

# No Women, No Peace: Gender Equality, Conflict and Peace in Myanmar

## KEY POINTS

- Myanmar has suffered from decades of civil war and military rule. Addressing the structural roots of violence, including gendered inequality, are crucial in order to build a sustainable peace. It is essential to analyse conflict, violence and human insecurity within a social context that is shaped by gender inequality. Women are involved in and affected by civil war as victims, survivors and agents of conflict and peace in specific ways which are often different from the experiences of men.
- The role of women is critical to the achievement of peace and democracy. To create a peace and national reform process that is effective and truly inclusive, women need to participate in all levels of decision-making to prevent, manage and resolve conflict.
- International experience shows that failure to incorporate women's gendered needs and priorities in peace agreements will greatly undermine the potential for sustainable peace. As a result of advocacy from the global women's movement, many international agreements are now in place providing an imperative for governments to guarantee women's rights to equitable participation in decision-making on national issues of peace and governance.
- Myanmar's political and ethnic leaders appear to lack understanding of their responsibility to implement women's equal rights in decision-making on peace-building and national transition. Women have mostly been excluded from high-level peace negotiations. However women are already participating in important efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation but lack official recognition for this.
- Despite facing repression and discrimination, women's organisations have accelerated their activities in promoting the rights of women and seeking to ensure that women's representatives achieve rightful participation in national reform, peace processes and decisions about the country's future. Myanmar's leaders and the international community need to demonstrate acknowledgement of these efforts and expand the opportunities for inclusive and gender-equitable decision-making in the peace and democratisation processes under way.

## Introduction

This briefing explores the gender dimensions and gender impact of conflict in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> Such information is relatively scarce, and there has long been a need for a deeper understanding of the intersections of gender, ethnicity and other identities in peace-building and democratisation. Progress on the rights of women and the participation by women's organisations in conflict resolution and national reform are vital if sustainable peace and democracy are to be built within the country.

Decades of civil war and military rule have had a deep impact on the peoples of Myanmar, especially in ethnic nationality areas where most of the fighting has taken place. The reform process initiated by the government of President Thein Sein, a former general and member of the previous military government, has raised hopes that the country will finally move towards a more democratic and inclusive society, and that a sustainable peace can be achieved through a political agreement with ethnic representatives addressing key grievances and aspirations. However, at the beginning of 2016 fighting still continued in ethnic nationality regions in the north of the country, despite the partial signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015 and the landslide victory of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2015 general election.<sup>2</sup> The outcome of both processes is, as yet, unclear.

While conflict continues, the gender implications of such suffering and marginalisation are rarely factored in during discussions or initiatives for national reform. This neglect now has to end. In fact, although men have been the highest casualties in combat, it is very often women in Myanmar who have been the prime victims of conflict, whether through sexual violence, human trafficking and other rights abuses or such indirect consequences as reduced access to clean water and health services, the increase in female-

headed households, and the inordinate burdens for women and girls in conflict-zones. Equally unaddressed, women have very often been denied participation in initiatives towards peace, a marginalisation that is reflected in the landscape of national politics. Far from women being a "secondary" or "sectoral" group within society, their equitable participation in national life is one of the most integral challenges in socio-political reform that faces the country today.

Despite such disadvantages, women in and from Myanmar have remained highly active as agents for reconciliation and political change in grassroots and civil society initiatives for peace, community-building and reform over the decades. Their role, however, is very under-acknowledged, and, with few exceptions, women have remained notably absent from high-level peace negotiations, both under the Thein Sein government and the preceding regime of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC: formerly State Law and Order Restoration Council, SLORC). The need is thus urgent to increase awareness of the many difficulties afflicting women and promote the essential role of women if peace is to be established in the country's new political era. As women activists proclaimed in Myanmar on the International Day of Peace 2015: "No Women, No Peace".

As a matter of priority, it needs to be affirmed that women do have equal rights under a host of laws and protocols to participation in public decision-making about their lives, their communities and countries. These rights are today underpinned by international law and international instruments, including human rights conventions and UN Security Council resolutions. The need now is for these rights to be fully implemented and guaranteed in Myanmar. As a growing body of evidence from peace processes in different countries has shown, when women are represented at all levels of decision-making about peace-building and democratisation, the gender-specific needs of women and men tend to

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be addressed more equally. Such inclusion is, in turn, an essential factor in the establishment of national stability and reform.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing will start with an overview of the present ethnic and political situation in Myanmar, followed by analyses of the current involvement of women in conflict resolution and national reconciliation in Myanmar. Reference will be made to the significant difference that gender-inclusive peace agreements and peace-building efforts have made in other countries around the world.<sup>4</sup> Then, following an overview of the contemporary landscape, the briefing will make a clear case for the urgent need to have a gender-equitable and inclusive peace process in Myanmar. The briefing will then conclude with recommendations for the promotion of gender awareness and participation of women from all ethnic backgrounds in peace initiatives in the country as a whole.

## Towards Ethnic Peace and Democratic Governance?

At present, the ethnic and political situation in Myanmar is delicately poised. After long years of internal conflict and bitter struggle, two events have brought about the best opportunity in many decades for initiatives to address the serious political, socio-economic and humanitarian challenges facing the country: first, the resounding victory of the NLD in the November 2015 general election, the most free and fair in half a century; and second, efforts towards a nationwide ceasefire agreement which, if completed, could herald the first real end to armed conflict in the country since independence in 1948.

In the coming months, there is likely to be an intensive inter-play between the three main stakeholder groups in national politics: the newly-elected NLD; the country's diverse ethnic parties, some of which have been under arms since independence; and the national armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, which have controlled government in Myanmar for over five decades.

Buoyed by a clear mandate for democratic change, hopes are high among Myanmar's peoples that a new and inclusive way will be found for all parties to work constructively together in a common endeavour to build peace.

There is, however, a long way to go. For the moment, the transition to a new government or political culture is yet to become clear, while conflict is still continuing in several ethnic nationality territories. But whatever paths towards national peace and stability are initiated, two essential steps must be completed to build a real sense of countrywide involvement in national change: the present parliamentary and peace processes must at some stage become inter-connected; and the many neglected peoples, including women as a crucial sector in Myanmar society, must also become participants in decision-making for national reform.

After decades of military government and state failure, many needs, communities and regions of the country can be highlighted as deserving for especial treatment and attention. But among many neglected crises, this marginalisation is often at its most acute in the nexus between conflict, gender inequality and the plight of Myanmar's minority peoples who make up an estimated third of the 51 million population. It is an overlooked subject, crucial to Myanmar's future, where substantive progress has long needed to be made.

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Tragically, ethnic conflict has a long and painful history in Myanmar with serious repercussions on all levels, including household, community, state/region, national and international. After the 1962 coup d'état, successive military-backed governments refused to take ethnic political demands into account, primarily treating ethnic concerns for self-governance and

nationality rights as a security threat that requires a military response. After the pro-democracy uprising in 1988, the then military government of the SLORC established bilateral ceasefire agreements with ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in some parts of the country. These

accords, however, did little to address the roots of ethnic conflict, but rather established a situation of “neither war nor peace”. Whether by accident or design, the result was a pattern of “managing” rather than “resolving” conflict by military-backed governments in Myanmar.<sup>5</sup>

Under the quasi-civilian government of President Thein Sein, who assumed office in March 2011, political reforms were introduced and a nationwide ceasefire agreement promoted. This has resulted in a much more open and liberal atmosphere, notably in the former capital Yangon and other urban areas. But ethnic and communal conflicts continued to flare up in different parts of the country. Fighting was especially heavy in the Kachin and Shan states, while there were also notable outbreaks of conflict in the Karen and Rakhine states.

Eventually, a partial NCA was signed with the government and Tatmadaw representatives on 15 October 2015 by eight EAOs that are primarily based in southeast Myanmar, but others remained undecided or chose against signing a “nationwide” agreement that does not include all EAOs in the country’s conflicts. In contrast to recognition by the Tatmadaw and Thein Sein government of 16 EAOs, opposition groups have proposed up to 21 organisations to be included. There was also caution amongst ethnic nationality leaders about signing an incomplete agreement before a general election and formation of a new government that, it was hoped, will better serve to support peace and dialogue in shaping the country’s future. On Independence Day (4 January), the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi asserted that the new government would prioritise peace and widespread participation through an “effective” peace conference.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in mid-January a “union peace conference” went ahead between the outgoing Thein Sein government and the eight EAOs, with selected political parties and other invitees in attendance. For the moment, the result of these initiatives is unknown.

Armed conflict is not the only manifestation of violence in Myanmar, however. Despite

increased political freedoms after President Thein Sein assumed office, peaceful protests for land rights and education rights have also resulted in violence and arrests by the police and security forces during the past four years.<sup>7</sup> But by far the most disturbing escalation in violence have been the clashes between Buddhists and Muslims, often resulting in loss of life and the destruction of homes and property, that have spread to various towns across the country, including Sittwe, Meiktila and Lashio. The main epicentre of this violence has been in the northern Rakhine state where the Muslim population, most of whom self-identify as Rohingya, has become among the most marginalised and disenfranchised communities in Asia, a situation that markedly worsened under the Thein Sein government.<sup>8</sup>

As such outbreaks of violence highlight, Myanmar is far from a country at peace at present, and there are still civilians continuing to flee across state and national borders in search of safety and a better life abroad. An estimated 800,000 civilians are currently refugees or internally displaced persons, while over two million citizens are working, whether legally or illegally, in Thailand alone.<sup>9</sup> The great majority of those displaced are ethnic minority peoples, including women, men and children, who have left their farms or other ways of earning an income behind. Clearly, major challenges in community resettlement and national peace-building still remain.

## **Gender (in)Equality, Conflict and Peace: a Conceptual Framework**

To analyse and promote the equitable participation of women in conflict resolution, a broader understanding of gender in society is needed. The concept of gender refers to “a system of femininities and masculinities and power hierarchies between them”.<sup>10</sup> Gender inequality stems from socially-determined identities, roles and responsibilities attributed to the biological sexes and the different social and cultural expectations and values placed upon our identities, roles and relations. Such dominant

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values, beliefs, attitudes and practices related to gender are inculcated and maintained by individuals and by society's main institutions and organisations. These include the family, religion and state, as well as legal and education systems. They influence who and what is valued, how resources are allocated, who can do what, and who gets what in society. Gender equality refers to equal opportunities, rights, responsibilities, and relations between women and men and those with other gender identities.

Every social, political, economic or cultural issue has gender dimensions. Women have an equal right to have a voice on all issues, not just those issues that are traditionally considered to be "women's issues" related to family and social welfare. Men and women are involved in, and affected differently, by almost every issue due to different gender roles and inequality. This means that women have certain gender-specific needs, which are different from men's needs.

To promote awareness and reform, women's rights activists and feminist movements put a "gender lens" on social, political, economic, cultural and conflict-related issues. They both analyse underlying unequal power relations and recommend measures that support gender equality and equal rights. Women constitute at least half the global population and, as such, they have an inherent, inalienable right to participate equally in decision-making about their own and their countries' futures. As experiences from around the world have shown, when women participate in community and political decision-making, the needs of women and men are more equally considered and represented.

Gender perspectives are pertinent in analysis of the challenges of ending violence and building peace.<sup>11</sup> As Elizabeth Porter and Anuradha Mundkur have written:

"As victims, survivors, peacebuilders and in some cases ex-combatants, women have a big stake in being involved in resolving conflicts and being involved in post-conflict reconstruction and future political and socio-economic development. With women making up at least 50% of the population in

most countries, without their participation it will be difficult to establish a broad-based legitimate peace mandate owned by the community."<sup>12</sup>

Gender, conflict and insecurity are linked concepts, not separate. A feminist analysis of peace and security means linking violence and human insecurity within a social context that is shaped by gender inequality.<sup>13</sup> It also means having a wider understanding of security as individual security instead of a more mainstream understanding of security as state or national security. Such a focus on individual security allows for a broad interpretation of security as freedom from economic, political and food insecurity, and freedom from threats to health, the environment, personal safety and community cohesion. A gendered understanding of security also requires analysing and redressing gender-specific inequalities and security needs of women in all the above dimensions of individual security. As Porter and Mundkur have stated:

"Women are more likely to.....see clearly the continuum of conflict that stretches from the beating at home to the rape on the street to the killing on the battlefield and can often relate more vividly to the links between violence, poverty and inequality in daily lives."<sup>14</sup>

As such persistent sufferings highlight, violence, conflicts and wars affect women and girls disproportionately and differently from men and boys. Due to the changing nature of modern wars, most victims in contemporary conflicts are civilians,<sup>15</sup> especially women and children, who constitute close to 80% of the world's refugees and internally-displaced persons.<sup>16</sup> This means that women are often primarily regarded as the victims or survivors of conflict. But it is important to acknowledge that women also participate as agents of conflict: i.e. as soldiers, medics and nurses or as active supporters of different armies, including opposition forces, for reasons of kinship (as mothers, sisters, daughters and wives of combatants) or allegiance to their ethnic identity.

The collective result of such experiences is that women have gender-specific social, economic,

physical and psychological vulnerabilities and needs during conflict that need to be recognised and redressed:

- While men are more likely to die from violence during conflict, more women die from the indirect consequences of conflict such as reduced access to food, clean water, health services and infrastructure.
- Conflict causes an increase in the number of female-headed households, with increased responsibilities and work burdens for women and girls.
- Sexual and other forms of violence against women perpetrated by men have varied motivations, are widespread in conflict, and often continue after conflict as well.
- Women and girls constitute the majority of survivors of sexual violence in conflict. Sexual violence has profound physical, psychological and social consequences for survivors.
- The end of conflict brings complex challenges for female and male combatants and those associated with armed groups. Female ex-combatants and army veterans, including those in support roles in the army, tend to face stigma in the community post-conflict and are often overlooked when reintegration support is provided.

- While women are at the forefront of community-level or informal conflict prevention, resolution and peace-building efforts, they are consistently under-represented in, or excluded from, formal peace negotiations. This means that women's participation is denied in negotiating peace agreements that need to address the underlying causes of inequalities and conflict.<sup>17</sup>

A growing body of international analysis and good practice in recent years has highlighted how important it is that equal rights and the representation of women are implemented at all levels in peace-making and peace-building (see Guatemala and Afghanistan boxes). As the UN General Assembly declared in 2010: "Women are crucial partners in shoring up three pillars of lasting peace: recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy."<sup>18</sup> In essence, conflict disrupts social relationships. But when a conflict is resolved, there are opportunities for transformative change and redistribution of power in society, enabling the redress of gender inequalities.

In particular, when women are absent from peace negotiations and denied ability to influence proceedings, a number of critical issues can be set in train that can jeopardise, and very likely undermine, a peace process. Peace tends to be defined merely as national security and the absence of conflict, while broader considerations of individual human security are overlooked.

## The experience of Guatemala

In Guatemala, women participated as soldiers and supporters of ethnic armed groups in the decades-long civil war. In the peace process in the early 1990s, women participated as delegates of the negotiating parties. As a result, the peace agreement included specific commitments to women on housing, credit and land; finding missing children and orphans; penalising sexual harassment; and the creation of a national women's forum. A global first, the Guatemalan women's movement also successfully used international legal instruments to hold the government's most senior general, Ríos Montt, accountable through the national court system for sexual violence committed during the civil war. On 26 January 2012, Ríos Montt appeared in court in Guatemala and was formally indicted for genocide and crimes against humanity.

This has a number of detrimental consequences. Crucial topics are ignored of social, political, economic and cultural importance that lie at the root of conflict and are experienced differently by women than by men; gender inequality and patriarchal beliefs that underpin gender-based violence and other forms of inequality are not addressed; and the issue of sexual violence against women is all too frequently overlooked.

Such analysis of the lack of women's participation in decision-making in states afflicted by conflict has been backed up by a host of international studies that have examined peace processes, either with or without women's participation, and illustrate the importance of the inclusion of gender perspectives and women's representatives. Research by UN Women, for example, and experiences in different post-conflict settings (such as Bougainville, Fiji, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Liberia) have demonstrated that peace and development are more sustainable when diverse views are considered during peace negotiations, including gender-based, ethnic, religious and political perspectives.<sup>19</sup> In consequence, when women's rights advocates have formally participated in peace negotiations, the resulting peace agreements have usually included a broader understanding of security as human security, with attention to such issues as equitable access to land, credit, education, training and employment, as well as a focus on justice for those who suffered sexual violence during conflict.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, research by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD) has shown that,

if the issues of women's rights are not included during the drafting of a peace agreement, the "likelihood is drastically reduced of them ever being addressed".<sup>21</sup> In their analysis of six peace agreements from the Asia-Pacific region,<sup>22</sup> CHD researchers assessed the gender sensitivity of the agreements in five themes: power-sharing, resource-sharing, security arrangements, access to justice and peace monitoring. They concluded that, despite international norms for the protection of women's rights, the design and dynamics of peace processes can work against the inclusion of women and gendered perspectives in the text of peace agreements. Such omissions, they warned, are significant, and can be highly detrimental because of the strong influence peace agreements have on shaping the social and political landscape of countries post-conflict. As Jenny Hedström has stated:

"Demands stipulated in peace negotiations influence not only the development of democratic institutions but also their focus. In order for gender-progressive legislation to be enacted – covering but not limited to such issues as domestic violence, sexual harassment, electoral quotas and socioeconomic rights – women must be able to both articulate their needs and have their voices heard. It is therefore critical that representatives from women's organisations are included in these negotiations from the very beginning and not brought in as an afterthought."<sup>23</sup>

In summary, to create an effective peace process, three key principles stand out. First, inclusion is

## The experience of Afghanistan

As a result of pressure from women's groups in Afghanistan, women were included in all but the first stage of peace negotiations in the official peace process. Three women participated as delegates in the final negotiations of the Bonn Agreement. The peace agreement called for the inclusion of women in the parliament and in all peace and reconstruction processes. It also called for the inclusion of female Afghani lawyers in the drafting of the new constitution and other legal provisions. Members of the European Union declared that international aid for Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction would be conditional on the participation of women in the decision-making and use of such aid.

essential, and women need to participate in all levels of decision-making to prevent, manage and resolve conflict; i.e., as peace-makers, peace-keepers and peace-builders. Second, women's gender-based needs and experiences of violence and suffering must be considered in all aspects of peace-building and conflict resolution. And third, the equal participation of women should include women representatives with a gender equality perspective and connections to diverse women's groups and sectors of society to ensure that the wide spectrum of women's rights issues are addressed. Without such inclusion, a genuine transition from conflict to peace and stability is unlikely to be delivered or sustained.

## Women's Rights in International Legal Instruments and Agreements

Despite historic marginalisation, women's rights to participate in decision-making about peace and governance have been increasingly enshrined in international law, instruments and conventions over recent decades. These instruments and conventions emphasize the imperative of women's participation in all aspects of peace processes and political decision-making, and seek to ensure protection from sexual and gender-based violence, access to justice, and prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict, as well as to make security arrangements, relief and recovery gender-sensitive. These international instruments and agreements include, but are not limited to, the articles in the box, International Instruments and Agreements.

As representatives of the international community and as UN member states, governments have the responsibility and the obligation to put these rights into practice and to ensure that national laws and policies are in line with these international laws, obligations and agreements. However it needs to be pointed out that, while these processes provide legitimacy to women's representation

and participation in peace and decision-making, there have been various challenges to the implementation of such international legal instruments and resolutions.

There are several difficulties that can be highlighted. First of all, there is an absence of enforcement mechanisms and implementation guidelines for the Beijing Platform for Action, UNSCR 1325 and other women, peace and security resolutions. This means that they are effectively only providing non-binding policy frameworks. For example, while CEDAW Committee GR30 provides a backbone to UNSCR 1325 by holding governments officially responsible to report on the implementation of UNSCR 1325, there are long periods of time between the obligatory periodic government reports to the CEDAW Committee, and the Committee can only issue recommendations but not impose any punitive measures for non-implementation.

This leads to a second obstacle to progress: that of attitudes. Due to the prevalence of patriarchal<sup>24</sup> cultures, women's issues continue to be marginalised in many countries, and women's participation is often unacceptable to male leaders in formal peace processes and public decision-making. UNSCR 1325, for example, does not directly address the roots of gender inequality, such as patriarchy, "hegemonic" notions of masculinity and militarised power. This is a serious failing. Addressing the structural roots of violence, including gender inequality, is essential in order to build a lasting peace.

The promotion of women's rights is also being held back by a third handicap: lack of awareness. Despite its fifteen years of existence, many government and non-state actors are not

sufficiently aware of UNSCR 1325 and other UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, nor do they appear to understand or take into account the ramifications in terms of their responsibility to implement and

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## International Instruments and Agreements

- The Geneva Convention of 1947 and Additional Protocols of 1977, and international treaties limiting the barbarity of war and protecting those who do not or cannot fight.
- The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), which defines what constitutes discrimination against women and holds governments accountable for reporting on their actions to eliminate such discrimination. CEDAW articles 4 and 7 set out strategies for promotion of women's participation in decision-making. CEDAW is binding international law for those countries that have ratified the convention.
- CEDAW Optional Protocol (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1999), which enables the CEDAW Committee to hear cases of violations of rights brought by individuals against their states.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (working since 1994).
- The 1995 Vienna Declaration of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights which frames women's rights as human rights.
- The Beijing Platform for Action (1995), outcome document of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, especially critical area "E" on women, peace and security. Strategic objective "E1" emphasises women's participation in all matters related to peace-keeping, preventive diplomacy, mediation and negotiations.
- The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) categorising crimes of sexual and gender-based violence, such as rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, trafficking, enforced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence committed in international and intra-state armed conflicts, as "crimes against humanity" and "war crimes". It also provides a statute for delivering gender-inclusive justice. It entered into force in 2002.
- United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (issued in 2000) and other Women, Peace and Security resolutions – 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2122, 2122 and 2242 (the latter issued in October 2015) – underscore state obligations to increase women's involvement in peace and security matters at every level. The resolutions do not simply focus on "women's issues", but instead provide an important set of objectives for gender-inclusive, transformative processes and practices. Their aims are to prevent conflict; to protect women and girls during conflict; to ensure women's participation in peace-keeping (external security forces), official peace-making (ceasefires, mediation and negotiation of peace agreements) and peace-building (all processes that build trust, restore dignity and develop peace), and to guarantee the prosecution of gender-based war crimes.
- General Recommendation 30 of the CEDAW Committee on Women in Conflict Situations, issued in 2013. GR30 makes it a binding international legal responsibility for governments which have ratified CEDAW to take all measures to ensure that state and non-state actors uphold human rights and prevent "the violation of any human right by any actor" during conflict and post-conflict. It requires all those governments to report on their implementation of UNSCR 1325 and its National Action Plan in their periodic reports to the CEDAW committee.

report on their progress. In addition, the direct budget allocations, both by governments and international donors, to implement UNSCR 1325 and related women, peace and security resolutions are limited. This is especially evident in comparison to the billions of dollars spent annually on fighting “the war on terror” and military defence expenditure in general.

In the conflict front-lines, too, community members and leaders may also lack awareness about international provisions for women’s equal rights to participate in conflict resolution and political decision-making. In particular, civil society organisations often report that a lack of suitable information and training materials in local languages and understandable terminology hampers awareness-raising about women’s rights.

A fourth major challenge is that the behaviour of combatants and the nature of conflict in the front-lines can hold back commitments to monitor and report on the implementation of UN resolutions and conventions. Member states, for example, may be perpetrators and parties to conflict and thus unlikely to provide honest and accurate reports. They may also choose to ignore what they deem inconvenient or unable to gain reliable data about. In such situations, civil society groups may not feel safe to report about events on the ground. This handicap is amplified when there is a lack of local awareness of international protocols on women, peace and security.

Finally, progress in the promotion of women’s rights continues to be disadvantaged by a lack of acknowledgement of the integral role played by women. Today many women’s organisations are involved in both formal and informal peace-building and reconciliation processes around the world. By their actions, they are already implementing commitments laid out in UN Security Council resolutions. They may not, however, be necessarily aware of this, nor even acknowledged for doing so, which means that, all too often, they are not consulted when talks move on to high-level processes for achieving peace.

There thus remains much room for improvement in implementing key international rights and conventions. In 2010, this failing was

recognised when more than 1,500 women from conflict-affected countries met with UN leaders for dialogue about how to improve the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Three common priorities emerged from talks that reflected a variety of different state, national and cultural contexts: increasing women’s political empowerment and participation in decision-making at all levels; the need for more effective measures and arrangements for women’s access to justice, protection and security; and the need to allocate economic resources and aid to support the recovery of women survivors of conflict.<sup>25</sup> To address these critical issues, advocacy and socio-political action to strengthen the gender-inclusiveness of conflict resolution and peace-building remain essential.

Despite all these obstacles and the slow progress of change, it is important to stress that UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its related resolutions on women, peace and security are making a difference to women’s lives internationally.<sup>26</sup> The resolutions make different kinds of collective bargaining possible for women’s organisations, allowing their voices to be heard at different levels. But while international agreements do provide a framework for the integral role of women in establishing peace, good governance and respect for human rights, there is clearly still some way to go in achieving implementation and real inclusion around the world.

## Gender (in)Equality and Conflict in Myanmar

At present, women’s organisations in Myanmar are highly active in informal, community-level peace-building and reconciliation activities, while remaining largely excluded (with a few exceptions) from formal and high-level peace-making initiatives, including bilateral negotiations and nationwide ceasefire talks. Such marginalisation and exclusions have long reflected the stasis and malaise in addressing the root causes of conflict.

At first glance, gender inequality in Myanmar is not as evident as in some of its neighbouring countries. Women are visible in the public domain

with apparent freedom of movement, working as farmers, market vendors and shopkeepers or as teachers, doctors and office personnel, for example. However, while some of the more obvious forms of gender discrimination do not exist widely in Myanmar, women certainly do not have equal rights or representation with men in all spheres of life.<sup>27</sup> As expressed by a male participant at a recent TNI gender workshop in Pekhon, Shan state: "Gender inequality is ingrained in our culture. It is very difficult to change."<sup>28</sup>

Such discrimination against women has been often under-estimated in popular discourse due to the respected domestic and global reputation of Myanmar's most prominent women leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who heads the NLD that has just won the 2015 general election. But in many respects, Aung San Suu Kyi has been the exception rather than the rule. The denial of gender inequality by Myanmar leaders and men in general goes much deeper than this and is based on deeply-held patriarchal values and beliefs.

According to Pyo Let Han of the Yangon-based Women's Political Action Group: "Our society never sees women as their leaders, except Daw Aung San Suu Kyi."<sup>29</sup>

Such challenges are pervasive among the diverse ethnic nationalities and cultures in Myanmar. As documented in various publications on gender equality,<sup>30</sup> different communities in the country have strong gender stereotypes that continue to be enforced by families, the state and other institutions. "Chin men think that women are not supposed to be involved in activities that are based outside of the house," said Cheery Zahau, a woman candidate for the Chin Progressive Party in the November 2015 election. "Women are housewives, taking care of the family. In society, most of the decisions are made by men."<sup>31</sup> In particular, many cultural values and religious beliefs uphold men's superiority to women, especially in the moral, spiritual and leadership realms. The scale of this challenge was summarised in a multi-year (1998-2000)

research project on women's rights in Myanmar, undertaken by Images Asia, which found that:

"Gender roles arising out of cultural and religious stereotypes continue to underpin laws and practices that prevent women from enjoying their full rights to personal safety, health, education, employment, freedom of movement and participation in leadership, recreation and community activities."<sup>32</sup>

As a result of such patriarchal norms, women currently have limited representation in political and public decision-making in Myanmar. A study conducted by ActionAid, CARE Myanmar and

Oxfam in 2010-11 found evidence of "norms that discourage women's participation in public life and decision-making in all [research] areas."<sup>33</sup> A 2014 discussion paper, for example, for the Myanmar Development Resource Institute and Asia Foundation found that there were no women township administrators in the country and that only two out of a total 33 ministries (Ministry for Education and Ministry for Social

Welfare, Relief and Resettlement) were headed by women.<sup>34</sup> These failings are also reflected in electoral politics. At the 2010 general election, only 29 women (4.4% of total seats) were elected to the Upper and Lower Houses of the Union-level parliament and 24 women (2.7% of total seats) at the State/Regional-level parliaments.<sup>35</sup> This marked the "lowest proportion of female parliamentary members" of any country in Southeast Asia.<sup>36</sup>

For the November 2015 polls, just 13% of the 6,074 candidates were women, which, while still low, included an increased number of ethnic minority candidates and represented the highest percentage of women in any general election in Myanmar since independence in 1948.<sup>37</sup> In the event, 13% of the elected seats of the Upper and Lower House parliaments went to women candidates, far below the number it could be. This means that about 10% of the final parliamentary seats will go to representatives who are women, a percentage that could increase under Myanmar's

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*As a result of such patriarchal norms, women currently have limited representation in political and public decision-making in Myanmar*

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2008 constitution if the Tatmadaw-appointed MPs (25% of the overall total) include more women.<sup>38</sup> For its part, the NLD put forward around 15% women in its candidate list. According to NLD spokesperson U Win Thein, this low number was because many of the women were “green” and “inexperienced”, and because women, due to cultural and religious traditions in the country, supposedly “lack confidence to be involved in politics”.<sup>39</sup> As the chair of the Union Election Commission, U Tin Aye, stated on the eve of the polls: “the transition to gender equality in political processes may not be immediate in light of the traditions of Myanmar’s people”.<sup>40</sup>

As these discriminatory figures highlight, international instruments and agreements to ensure women’s rights to participate in decision-making about governance have until now had limited impact in promoting women in Myanmar.

Women activists complain that this is partly due to limited awareness of their existence. According to Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe from the Karen Women’s Empowerment Group (KWEG): “The government agreed to implement CEDAW, but I doubt that many government officials know about it. Perhaps only those from the Department of Social Welfare know of it – at the township and village level, nothing is known”.<sup>41</sup>

Such persistent gender inequality in public decision-making has important ramifications during times of conflict and peace-building. As a male workshop participant in a TNI workshop in Lashio claimed: “In this difficult situation [of ongoing conflict], we don’t want women to participate.” Similarly, a woman participant observed at a TNI workshop discussing inclusion in decision-making among ethnic armed groups and political parties in Loikaw: “Some women have the capacity, but the criteria exclude them. We have capable and educated women, who have gone abroad, but they cannot participate due to the criteria of the party. Power is only in the hands of men.”<sup>42</sup>

Such countrywide exclusion is a fundamental discrimination against the rights of women that urgently needs to be addressed. At this critical

time in Myanmar’s history, women in positions of power and influence can ensure that the rights and gender-specific needs of women and girls are addressed in policy-making, resource allocation and public service provision. They can also focus the attention of those in authority on the need to address gendered dimensions and the impact of conflict during peace negotiations and in the drafting of peace agreements.

For the present, however, the ability of women to achieve gender-equitable policymaking is limited due to the low number of women in

parliament, ministerial positions and the leadership of political and ethnic nationality movements. Furthermore, not all are necessarily knowledgeable about gender issues or interested in advancing gender equality. For this reason, representatives from women’s organisations are adamant that a quota system is necessary. As

a participant at the Loikaw workshop stated: “Women are historically and culturally oppressed. That is why we need affirmative action. Men should consider this and learn.” A figure of around 30% has usually been proposed (mostly unsuccessfully) in political and peace processes.<sup>43</sup> “Positive discrimination policy should be applied,” believes Lahpai Seng Raw, co-founder of the Metta Development Foundation. “That is giving at least 30% parliamentary seats to the non-Bamar (Burman) and 30% for women. Otherwise the issue of inequality will be there for many more decades as the playing field is not even.”<sup>44</sup>

The situation is now urgent. As initiatives continue to achieve peace and reform, the absence of women’s representatives means that, until now, the different insecurities and vulnerabilities in conflict that are experienced by women have hardly been included in political decision-making and peace negotiations.

## Gender-Specific Impact of Conflict in Myanmar

Despite facing many obstacles, the voice of women in Myanmar is being increasingly raised.

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*“Women are historically and culturally oppressed. That is why we need affirmative action. Men should consider this and learn”*

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During the past two decades, the gender-specific impact of conflict on women and girls has been documented by Myanmar women's organisations, primarily those working in border areas and in exile.<sup>45</sup> In their publications, these women's organisations provide disturbing evidence of intimidation and verbal, physical and sexual violence perpetrated by armed forces (predominantly Tatmadaw soldiers) against women and girls. Outstanding in this regard was the 2002 report by the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), "Licence to Rape", which broke the veil of silence around sexual violence by government troops against women and girls in the Shan state.<sup>46</sup> The report details 173 cases of rape or other sexual violence by members of the Tatmadaw against the civilian population in Shan state during 1996-2001. Other women's organisations have produced similar accounts.<sup>47</sup> According to the Women's League of Burma (WLB), sexual violence has continued since the government of President Thein Sein assumed office in 2011:

"Reports of gang-rape, rape and attempted sexual violence from Kachin State, Karen State, Mon State, Chin State, Shan State and Karenni State continue to be received by WLB and our member organisations... Survivors face intimidation from authorities at every level, including from officers determined to subvert justice and ensure the culture of impunity remains intact."<sup>48</sup>

However, while such ongoing impunity urgently needs to be addressed, the WLB warns that a number of key clauses in the 2008 constitution leave the military authorities unaccountable to civilian courts and afford them *de facto* freedom from prosecution for crimes committed while on official duty. To the anger of citizens across Myanmar, still no action has been taken for a number of horrific crimes against women, including sexual violence, during continuing military operations in the Kachin and Shan states. As a recent report by the Legal Aid Network and Kachin Women's Association Thailand headlined: "Justice Delayed, Justice Denied".<sup>49</sup>

Gender-specific insecurities in Myanmar, however, are much broader than sexual violence. In war-

zones around the country's borders, women's and human rights organisations have also documented gendered experiences of economic hardship as a result of conflict, with troops destroying or stealing food, farm animals and other property from civilians, and women's mobility being limited by lack of safety. Such sufferings were also mentioned by participants at the TNI workshops who spoke openly of their experiences during conflict. For example:

"Men fled or were porters and had no time to earn family income, so women's workload increased. Women's mobility was limited due to threats from the military. Women felt unsafe and sometimes slept in the church."  
(Female participant in Chin state)

"One time, in our village, everyone was asked to come to the field and we were forced to eat grass like animals. The Tatmadaw said: 'You are all like cows.' Many men had to do portering for the army and forced labour for road construction, to build army camps and an army school. Women were raped by soldiers when the men were absent."  
(Female participant in southern Shan state)

Given the scale of loss of life and displacement over the decades, it is impossible to calculate definitive numbers. But in excess of one million civilians, mostly ethnic minorities and including men, women and children, are presently internally-displaced, refugees or have left the country to seek new lives abroad.<sup>50</sup> Such national displacement increases the burden on women in many parts of the country. When men are fighting, undergoing forced labour or have fled, women become the main breadwinners as well as caretakers of the family and sometimes leaders of the community. Health insecurities also increase, and there is a lack of access to clean drinking water, safe sanitation facilities, nutritious food, medicines and medical assistance, including for pregnant and lactating women. Sexual and gender-based violence also continues, and the psychological impact of the lack of safety and the shame and stigma faced by women who have been raped can be devastating. In consequence, many women and communities in the conflict-zones have long been deprived of the most basic

human rights under international conventions on the most serious scale. But, until now, there have been persistent disregard and shortcomings by subsequent governments in taking women's gender-specific concerns into consideration, whether in national governance, budget allocations or the practice of justice.

It is thus important to stress that, when TNI explored the experiences and views on women's participation in peace-building and democratisation during recent workshops, the participants' understandings of peace were much broader and more nuanced than simply the absence of conflict or violence. An end to fighting is a *sine qua non*. But the reflections by participants also included individual inner peace, mutual understanding, empathy, forgiveness, good relationships and harmony within communities and between different ethnic groups, cultures and religions; non-discrimination and acceptance of diversity, gender equality and equal rights for women and men; justice and the rule of law; and respect for human rights.

Equally striking, "real" security for communities in conflict means freedom from economic and food insecurity as well as from threats to health, the environment, personal safety, community cohesion and political stability. It does not mean simply "state security". In this respect, the dimension of physical and psychological safety from sexual and gender-based violence is especially crucial to the personal integrity, well-being and social identity of women. This aspect of security is often overlooked by male leaders during peace talks or processes in Myanmar, because it is not a similarly essential part of men's experience of conflict or because it is an "inconvenient truth". This means that sexual violence has been a difficult issue to gain official acknowledgement and resolution for.

Women's organisations from Myanmar, however, have continued to bring this issue to the attention of peace negotiators, the government and the international community whenever they can. Access to justice and an end to impunity for sexual violence have long been advocated for by the women's movement-in-exile. In contrast, women's organisations based inside the country

have faced more limitations on their ability to undertake advocacy on such issues publicly. However, since 2011, women's organisations and networks from inside and across Myanmar's borders have increased their collaboration and alliance-building, including the WLB, Women Organisations Network (WON), and the Gender Equality Network (GEN).

To promote cooperation and awareness, women's groups have jointly organised a series of workshops, discussion groups and conferences on both sides of Myanmar's borders and have created new cross-border women's rights advocacy networks during the past four years. They have also held a series of Myanmar Women's Forums, organised jointly by women's organisations based in the country as well as along its borders, attracting large numbers of participants and wide publicity. Of late, advocacy to end all forms of violence against women, including sexual violence in conflict, has become an important part of the joint agenda of this emerging women's movement, although differences of opinion remain about how explicitly this issue should be articulated in joint advocacy with the government.

A statement from the National Women's Dialogue for Peace, Security and Development, organised by the WLB, WON and GEN in Yangon in November 2013, expressed the challenge currently facing the country and its peoples:

"Peace is urgently needed in Myanmar, a multi ethnic country with ongoing civil war, conflict and political unrest. Women are the most affected by political unrest and armed conflict through sexual violence and other forms of violence, so their participation in conflict resolution processes and the building of a democratic future in Myanmar is crucial."<sup>51</sup>

In the coming years, bringing the perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict to justice will be an essential point on the agenda of the women's movement in Myanmar – as it is globally. But women activists are adamant that they do not want women to be seen only as "victims" of war but also as equal decision-making partners in

peace processes and democratic governance. This principle is shared by women's organisations which have formed the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) to campaign on this issue.<sup>52</sup>

The road ahead, however, is likely to be difficult, and women's organisations still face many challenges in addressing attitudes among many men and some women. This was highlighted in views expressed by representatives from women's organisations during the TNI workshops in Loikaw:

"When women's organisations give training in communities, some men speak very critically to women. Men cannot accept women's leadership yet. We have given lots of training to women, but men's attitudes also need to be changed."

"Some men have challenged us in official meetings and asked us 'if we are ready to get our rights'. We want men to recognise our voices."

"Even U Aung Min [the government's chief negotiator] said 'we are ready to give you as much participation as you want, not just 30%.' But they play volleyball with the implementation and don't commit to their promises."<sup>53</sup>

However, since the government of President Thein Sein assumed office in 2011, more space has begun to open up in the country for community-based and civil society organisations to be openly active and participate in building institutions for democratic governance. Although this space is not entirely free and is contested by groups with diverging agendas and values, it is undoubtedly broader than the tightly-controlled environment in national politics prior to 2011. In consequence, the country has witnessed a rapid spread during the past four years of civil society organisations, local NGOs and networks that previously were very circumscribed in activities that they could safely conduct.<sup>54</sup>

In this new space, women's organisations have been at the forefront in increasing their visibility and voice, growing in unity and strength through

the Women's Forums and other alliance-building activities. Most recently, the women's movement has been a visible actor in the lead-up to the November general election and during lobbying by civil society organisations over the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement process.

Such activities are set to continue in the coming years, with women claiming more space as agents of reconciliation, social change and political reform. But women's organisations are very aware that the influence and representation of women will continue to be marginalised unless women gain participatory access to positions of public or political decision-making where they are able to ensure that their needs and concerns are addressed by policymakers and political leaders. From alliance-building events and women's forums, the demand is growing ever stronger for the just and equitable inclusion of women. In essence, progress on the rights of women is now an integral benchmark for future democratisation and peace-building in the country.

## Contributions of Women Activists and Organisations to Peace in Myanmar

In recent decades, women's peace movements have made vital contributions to influence change in international thinking about peace and security, by highlighting human security concerns that can persist after armed conflict subsides, and by introducing gendered perspectives and analysis into all areas of conflict resolution and prevention. The various UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security and CEDAW General Recommendation 30 on Women in Conflict Situations are clear evidence of the success of lobbying by the global women's movement.

In Myanmar, a diversity of women's organisations has been promoting gender awareness and support for the protection and promotion of women's rights for many years. These include both border-based groups, such as the WLB and its member organisations,<sup>55</sup> and in-country civil society organisations, such as the Shalom (Nyein) Foundation, Metta Development Foundation, Kachin Women's Peace Network, Karen Women

Empowerment Group, Myanmar Council of Churches, GEN, Phan Tee Eain, and WON.<sup>56</sup>

A common aim among these organisations is to address the broader aspects of peace-building and reconciliation, starting from the community levels to the state, national and international levels. Their work includes a wide range of activities, including community awareness-raising, information-sharing, “listening” and human rights documentation projects, training programmes, and advocacy with local leaders. They also seek to build women’s leadership skills and capacity through long-term training programmes and internships, to provide support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking, and to build a women’s movement across ethnic, religious and national borders. Through these efforts, they have been able to promote women’s and human rights and social justice concerns; address gender-based violence in families, communities and, in some cases, perpetrated by members of the national armed forces; and protest against social and political injustice and facilitate peace dialogue within communities and with parties to conflict at various levels.

Some of these endeavours have been recognised internationally with human rights awards and media publicity. But other work has had to remain “under the radar” and little publicised for reasons of confidentiality and security in a country that has not been free, democratic or safe for all activities. Until today, for example, speaking out against religious hate-speech or restrictive marriage laws can be dangerous, with women receiving death threats from Buddhist ultra-nationalists. But as the Myanmar Times has reported, women activists “have refused to back down in their goals of equality and democracy.”<sup>57</sup>

At present, the national landscape is continuing to change in the country, a period of expectation and uncertainty highlighted by the November 2015 general election. In this transitional context, many women’s and human rights groups can be mentioned for their work to promote gender equality and/or peace. But, as evidence of the

diversity of challenges and experiences faced by all, two examples of successful women’s rights alliance building efforts can be picked out: the Women’s League of Burma and the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process.

The WLB was formed in 1999 by 12 women’s organisations-in-exile with the intention to unite across ethnic boundaries and work together for women’s rights, peace and democracy. The

WLB was formed after a series of meetings between border-based ethnic women’s organisations, such as the Karen Women Organisation, Shan Women’s Action Network, Kachin Women’s Association Thailand, and Burmese Women’s Union.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, the WLB was able to bring different nationality

groups together into one alliance despite initial fears from ethnic minority women groups that it could be overshadowed by representatives from the ethnic Burman (Bamar) majority. According to the “herstory” of the WLB:

“[Several] of the ethnic women were worried that any alliance would be dominated by Burmans. Equally important, most of the women had come without any agenda except to meet other women and learn more about their work, so the idea of forming an alliance seemed premature to them. Nevertheless, they were eager to meet again, and felt energized by hearing about all the other women’s groups’ activities.”<sup>59</sup>

In subsequent years, the WLB has managed to build a strong and enduring inter-ethnic alliance within a wider context long characterised by inter-ethnic conflict and distrust. Such a process of working together and across the divisions between Burman and non-Burman communities has been a significant accomplishment, and such alliances are key vehicles for building inclusive peace and democracy in Myanmar. As the WLB points out: “Two struggles, one for autonomy in the non-Burman ethnic areas and one for democracy, have been going on for decades, but they have not always been linked.”<sup>60</sup>

Another example of the role of women’s

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*Speaking out against religious hate-speech or restrictive marriage laws can be dangerous*

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organisations in conflict-related initiatives is the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. Established in 2014 by the Shalom Foundation, Gender Equality Network, Women's Organisations Network, Women's League of Burma and Gender Development Initiative, AGIPP is an alliance of women's and civil society networks, with the aim of policy advocacy for the inclusion of women's representatives and gender equality perspectives in peace and democratisation.<sup>61</sup> Other networks and organisations from different ethnic states have since joined the alliance, and AGIPP has established a secretariat in Yangon. Despite teething issues around inclusion and representation, the stage is now set for AGIPP and other emerging women's networks to become major advocates for a gender-equitable, peace-building process in Myanmar, a critical issue that has long needed to be addressed.

As the success of such initiatives highlight, in recent years some individual women leaders in Myanmar have also gained wide recognition for their work on promoting women's rights in peace-building and democratisation during the hoped-for transition from military rule. Most, but not all, are from the broader women's movement, but the impact of all their endeavours has been significant in fostering national change. Any list is necessarily selective. Thus the following are only some better-known personalities amongst those who have stood out in media headlines:

- Daw Aung San Suu Kyi MP: NLD chairperson and 1991 Nobel Peace prize laureate, she has gained global renown for her commitment to the democracy cause and many years of resilience under house arrest.
- Naw Zipporah Sein: first woman in the upper leadership of a non-state organisation, the Karen National Union, and chairperson of the Ethnic Armed Groups Senior Delegation during the 2015 NCA negotiations, she has promoted the participation of women in peace talks at all levels.
- May Sabe Phyu: peace and women's rights advocate and 2015 winner of the U.S. State Department International Women of Courage Award, she has played a leading

role in the evolution of the Kachin Peace Network, Kachin Women's Peace Network and Gender Equality Network.

- Dr Cynthia Maung: 2002 Ramon Magsaysay Award winner and founder of the Mae Tao clinic, since 1989 she has been providing health care for refugees and migrants on the Thai-Myanmar border and training backpack teams to respond to the health needs of people living in conflict areas.<sup>62</sup>
- Lahpai Seng Raw: 2013 Ramon Magsaysay Award winner and co-founder of the Metta Development Foundation and Airavati, she has pioneered community-level reconciliation, humanitarian, environmental and peace-building programmes across the country.<sup>63</sup>
- Naw Ohn Hla: a former and current political prisoner, she is co-founder of the Democracy and Peace Women Network, a 2014 N-Peace award winner that campaigns against gender-based violence and for ethnic nationality and other human rights.<sup>64</sup>
- Ma Thandar: an NLD candidate in the 2015 election, she is another co-founder of the Democracy and Peace Women Network and an advocate for political prisoners, justice and human rights.<sup>65</sup>
- Bawk Ja Lum Nyoi: is a political activist who led a campaign against land grabbing by the Yuzana company in Kachin state, and ran in the 2010 general election against a former regional commander; she lost after a large number of votes were controversially declared invalid. She was briefly jailed in 2013 for what many believed were politically motivated charges.<sup>66</sup>
- Nang Charm Tong: human rights activist and winner of the 2007 Student Peace prize, she is a co-founder of the Shan Women's Action Network and international advocate against impunity for sexual violence in conflict.<sup>67</sup>
- Dr Ma Thida: a former political prisoner, writer and winner of the PEN/Barbara

Goldsmith award, she has campaigned for freedom of expression and against censorship and religious hate speech.

- Saw Mra Raza Linn: executive member of the Arakan Liberation Party and chairperson of the Rakhine Women's Union, she is one of the few female negotiators in the country's peace process.<sup>68</sup>
- Ja Nan Lahtaw: 2015 N-Peace award winner, and Nang Raw Zahkung: director and assistant director of the Shalom (Nyein) Foundation, they have been working as advisors and bridge-builders between different parties during peace and ceasefire negotiations at both the national and local levels.<sup>69</sup>
- Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe: director of the Karen Women's Empowerment Group, she has led a campaign to end the decades-old civil war as well as a signature campaign to lobby the president to involve women in the peace process.<sup>70</sup>

As such a diversity of achievements demonstrate, the advocacy, human rights and peace-building activities by women's leaders and organisations are being carried out with great determination and courage, often at considerable personal risk and cost to themselves and their families. In the coming years, it is vital that such work, and the women undertaking it, gain official acknowledgement and representation in national-level peace processes underway, if inclusive and sustainable reform are to be achieved.

## Women's Representation within Formal Peace and Democratisation Processes

Although under-reported, women's organisations are contributing substantially to peace-building and reconciliation processes at informal and community levels in Myanmar. As such, they are participating in broader efforts towards nationwide peace. However formal recognition by the government and ethnic nationality leaders of the peace and democratisation work undertaken

by women has generally been lacking. While this may in part be due to the relatively hidden nature of their work under previous military regimes, there are other reasons that respect for, and acknowledgement of, the crucial role of women has been held back under the current government. These include a general lack of gender sensitivity in national politics and a limited understanding by (predominantly male) political and ethnic leaders of the need to include women's perspectives. As a representative from an ethnic armed organisation stated during a TNI workshop:

"The ceasefires are only related to the government and ethnic armed groups, not other groups. After signing the ceasefire, both sides will organise meetings to get ideas from the people. They will be invited according to the issues. Women's representatives will be invited for women's issues."<sup>71</sup>

In similar vein, government officials also continue to downplay or deny explicit critiques by women's organisations, particularly those that have been based on Myanmar's borders. Less restricted by censorship, these border-based groups have historically been more direct in their criticism of government policies than women's organisations based in areas under central government control. In contrast, civil society organisations in government-controlled areas have been more limited in their ability to engage in overt activism for women's rights or human rights more broadly. This was largely due to punitive restrictions on any social or political organising that could be perceived as anti-Tatmadaw or anti-government. The legacy of such repression still continues, and some women's groups can be wary of openly criticising the government. This, in turn, poses challenges to finding a common voice among women's organisations in emerging alliances and networks around the country.

Whether in central Myanmar or the ethnic borderlands, the collective result of such limited opportunity, patriarchal attitudes and lack of positive recognition for women's rights activism is that representatives of women's organisations have all too often been marginalised or excluded from ceasefire negotiations and public decision-

making bodies in high-level peace and reform processes. For example, just two women – the MPs Daw Doi Bu and Daw Mi Yin Chan – were appointed on the Thein Sein government’s 52-member Union Peace-making Work Committee. This was a detrimental situation that women activists strongly objected to, and in 2015 they publicly marked the International Day of Peace with the slogan “No Women, No Peace”. As the Myanmar Times reported: “Women’s rights activists have challenged the government’s exclusion of women from ceasefire negotiations with ethnic armed groups, saying that confining them to the kitchen – literally – was not helping the cause of peace.”<sup>72</sup> The issue of the marginalisation of women revived in the run-up to the November 2015 election and the January union peace conference, but no affirmative action appeared to be taken.<sup>73</sup>

A further limitation for women is the narrow definition of the “peace process” in Myanmar which, until now, has been usually taken to refer to the “Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement” pursued by the government of President Thein Sein. To date, this has been non-inclusive, not only in terms of organisations represented but also sectors of society and conflict regions of the country. Such omissions reflect an unhelpful, and often self-serving, interpretation of a “peace process” that overlooks certain groups and downplays community reconciliation and advocacy activities for inclusive peace-building undertaken by women’s and other civil society organisations on the ground.

In particular, the general exclusion of women as official stakeholders to peace negotiations such as the NCA constitutes a fundamental denial of women’s rights that urgently needs to be righted. For women’s organisations, this is a negative and highly frustrating situation. For although the work of women’s groups in implementing some of the commitments stipulated as state responsibilities in international women’s rights conventions has helped the government meet its obligations under

CEDAW and UN Security Council resolutions, their crucial role has neither received formal acknowledgement nor led to women’s organisations being included by the government or ethnic armed groups as decision-making partners in high-level planning and formal peace negotiations. In fact, both international law and agreements ratified by the Myanmar government emphasize the importance and rightfulness of women’s participation. As Phan Tee Eain and the Myanmar’s Women’s Forum reminded in 2014:

“To achieve sustainable peace, the meaningful participation of women in the peace process is necessary and essential... We respectfully request the inclusion of representatives from ethnic women’s civil society organisations in all aspects of peace processes undertaken by the government and ethnic organisations.”<sup>74</sup>

In effect, the voices of women’s organisations are being denied from making needed impact on both formal and high-level peace processes that, until today, remain afflicted by major difficulties and have a long way to run before achieving nationwide peace. Indeed the participation of women is now even more critical in the aftermath of the November general election that could determine the future of democratisation and parliamentary government into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At a time of such uncertain national transition, inclusion and input from all sectors of society are essential. But clearly, with armed conflict still continuing in several borderlands, the present NCA is a far from complete or inclusive process, and this is the destabilising legacy that a future NLD government is expected to inherit this year.

Meanwhile, although largely excluded from high-level positions, women’s organisations are continuing to show a strong commitment to influencing formal processes from the sidelines. Women’s participation is taking many forms. Women’s organisations are key actors in civil society’s engagement with official negotiations; they are

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*The general exclusion of women as official stakeholders to peace negotiations such as the NCA constitutes a fundamental denial of women’s rights that urgently needs to be righted*

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promoting a rightful representation of women in peace initiatives and political dialogue; and the capacity of women's organisations and collective bargaining is being boosted by leadership training programmes, internships and alliance-building activities. In particular, alliance-building is significant because it demonstrates the commitment and ability of women's organisations to transcend divisions of ethnicity, religion, political affiliation and past roles in conflict to work together for a shared agenda of national reform and gender equality. By such methods, peace and reconciliation are being put into practice.

In line with these strategies, women's organisations have been active on many fronts. Since 2013, for example, the Women's Forums, National Women's Dialogues and other joint events held by the

women's movement to strengthen advocacy and alliance-building have resulted in platforms calling for attention from the government, international community and development organisations to the need for women's equal participation in peace processes and decision-making. AGIPP, GEN and WLB have all been very active in the promotion of women's organisations' and gender perspectives in national initiatives. In recent years, such calls have been backed up by peaceful marches to stop violence against women in different cities on International Women's Day and during the global 16 Days Campaign to End Violence Against Women. In a country where peaceful protests have often – and still can be – met with repression by the authorities, such public activism takes daring and courage.

Since the late 1990s, women's organisations from Myanmar have also undertaken international advocacy on women's rights to participation in decision-making and peace-building and for protection from gender-based violence. Important lobbying has been with, among others, the CEDAW Committee, United Nations Human Rights Council, UN General Assembly, UN Special

Rapporteurs on Myanmar and with foreign ambassadors and other diplomats to Myanmar and the region.

Media and internet campaigning has also increased, with documentary films, research reports and other resources about women's leadership and experiences in conflict widely disseminated. One recent example of research combining organisational strengthening and the documentation of women's experiences in conflict is the multi-year participatory action research project undertaken by Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) with women's organisations in Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Myanmar. The materials published in this project poignantly document the stories of more than 140 women survivors, highlighting the similarities in experience and

unmet needs of women survivors of conflict-related violence in the three countries.<sup>75</sup>

Despite these achievements, many challenges continue to hamper the work by women's organisations towards equitable representation and gender justice in Myanmar. These impediments are widespread across the political, social and national landscape. Under-pinning these difficulties are a number of attitudinal, conceptual and institutional challenges in politics and society that need to be addressed.

First, patriarchal values and beliefs continue to persist among many decision-makers in the country, both male and (some) female, who deem women's leadership in the public domain culturally inappropriate and unnecessary. As the WLB recently wrote: "Women's participation in political processes

is curtailed by barriers to entry informed by a firmly rooted patriarchal mindset – for example, the ascription of authority to men, the rejection of women in leadership roles, and severe time constraints resulting from women's shouldering of 'reproductive labour'."<sup>76</sup> Such deeply held beliefs

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*Many challenges continue to hamper the work by women's organisations towards equitable representation and gender justice in Myanmar*

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## Perspectives by participants at TNI workshops 2015

"I don't know where to get involved in this peace process. There is still war in our area. I feel the peace agenda is like a playground for talking. It is not a real peace process." (Shan male participant)

"If we have peace, there will be more land grabbing in our area (Dawei), so it is a dilemma. Peace can bring a lot of problems to our area." (Female participant from Dawei)

"Both government and ethnic armed groups do not prioritise women's involvement in the peace process. Women's roles are limited by social practices and cultural beliefs." (Group discussion comments, Yangon)

"Men are still questioning and criticising us when we demand 30% quota for women's participation [in the Political Dialogue]. If UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW article 4 cannot be implemented in this country, women's involvement is still limited. (Female Kayan participant)

"When we (women's organisations) do advocacy, we try to do this with the ethnic armed groups and the government. They play us off against each other, saying that if the other group accepts women's participation, they will also accept it." (Female Kayan participant)

"A kind of system needs to be created after the conflict for both government and ethnic armed groups to invite women. And women must be ready to be involved." (Male participant, Loikaw)

"Issues are not being addressed at present, only promises are made. There is no guarantee that they will be implemented....The government side focuses a lot on disarmament and the ethnic armed groups are mostly concerned with their security, so they could not focus on political dialogue, political or economic issues. That means the peace agreement won't result in the end of fighting." (Female participant, Loikaw)

of gender inequality are reinforced in everyday practice in households, families and communities across the country, and it will be a long-term process of change to bring about gender equality.

A second significant barrier to change is the conceptualisation of peace and political reform negotiations as a ceasefire process only between the government, Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups. In essence, the conflict parties contend that peace negotiations are primarily about the cessation of armed conflict and women therefore do not have a role to play since they are not deemed to be combatants. Such views reflect a reductionist understanding of peace processes, not least because some women do bear arms. But as a participant in a TNI workshop stated: "Leaders think that only armed groups members

should get involved in peace process. Without taking arms, women can participate with pens." This perspective was also highlighted in an analysis of four peace negotiations (Chin, Karen, Mon and Shan) by Salai Isaac Khen and Muk Yin Haung Nyo who concluded that "the gender issue is completely neglected in the ceasefire agreements and the participation of women in the negotiations is still very low."<sup>77</sup>

It is therefore essential that this narrow view of peace-making is challenged in the coming months. Not only does such marginalisation ignore women's crucial role in defining and constructing peace and achieving transitional justice, but it also prevents women's participation and the consideration of gender issues in political dialogue, whether under the present NCA or

subsequent accords, thereby contravening the Myanmar's government obligations under international law. UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security clearly call for women's representation at all decision-making levels and for adopting a gender perspective when negotiating and adopting peace agreements. These are not simply rhetorical words. International experience has long shown that failure to incorporate women's gendered needs and priorities and, for example, failure to hold those culpable of sexual violence in conflict accountable will greatly undermine the potential for sustainable peace.

A third significant obstacle is the apparent lack of understanding among male leaders around the country of their responsibilities to implement international provisions for women's equal rights, at both the national and community levels, in conflict resolution, peace-building and political decision-making. For their part, women's organisations are actively disseminating information about CEDAW, UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, and other international provisions to raise awareness about the government's obligations on women's rights with community and national leaders. Generally, however, they report this as an "uphill battle" in which they encounter plenty of resistance, and even disinterest, alongside limited gains.

Finally, as in a number of other countries around the world, the absence of enforcement mechanisms and implementation guidelines for the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security make it difficult to hold the Myanmar government accountable to its international obligations to enable women's participation in decision-making about peace-building and democratic governance. Despite more than a decade of advocacy by women's organisations and the international community, the Myanmar government's stated commitments have had limited realisation so far.

The question, then, is whether the next government in Myanmar, in the light of the 2015 general election, will finally wake up to such

essential duties and needs. From the continuing peace talks in the ethnic borderlands to the victory of the NLD and pro-democracy parties in the polls, Myanmar once again appears to be on the brink of historic change. The best opportunity in many decades for nationwide peace could be approaching. But for real peace and national reform to be delivered, it is vital that women's organisations and all nationality peoples and sectors of society are this time included. Women in Myanmar have long been working towards this opportunity and moment.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

As in any other country in the world, gender inequality shapes many aspects of Myanmar's social, cultural, economic and political landscape. In Myanmar's case, such disparity also needs to be understood in the context of decades of insecurity and conflict that have been endemic for decades in many ethnic nationality regions of the country. Not only are women often principal sufferers as refugees or displaced persons, sole carers for families and victims of political or sexual violence in conflict, but they are also significantly under-represented in many sectors of leadership in national life, including government, electoral parties and ethnic nationality organisations, whether armed or civilian-based.

Such marginalisation has two very detrimental consequences that are holding back national reform at a key moment in Myanmar's history. First, women's experiences and concerns are frequently overlooked in socio-political discussions at both the national and community levels. And second, the participation of women's organisations and women activists is being denied in formal or high-level decision-making processes about ethnic peace and political reform where women's participation is essential if sustainable peace is to be achieved.

In recent years, despite often facing repression and discrimination, women's organisations and women activists have accelerated their activities in promoting the rights of women, raising awareness and seeking to ensure that women's

representatives achieve rightful participation in national reform, peace processes and decisions about Myanmar's future. However the country is still at the beginning of ethnic peace-building and political reform, not at an end, and there is a very long way to go in ensuring that the rights and perspectives of all women are respected and included. The unmet humanitarian, social and political needs of women in many parts of the country are significant, and there have been too many disappointments in the past for naïve expectations now. Armed conflict continues in several borderlands, land-grabbing and natural resource exploitation is undermining stability in many communities, and the legacies of militarisation and repression remain to be addressed. Huge challenges still lie ahead.

Despite this troubling backdrop, there are reasons to be hopeful and to redouble efforts for meaningful change in Myanmar now – and not at some distant time in the future. Indeed the very seriousness of the situation only highlights the necessity of action.

First, due to long years of advocacy from the global women's movement, many international mechanisms and conventions are now in place providing an imperative for governments to guarantee women's rights to equitable participation in decision-making on national issues of peace and governance. Such international instruments provide the basis for a rights-based approach to democratisation and peace-building, which is exactly the kind of principled framework that has long been needed in Myanmar to move national processes of peace and reform forward. Although ratified by the Myanmar government, the challenge now is to ensure that they are truly implemented and guaranteed.

A second reason for optimism is the changing landscape in Myanmar itself. For the moment, the national political stage remains highly uncertain. But the victory of the NLD in the 2015 general election, steps towards a nationwide ceasefire and the liberalisation in the political environment during the past four years all provide a platform for long-needed reforms towards peace and

democracy, and allow for more equitable participation of women. In Myanmar's conflict landscape, such a coalition of factors has rarely occurred since independence in 1948, and it is a potential moment for inclusive reform that might not quickly come again.

The third reason for attention and positive action are the demands by women themselves, who are primary sufferers from the conflicts in the country. Despite the many obstacles they face, women's organisations and women activists in Myanmar are determined that they should play their full role in building peace, security and democratic transition and ensure that they are not marginalised once again. As experiences in recent decades have highlighted, there are many women in the country's diverse women's movement with the capacity and determination to participate in decision-making positions in national

processes of peace-making and political reform, and they have demonstrated such intention through both domestic and international lobbying in difficult and often risky circumstances. That women remain largely excluded from formal peace processes at present is not because they lack capacity, but because of patriarchal values and beliefs by those in power who do not consider including women is necessary or appropriate.

Such regressive attitudes now have to change. Formal and official acknowledgement has long been due to the role of women and contributions women organisations are making to processes of social change, peace-building and national reconciliation in Myanmar. As experiences in other countries in conflict highlight, women are agents of change and their capacity and contributions need to be acknowledged and enhanced if sustainable peace and democracy are to come to Myanmar.

It is therefore vital in the country's present political transition that representatives of women's rights organisations are included at all decision-making levels of peace processes and that a broader understanding of the interconnections between gender inequality,

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conflict and peace is developed and acted upon. To achieve this, government, political and ethnic leaders have to shoulder the implications of making peace equitable, just and sustainable. In particular, they need to incorporate the following principles and steps:

- Promote gender equality and justice by honouring and implementing their stated commitments to international conventions and agreements on women's rights, peace and security.
- Address the root causes of conflict, including persisting inequalities and patriarchal beliefs or values and enable the meaningful participation of women as decision-makers, including women from conflict-affected areas and those representing women's rights organisations, in all aspects of negotiating and building peace.
- Guarantee transitional justice mechanisms to hold the perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict to account and ensure an end to impunity for sexual violence as an essential step towards reconciliation and sustainable peace.
- Support amendments to the 2008 constitution in order to make transitional justice mechanisms possible, just and meaningful.
- Ensure the protection and security of peacemakers and women's rights defenders so that they are able to express their opinions and continue their work freely.
- Create participatory, democratic decision-making structures at all levels of peace-building and reform to ensure inclusive representation of all peoples, genders and sectors of society in every part of the country.
- Ensure that the government is open and accountable to all citizens, and fosters civil society as an integral partner in building peace and democracy.

In short, it is time to move on from talking about reform in promotion of women's rights in Myanmar to taking steps that truly implement such essential rights and laws.

The international community can support this by strengthening its lobby and diplomatic pressure on the Myanmar government to put into practice its obligations under CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 and other resolutions on women, peace and security and make any aid to government-related programmes conditional on reaching targets of women's inclusion in democratisation, conflict resolution and peace-building. At the same time, the international community should enhance support to women's and civil society organisations in their promotion of democratic governance, protection of women's rights, assistance to survivors of violence in conflict, and full-inclusion in peace-building initiatives in the country.

The National League for Democracy won the November 2015 general election with a significant national mandate under the campaign slogan "time for change". The peoples of Myanmar are now hoping that such a unifying national aspiration is put into practice.



## Endnotes

1. In 1989 the then military government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar. They are alternative forms in the Burmese language, but their use has become a politicised issue. Myanmar is mostly used within the country and in international diplomacy, but it is not always used in the English language abroad. For consistency, Myanmar will be used in this report.
2. For recent analyses by the Transnational Institute (TNI) on some of these issues, see e.g., TNI, "Military Confrontation or Political Dialogue: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy in Myanmar", TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing Nr 15, July 2015; TNI, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?", TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing Nr 17, December 2015.
3. See e.g., for example: Elizabeth Porter & Anuradha Mundkur, *Peace and Security: Implications for Women* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2012); UN Women National Committee Australia, "Women, Peace and Security", 2013; Cate Buchanan (ed.), "Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific: Women's participation, perspectives and priorities" (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2011).
4. For examples, see e.g., Buchanan (ed.), "Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific"; Maneshka Eliatamby & Sandra Cheldelin (eds.), *Women Waging War and Peace: International Perspectives of Women's Roles in Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2011).
5. See e.g., Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (East-West Center Washington: ISEAS, Singapore, 2007), pp.20-25; TNI, "Neither War nor Peace, the Future of the Ceasefire Agreements in Burma", July 2009; and TNI, "Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace", Burma Policy Briefing Nr 8, February 2012.
6. "Suu Kyi: Incoming Government to Prioritize Peace in Myanmar", AP, 4 January 2016.
7. See e.g., "Protests in Rangoon After Letpadaung Shooting", The Irrawaddy, 26 December 2014; Amnesty International, "Open for Business?: Corporate Crime and Abuses at Myanmar Copper Mine", February 2015; Fortify Rights & Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic, "Crackdown at Letpadan: Excessive Use of Force and Violations of the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Expression in Letpadan, Bago Region, Myanmar", October 2015.
8. See e.g., International Crisis Group (ICG), "The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar", Asia Report No. 251, 1 October 2013; ICG, "Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State", Asia Report No. 261, 22 October 2014.
9. See e.g., UN OCHA, "Myanmar: Snapshot of Humanitarian Issues (as of 11 Dec 2015)", 11 December 2015; The Border Consortium (TBC), "Protection and Security Concerns in South East Burma", November 2014. UNOCHA counted 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Kachin and northern Shan states and 140,000 (mostly Muslims) in the Rakhine state, while TBC has calculated 400,000 IDPs – mostly Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan – in the southeast of the country. There are also around 110,000 refugees in camps in Thailand, while over 70,000 civilians were displaced as IDPs or refugees fleeing conflict in the Kokang region along the China border during February-March 2015.
10. Elaborated from Porter & Mundkur, *Peace and Security*, pp.150-51.
11. Peace processes are complex and multifaceted, encompassing both formal and informal peace-making (negotiations and agreements), peace-keeping (by internal or external security forces), and peace-building (activities to build trust, restore dignity and develop peace) processes. These are sometimes referred to as 'track 1' (high-level), 'track 2' (CSO level) and 'track 3' (community level) peace processes; source: UN Women National Committee Australia, "Women, Peace and Security: An Introductory Manual" (Canberra: 2014) pp.6-7. To be effective, these processes need to take place at different levels of decision-making. These include the informal community level (activities responding to the direct impact of violence on local peoples), the civil society level (involving critical engagement with and advocacy on government policy), and the formal, high-level ceasefire negotiations and peace agreements between conflict actors, states and nations. Peace-building activities include relief, rehabilitation, transitional justice, post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, all of which shape the future social and political landscape of a country.
12. Porter & Mundkur, *Peace and Security*, p.117: source: Tsjeard Bouta, Georg Frerks & Ian Bannon, *Gender, Conflict and Development* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2005).
13. Author's elaboration of a statement presented by Jenny Hedström at ACFID Universities Conference 2015.
14. Porter & Mundkur, *Peace and Security*, p.89.
15. There are about 90 civilian deaths to every ten military casualties in contemporary violent conflicts; cf., Charles Kegley & Shannon Blanton, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (Boston MA: Wadsworth, 12<sup>th</sup> edition, 2010), p.509.
16. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2011), p.6.
17. See e.g., Sarah Shteir, "Gendered Crises, Gendered Responses: The necessity and utility of a gender perspective in armed conflicts and natural disasters: an introductory overview" (Canberra: Australian Government/Australian Civil-Military Centre, 2013), pp.10-23.
18. Porter & Mundkur, *Peace and Security*, p.33.
19. See e.g., Ibid; UN Women National Committee Australia, "Women, Peace and Security".
20. Buchanan (ed.), "Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific".
21. Cate Buchanan et al, "From clause to effect: including women's rights and gender in peace agreements", (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2012), p.82.
22. Mindanao 1996, Chittagong Hill Tracts [Bangladesh] 1997, East Timor 1999, Bougainville 2001, Aceh 2005, and Nepal 2006.
23. Jenny Hedström, 2015, "Peace for whom? The institutionalisation of gender inequality in Myanmar's reform process", Svenska Burma Komitten/Swedish Burma Committee, p.3.
24. Patriarchy refers to the institution or practice of male rule and privilege, which presupposes women's subordination.
25. Porter & Mundkur, *Peace and Security*, p.48.
26. For case studies and examples, see e.g., UN Women National Committee Australia, "Women, Peace and Security"; Eliatamby & Cheldelin (eds.), *Women Waging War and Peace*; Porter & Mundkur, *Peace and Security*.
27. See e.g., Paul Minoletti, *Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar* (MDRI-CESD & The Asia Foundation, June 2014).
28. In May-June 2015, TNI held workshops with women's organisations and other civil society organisations in the Chin, Shan and Kayah (Karenni) states on gender issues in the current peace and democratisation processes. The discussions in these workshops form part of the basis for this paper.
29. Charlotte England, "Female candidates face fierce, unfair fight in Myanmar's elections", The Guardian, 5 November 2015.

30. See e.g., Brenda Belak, "Gathering Strength: Women from Burma on their Rights" (Chiang Mai: Images Asia, 2002); Manon van Zuijlen, "Assessing Gender Equality in Myanmar: Gender assessment undertaken for DfID Southeast Asia" (Bangkok: DfID, 2002); Annami Löfving, "If Given the Chance: Women's participation in public life in Myanmar" (Yangon: ActionAid/CARE/Oxfam, 2011); Jessica Harriden, *The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012); Gender Equality Network (GEN), "Taking the Lead: An assessment of women's leadership training needs and training initiatives in Myanmar" (Yangon: GEN, 2013); Gender Equality Network & Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, "Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar" (Yangon: GEN/MSW, 2015).
31. England, "Female candidates face fierce, unfair fight".
32. Belak, "Gathering Strength", p.33.
33. Löfving, "If Given the Chance", p.vii. The study was carried out in the Rakhine, Kachin, Kayah and Shan states and Magway, Mandalay and Ayeyarwaddy regions.
34. Minoletti, *Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance*, pp.8-10.
35. GEN, "Gender Equality in Public Life & Elected Office" (Yangon: GEN, 2012), p.2.
36. Fiona Macgregor, "Unleashing women's power, potential", Myanmar Times, 6 November 2015.
37. Ei Cherry Aung, "Despite record numbers, Myanmar's women candidates face hurdles", Myanmar Now, 1 October 2015; Nyein Nyein, "Women seeking wins along ethnic lines", The Irrawaddy, 5 November 2015.
38. Fiona Macgregor, "Woman MPs up, but hluttaw still 90% male", Myanmar Times, 1 December 2015.
39. Ibid.
40. "Head of Gender Election Observation Mission meets with Chairman of UEC", Mizzima News, 8 November 2015.
41. Jessica Mudditt, "Susanna Hla Hla Soe on women's rights", Myanmar Times, 10 June 2013.
42. Loikaw workshop, TNI, June 2015.
43. See e.g., Yen Snaing, "Calls for More Female Voices in Burma's Peace Process", The Irrawaddy, 18 December 2015; "Decisions and minutes made during NCA", S.H.A.N., 11 January 2016.
44. TNI correspondence, 28 November 2015.
45. For example: Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), "Walking among Sharp Knives: The unsung courage of Karen women village chiefs in conflict areas of Eastern Burma" (Mae Sariang: KWO, 2010); Palaung Women's Organisation, "The Burden of War: Women bear the burden of displacement" (Mae Sot: PWO, 2012); Shan Women's Action Network & Shan Human Rights Foundation, "License to Rape: The Burma military regime's use of sexual violence in the ongoing war in Shan State" (Chiang Mai: SWAN and SHRF, 2002); Women's Organisations of Burma, "The current state of women in conflict areas: a shadow report to the 22<sup>nd</sup> session of CEDAW", 2000; WLB, "Same Impunity, Same Patterns", January 2014; WLB, "In the Shadow of the Junta: CEDAW shadow report", 2008.
46. Shan Women's Action Network & Shan Human Rights Foundation, "License to Rape".
47. See e.g., KWO, "Shattering Silences: Karen Women speak out about the Burmese Military Regime's use of Rape as a Strategy of War in Karen State", April 2004; WLB, "If they had hope, they would speak: The ongoing use of state-sponsored sexual violence in Burma's ethnic communities" (Chiang Mai: WLB, November 2014).
48. WLB, "If they had hope, they would speak". p.4.
49. Legal Aid Network & Kachin Women's Association Thailand, "Justice Delayed, Justice Denied", November 2015; see also, Fiona Macgregor, "Vow to 'avoid' rape highlights impunity", Myanmar Times, 30 October 2015.
50. See n.9.
51. Excerpt from: "The National Women's Dialogue for Peace, Security and Development in Myanmar, November 9-11, 2013".
52. Shalom (Nyein) Foundation, GEN, WON, WLB and Gender Development Initiative.
53. Quotes from Loikaw workshop, TNI, June 2015.
54. See e.g., Tom Kramer, "Civil Society Gaining Ground: Opportunities for Change and Development in Burma", TNI, November 2011.
55. The founding members of WLB were: All Burma Democratic Lushai Women's Organization, Burmese Women's Union, Chin Women's Organization, Kachin Women's Association Thailand, Karen Women's Organization, Lahu Women's Organization, Pao Women's Union, Rakhine Women's Union, Shan Women's Action Network, Tavoy Women's Union, and Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma.
56. For some websites, see e.g., <http://nyeinfoundationmyanmar.org>; <http://womenofburma.org>; <https://www.facebook.com/genmyanmar/>; <https://www.facebook.com/PTE.PhanTeeEain>
57. Fiona Macgregor, "Unleashing women's power, potential", Myanmar Times, 6 November 2015.
58. WLB, "The Founding and Development of the Women's League of Burma: A Herstory" (Chiang Mai: WLB, 2011). See also n.55. The BWU was formed by mainly ethnic Burman (Bamar) women activists from central Myanmar who fled to the Thai border following the crackdown by the then military government on the 1988 democracy movement. The "Herstory" seeks to put the founding of the WLB and struggle of women in Myanmar in context. According to the WLB's website: "To understand why it was such an accomplishment to form the Women's League of Burma, it is necessary to look at the political context in Burma over the last sixty plus years. This book takes us through the numerous, often horrific, ups and downs in Burma's history, to reveal the long journey by women activists that began even before the creation of WLB."
59. Ibid, p.21.
60. Ibid, p.3.
61. Seven organisations are on AGIPP's steering committee: Gender and Development Initiative, GEN, Kachin State Women Network, Mon Women's Network, Shalom (Nyein) Foundation, Women and Peace Action Network (Shan State), WLB, and WON/WIN-Peace.
62. <http://maetaoclinic.org>
63. <http://www.metta-myanmar.org>; <http://airavati.net>; for an interview, see e.g., Lahpai Seng Raw, "Too Many Lives Have Been Lost: Humanitarian Seng Raw on Kachin War", The Irrawaddy, 10 June 2015.
64. Nyein Nyein, "Burmese Women Honored for Activism", The Irrawaddy, 24 October 2014; Nyein Nyein, "Prominent Jailed Activist on Hunger Strike Over Presidential Protection Bill", The Irrawaddy, 6 January 2016.
65. For an interview, see, Kyaw Hsu Mon, "Farmers Need to Know Their Rights", The Irrawaddy, 3 June 2015.
66. Kachin News, "Kachin land rights activist turned politician Bawka Ja freed", 24 January 2014.

67. <http://www.shanwomen.org>
68. For an interview, see, Nang Seng Nom, "Saw Mra Razar Lin: A Woman Warrior-Turned-Peacemaker", *The Irrawaddy*, 7 July 2015.
69. <http://nyeinfoundationmyanmar.org>; Nyein Nyein & Feliz Solomon, "For One Kachin Woman, Peace-Brokering is in the Blood", *The Irrawaddy*, 29 September 2015.
70. See e.g., Jessica Mudditt, "Susanna Hla Hla Soe on women's rights", *Myanmar Times*, 10 June 2013.
71. Loikaw workshop, TNI June 2015.
72. See e.g., Cherry Thein, "Anger as women kept 'in the kitchen' during peace process", *Myanmar Times*, 23 September 2015.
73. See Snaing, "Calls for More Female Voices".
74. Phan Tee Eain and Myanmar Women's Forum organisers, "Voice of Women", Phan Tee Eain, Yangon, 2014, pp.15, 17.
75. AJAR, "Surviving on their own: Women's experiences of war, peace and impunity", AJAR, Jakarta, 2014; AJAR, "Opening the box: Women's experiences of war, peace and impunity in Myanmar", AJAR, Jakarta, 2015; and, AJAR, "Don't be afraid, we will be with you", AJAR, 2015: video documentary on women conflict survivors from Myanmar. Other relevant reports have been referenced throughout this paper. The Shalom (Nyein) Foundation and UNDP are in the process of bringing out publications and video documentaries on the contributions of particular women leaders (both well- and lesser known) to peace and reconciliation processes.
76. WLB, "If they had hope, they would speak; the ongoing use of state-sponsored sexual violence in Burma's ethnic communities" (Chiang Mai: WLB, 2014), p.13.
77. Salai Isaac Khen & Muk Yin Haung Nyoi, "Catalyzing Reflection: Looking at the Current Peace Process in Myanmar through a Gender Lens" (Yangon: swisspeace, 2014), p.41.

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