

Paung Ku Diversity Guidelines¹

‘If the herd of cows splits up,
the tiger can eat them’

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Myanmar is a country rich in diversity. Its people, its wildlife and its natural environment are diverse. Paung Ku knows that this diversity is one of the main strengths of Myanmar; it is the many different ‘parts’ that contribute to the beauty and social harmony of the whole.

However the experiences of Paung Ku and its partners has shown that Myanmar’s human diversity and social harmony is threatened when individuals, or groups, judge certain groups of people as more important or more worthwhile than others.

This threat is made more dangerous when individuals, or groups, misuse their existing power to privilege certain groups above others; seek to gain more power by placing certain groups above others; and when they control access to resources and seek to control the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of other people.

Judgements of worth, misuse of power and desire to control people and resources result in **inequality and conflict** at personal, community, and national levels. Those who suffer most from this inequality and conflict are, invariably, those who are the least powerful and most marginalised members of our communities.

During workshops held in 2014, Paung Ku’s staff members and partners identified five types of diversity where inequality and conflict most often arise, as a result of judgements of worth, misuse of power and control of people and resources. These are:

- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Gender (which is intricately linked to sexuality)
- Disability
- Financial status (rich or poor)

These five types of diversity—and the inequality and conflict that can arise in relation to these types of diversity—are very closely interlinked. For example many religious systems are linked to particular ethnicities and all religious systems preference traditionally masculine men over women, and also over men who are less traditionally masculine.

Threats to Myanmar’s social harmony include:

- A rise in ultra-nationalism that seeks to place followers of one religion above followers of another, instead of respecting everyone’s rights
- Ongoing ethnic conflict, which generates stereotyping and hatred of different ethnicities (including Burman)
- The undermining of women’s human rights, under the guise of ‘protecting’ women
- Lack of recognition of basic rights for certain groups of people living in Myanmar (e.g., those in IDP camps)

¹ These Guidelines are intended as a resource to help all Paung Ku’s staff members and partners in their work to protect and promote the diversity that helps make Myanmar great.

When inequality is defended in the name of 'culture and tradition'...

Many different cultures and traditions co-exist in Myanmar. Yet there are times when *one* type of culture, or *one* type of tradition, is used to justify the inequality and conflict that arise from judgements of worth, misuse of power and desire for control.

For example young men and women have had sex before marriage since the dawn of time. This is one type of tradition. Another (more recent) type of tradition is that young men and women are told not to have sex before marriage. In other words, their behaviour—which is, itself, traditional—is controlled by those with power over young people. This includes their parents, their community leaders and their peers, who may gossip and shame those who, they think, have had sex before marriage. The greatest level of power and control is exercised over young women.

Several workshop participants began by arguing that Myanmar culture and tradition was such that young women's virginity should be protected.

These participants said they kept their own daughters in at night because they loved them and wanted to protect them from both physical harm and from social judgement and shame.

Others saw this as misuse of power and control, borne of the fathers' fear of what others might say. Emotions ran deep.

Later, one of the participants—a village leader—reflected:

'In our village, when young women wear short skirts or trousers many people say "it's against our religious tradition" and think the women are immoral. But actually, Buddha never said anything about what women wear. It's people who do that, so they can try and control the young women.'

A young woman participant said:

'I went to pray recently, and as a woman I was not allowed to enter the central part of the temple. But a female dog wandered in and out at will. I thought to myself, "if the dog can go in but I can't, does that mean I am considered even lower than the dog?"'

Diversity as difference, or as threat?

As noted, Myanmar's human diversity and social harmony is threatened when individuals, or groups, judge certain groups of people as more important or more worthwhile than others.

As humans we are very quick to judge others, despite the fact that Buddhism and other religions teach us we should concentrate on self-reflection and self-improvement. Recognising that we judge others, and that these judgements are often based on false assumptions and emotional reactions, is a major part of the work we each need to do if we wish to contribute to a peaceful and more harmonious world.

But diversity and social harmony is threatened when this habit of judging is used to create a sense of 'them' and 'us', in which people on one side ('us') are considered automatically good and in the right, and people on the other side ('them') are considered automatically bad and in the wrong. In this scenario, diversity is no longer just about differences between people; it is about *judgements of worth* based on that difference, and it is about difference being seen as a threat.

The dangerous consequences of such division were demonstrated vividly (and murderously) in the recent Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Myanmar. People of both religions died. Homes and businesses were destroyed. Neighbours took arms against neighbours, based on the religion someone was known to follow or based on an assumption about their religion, made from the colour of someone's skin.

When diversity is understood as 'different and lesser', rather than 'different but equal', people stop accepting that we should all live together in peace and start thinking '*they* are a threat to *us*'.

While the reality was that there were certain sectors of society that promoted the violence, it was Myanmar as a whole that suffered. Rumours spread like wildfire, and people believed the most terrible stories without asking themselves: 'what is going on here? Did this really happen? Who is behind this?'

Relationships of respect were replaced by relationships of anger, fear, and hatred. 'We live together in peace' was replaced by '*they* are a threat to *us*'. For some, the 'they' being referred to were Muslims; for others, the 'they' being referred to was Buddhists.

The importance of emotions

During the workshops on which these Guidelines are based, participants agreed that **fear, hatred and anger** are possibly the most negative emotions that human beings experience. These emotions are destructive emotions, directed at a target: that target is often one diverse group, singled out for attack because 'they' are different. 'They' should leave; 'they' should suffer; 'they' should accept the inequality they face, because 'they' deserve it.

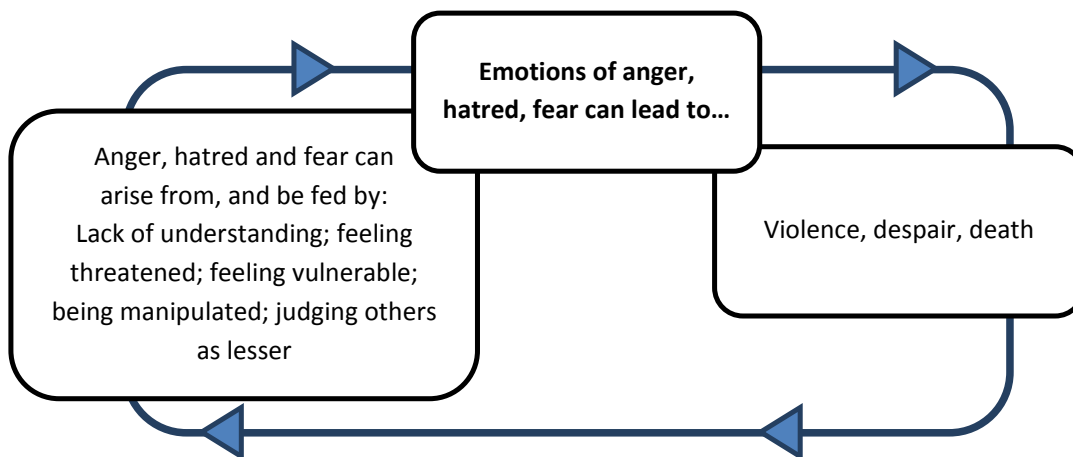
Such emotions are incredibly powerful. They burn in us, and can easily drive us to act in ways that we might not think possible: ways that can result in violence, despair, and death.

In the workshops on which these Guidelines are based, one Buddhist participant spoke about recent religious violence in his town and admitted:

‘In the beginning, I hated Muslims. I saw a video of Muslims attacking Buddhists in Rakhine and it made me crazy. Then I realised that the violence was manipulated by those who stood to gain from stirring up hatred. Muslims and Buddhists died, needlessly. Now I realise that I have to start with myself; I have to look inside myself and try to avoid anger, hatred and fear.’

During the workshops, participants talked about the possible reasons for these negative emotions developing and the ways in which such emotions can lead to actions that, in turn, reinforce the original reasons.

This can be represented as follows:



On the other hand, participants spoke of **compassion, empathy and loving kindness** as being possibly the most positive emotions that human beings experience.

These emotions are constructive and by their very nature do not allow for ‘them’ and ‘us’ but, instead, require an understanding of shared humanity; of ‘we’. Again, participants talked about the possible reasons for these positive emotions developing and the ways in which such emotions can lead to actions that, in turn, reinforce the original reasons.

This can be represented as follows:



Sometimes, however, people will claim that their 'love' of something (usually a positive emotion) justifies hatred. One workshop participant admitted that sometimes he had used his love of his religion to justify hating those of other religions:

'Is that still love?' he asked. 'Is it an act of love if I attack others to defend my religion?' Then he answered his own question: 'An act of violence can never be an act of love'.

Peace, freedom, equality and social justice *for all?*

Whatever their differences, there are certain values that all right-thinking Myanmar people hold. These are the values of:

Peace, freedom, equality, and social justice

(Shown in the illustration above as the possible outcomes of loving kindness, compassion and empathy)

However often people say that they hold these values dear, but act (or think) in ways that in fact run contrary to the values. This does not necessarily happen consciously, but in our everyday lives there can be little space for reflection on whether or not we act in ways that are consistent with the things we say we hold dear.

The following questions are intended to help this reflection.

Key questions that can help to protect, or promote, diversity:

When individuals or groups use culture and tradition to defend their judgement of others as being lesser than themselves, or to explain inequality:

- Whose culture and tradition is being prioritised? What other cultures and traditions are of relevance, in relation to the judgement being defended or the inequality that exists?
- Who is being controlled? Why? Who benefits?

Can individuals or groups really value peace, freedom, equality and social justice if they:

- Judge others as lesser?
- Hate, fear, or discriminate against certain groups of people because they are different from you?
- Accept inequality, because it is disguised as 'tradition and culture'?

When you hear someone talk about a religion, ethnic group, sex, or other identifier (masculinity or femininity, for example) as if everyone who belongs to that group is the same, ask:

- What is the result of this?
- Why do people do it?
- What are the benefits and the risks of it?
- Why is it easier to think about 'them' and 'us' instead of 'we'?

When individuals or groups seek to judge others, or to misuse power or to control resources or other people, and claims it is 'their right' to pursue their own ends, ask yourself:

- Who holds most personal, cultural, social and practical power in this situation?

- Whose rights should take precedence: the rights of those who already hold power and have access to resources, or the rights of those who are less powerful, have less resources and who are often more vulnerable and marginalised?

Whenever you hear someone say 'All xxxxx do this,' or 'All xxxxx are dirty, or lazy, or stupid, or can't be trusted, or can't make decisions, or don't respect others', ask yourself: 'if someone talked about a group to which I belong as if we were all the same, and all of lower value than others, how would I feel?'

Gender diversity: a case study

Gender is a social process of meaning-making and judgement that affects every physical body, regardless of its (born, or lived) sex.

This process, which occurs in all societies, feeds on understandings, expectations, value judgements, power relationships and resultant/reinforcing behaviours related to 'masculinity' or 'femininity'.

Deeply and emotionally embedded within the fibre of all of our (social, individual and relational) lives, processes of gender are constantly regenerating. Gendered judgements and assumptions are intimately connected to our sense of self, our place in the world, and the way in which we as individuals and as a society police our and others' behaviour, usually without even recognising it.

Despite having worked on theory and practice related to issues of gender and sexuality for more than a decade, I recently found myself standing in an off-licence, annoyed because the (older) male staff member was busy and I had to ask the (younger, fashionable, good-looking) woman for advice about wine. She was, of course, extremely helpful and knowledgeable. I was mortified that I had made an immediate (and wrong) judgement of her ability to tell me about wines, based on the facts that she was a) female; b) young; and c) wearing an above the knee skirt.

Another example, this time from Myanmar: Sayardaw U Tay Zadiapati from the Shwe Chin Thae CSO in Sagaing Division gave a presentation to the 2009 International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in which he spoke about 'Overcoming Stigma With Brahamavihara'.

In the presentation, Sayardaw quoted Buddha's words: '[Practice] no discrimination; strive to understand root cause and effect and treat everyone with the same respect and dignity, no matter what one's class, sexual orientation and past'.

He also shared the story of Pandaka, a man who had sex with other men, who became a monk in the Noble Order of Sangha (from the text Mahavaggapali, Vinaya Pitaka).

Despite this, men who have sex with men are, today, frequently described in Myanmar as 'not part of our culture, not part of our tradition'. Often, men having sex with men are described as 'being against Buddha's teachings'.

As the Sayardaw showed, this has nothing to do with Buddha's own words or behaviours but, rather, with the judgements of people. In the case of men who have sex with men, judgements are made regarding their perceived lack of masculinity. This is also a judgement of gender.