aung San Suu Kyi to the NGO Forum on Women held in Huaroiu in August 1995. Section Three is an elaboration of the plight of Burmese women and provides an account of the role women played during the 1988 uprising and in the aftermath of the military coup. It also contains a discussion of women as military porters and as refugees and chronicles various abuses they suffer under the SLORC regime. Section Four is entitled "The Women of Burma: Holding Up Two Thirds of the Sky," a short chapter that



offers an examination of some attitudes towards women that are undergoing change in Burmese society.

Burma and the Role of Women is a "noble" attempt toward telling the story of Burma today. The writing is full of feeling, seriousness and sincerity. Taken as a whole, the crimes enumerated here are not only crimes against Burmese women but against all its citizens—men, the young, the old, the sick and every other victim of the current military presence in this suffering nation.

I would like however to point out a number of significant omissions and suggest a few changes that I think will add more power to the telling of this story that has to be told. For a start, an

early explanation of the ABSDF would have given the reader a contextual background to the writing. A more effective placement of the write-up on ABSDF would have been in the beginning of the text and not at the end of it.

Some general information about Burma which have been left out provides readers who are not familiar with Burmese history with an incomplete picture. For example, major ethnic groupings and their separate languages are referred to in the text but are not properly noted. More importantly, China's current political and economic influence is not mentioned at all, in spite of its huge impact on Burma's society and its women today. Adding a small section devoted to the "brain drain" of professional women who have left Burma for safety would better round out the treatment of Burmese women.

I would certainly recommend that the story of women in Burma be told—over and over again. If action is one of the missions of this book, it will be helpful if clear courses of action can be suggested to the reader. Let's hope that when this book is revised for its next edition, it achieves its twin goals of informing and inciting action of supportive readers. ♪

Joanne Higa-Cole is an Asian American who has been living in the Philippines for two years. While her formal studies is in business marketing, Joanne has a long term interest in feminism.