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**Changing the world
with women and girls**

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Leading the way:

**Civil society movements reshaping
peace and security in Myanmar**

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1 Introduction

This policy brief has pulled together evidence, stories and experiences from women, young people, and their organisations who are involved in activities on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and post-conflict support. It has explored their lived experiences to better understand and document their work in conflict-affected regions, including the challenges they faced and solutions they found.

The findings demonstrate the impact of the complex conflict and heightened violence experienced by many communities across Myanmar in recent years. This conflict has played out against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchal norms and some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the region.¹ In response, women's movements and their organisations have led conflict response and peace-building initiatives. They have found alternative ways to respond in conflict and reshape what peace and security means for them.

ActionAid has worked with these organisations to document their challenges and alternative solutions, with a call to humanitarian and peacebuilding actors and donors to invest in local women led interventions and shift power, decision making and resources to WRO for higher quality interventions. It is vital to understand the role that these national and local, women led interventions have the potential to play a unique role in Women Peace and Security (WPS) programming and advocacy, in ways which are often inaccessible to the international community.

1.1 Country context and the WPS agenda

Myanmar has been engaged in complex conflict dynamics ever since 1948, when the country gained independence from Britain and started

Military attacks have a significant impact on civilians, in particular affecting women, girls, and gender minorities through rising physical assaults and conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, including group rape, forced prostitution, and forced recruitment into the armed forces.

to transition to a democracy.² The recent military coup, which started in February 2021,³ has devastated communities across Myanmar. It has faced significant resistance from civil disobedience movements in response to the military's oppression, with the army increasing widespread aerial assaults, violation of human rights⁴ and mass displacement and death of civilians.⁵ Military attacks have a significant impact on civilians, in particular affecting women, girls, and gender minorities through rising physical assaults and conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, including group rape, forced prostitution, and forced recruitment into the armed forces.⁶ In addition, the exacerbated conflict alongside the Covid-19 pandemic, has damaged the country's economy, creating a profound and complex humanitarian emergency characterised by the disintegration of public systems.⁷

In response, alliances have formed between anti-military civil disobedience movements and armed resistance groups.⁸ In October 2023, the Three Brotherhoods Alliance,⁹ launched Operation 1027

to gain control over areas held by the military Junta,¹⁰ gaining control over major border cities and towns in the northern part of Myanmar. Simultaneously, in Karenni (Kayah) State, the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force led Operation

Women and girls across Myanmar have been disproportionately impacted by the coup which has contributed to a surge in intimate partner violence; trafficking; and sexual violence and harassment.

1111, gaining control over 90 percent of the state.¹¹ These coordinated efforts highlight the complex, multi-front nature of Myanmar's conflict, with various ethnic and resistance groups playing key roles in challenging the military junta's control.¹²

In February 2024, the State Administration Council (SAC) activated a conscription law that enforced mandatory military services in the country, that forced all men aged 18-35 and, in later stages of recruitment, women aged 18-27, to join the military.¹³ This has increased psychological trauma and insecurity, particularly among young people and women¹⁴ which led the migration of young people, most predominantly young men, to neighbouring countries or areas controlled by resistance groups.¹⁵ This has resulted in many women being left behind with all the additional responsibilities and pressure that come with increased violence and militarisation.

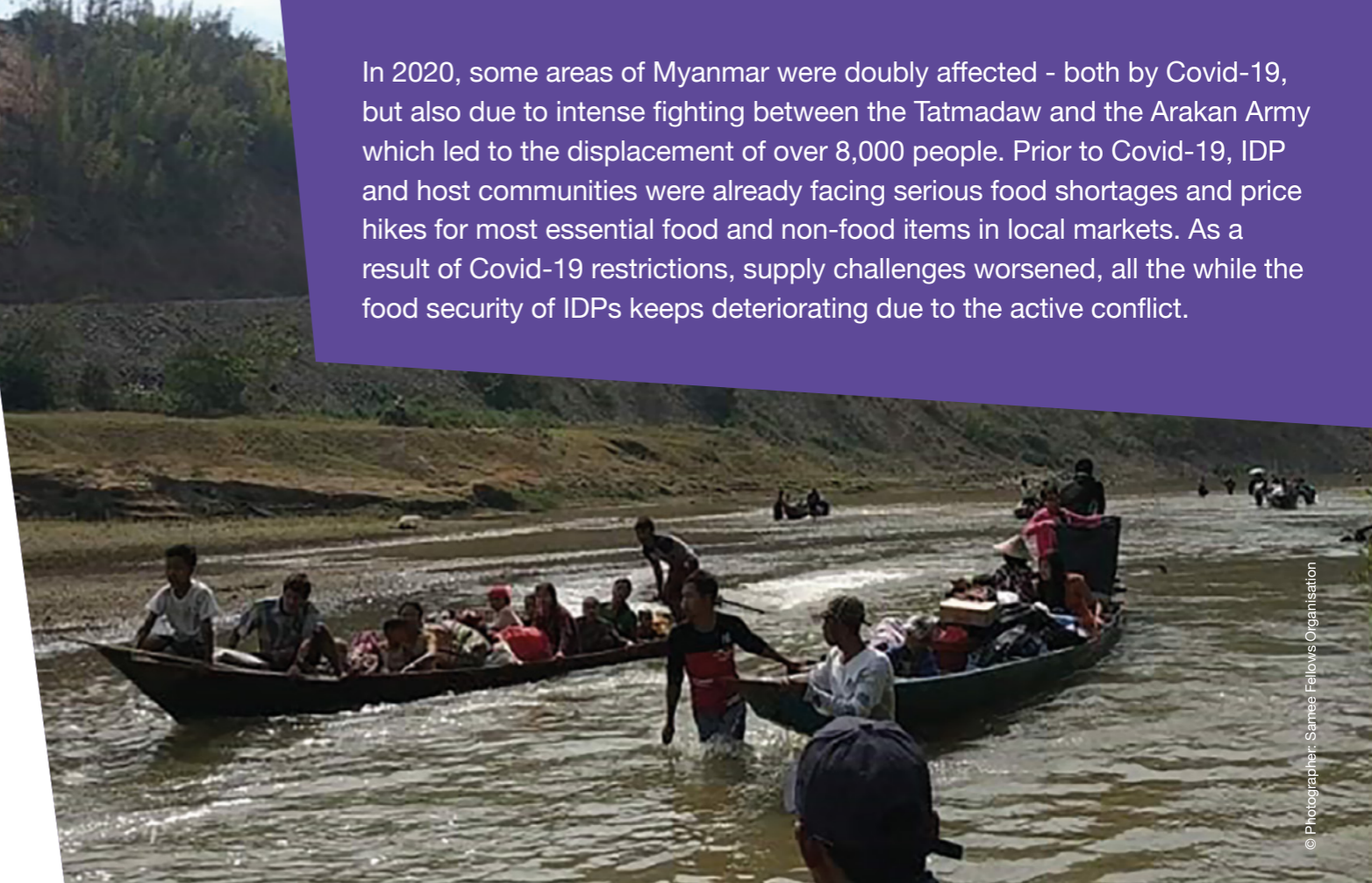
Women and girls across Myanmar have been disproportionately impacted by the coup which has contributed to a surge in intimate partner violence; trafficking; and sexual violence and harassment. Women and girls have struggled to access support and specialist services, including for their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and mental health. The gendered inequalities were further exacerbated by the military's 'Four Cuts' policy which cut the flow of goods, information and services in areas in which resistance groups were known or assumed to be active, which deprived a large group of people and communities of food, intelligence, money, and human resources even further¹⁶ and pushed almost three million people into displacement.¹⁷

With the disintegration of a formal peace process, the opportunity to advocate for women's participation and leadership in peace and conflict-resolution has been squandered, which has stalled progression to Myanmar's WPS commitments. Despite this, throughout the crisis and despite all the challenges, women's rights organisations (WROs), women-led organisations (WLOs) and women's human rights defenders have been advocating for justice and accountability for human rights abuses, delivering humanitarian assistance and working towards the reconciliation of peace.

1.2 Methodology

The brief explores how women's rights organisations in Myanmar have faced challenges, and posed their own alternative solutions in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and post-conflict activities. It finds that national and local women and youth-led interventions have the potential to play a unique role in the WPS space, with a potential call to invest in local women-led interventions and shift power, decision making and funds to WROs for higher quality interventions.

In 2020, some areas of Myanmar were doubly affected - both by Covid-19, but also due to intense fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army which led to the displacement of over 8,000 people. Prior to Covid-19, IDP and host communities were already facing serious food shortages and price hikes for most essential food and non-food items in local markets. As a result of Covid-19 restrictions, supply challenges worsened, all the while the food security of IDPs keeps deteriorating due to the active conflict.



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ActionAid adopts a feminist approach to research, seeing it as a tool to bring about shifts in power, through ActionAid's Feminist Research Guidelines.¹⁸ Research findings and evidence are used to dismantle potential bias from decision-makers views and actions, and to challenge how and where power negatively manifests and reproduces oppression. The voices of women and girls from communities and women-led organisations and women's rights organisations are prioritised as evidence. Women-only and girl-only spaces are created for evidence generation.

Aligned with this, the policy brief adopted a feminist research approach, by centring the experiences and rights of those who are most at risk of being marginalised within conflict affected regions, and interrogating the causes of inequalities. To do so, 19 women leaders and 13 women movements and/or organisations participated from seven states participated in the study process. These organisations were chosen with a focus on states affected by protracted

conflict and political crisis. The research questions were tested and co-developed with a range of women leaders to ensure they were aligned with the current context, and would mitigate against any risk or ethics concerns, with a thorough ethics document developed for this study.

The research employed a mixed methodology, incorporating focus group discussions (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), surveys, and secondary data review. In addition to the qualitative analysis, a structured questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection from project participants.

Conflict exacerbates pre-existing inequalities, which has had significant impact on women and girls' access to basic rights. Our research findings highlighted that women and girls experience the coup differently to men and boys, with disproportionate risks affecting their safety and security. The increased militarisation has further perpetrated harmful cultural norms that have increased barriers for women and girls in accessing livelihood opportunities, their participation in peacebuilding mechanisms, and access to information and basic services such as healthcare and the legal system, as well as increased risks of gender-based violence.

2.1 Limited leadership opportunities

“Women and girls have always been marginalised groups in Myanmar even before the conflict. After the coup this impact is even more high.”

Women Leader, Myanmar

The lives of women and girls in Myanmar have been impacted by strongly defined patriarchal norms,¹⁹ stemming from decades of culture of militarisation and hyper-masculinity in Myanmar, that has led to the normalisation of women's exclusion from positions of power.²⁰ Widely held beliefs that men make more effective political representatives and leaders, and the perception that women's primary role is within the domestic sphere has meant that women's needs and priorities have been largely underrepresented in Myanmar's peace processes. As a member of a WRO explained it:



Women have no rights under the coup. The lack of post-coup governmental structure has meant that the needs of women and girls are forgotten, because there are no processes in which women can fight for their rights.”

This is evident too by data: in Myanmar, women's representation in national and domestic political spaces, and decision-making positions in both the private and civil sectors remains low.²¹ In 2021, only 14% of women were elected officials in Myanmar, significantly lower than the global average (24%).²² This is further replicated in the current political affairs of Myanmar, where only 3 women were given decision making positions in the Pyidaungasu Hluttaw – the parliament of Myanmar – compared to 17 men.²³ Similarly, out of the 17 ministers in the National Unity Government, only 3 are women.²⁴ Via a focal group discussion, a participant questioned “*who advocates for our rights in these spaces?*” with another stressing, “*we are only ones who can*”. And yet, in contrast, women participants stressed they faced ‘backlash’ when trying to engage in peacebuilding, leadership or decision-making roles, with one participant reflecting that “*women cannot be seen or considered to take leadership positions. Leadership is only for men.*” This has prevented women and their organisations from participating in decision-making spaces and influencing decisions that later impact their lives, and instead has strengthened harmful gender cultural norms and has led to a decrease of women's rights.

2.2 Livelihoods

The findings highlighted that living in conflict decreases women and girls' access to employment and education. Women and girls are overrepresented in informal employment,

ActionAid and partners supporting agricultural and livelihood loans in Magway region, to support communities resilience and new livelihood opportunities



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such as working in garment factories, and societal expectations for women to shoulder the burden of housework and caring for family, limits women's activities outside the home.²⁵

The ongoing conflict and enforcement of the 2010 People's Military Law has posed additional challenges to women's livelihoods and their participation in employment opportunities. We spoke to many women leaders whose husbands were forcibly enlisted to the military, leaving them with additional caring and financial responsibilities for the household.²⁶ As one woman leader explained:



Women are under triple burden. They have to now be in charge of the economic activities, have all the caring responsibilities, and still be expected to do the community work [...] the burden has come back to women, time and time again.”

The ongoing conflict and follow up from the Coup has also negatively affected Myanmar's economy.²⁷ The World Bank forecasts a 1% economic growth for Myanmar, suggesting that the economy will be 10% weaker than it was five years ago, with garment manufacturing named as one of the industries most affected.²⁸ This has significant implications for women, who make

up about 90% of the garment factory workforce.²⁹ Research participants reported the decrease in livelihood opportunities due to factory closures, and the difficulties this has created for women in providing for their families. They highlighted that the ongoing economic burden, and lack of employment opportunities, and increase in care responsibilities, have made it particularly challenging for women to make a living. Our research participants flagged that this has led to increased levels of malnutrition, as women-headed households struggle to afford quality food.

Lack of employment opportunities for both women and girls have led to negative coping mechanisms, such as early marriage, migration, selling off assets, and taking high interest-bearing loans, and sex work, as alternative mechanisms to earn income. Respondents explained that some girls fake their age in order to migrate to other cities by themselves, in search of employment to support their family, including employment in the entertainment industry. A female participant said: “*Young women? They do not have the chance of being secure in homes and in the community at this moment. They seek other jobs or get into early marriage. That is the only way they think they can be secure.*”

This is heightened by the limited access to the education system in Myanmar. Many schools are closed or don't have qualified teachers. Interviewed participants warned that some "schools have closed for 2 years, in other places girls are forced to leave school because their parents cannot afford it [...] for them the future has been early marriage, migrate for work, some are trafficked".

The increase in early marriage, limited education and livelihood opportunities have impacted women and girls' freedom and limits their opportunities to engage in social or political life.³⁰ As a result, women and girls face additional limitations in the future in terms of livelihood opportunities driven by the lack of education, skills, and confidence.

2.3 Safety and security

All interviewees stressed that the major impact of the ongoing conflict has been the surge in gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, exploitation, sexual violence and harassment. Women and girls have struggled to access support and specialist services, including for their sexual and reproductive health rights (SRH) and mental health.

In 2023, UNDP released data that showed that in Myanmar, 68% of women don't feel safe walking alone in the city at night and 1 in 5 ever married women aged 15-49 have experienced some form of intimate partner violence.³¹ The predominance of gender-based violence has further decreased women's and girls' independence, and participation in cultural and political lives, highlighting how the conflict has perpetrated unequal relationships within the household:



The number of gender based cases has been increasing as conflict continues. So many [women] have lost their future. Many men are depressed and drunk. The easy target is women [and] wives at home."

This was further reported by women living in camps, and displaced women, who flagged that increased 'stress and frustrations of displacement', 'constrained spaces' and lack of privacy have contributed to more violence being perpetrated.

This is linked with increased fear as women worry about their future, with the increase of militarisation and armed conflict further solidifying deeply-embedded patriarchal norms. This is two-fold: women didn't feel safe at home with their partners, and women also felt increasingly scared when passing near armed soldiers. Soldiers use weapons to intimidate women and perpetrate sexual harassment and assault. Many interviewed participants reported that women are used as a weapon of war – they are targeted, taken hostage, tortured, and killed, particularly if they are actively protesting against the military. One women's group stressing the increased risks of: "Women activists, who are arrested and sexually abused/raped and tortured. Men suffer too, but women experience sexual abuse more".

Despite an increase in conflict-related sexual violence³², there are limited support mechanisms available, and the collapsed central judicial system is unable to support survivors of violence.³³ Women leaders told us this has led to a lack of adequate complaint mechanisms or gender-based violence referrals, and limited safety to travel, work or even walk in particular areas. The restrictions have also stopped infrastructure from functioning properly. For example, a woman explained that "The local transportation system is not working at night in my town. It has become so dangerous for women to come back home at night". This limited access to services and increased militarisation has intensified gender-based violence, whilst at the same time limiting pathways to justice and support.

2.4 Access to healthcare and justice



Conflict-affected communities' access to health is out of question. Even if we have access to doctors and nurses, they do not have equipment's and medications that we would need."

As with increased gender-based violence, the coup in Myanmar has had a disproportionate impact on women's and girls' access to basic services such as healthcare and the justice system. The healthcare system has been under constant attack since 1 February 2021. As of 2023, 880 healthcare workers have been arrested, 97 killed and 117 injured, and many health facilities have been damaged.³⁴ This has a significant impact on the ability to provide adequate health care support, and some women leaders mentioned that airstrikes to healthcare facilities prevent people from trying to access support, due to a fear of being targeted.

This was corroborated by our findings, with participants reporting that hospitals lacked appropriate equipment, medications, and doctors. They stressed the impact this has on pregnant women, who are unable to access targeted healthcare services, leading to increased newborn mortality. Others flagged about difficulties in accessing sanitary kits or forms of contraception. Where facilities are available, public services no longer have cost-sharing programmes, with one female leader explaining that healthcare is inaccessible due to "all costs now being borne by the patient. I have to say that there is no more public service."

The legal system in Myanmar has also become significantly less accessible for people post-coup, due to the increased militarisation.³⁵ Some lawyers face increased "threats, arbitrary arrests, detention and prosecution and in some cases, torture, and other ill treatment" and remain unable to support legal cases.³⁶ In the cases where access to justice is possible, the women leaders

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we spoke to said there is limited trust in a system led by military control or a military-held federal unit, with many people believing that, even if you have a legal claim to make, you have to still keep a low profile to ensure safety. Instead, this has led to some communities re-enforcing harmful customary practices such as survivors of rape having to pay a jar of wine and a pig to 'clean' the village, and women being forced to compensate their husbands when they want to divorce, even in cases where the husband was abusive.

Findings: Women's rights organisations' activities and challenges

All the women-led, women's rights organisations and movements we spoke to highlighted the importance of national and local civil-society work in responding to humanitarian needs at a time of conflict.

With the coup and militarisation of Myanmar, international assistance to Myanmar has diminished, with national organisations stepping up to fill this gap. In reality, the areas most in need of support are junta-controlled areas and official camps for internally displaced people,³⁷ as well as regions that have been made inaccessible by the increased violence.³⁸ This has prevented international organisations from providing independent, impartial responses to the conflict in the country, and has led to a high number of arrests and detentions of humanitarian workers, with increased blocks of relief supplies at disrupted operations.³⁹

The women movements we spoke to have used this as an “opportunity for women's organisations engagement and awareness raising on the rights of women and girls who [...] have had to come together, organise and work in unity for the needs of women and girls. We recognise that militarisation comes with the masculinisation of Myanmar, and there is no one else but us to support in unpacking this [...] we have come in to this space. CSOs and Women's groups [are working] together to respond.”

Nevertheless, women-led organisations have been faced with a multitude of daunting challenges.

3.1 Challenges WROs and WLOs faced in delivering humanitarian and peacebuilding work in conflict

With the conflict increasing pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities for women and girls, it has also posed additional challenges to women's rights and women-led organisations to respond to the humanitarian needs of communities, as well as supporting the rights of those the most affected.

Challenges of operating in a conflict context

Operating in a situation of ongoing armed conflict has presented many obstacles for women's rights and women-led organisations in responding to the immediate and long-term needs of the communities they work with. Difficulty transporting materials, poor internet connection, danger to safety and security of staff, checkpoints, and difficulty transferring funds were all raised by women as obstacles to carrying out their work.

In the Myanmar context, the issue of registration was raised as a particular challenge. This law, enforced in October 2022, introduces new requirements for non-governmental organisations to be formally registered to work in Myanmar, with arrests and fines for unregistered aid providers.⁴⁰ However, many national and international organisations have been unable or unwilling to register with the junta, in an attempt to maintain a low profile and keep their work and communities safe, but this has not come without challenges. Women leaders described the difficulty of engaging donors if their organisation is not registered, but also the challenges of engaging community members if they did register. While one woman explained that “funding is not provided without

registration”, another shared that being registered resulted in “no trust from the community”.

As a result, civil space is shrinking in Myanmar. In 2014 and 2020 the number of NGO and INGOs registered at the national level was 1,385. In 2021, there was only a total of 899 registered NGO and INGO organisations in Myanmar – 484 had an expired registration, of which only 154 decided to renew their registration.⁴¹ As of December 2022, OCHA estimates that only 88 national NGOs, 36 civil society organisations and 66 international organisations are formally operating in Myanmar.⁴²

Because of this, security concerns were consistently raised as a challenge for WROs and WLOs in responding to conflict. Multiple women shared the need to keep “a low profile” and only organise in small groups due to concerns for their safety and security. One woman shared “we cannot organise with a big group of people” and another that they “cannot gather more than five people”. The potential risks of public activism remain high. Another participant said, “After you do something, you have [to] run away. Otherwise, you will be arrested.” Security concerns also present challenges for WROs and WLOs engaging women and other community members in their projects and programmes. As a respondent explained: “Women are fleeing for their lives. They cannot participate fully. We feel bad to engage with them. For women to participate, they have to be secured.”

These security concerns and barriers have very real impacts on women's access to, and participation in, decision-making spaces on humanitarian action and peacebuilding. Since the coup, women's engagement and ability to contribute to peace and social cohesion has significantly reduced, due to the lack of peacebuilding frameworks and organised conflict-resolution mechanisms. One woman reported that “only a handful of people can access the space” and another added, “WROs and WLOs cannot have the same space”. It was widely

acknowledged by the women involved in the research that lack of access to humanitarian and peacebuilding spaces was a hindrance to their work and activism.

Discrimination and patriarchal norms

Even when WROs and WLOs do gain access to global and national humanitarian spaces and peace negotiations, meaningful participation in decision-making processes on peace and security remains a huge challenge. “We have not reached meaningful participation of women in various mechanisms” said a participant, with another stating:

“I am not so sure whether my voices are taken in account. Now women are invited to the meeting, [but] women are tokens. They [the international community] already have their thoughts. Just let us know what they have decided. We are just token, to sign and to take pictures.”

This was shared across all interviews and focal group discussions, where women noted that they engage in these spaces as “observers” or “followers”, with the main decision makers being predominantly men. This was connected to the high patriarchal norms, prevalent in society and intensified during conflict, and the increased power dynamics between women and men. This highlighted a ‘double obstacle’ to power, with significant barriers inhibiting not only their access to decision-making positions and processes in the first instance, but also their ability to influence within these structures once granted access. In January 2016, women occupied only 4% of the 48 members of the leadership body of the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), and only 7% of participants at the fourth 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference. And still, in 2019, only 4 women among 78 participants played a role within Myanmar's National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) process.⁴³ The inability of women to be part of those spaces and influence future changes has strengthened harmful gender

cultural norms and kept women out of crucial conversations around peace and reconciliation.

Dominant patriarchal norms and preexisting gender discrimination also came through as a challenge for women engaging in conflict response. At the household level, women spoke of the resistance they experienced from family members when they sought to engage in conflict response, saying: *“There is a lot resistance within the family about why they are doing this job, and their family tell them to not try to do this job. Their home is under watch, there are security threats.”* More broadly, women shared that patriarchal norms shaped societal expectations about the kind of work women should do, creating barriers for engagement in conflict response. A woman stated, *“Revolution is violent in nature and there is discrimination that it is not women’s business, but male business.”* Other women agreed, saying: *“The frontline becomes militarised and women succumb to a supporting role. This is not the choice of women but gender norms and peer pressure. This is because conflict is only associated with men, so women’s participation is limited in conflict response.”*

This has created a culture which is not accepting of women’s leadership. In general, it was shared that WROs and WLOs did not have the same space as other organisations because of gender discrimination, due to patriarchal mindset and *“the blaming and shaming of women leaders”*.

Lack of meaningful engagement by international community

Some of the women involved in the research made a comparison between their own ability to engage in advocacy spaces to that of international organisations. Participants described how international organisations failed to meaningfully engage them and bring them into decision-making spaces. While one woman said *“there is no effective channel”* between local organisations and the international community, another stated

that *“we are doing [the work] by ourselves without meaningful help from international community”*.

There was a sense that international organisations care more about branding than meaningful engagement, with one woman concluding *“in short, we work for the people and international community work for the system”*. Another woman spoke of the power dynamic with international organisations, reporting that they often felt secondary to international actors, with their opinions disregarded. One woman said that *“international organisations hear our voices but they ignore them”*, highlighting the limited meaningful consultation, with meetings often feeling tokenistic, with no further action. Another woman summarised, *“In general the international community decide based on their frame and interests. They came to consult with us, but do not listen to our voices.”*

This disregard was a particular concern of the women organisation and movements in this research, who highlighted that international organisations often lack the contextual understanding of conflict situations that WROs and WLOs have. Unlike local and national organisations, which work with conflict-affected communities on a daily basis, international organisations are not familiar with the specific and rapidly changing needs of conflict-affected communities. The international community can only partly support the needs of women, one woman explained, because *“our context is changing very rapidly”*. The women involved in the research spoke of a gulf between local and international organisations in terms of their knowledge and experience of working with affected communities, and therefore their ability to deliver an effective response. One respondent said of international organisations:

“**Their understanding of conflict and our experience in conflict is totally different. It seems they also want to colonise conflict in Myanmar. They do not put on our shoes.”**

93% of the survey respondents felt that the international community is not sufficiently responding to the conflict in Myanmar, with 67% of respondents feeling that the international community does not understand the context of conflict and peace in Myanmar.

Without adequate contextual understanding, international organisations and donors deliver fragmented responses, failing to adopt a long-term integrated approach. As one woman explained, *“[The international community] take lots of time and cannot really figure what’s going on. Funding for WPS is not enough. We cannot just do prevention for 6 months. Rather we need long-term commitment and a mixture of all kinds of response modality.”* Many participants echoed this need for more integrated and long-term funding commitments. One woman spoke about a lack of focus on long-term community development by UN agencies, saying that *“despite their [own] shouting of Nexus, they only focus on short term support”*. This need for sustainable support was echoed across the interviews and focal group discussions, with 56% of participants feeling a disconnect in the reality of what is happening in Myanmar, and the response from international actors.

A core component of the nexus approach which has been overlooked by international actors is the integration of gender and women’s needs. Multiple women shared that international agencies often failed to integrate gender responsiveness into the planning and delivery of support. *“Funding agencies are reminded to support women and children but gender budgeting is limited. The finance team of the funding agencies should understand the concept of gender budgeting. It is very important during conflict situations”*, one woman explained. This was reiterated throughout the research, as women highlighted that often women’s specific needs remained neglected, both in bid developments and in project design and implementation. Gender needs must be better integrated and costed into

the strategies of international organisations, if women and girls are to effectively access support. While one woman stated that *“to have effective support for women and girls there needs to be a strategy”*, another added that *“[international organisations] need to be more specific”* to ensure women and girls’ needs are adequately addressed. It was recognised that *“the cost of inclusion of women is expensive”* but that this was not an excuse for gender blindness in policy and programme implementation.

Lack of flexible and accessible funding

A key failing raised by the women involved in the research was a lack of flexible and accessible quality funding and limited funding support, both from donors and international allies. This resonates with the OEDC data in 2021, where only 0.68% of official development assistance in Myanmar went to WROs.⁴⁴ Through focal group discussions, WROs discussed how difficult it was to access funds, or be successful in receiving international funds, with a women leader stating: *“Every year, we receive an invitation from international funds to submit proposals, but we have never been successful[...]. There is no intention to fund us directly. It’s like we are being fooled and our idea gets taken free of charge. For example, none of on-ground organisations whom we know doing actual implementation were granted, but the one successful and granted was not actually [implementing directly], and ended up approaching local partners as sub-grantee or as implementation partners.”*

Currently, due to lack of funding, participants reported that they had to undertake activities without budget. Even where funding is available, the women we spoke to explained that it is often not suitable to meet the needs of the communities they work with because it is too slow to arrive in rapidly changing conflict-affected contexts.

Lack of flexibility was also raised as a barrier, with donors ringfencing funding for specific

projects, which often does not respond to the needs of women and girls. One woman shared “we have difficulties finding network which is not only project based” as opposed to more flexible funding opportunities which give WROs and WLOs more autonomy to choose how the money is spent. This was reflected in the survey respondents: 79% of respondents receive funding to serve delivery and programme implementation to respond to an emergency or towards a specific response. This reinforces power dynamics, with one woman sharing that local and indigenous organisations “lack bargaining power because of the shortage of funding”.

Our survey found that even when funding is available, 73% of respondents usually receive short-term grants (less than a year), which are primarily dedicated to programmatic work and have little flexibility. Only 17% have received long-term grants for more than 3 years.

Another barrier to accessing quality funding is the high level of bureaucracy involved. The complex reporting and due diligence requirements imposed by international organisations mean that those WROs and WLOs working closest with affected communities can miss out on funding opportunities, often because these are agencies or organisations who have had to stop their registration or are being heavily monitored by the military forces. As one group of women leaders added, this led to “lots of challenges” in accessing funding including documentation and reporting requirements, which created funding barriers for women and their organisations, with the consequence that funding often does not reach where it is needed most. A participant stated that “the organisations that can handle financial accountability might not be able to reach to the affected community” and another raised the question “how much funding is reaching the affected community?”.

Stories of Change: The need to de-colonise humanitarian partnerships

A range of WROs we spoke to have felt that INGOs have often used ‘power over’ smaller entities. They use them as service providers, but often do not want to work on the programmes or initiatives that the WROs were originally providing, leaving gaps in support for affected communities.



Money is such a problem, and it is brave for our organisations to say no – actually saying no, we want to apply as [name retracted for safety], without you as a partner, is our own revolution because we don’t want to be ‘controlled’ by the international organisations. We are already militarised by the coup, but if we also follow the guidance of international orgs and their priorities too – we want to be free and break power dynamics which impact us and can actually support our community. That’s why decolonisation is so important. We need to localise our thinking.”

Another spoke about INGOs hampering their action through bureaucracy, saying: “When there is a response programme, we are able to move ahead with local procurement through local supply chain but it doesn’t ‘pass’ the INGO regulation – which increases bureaucratic notions. It is not possible to transport out of ‘standard’ kits that has 9 items within the INGO programme list, even if the needs at the moment is severely needed for 3 out of those 9 items, and they are readily available. Instead, WROs have to always source the 9, even if 6 of those are no longer relevant, cost more, and are not as easily accessible, causing unnecessary bureaucratic delays.”

Women are very underrepresented in formal governing mechanisms and decision-making structures established to engage in peacebuilding in Myanmar. Despite this, WROs and WLOs have found alternative solutions to address the challenges posed by operating in a conflict setting, short-term funding and limited leadership opportunities.

The WROs we spoke called the ‘sisterhood approach’, emphasising that women’s rights and women led organisations at all levels come together to respond to the gendered-impacts of conflict, which otherwise are left unaddressed. This is because they have greater understanding of their communities, and are already located in regions that are inaccessible to other national and international organisations. Some women spoke to their work as being seen as a ‘trusted bridge between donors, international community and the local community’. This has allowed groups to undertake humanitarian distribution and emergency response in otherwise inaccessible regions.

Women leaders have also been at the forefront of women’s protection approaches. With the justice system in tatters and high rates of GBV, WROs and WLOs are seen as a safety net for thousands of women and girls living in conflict-affected regions in Myanmar today. Their activities range from awareness-raising on the rights of women and girls, to training on mental health services and counselling for survivors.

The WROs, WLOs and women movements we spoke to highlighted the following alternative solutions:

4.1 Reshaping peace

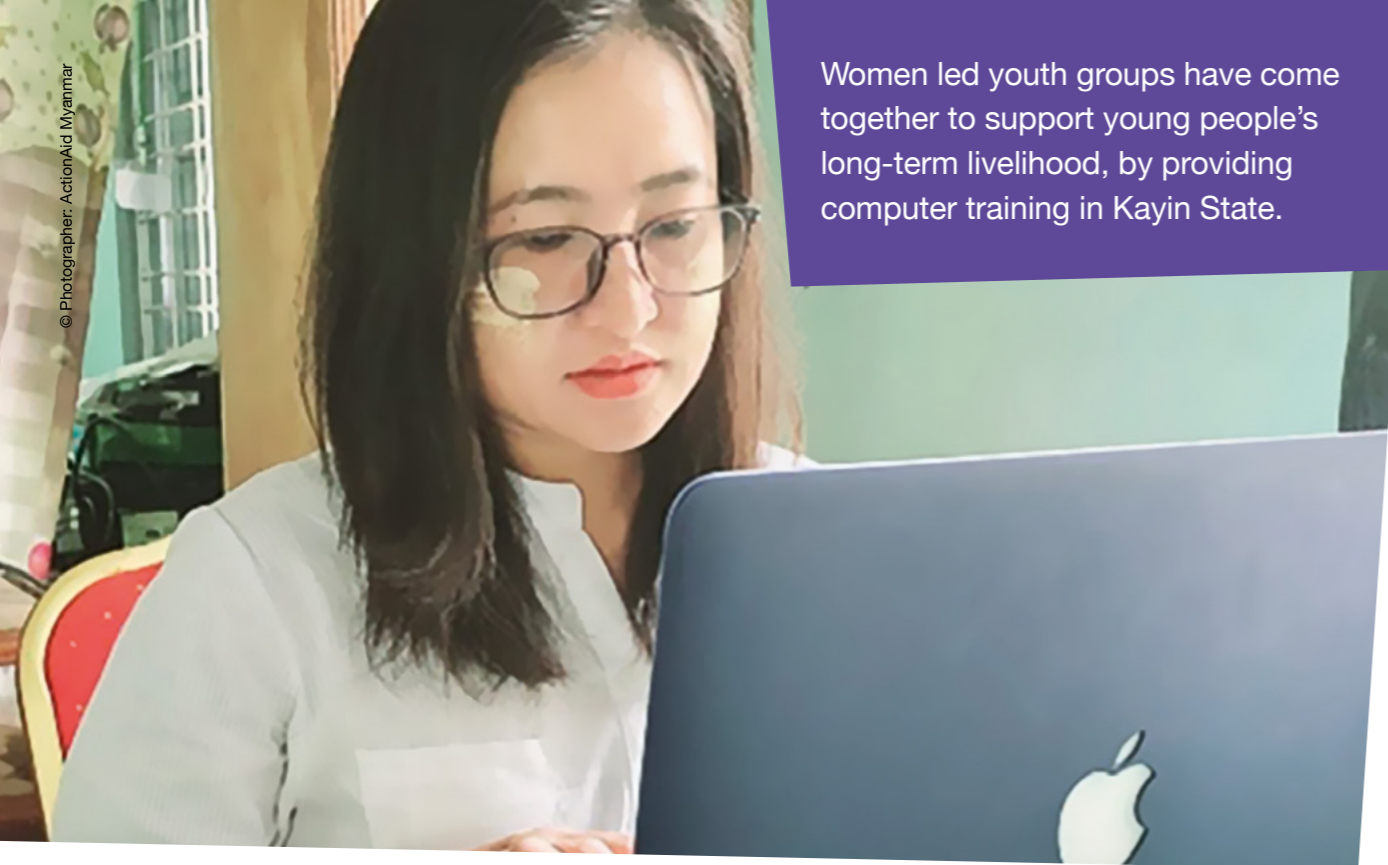
The peace talks in Myanmar have prioritised security, political stability and infrastructure at the expense of gender-responsive social welfare and economic development. The women leaders we spoke to reported that women have made important contributions to peace, but this has not changed perspectives. For these women leaders, peace is linked to their own safety, the reconstruction of what justice means to them, and their fight for women and girls’ rights.

Women groups we spoke to highlighted how they found solidarity in working across justice and revolutionary projects, with national organisations joining together to become a growing network of women leaders calling out for change and their rights. As one woman leader put it:



We are a movement of brave women, who now dare to speak out for our rights. Participation in [the] current context is very challenging due to the risks factors[...] We have to fight against the odds. We fight for the whole movement, despite the risks and the challenges.”

Some women described a “sisterhood movement” that is based on trust, and explaining that using “one collective voice”, has helped them maintain a low profile and anonymise their own identities and that of their organisations. This has allowed them to engage in rallies on women’s rights across different communities, as well as engage and develop safety nets and information sharing for women. They have pulled together their own communities of practice that focuses on the protection and well-being of women, through updates on social media or communication platforms, to frequently share information and



Women led youth groups have come together to support young people's long-term livelihood, by providing computer training in Kayin State.

update each other on recent attacks, potential threats and new insecure locations.

This was further highlighted by women IDPs, who have formed alliances for their own security. A woman leader said: *“social cohesion has been stripped so much, when women want to do something, they need to start from zero. You need to consider we are likely political refugees, we are not wanted in the community, and that's why we need to be connected.”* Women movements have engaged in activities to raise awareness, including awareness-raising sessions with men, boys, women and girls, to speak about the importance of preventing GBV and protecting themselves against it. They have also facilitated women-friendly spaces to speak to women's empowerment and leadership training.

Women leaders we spoke to also highlighted that this sisterhood approach has meant their voices are stronger and more heard. This is both when aiming to reach local and national authorities, or engaging in peace-building and humanitarian conversations with international agencies or national fora.

4.2 Social media

Restrictions on movement and women's limited access to technology were flagged by participants as both a gap and an opportunity. Conflict-affected regions often face significant barriers to accessing the internet and using digital devices due to limited internet connectivity, in addition to having lack of access to devices, lower digital literacy, and time constraints at times of active conflict. This negatively affected communities, as they lacked easy access to real-time information which could help keep them safe. These challenges are exacerbated for women with disabilities, who may require additional support, such as a companion to help them access the internet, which adds extra costs and logistical difficulties.

To address this, social media and online platforms have been used as a tool to raise awareness of the conflict, with some women's organisations giving smartphones and other devices which are shared between communities. Others have hosted online training on feminist peace building.

Some women movements flagged that they have used social media for their own livelihoods, such

as by selling their products online, when some areas are too dangerous for travel. In locations where there is an internet ban, through the sisterhood movement women leaders are able to share their experiences through the use of IT secure platforms and VPNs – sometimes reaching allies who have fled the country and can share stories in international media.

4.3 Feminist funding

As traditional funding from external donors has become less accessible because organisations are not registered, feminist funding has emerged as a crucial alternative for the WROs and WLOs we spoke to, particularly in times when traditional funding from external donors has become less accessible, either because they are not registered or are unable to access the funds available by larger donors.

With the reduction of external financial support, WROs have increasingly taken on the role of funders themselves, creating cash-based funds that are not as *“tight-knitted”* and *“fragmented”* as some international funds. These are used to help fund small organisations and grassroots initiatives in their communities. One woman leader states: *“Our main emergency response provide feminist emergency response fund. This is based on the community members' needs, and can encompass anything: SRHR, food, money for child delivery, water supply for the IDPs, sanitary pads, medicine, toilets, bathroom for women to have more privacy.”*

These funds offer greater flexibility compared to conventional funding streams, allowing recipients to adapt resources to their specific needs and circumstances. A woman leader explains: *“We are the ones in reality who provide the most feminist type of funding, in the sense that we provide women with direct cash, that allows them to get the goods they need, with no strings attached!”*

An innovative approach adopted by some WROs is the establishment of an *‘Urgent Action Fund’*.

With the reduction of external financial support, WROs have increasingly taken on the role of funders themselves, creating cash-based funds that are not as “tight-knitted” and “fragmented” as some international funds.

This fund collects members' contributions over a period of time and is designed to distribute immediate relief when needed, especially for women survivors of sexual gender-based violence. It can also support individuals with emergency relocation support, which is not easy to get funded by international donors.

Beyond providing financial resources, the WROs we spoke to have flagged the importance of groups facilitating conversations aimed at reducing the challenges that women's organisations face when competing for funding with larger entities. These discussions often focus on the importance of supporting institutional strengthening, leadership and skills development, staff retention, and securing long-term, flexible strategic funding.

Participants pointed out that their feminist funds *“model caring and power-sharing practices, and not tick-box restrictions”*. These efforts are characterised by a commitment to the needs, diversity and inclusion of the community, which ultimately lead to more meaningful, resilient, and sustainable impacts both within the organisations and in the communities they serve.

Stories of Change: Humanitarian distribution

The women leaders responding to this emergency have provided cash distributions to women who were forced to flee the city or town they lived in due to conflict, providing communities with food and direct cash. Since the coup, the women organisations we support are some of the few that distribute hygiene kits to women and girls, as well as tailored kits for pregnant women and newborns. This has provided communities with an element of safety.

The women's organisations we spoke to flagged innovative ways to map out GBV referral service mapping for their communities, especially for women who have had to relocate homes or cities, or that live in displacement camps. This has been done by information sharing, and mapping out the closes services to certain locations, as well as enhancing knowledge on the process within safe shelters and via social media.

“There is no rule and law, and it is difficult to say who we should rely on to support women's protection, because the structure in the community is destroyed, and so we do it,” said one women's organisation.

Women's organisations have set up safe spaces to provide support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as to hold vocational skills training such as sewing or cooking classes to support women to start their own business.

Please note – for the security and safety of the women leaders and their organisations and movements, they have all remained anonymous.

Our findings reveal that the complex conflict dynamics in Myanmar have disproportionately affected women and girls, with increased risks around women's protection, safety and livelihood opportunities. The national and local groups flagged that, to date, responding to the needs of communities especially women and girls by international organisations has fallen short in Myanmar, who have sometimes missed to understand the complexity and root causes of the conflict, and have mostly responded to short-term humanitarian needs, with a disregard to peacebuilding and community resilience.

Instead, WROs and WLOs have found ways to fill the gaps left by the international actors, by finding alternative solutions to respond to the needs of communities and advocate for peace, via community-led initiatives and international advocacy. These activities were taken onboard despite the multifaceted obstacles and challenges they faced, such as the lack of recognition by international actors, chronic funding shortages, and increased safety concerns with the enforcement of registration with the military regime, which reinforced patriarchal norms that has led to increased risks of arrests of humanitarian workers, and increase in violence in many regions of Myanmar.

The lack of formal peace processes, and disintegration of rule of law and opportunities for women and young people to participate in leadership in peace and conflict resolution has had a significant impact on meeting WPS commitments and hinders peacebuilding

progress in Myanmar. Our findings show that the efforts that women's rights and youth groups put into supporting communities stay unrecognised and their knowledge and expertise are overlooked by international actors. An increase in engagement between international communities and local women's rights and women-led organisations and local communities through their involvement in intervention design, and all stages of implementation is essential. This includes recovery and peace building to ensure a proper understanding of the complexity of the conflict to holistically address the issue. The lack of accessible funding remains a main barrier in addressing the needs of communities in peacebuilding work, with greater support and recognition of local organisations capacity and work in areas inaccessible to international actors is essential. This support should include long-term, multi-year, and flexible funding and allow different mechanisms for funding streams, and simplification of the bureaucratic systems in the conflict-affected contexts.

Recommendations:

The organisations we spoke to collaborated to write the recommendations outlined overleaf, which aim to enhance the participation of women leaders within their fight towards durable peace, via their revolution and strive toward peacebuilding and humanitarian responses, both locally and internationally.

Recommendations for donors, civil society organisations and civil international actors:

Recommendations for programming:

1. Women's leadership and participation:

The international community should actively engage with local women and women led organisations. This involves not only acknowledging their efforts but providing substantial support to help them undertake peacebuilding work effectively within their localities, including with:

- a. Better information sharing during humanitarian response situations.
- b. Strengthening the capacity of local women and youth by providing them with necessary resources, skills and training to engage more effectively in conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities.
- c. Promote the inclusion of women and their organisations, so they can engage in advocacy spaces and contribute to decision-making processes at all levels.

2. Gender Transformative Programming:

Recognise the gendered impacts of the conflict, and put in place gender-transformative responses, in order to meaningfully support peace-building and any long-term resilience programming. Not doing so, means responses will lack adequate understanding of the root causes of conflict, and will not address the issues in a holistic manner. This can be done by:

- a. Designing post-conflict transitional justice interventions, in collaboration and coordination with WROs, YLOs and communities, to ensure their needs are represented.

- b. Collaborate with women's movements in all stages of conflict programming, including recovery and peace-building initiatives, to support survivors and reduce harm. Their continuous involvement is crucial for maintaining peace and aiding recovery in conflict-affected communities.

- c. Address the specific experiences and needs of women and girls in conflict-affected states in Myanmar and provide tailored and contextualised responses to support them by undertaking frequent gender-transformative conflict analysis throughout the project cycle.

- d. Ensuring considerations around gender-based violence, including partner violence, parental abuse, trafficking and child, early or forced marriage are integral in programming set up in conflict-affected regions of Myanmar. These efforts must be accompanied by long-term investment in repairing the legal and judicial system, to challenge the entrenched culture of silence and impunity in Myanmar.

Recommendations for advocacy:

1. Support women peacebuilding activists

in their work and continue to pursue capacity enhancement in women, peace and security advocacy in GBV prevention co-ordination mechanisms both nationally and globally, through the advancement of the commitments envisaged by signatories of the Call to Action on prevention of violence in emergencies, and in global WPS policy spaces.

2. **Systematically coordinate** on international governance and diplomacy with and lobby border countries such as Thailand, Lao, India to bring about peace.

3. **Engage in ongoing advocacy** in support of a ceasefire, including working with, and funding, civil society and WROs to continue to support this work.

Recommendations for funding:

1. **Provide long-term, multi-year and flexible funding** which can be adapted to the needs of the most affected communities, and allow for different mechanisms for funding streams, e.g. providing cash rather than bank transfers. Donors should set up in-country advisory meetings with WROs and WLOs to understand which funding mechanisms work best in their context.

2. **Simplify funding requirements** to have more accessible application routes, enabling quick mobilisation for emergency responses. This also will allow funding streams to be more easily and quickly accessed by WROs and WLOs, rather than working through intermediaries.

3. **Consider bureaucratic complications** in conflict-affected contexts, for example by funding non-registered organisations via a registered entity or trusted network of partners.

Recommendations for partnerships:

1. Reshape local partnership approaches

by meaningfully shifting power and resource to a diverse group of local women and WROs. To do this meaningfully:

- a. Base partnerships on mutual accountability and joint strategies. Demonstrate trust in WLOs, WROs and YLOs as technical experts in joint programming and strategy development and ensure their knowledge, skills and expertise are attributed. This includes listening to and acting upon the recommendations proposed by partners and effectively consulting communities in the design of humanitarian and peacebuilding activities, as well as supporting their institutional growth, resource mobilisation and programme quality.

- b. Be context specific in partnership agreements by diversifying partnerships through working with more local and national organisations, and undertaking frequent risk analysis to mitigate against, and accommodate potential risks, by recognising that some organisations have had to re-shape or register as different entities, and may have had to relocate for their safety and security.

- c. Allocate adequate resources to partnership agreements. Provide sufficient funding, time and staffing to ensure continuous learning and reflection as part of accountability within partnerships. In turn, this will allow partnerships to be longer lasting and move away from short-term, periodic programming, which can often be tokenistic fail to effectively meet communities' needs.

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2. Creative Home (CH)
3. Myanmar-Women, Peace, and Security (M-WPS)
4. Gender Equality Network (GEN)
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Cover image: Young Myanmar woman stares out at the Irawaddy River, Myanmar.



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