

Analysis on the Status of Women Participations In Myanmar's Political Process

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Abstract

In Myanmar as in many other countries, women participate in local and national political Process and governance as voters, candidates for elections, elected officials, holders of public office (elected or appointed), and as active citizens. Women's full and equal Participation with men in governance at all levels has intrinsic normative value that demonstrates the individual and collective exercise of democratic rights and freedoms of half the human population and a greater democratization of power relations .However, women's equal participation with men in political processes and governance is also efficiency-oriented. It brings women's unique perspectives, experiences, knowledge Networks, skills, and abilities to bear on public decision making and spending relative to Women's and girls' priorities. These are often different from men's and boys' priorities Because of the unequal position, status, and relationship between men, women, boys, and girls at all levels, and in all spheres of most societies. Gender also interacts with economic status, race, ethnicity, geographical location, and other factors calling for the priorities of different groups of women and girls (as also men and boys) to be well reflected in public policy and its execution. Conditioned by their socially mediated roles as nurturers and caregivers, women, as research shows, are more likely than men decision makers to address such issues as food security, education, health, water, and sanitation. However, it requires a critical mass of women in politics and the management of public affairs who strategically influence the policy agenda in ways that matter to different groups of women (and men). Not only being citizens of Myanmar, but also being made up half of the country's population, women shouldn't be ignored and excluded from the political process of Myanmar. This paper tried to answer these three questions (1) what are the main obstacles for women to participate in Myanmar politics? (2) why are women's participation not satisfactory in Myanmar political process and (3) how to encourage women to participate more in Myanmar political process in the future. This paper analyzed all these obstacles and challenges based on quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Key word Gender, Unequal positions, Public Policy, Obstacles , Equal participation

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Historically women enjoy equal constitutional rights to participate all areas of life in the Myanmar society. Myanmar women have obtained the right to vote many years before the Western women were granted their political rights. Myanmar Women have played a critical role during the anti-colonial and independent movement. Women have actively and visibly participated in domestic life, education, business sector, and civil-society organizations. In many aspects, Myanmar women have enjoyed equal treatment and high status in the society compared to other Asian cultures throughout history.

People have equal chances regardless of gender, ethnic groups, sexuality, religions and disability or social status. Gender inequality is a form of structural violence. Gender is different cultural expectation and values that women and men follow. The exclusion at talks of representatives of more than half of Myanmar's population is particularly egregious given that women have suffered disproportionately in the wars that have raged in the country's borderlands for more than half a century. Rape and sexual violence, especially of ethnic women and girls, are faced with and human rights groups have accused the Myanmar army of committing abuses with impunity in conflict zones. The nationwide peace process, underway since 2011, has been wholly male-dominated with women barely visible, despite rhetoric of inclusiveness.

Women in politics

Women who suffer the consequences of war, They are also the groups who wrack their brains to achieve peace. That's why women's strengths, views and approval should be sought," The lack of women at the negotiating table is symptomatic of entrenched patriarchal attitudes in Myanmar. but the key issue for women's rights activists is how many women will be invited to attend. Myanmar women worry that if women are poorly represented in the conference, it could set a standard and make it harder for women to participate in the future. Women are asking to get a minimum 30 percent quota of women to be included in the political dialogue, the next step of the peace process. It also says the 30 percent quota should be seen as a starting point, rather than a ceiling. Questions about Women will try to include as many women as possible. If there are women who are really competent, of course they will include them, Women's participation in the public sphere in Myanmar is still limited, and female Politicians Intimidation and harassment, ranging from husbands and family members who feel women do not belong in politics to smears and personal attacks by other politicians or the media.

Women's role in Myanmar politics is often invisible, informal, and unrecognized. Currently, women are extremely under-represented in Myanmar political system, the peace

negotiation processes, and in public decision making professions and positions. Peace and gender Equality. Over half of the populations in Myanmar are women. Cultural and traditional gender stereo types and biases against women's participation and relevancy in public sphere Male predominance in the public sphere which resulted in lack of political will to include women in politics. Girls and women have limited opportunities to build and refine their capacity for professional public service positions.

Women's representation in public and political life remains low. Women were absent from national and subnational governance systems and from decision-making and leadership within many ethnic communities. The Number of Female representatives in the national parliament more than doubled from 6 % to 13.7% of all elected Members of Parliament. This percentage of female drops to 10.5% of all Members of Parliament, including military, as the military appoints only two female Members of Parliament to the Lower House. Women Members of Parliament comprise about 12.5% but military appointed only two female Members of Parliament in the states and regions bringing that percentage down to 9.7% when all Members of Parliament are considered.¹ The male dominate political setting which places constraints on acknowledging women's leadership. But the changing political context is an open door to expand the participation of women in peace process.

Looking at the New Member of Parliament, women are much more educated than their counterparts, with 93.9% holding at least a bachelor's degree. Women are well represented or even surpass their male counterparts. The most significant barriers of women participation in Political process is their own lack of confidence. Most crucial part is that because of the cultural and social practices that undermine gender equality, making women difficult to support other women. In 2014 survey, women felt that men made better political leaders than women.

General Secretary of Women's league of Myanmar, Lawy Poe Ngeal, argues; "it is not just about number. Meaningful participation of women in the peace process is about the quality of participation. If we focus only on 30% women's participation, it is about women's leadership. We need women in the peace process who can take decision in the negotiation table. Some men uses feeble excuse that women are not to be at the table. What qualification they want, a degree – we have them; an ability to talk .To encourage

¹ Daw Shwe Shwe Sein Latt, *Current Women's political affairs in Myanmar Parliament* [Yangon: Mspiral Creative Agency, 14 August 2018].

more women participation, we need to have patience because it is a step by step process to have more active women in political process, peace process, social process, security process and many other things”.²

The Role of Women in Political Process

In Nov 2012, MPC was established by Presidential Decree to serve as secretariat to the UPCC and UPWC. The MPC had not the satisfactions of women position; only 12 out of 50 staff members are women. In 2015, eight EAOs signed the Nationwide Ceasefire agreement. They are AVSDF, ALP, CNF, DKBA, KNU / KNLA PNLA, RCSS. The Lahu Democratic Union and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) joined the ceasefire and signed the agreement on 13 February 2018. Among the 14 EAOs that had ceasefire agreements with the government, only KNU, NMSP, and KNPP had women in their negotiation teams. Women participated as technical experts and advisors to EAOs.³ However, women’s role as observers is limited to listening, observing and providing feedback after meetings.

Women Participation in Peace Process

The first UPC was marked as the peace process led by military leaders and marked by closed door negotiations, unwritten agreements and the absence of women and their priorities. The first union Peace Conference (UPC) in January 2016 saw an extremely low women’s inclusion rate. Women constituted 54 out of 700 delegates, making up a total of 7.7% of all delegates. The outcome of this five day of conference was a decision to implement a gender quota for future talks, requirement of 30% inclusion of women at different levels of political dialogue but without an implementation strategy.⁴

In the political sector discussions of UPDJC, only basic political principles for a federal union were discussed with special emphasis on the principles of equality, self-administrations and structure an power sharing. The issues of democratic rights, basic human rights and gender equality were not discussed. In the discussions on the social sector, it was found that the delegates who are actively discussed women’s affairs were women⁵. In the discussions on the economic sector not only gender perspective wasn’t

² *Women’s participation in peace process: the central role of Women’s Leadership* [Yangon: Joint Peace Fund, March 2018].

³ *The NCA between GoM and EAOs: Basic Principles* [KNU-DOI and Research Institute for Society and Ecology (RISE), 31 January 2016], 9.

⁴ *WPS policy making in Myanmar: Context Analysis and Recommendations* [Yangon: AGIPP, Edition 1, 2016, December].

⁵ *Analysis of Myanmar’s second Union Peace Conference: 21st century Panglong from a gender perspective* [Yangon: AGIPP, June 2017].

included in the proposal, but also absent from discussions. Apart from keeping one single army, women's affairs and gender equality issues were not included and ignored in the discussions on the security sector.

Only women's participations in the NCCT: 6.25%. The NCCT has 16 members. Among the Senior Delegation 15 members, only 2 of them are female members. No women members were included in the UPCC, JICM and JMC-U. Out of 52 members in the UPWC, 2 are women making 3.8% of it. Only 6.2%, that is 3 out of 48 members of the UPDJC are women.³ Women's Rights are briefly mentioned in some provisions of the NCA, in the NCA Basic Principles. The NCA does not include mechanism that would guarantee and secure access to justice and accountability for survivors of GBV.

AGIPP has pointed out and identified seven main points of concerns in the NCA that reflects gender inclusion. Seven points of concerns are as follows:

1. Lack of reference to international standard
2. Implementation mechanism excluded women
3. Inadequate definition of violence and forms of insecurity
4. Weak justice and accountability mechanisms
5. Limited role for civilian participation
6. Lack of reference to female combatants and those supporting fighting forces
7. Lack of gender perspectives include in references to initiatives on health, education and livelihoods⁶

Regarding the NCA's lack of reference to international norms and standards on WPS, International treaties such as refugees and criminal laws guarantee women the right to protection from violence in all situation of armed conflict. The NCA lacks references to any obligating international standards as well as the various UN Security Council Resolution that comprise a core part of WPS framework.⁷ However, the NCA includes a vague clause stating that "a reasonable number of women representatives" will take part in the political dialogue process. The NCA doesn't define what constitutes a reasonable number of women, or clear gender quota.

Obstacles and Barriers of Women Political Participation in Political Process

Although Myanmar's democratic transition has become synonymous with the country's leading, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar Society still has many obstacles to overcome before gender equality is achieved. This is especially true in ethnic territories

⁶. "If the Half population mattered," 2018, 6-7.

⁷ "If the Half population mattered," 2018, 7.

where women face barriers unique to their customs and cultural setting.⁸ Women are still largely excluded from the ongoing peace process in Myanmar although a growing women's rights movement aims to tackle the persistent sexism that blocks women full participation.⁹

Gender stereotypes based on cultural and religious norms about women's roles within society continue to pose major barriers to women's political participation. Culture views that a woman's value is the ability to have children and that a woman's place is in the home. In Myanmar, women and girls are socially obliged and expected to be in charge of the household, women's value is the ability to have children and that a women's place is in the home. In Myanmar, women and girls are socially obliged and expected to be in charge of the household, children, elderly relatives, and take on their caring responsibilities. These duties impose time constraints on women's ability to participate in political activities outside the household.¹⁰ Religious teachings that portray men as spiritually superior to women also fuel these gender stereotypes. Some women believe these teachings and are consequently hesitated about being in leadership position even when they are assigned to such a position.¹¹

Men, especially in power, think that they know what women need and want, and what they should do for women. Thus, they habitually set programs and policies without consulting women. This happens in families and national politics. For example, the Myanmar National Committee for Women Affairs, which was formed by generals and led by their wives, was under the command and control of top generals.¹² The CEDAW Committee has noted that unequal access to education deprives women of the necessary skills to participate effectively in government. Low level of education also deters women from

⁸ Lae Phyu Pya Myo Myint, *Ethnic women leaders break silence on gender discrimination*, rev.ed., [Yangon: Myanmar Time, 20 August, 2018], under "Setting," <https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/25679-ethnic-women-leaders-break-silence-on-gender-discrimination.html>. [accessed on 3 August, 2018] (Henceforth, Lae Phyu Pya Myo Myint, *Ethnic Women Leaders break silence on Gender Discrimination*, rev.ed, 2018)

⁹ Odharnait Ansbro, *Women of Peace: Women Fight to Make Their Voice Heard in Myanmar's Peace Process*, rev.ed [Mandalay: Odharnait Ansbro, August 8, 2017], under "Setting,"

¹⁰ Women Organization Network, *CEDAW Shadow Report: Barriers to Women's Political participation* (WON, June 2016), 7. (Henceforth, *CEDAW Shadow Report*, 2016)

¹¹ Ja Nan Lahtaw & Nang Raw, *Myanmar's Current Peace Processes: anew role for women? :Role of Women in Myanmar's society and peace processes* [Yangon: Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, December 2012], 8. (Henceforth, Lahtaw, *Myanmar's Current Peace Processes*, 2012)

¹² Ibid, 9.

taking part in political and public life because of the Government has not taken adequate steps to remedy gender discrimination in education.¹³

Moreover, if a family can only afford to send one child to school, prevailing socio-cultural norms dictate that a son's education be priorities over that of a daughter. Another group that suffers from a lack of education under the conditions of armed conflict is female combatant working in EAOs. Female combatants, often recruited youth, face ongoing obstacles to accessing, or continuing, their education. Add to the dearth of funding in ethnic and violence conflict afflicted areas, and it becomes clear that education in Myanmar has reached a crisis state. Lack of teachers, basic infrastructure, resources and materials, coupled with social norms privileging the education of sons all hinder girls' access to quality education, while the persistence of violent conflict creates an obstacles for parents who need to send their daughter to school in distant locations.¹⁴ Policies also exist that require female to receive higher marks than male on their university entrance exams to study certain subjects including engineering, medicine and technology. These policies violates Article 10, which requires the Government impose the same condition on both men and women for access to studies and eliminate stereotype about gender roles at all level of education.¹⁵ Women Myanmar do not travel alone, especially at night, because of fears for their safety. Restriction on women's travel limit women's political participation because many political activities involve travelling such as attending training and meetings, visiting government offices and houses of constituents. These limitations also reduce women's participation in social and economic activities that would increase women's opportunities to engage in political decision-making.¹⁶

The nature of politics, with its combative debate, ruthless personality, conflict, violence, and aggression, including against women, is a factor that could inhibit women's political engagement.¹⁷ In some cases, women candidates faces physical threats, even death threats when travelling to campaign. Women are often compelled to travel with a friend or college, which puts additional financial burdens on the candidate. Respondents in

¹³ CEDAW Shadow Report, 2016, 8.

¹⁴ Lahtaw, *Myanmar Current Peace Processes*, 2012, 9.

¹⁵ CEDAW Shadow Report, 2016, 9.

¹⁶ CEDAW Shadow Report, 2016, 9.

¹⁷ ADB, UNDP, UNPF, UNEGEEW, *Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar: 7.3 Enablers and Obstacles to including Women and Their Priorities in Myanmar's Peace Process*[Mandaluyong City: ADB, UNDP, UNEGEEW, 2016], 192. (Henceforth, *Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar*, 2016)

WON study also complained about the absence of laws that would effectively protect women candidates from threats to personal security.¹⁸

Financial resource is critical for candidates to contest an election. Women's poor campaign financing impedes their political participation.¹⁹ Campaigning is very expensive for women who need companions or bodyguards. WON's interviews indicate that women who run for offices are responsible for these expenses themselves, and they receive no government or party assistance. As a result, women often need to seek approval and financial support from their husbands or families before running for office.

Another obstacle to women's political participation is women's lack of knowledge and awareness of political matters. Most of women do not fully understand their rights. Some women reported that even if women are interested in many cases, they often do not know how to vote or otherwise engage in politics. This lack of awareness about women's political participation is even more prevalent in conflict – affected areas and among the regions, where most of the women do not understand Myanmar Language.²⁰ General Secretary of KNU, Zipporah Sein explained that the inclusion of women did not come automatically, but the space for women must be enhanced by themselves.²¹

In addition, women face legal barriers that prevent them from realizing their right to political participation. These barriers include the military's dominion of Parliament and a lack of temporary special measures. Although the 2008 Constitution states that one of the Union of Myanmar's consistent objectives is to enhance the "eternal principle of Equality" and that every citizen shall have the right to elect and be elected in accord with the law", it contains provisions that discriminate against women. It expressly permits the Government to appoint only men to "positions that are suitable for men only." ²²For example, Article 59 (d) stipulates that those who assume top-level leadership and decision making positions in the country's governance, legislature, and judiciary functions – including President and Vice President – are required to be 'well – acquainted' with defense matters. This stipulation implicitly hinders women's participation in top-level leadership and decision-making positions within the Government, as women have been historically kept out of defense related roles.. Chapter 8, article 352, which references 'men-only' positions and stipulates,

¹⁸ *CEDAW Shadow Report*, 2016, 9.

¹⁹ *Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar*, 2016, 192–93.

²⁰ *CEDAW Shadow Report*, 2016, 10.

²¹ *Myanmar's Current Peace Process*, 2012,

²² *CEDAW Shadow Report*, 2016, 10.

‘nothing in this section shall prevent appointment of men to the position that are suitable for men only’ opens the door to a series of legal loopholes for indirect discrimination. The clause does not provide clear specification on what constitutes suitability of men only certain positions, making it extremely difficult for women to build a case claiming discrimination against them.²³

Although the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) commits to adopting temporary special measures, namely quotas and capacity building for future women leaders on leadership and negotiation skill, no quotas have been implemented. Civil Society leadership can also replicate this dynamic though women are increasingly leading NGOs. This reproduces the dominant norm across Myanmar institutions and culture, in which women are relegated to inferior positions in social and political life. The representation and participation in politics between men and women are not the same.²⁴ The current chair of AGIPP, Mi Kun Chan Non believes that limited women’s ability to make a meaningful contribution. The majority of people in decision making positions are men, so they meet often and share information with each other but it’s never shared with women. The women did not know when things were being discussed, so they didn’t have enough time to prepare. So lots of women are still let out of the discussion.²⁵ Myanmar should focus on the strategic ways to promote women’s participation in Myanmar Peace Process more than before. There are 12 contributing factors in order to enhance women’s participation in Myanmar Peace Process. They are;

1. Implementing a minimum 30% gender quota in the Political Dialogue
2. Women as ceasefire monitors and commissioners
3. Gender inclusion audits can be undertaken to assess how women are involved in what ways & levels
4. Implementing practical solutions to reduce barriers to women’s participation in the peace process
5. Support implementation of the National Strategic Plan for Advancement of Women(NSPAW)
6. Civil society forums & groupings actively focus on women’s participation

²³ “Moving From Discrimination to Inclusion: Gender Perspectives on the Political Dialogue Themes: 2.1.1 Policies and practices”, *AGIPP Policy No.2* [Yangon:AGIPP, February 2017], 7.

²⁴ *CEDAW Shadow Report*, 2016.

²⁵ Lae Phyu Pyar Myo Myint, *Ethnic Women Leaders Break Silence on Gender Discrimination, rev.ed*, 2018.

7. Convene an International WPS Funding Group to promote information exchange & coordination of WPS activities and grant making
8. Promoting skill & leadership trainings for women
9. Advance basic infrastructure to reduce women's time constraints
10. Not extremist on Cultural & Religious norms
11. The effect of women leaders on other women's participation
12. Recognize that representation, inclusion & participation are not one & the same

As a trainer for Northern Shan State Women Organization Network (NSSWON), the author have done need assessment by listening feelings and voices of women living in the conflicted areas. War, conflict and violence directly affect more women than men. Security and safety of women connected with national security. Women are insecure, the families are insecure. When the families are insecure, the communities are insecure. When communities are insecure, countries are insecure. Therefore, Women, Peace and Security is a fundamental element national security. Women's experiences, voices and perspectives must be considered in conflict resolution processes to achieve long lasting peace. By investing in measures that promote gender inclusion, it can cause direct and indirect effect in peace process. Empowering women in crisis and conflict must be one of the most important roles in the peace process and using established women network can be a good starting point to make leaders aware of the importance of including the whole population.

Conclusion

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country with a long history of ethnic armed conflicts under successive governments. Women have been traditionally barred from meaningfully contributing towards peace and security of the country. Based on many years of research, we have come to realize that including women in security sector can bring additional perspectives and tools towards resolving long-running conflicts and achieving peace. In order for Myanmar to leverage and include women effectively into the security sector and peace negotiation processes, we must build the women's capacity to lead and to remove barriers of self-limitation. The author hope to contribute towards this capacity building process within country through students and through education and inspire them towards inclusive security to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity for Myanmar. Then high school or college and university students should be learned gender based curriculums in order to get knowledge about gender equalities or gender inequalities. Besides, TVET programs for women empowerment should also be promoted. The simplest and easiest to measure indicators of gender equality participation look only at the relative number of women and men in governance and peace related institution.

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