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**GENDER (IN) EQUALITY IN THE GOVERNANCE  
OF MYANMAR:  
PAST, PRESENT, AND POTENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE**

PAUL MINOLETTI

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# **GENDER (IN) EQUALITY IN THE GOVERNANCE OF MYANMAR:**

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## **ONE: INTRODUCTION**

In the last few years there has been a limited increase in women's level of participation in Myanmar's governance bodies, but these bodies remain heavily male dominated. This policy brief discusses why gender (in)equality of participation in governance matters; current and historical levels of (in)equality of participation; the extent to which policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery promote or fail to promote gender equality; and current actions by the government and non-governmental actors to increase the gender equality of participation and promote gender equality through policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery. Increasing the gender equality of participation in governance is desirable as a means to increase the equity of decisions that are made. Research carried out in various developed and developing countries shows evidence that men and women have different preferences for policy and budgetary decision-making, and that female leaders are more responsive than male leaders to women's preferences. The evidence base for Myanmar also suggests that men and women have different preferences, and female leaders are more responsive to women's preferences. Thus, increasing the gender equality of participation in the governance of Myanmar is likely to result in more gender-equitable decision-making.

In 2011, the highly centralized state of Myanmar began to decentralize and democratize, transferring a (limited) degree of decision-making authority to existing and newly created bodies at the subnational level. The potential benefits of decentralization include making government more responsive and accountable, improving political stability, increasing political competition, reducing abuses of power, and altering government spending allocations and public-service provision in ways that improve development outcomes. Section 2 of this brief describes the gender equality of

participation in the governance of Myanmar, and discusses the factors affecting it. Section 3 outlines current efforts by a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations to raise the gender equality of participation, and suggests potential approaches for building on, improving, and expanding this work in the future. Section 4 examines three key aspects of governance – policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery – and considers to what extent these aspects of governance currently promote or fail to promote gender equality. Section 5 provides a general conclusion and some specific suggestions.

## **TWO: MALE AND FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE OF MYANMAR**

### **2.1: Gender Statistical Representation in Government and other Governance Bodies**

#### **2.1.1 Elected Officials**

The November 2015 elections for Myanmar's Union and state and region parliaments resulted in huge wins for the National League for Democracy (NLD), a party that is led by a woman. Although Aung San Suu Kyi is currently constitutionally barred from becoming president, immediately prior to the election she stated, "If we win and the NLD forms a government I will be above the president," and her actions since the NLD took power have conformed with this claim. Despite Myanmar's government now being led by a woman, and a higher proportion of MPs being female than at any previous point in Myanmar's history, there is still a very high level of gender inequality in statistical representation in the Union Parliament. As Table 1 shows, women account for only 13.6 percent of elected MPs at the Union level. This figure is extremely close to the percentage of candidates for Union-level seats that were women (13.5 percent), showing that women are not systematically being assigned to less winnable seats.

*Table 1: Women’s Representation in Myanmar’s Union-Level Parliament*

	Constituencies (N)	Elected MPs (N)	Elected MPs Who Are Women (N)	Women as % of Elected MPs	Military MPs	Total MPs	Women as % of Total MPs
Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House)	330	323	44	13.6%	110	433	≥10.2%
Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House)	168	168	23	13.7%	56	224	≥10.3%
Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Lower House and Upper House Combined)	498	491	67	13.6%	166	657	≥10.2%

Source: Database of MPs elected in November 2015 and subsequently approved by the Union Election Commission, supplied to the author by the Gender Equality Network in February 2016.

In aggregate, the gender equality of statistical representation in Myanmar’s state and region parliaments is similar to that at the national level. Women are 12.5 percent of elected state and region MPs, which is likely to be a little under 10 percent of total MPs. Again, the percentage of elected MPs who are women is extremely similar to the percentage of candidates for state/region-level seats who were women (12.9 percent). It is important to note that there is considerable variation among states/regions in the gender equality of statistical representation, with more than one-quarter (26.1 percent) of elected MPs in the Mon State Parliament being women, while there are no women elected MPs at all in the Chin, Kayah, and Rakhine parliaments.

Gender inequality of electoral representation is even starker at local levels than at Union and state/region levels. The position of ward/village tract administrator (hereafter VTA) became an elected one following the passage of the Ward or Village Tract Administration Law in 2012. So far, very few women have been elected to this position: women made up only 42 of the 16,785 VTAs in Myanmar – just 0.25 percent of the total – as of 2014.

## 2.2: State and Region Legislative Responsibilities

The 2008 Constitution gives state and region governments the right to enact laws, collect taxes, and manage entities under their control as set out in Schedule Two. Although the specific areas prescribed under Schedule Two are intended as a means of distributing

the duties of the Union government to state and region governments, they are also relatively broad, covering eight sectoral categories.<sup>1</sup> Under each of these categories, Schedule Two also lists areas of responsibility, with the number of areas of responsibility varying from category to category. In some instances, there appears to be substantial overlap between state/region responsibilities and the responsibilities of the Union government.

### 2.1.2 Political Parties

In the 2015 elections, the NLD won a majority not only of the elected seats, but also of total seats in both national houses of Parliament, winning 79.3 percent of elected seats and 59.1 percent of total seats in the lower house, and 80.4 percent of elected seats and 60.3 percent of total seats in the upper house. The NLD also took 75.3 percent of elected seats and 56.1 percent of total seats across the state/region parliaments. As Table 3 indicates, NLD’s high level of success has helped to raise the gender equality of participation in Myanmar’s parliaments: of the major parties, only the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) has a higher proportion of MPs that are women.

Female representation is far higher in the NLD (15.1 percent of total MPs) than in the next largest party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), with women accounting for only 2.6 percent of USDP’s total MPs.

Women’s representation in the highest positions in political parties is extremely low: apart from the NLD,

only the Mon Women's Party and the Danu Nationalities League Party have a woman in any of the following positions: leader, chairperson, or deputy leader.

### 2.1.3 Civil Services

In contrast to the situation for elected officials, there is a high degree of gender equality among civil servants overall, with marginally more women than men so employed (52.3 percent versus 47.7 percent). There is also quite a high level of gender equality overall for "senior positions," with women accounting for nearly 40 percent of staff at the level of deputy director and above. However, there is wide variation between ministries and state administrative bodies in the proportion of staff who are female, both overall and in senior positions.

Despite this somewhat rosy picture of gender equality, it is vital to note that women are almost entirely absent from the most senior civil service positions of director general and deputy director general (DDG). And notwithstanding some recent improvements, decision-making within ministries remains extremely top-down and hierarchical, and positions below DDG typically do not come with substantial decision-making authority.

### 2.1.4 Peace Process

Over the last few years, the attempt to reach a comprehensive ceasefire agreement has been one of the most important political and developmental issues in Myanmar. Women's representation in this process has hitherto been extremely low. As of October 2015, only two of the 52 members of the government's Union Peacemaking Working Committee were women (3.8 percent), and the 11 members of the Union Peacemaking Central Committee were all men. By October 2015, only eight of the EAGs had signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), and the bodies created as a result of the NCA also currently feature a low level of female representation: there are no women in the Joint Implementation Coordination Meeting or on the Union-level Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, and only three women on the 48-member Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (6.3 percent). At the January 2016 Union Peace Conference, it was agreed to adopt a

quota mandating a minimum women's participation rate of 30 percent in bodies responsible for political dialogue related to the peace process.

## 2.2: Key Influences on Men's and Women's Participation

### **Time Constraints and Household Bargaining:**

Echoing the findings of previous research, a number of the people interviewed stressed the importance of women's time constraints in limiting their ability to participate in governance, with many women already having to balance heavy loads of paid market work and unpaid domestic work. Interviewees also stressed the role of cultural norms as a factor in this regard, with men in Myanmar typically being strongly resistant to taking over domestic chores that are seen as a woman's responsibility. Research on Myanmar indicates that women who work outside of the home and have their own source of income have greater bargaining power within the household, which can therefore sometimes help women to overcome opposition from other household members to their participation in governance activities. However, taking on such work is likely to increase women's time constraints, which can limit their opportunity to participate in governance.

**Cultural Norms and Biases:** Cultural norms affect men's and women's opportunities for participation in several other important ways as well. Leadership in Myanmar is closely associated with "maleness." The preference for male leadership and authority affects not only the number of women and men in leadership positions, but also the quality of their participation. Women who do attend public forums are less likely to speak up than men are, and if they do speak, their opinions are typically given less weight. Women in Myanmar typically have much less confidence than men to contribute to public discussion, and this lack of confidence is one of the key barriers limiting the quality of their participation in decision-making. This lack of confidence can be partially attributed to women's relative lack of experience in participating in public forums, but seems to be primarily due to cultural norms that associate leadership and knowledge of public affairs with masculinity, and femininity with modesty and politeness.

**Family Members' Participation in Politics and Governance:** As noted in a recent UNDP study of female VTAs in Myanmar, if an individual's father or other family member has been involved in governance leadership positions, it is more likely that the individual in question will also be involved. The presence of close family members with governance leadership experience can also be expected to make Myanmar men more likely to take on leadership positions; however, we do not currently have the data to assess the relative importance of this factor for men and women.

**Role Models:** Women taking on leadership positions can have a powerful effect in changing the participation of other women. This can be due to these women taking deliberate steps to promote the participation of other women, but also to a "role-model" effect. Achieving greater equality in representation in leadership positions can also increase the likelihood that all citizens will feel able to contribute to public discussions. Research on local governance bodies in South Asia has found that, as the gender equality of representation on community forestry executive committees increases, women are more likely to speak up in meetings, and the same effect occurs when the village head is female.

**Restriction on Travel:** Due to a combination of time constraints, cultural norms, and the threat of gender-based violence, women's mobility is generally more restricted than men's in Myanmar, and this is another key factor in the high degree of gender inequality of participation. Conflict areas have long had a particularly high incidence of gender-based violence (as well as other forms of violence), and travel can be particularly restricted in such locations. However, fear for women's safety when they are away from the home is widespread in Myanmar, and anecdotal evidence suggests that the

level of fear may be greater than the actual threat in many areas.

**Education, Experience, and Skills:** Although it was traditionally the case that men in Myanmar were more likely to be educated than women, any such difference has not been extreme for several decades at least. Recent data shows that 34.2 percent of women complete upper secondary school, whereas only 25.7 percent of males do so. Females also make up 65.2 percent of undergraduate students, 80.5 percent of masters students, and 80.8 percent of PhD students in Myanmar. While formal educational attainment appears to be insignificant in explaining women's low level of representation in decision-making positions, their historically widespread exclusion from these positions means that they have had less opportunity to acquire relevant skills and experience. If women's representation in decision-making positions continues to increase, then the gender gap in experience and informally acquired skills will decline. However, such change will occur slowly, and this process can be hastened by providing training in leadership and specific technical skills to current and potential female leaders.

**Institutional Factors:** Institutional factors can be important in shaping men's and women's ability to participate. For example, multi-country studies have found that women in countries that have first-past-the-post, majoritarian electoral systems are less likely to be selected as candidates, and subsequently be elected as MPs, than those in countries that have proportional representation electoral systems. Thus, the electoral system in place in Myanmar for Union and state/region parliaments is likely to limit women's access to electoral office.

## **THREE: INCREASING GENDER EQUALITY OF PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNANCE OF MYANMAR**

### **3.1: Recent and Current Efforts**

#### **3.1.1 Government of Myanmar**

The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, 2013-2022 (NSPAW) was published in 2013 and calls for the improvement of “systems, structures, and practices to ensure women’s equal participation in decision-making and leadership at all levels of society.” However, NSPAW is a non-binding commitment, and the government of 2011-15 took very little practical action to improve the gender equality of participation. An exception to this general neglect has been the piloting of the National Community Driven Development Project (NCDDP), which began in three townships in 2013 and was due to expand to 27 townships by the end of 2015. The World Bank-funded NCDDP targets poor, rural communities and is intended to promote citizen participation in local decision-making so as to improve communities’ access to basic infrastructure. The World Bank was able to persuade the Department of Rural Development to adopt a quota mandating 50 percent male and 50 percent female representation on the village tract committees created for this project. These committees are the key decision-making bodies for deciding which infrastructure projects will receive funds. Training for women committee members to increase their confidence and capacity to contribute to decision-making is also part of the project design.

Although it is still too early to know what steps the new government will take to promote gender equality of participation in governance, NLD’s manifesto has dedicated a page to women’s issues, covering the following topics: (1) effective implementation of existing laws to ensure gender equality in business, government, and the social sphere; (2) ending “the persecution, insecurity, violence, and other forms of harassment and bullying suffered by women”; (3) equal land tenure rights; (4) equal pay and promotion in the workplace; (5) gender equality of educational access; and (6) access to prenatal and postnatal care and

maternity leave. It should also be noted that the NLD has done considerably more than the USDP to promote gender equality of participation within its own party, including having a high percentage of female members on the Central Executive Committee (CEC) and adopting a policy in late 2013 that gives preference to selecting women, ethnic minorities, and youth as parliamentary candidates when there is no clear difference in ability.

#### **3.1.2 Political Parties**

A small number of parties running in the last election adopted voluntary targets for a minimum number of female candidates; however, only the National Democratic Force met its target. The majority view in most parties appears to be opposed to mandatory quotas, and no practical steps have been taken to address this issue.

#### **3.1.3 The Peace Process**

The peace process has hitherto had very low gender equality of participation, and gender considerations have received little attention in the discussions. In an attempt to help remedy this, the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) was formed in 2014 to advocate for greater gender equality in this crucial sphere of governance. AGIPP initially focused on getting a quota mandating a minimum 30 percent representation of women in bodies responsible for political dialogue related to the peace process. This call has now been heeded, with the participants at the January 2016 Union peace conference talks agreeing “to enable at least 30 percent participation by women at different levels of political dialogues according to the political dialogue framework of [the] Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.” However, it should be noted that, as of mid-February 2016, there is no clarity as to which bodies this will apply to, or how it will be implemented.

#### **3.1.4 Myanmar Civil Society and International Development Organizations**

The combined membership of the Women’s Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON) and the

Gender Equality Network (GEN) includes most of the domestic and international non-governmental organizations working on gender equality and women's rights in Myanmar. GEN and WON member organizations working on women-and-leadership/women-and-public-life have primarily been engaged in advocacy work and providing leadership trainings to women. Since 2011, CARE Myanmar has implemented what is perhaps the most comprehensive and holistic approach to promoting women's participation. CARE stresses the need to (1) increase the "individual agency" of women (through building their knowledge, skills, confidence, and awareness), and (2) influence "relations" (with family members, peers, friends, religious leaders) and "structure" (norms, tradition, policy, law, religion, regulations). CARE reports that it has already had some successes with its programming. Some women in the target townships have become 10-household and 100-household heads, and women have taken on leadership roles in other projects, such as the woman who became chairperson of her village's Green Emerald yFund committee.

Over the last 20 years, a number of Myanmar women's organizations operating in exile have been engaged in research and advocacy work to influence domestic policy and the policies of other countries towards Myanmar. Since 2011, there has been increasing space for Myanmar civil society and international development partners to conduct research and advocate for policy changes that promote gender equality and participation in governance. Of the organizations working with political parties, Phan Tee Eain has probably been the most prominent, using their Women's Leadership Academy to work with a number of parties (although not the NLD or USDP) to provide capacity building workshops, advocacy workshops, and exposure visits (to India and Sweden) for women party members. Around 60-70 of the women party members that received their training went on to contest seats in the 2015 elections. Despite the large number of non-governmental organizations now carrying out research, advocacy, and program activities, these organizations have had relatively little interaction with the government or political parties. It is hoped that in the coming years, international development partners and Myanmar civil

society will be able to increasingly engage with the Myanmar government and political parties on the issue of gender equality of participation, and share their technical expertise.

### 3.2: Future Plans and Opportunities

**Engaging Men and Changing Social Norms:** Over the last one or two years there has been growing recognition within organizations working on women's rights and gender equality issues in Myanmar of the need to engage more with men. Engaging men is important, because male attitudes crucially shape household attitudes towards women's participation in governance; they determine how men respond to women when they do participate; and they affect the broader social context determining men's and women's opportunities for participation. In addition to the household and community levels, it is essential to engage men in government, political parties, EAGs, and civil society.

Hitherto, many of the activities of development organizations promoting women's empowerment and leadership have focused on trainings to raise women's knowledge, skills, and confidence. Although such trainings are certainly needed, the broader social context must also change if significant gains in gender equality of participation are to be achieved. This is closely related to the need to engage men, and the need to change attitudes within their own organizations, in political parties and the government, and among friends, colleagues, and the public.

**The Role of Media:** Access to international media has been shown to affect gender norms in a number of developing countries. Access to media sources such as cable television and, even more so, the internet, is expanding rapidly in Myanmar, and can be expected to promote greater acceptance of female leadership. Greater exposure to role models of female leaders in Myanmar and other countries is also likely to give more women the confidence to seek leadership positions.

**Training and Exposure Visits:** The women leaders from political parties, NGOs, and CBOs who had attended leadership training workshops found the training useful. Women from CBOs typically referred

to the “knowledge” they gained; women from NGOs mentioned improvements in specific leadership skills such as public speaking, prioritizing issues, motivating themselves and others, and critical thinking; and women from political parties spoke of their increased understanding of women’s rights, legal issues, and governance issues. The women also spoke positively of the opportunity to network with other women leaders that the trainings provided. It is important to note that there have been very few leadership trainings specifically targeting women in Myanmar’s civil service.

**Local Development Programs:** “Community-driven development” (CDD) projects have been a popular approach in recent decades for donors and international development organizations, most notably the World Bank, looking to increase citizen participation in decision-making and the provision of public services, with the concomitant benefits that increased participation can potentially provide. Such projects often include measures to increase the gender equality of participation in local decision-making. In some cases this has included quotas mandating gender equality of representation in decision-making bodies, as is the case in the NCDDP, currently rolled out in Myanmar.

A number of international NGOs and at least one Myanmar NGO (METTA Development Foundation) involved in creating local decision-making bodies to improve the provision of public services have included a strong focus on gender equality of participation in these bodies. This approach is not universal, however, and there is insufficient information to judge the success of these interventions.

**Quotas:** As already mentioned, the NCDDP includes a quota mandating 50:50 representation of males and females on the relevant village tract committees. The impact of quotas varies according to the nature of the quota system and the political and social context. A well-designed quota system, particularly when combined with appropriate additional measures (such as trainings and public awareness campaigns), remains one of the most potentially powerful tools for increasing the gender equality of representation. Quotas mandating a minimum level of gender equality of participation can

be considered for a wide range of governance bodies and positions, including Union MPs, state/region MPs, the elected committees at township level, village tract administrators, and various committees at the village tract and village levels.

**Actions to Promote (Female) Participation at Local Levels:** The 2012 Ward or Village Tract Administration Law introduced indirect elections for the position of VTA. In theory, household heads elect someone to represent their designated group of 10 households, then the 10-household heads elect the village tract/ward administrator from among themselves. Most household heads in Myanmar are men, so in practice this electorate is highly gender unequal, restricting women’s participation and voice. It is recommended that this system of indirect elections be replaced by direct elections in which all adult citizens are able to vote for their preferred candidate for VTA.

The Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWWAF) and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) have nationwide coverage within the government-controlled areas of Myanmar from the village tract level upwards. They are able to mobilize a large number of members to engage in development activities, and can provide women with leadership experience that can help prepare them for other governance roles. Despite the positive role that MWWAF and MMCWA can sometimes play, these organizations also have some notable drawbacks. A number of senior figures have conservative positions on gender roles and women’s rights, and have sometimes sided with the government to oppose women’s rights. Though less prevalent now, the practice of women assuming leadership roles in these organizations because their husband is the senior official at the corresponding level of government is still fairly common.

**The Need for Coordination:** As in various other sectors, many international development organizations are starting to work for the first time on promoting gender equality of leadership and participation in governance in Myanmar. The funding available for Myanmar organizations working in this field is also increasing, and a number of existing organizations are

expanding their programs. The potential benefits from increasing gender equality of participation in governance are considerable, and the changing political landscape has made it easier to work productively in this field. However, this sudden expansion also carries potential risks, including a possible lack of coordination resulting in overlapping projects, and insufficient numbers of appropriately skilled staff to implement the projects. And international organizations newly entering the field may lack sufficient knowledge of the country to design appropriate programs and effectively carry out their operations.

## **FOUR: GENDER (IN)EQUALITY AND POLICYMAKING, BUDGETING, AND PUBLIC-SERVICE DELIVERY**

### **4.1: The Importance of Incorporating Gender Equality Considerations**

Gender inequalities in a country's economy, society, and access to public services are unfair and reduce the welfare of the "less equal" gender, but they also limit economic and social development in general. Therefore, by challenging gender inequalities, adopting a gender perspective in policy-making and budgeting can lead to a more efficient use of government resources. An appreciation of gender differences in access to public services can also increase efficiency and equitability. For example, women in Myanmar are typically less able to travel than men, especially if it requires staying away from home overnight, and this ought to be considered when providing trainings, healthcare, and a range of other public services. Increasing citizen participation, and the equality of participation, is in most cases welfare enhancing in itself. And by harnessing the knowledge of more members of society, it can improve the quality of decision-making and result in more effective and efficient delivery of public services. As noted, men and women have different preferences with regard to policies and spending, and so accounting for and responding to these differences will also increase equitability.

Policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery ought to be considered hand-in-hand. Yet, at the moment, Myanmar's budgets largely follow prior practice, and there is little central strategic oversight or

control of spending allocations. Although some measures to promote gender equality can be relatively low cost in budget terms (e.g., removing any laws that explicitly discriminate against women), policies aimed at promoting gender equality, as with most government policies, need adequate funding to be implemented effectively.

### **4.2: Current Situation of Myanmar**

#### **4.2.1 Government of Myanmar's Commitments under CEDAW and NSPAW**

In 1997, Myanmar became a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The CEDAW Committee has indicated that states have obligations to use budgetary measures to achieve women's equality. Further, Myanmar is also a signatory to the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), which has promised to finance the securing of equality between women and men and make efforts to systematically review how women benefit from public-sector expenditures. To facilitate implementation of CEDAW and BPA, in 2013 the Government of Myanmar (GoM) published the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women. NSPAW covers 12 priority areas, and states that laws and policies should be reviewed, developed, and applied so as to promote the rights of women and girls. Unfortunately, despite NSPAW's bold aims, it has so far had very little impact on actual policymaking or budgeting, and there has been little commitment shown by Parliament or state entities outside of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement (MoSWRR) – a ministry that in FY 2014-15 received just 0.1 percent of the government budget.

#### **4.2.2 Recent Legislative and Policy Changes**

The term of the last government saw some limited legislative progress towards promoting women's rights and gender equality, including the development of a draft Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) law and certain aspects of land use policy (although the provisions to promote gender equality and women's rights in the current drafts of these documents are not as

strong as they could be). GEN and its member organizations have also been able to raise gender equality issues within Myanmar's universal periodic review process. However, 2015 saw the passing of what are commonly referred to as the "four bills to protect race and religion." These bills contain provisions that clearly contradict Myanmar's commitments under CEDAW, and are regressive for women's rights. And there is little understanding within government of the need to consider gender differences when designing and implementing policies or allocating budgets.

#### **4.2.3 Gender Differences in Policy and Budget Preferences**

According to research, there are gender differences in budget and policy preferences in Myanmar. It seems that women in Myanmar give higher priority to health and education, whereas men give higher priority to transportation. It can also be noted that services provided by the underfunded MoSWRR are far more closely aligned with the activities that women spend their time on. Although spending on education and health has increased rapidly in the last few years, the Union budget for FY 2014-15 allocated less money to the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the MoSWRR combined than was given to the Ministries of Energy, Defense, or Power.

#### **4.2.4 Measuring Budget Outputs and Outcomes**

Ultimately, including detailed analysis of budget outputs and outcomes by gender is the best way to use budgeting to promote gender equality. However, this will not be feasible in the immediate future, and there are more basic changes to the budgeting process that should be made first, including establishing clear policy priorities and setting budget allocations accordingly, establishing a universal and unified budget, increasing the transparency of budget allocations and processes, and increasing opportunities for all citizens to meaningfully participate in budget decision-making at all levels of government.

#### **4.2.5 Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Accountability**

The current absence or low quality of much of the budget data required to carry out effective quantitative analysis of Myanmar's budget allocations, outputs, and outcomes means that decision-makers have much to gain from the insights provided by citizen participation in budgeting and public-service delivery. However, citizens' ability to participate here is hampered not only by the factors described in Section 2.3, but also by the extremely low level of awareness they have of budgeting processes, responsibilities, and allocations. This low level of awareness is especially prevalent among women. In particular, the general ignorance as to which individuals are responsible for decisions on planning, budgeting, and public-service delivery at subnational levels severely limits citizens' ability to hold decision-makers to account. Many CSOs also have a low level of awareness on these issues, limiting their capacity to represent citizens' voices and demand accountability. The lack of awareness is partly due to budget information not being publicly available, and to the ineffective communication of the information that is available.

#### **4.2.6 Existing Efforts in Myanmar to Integrate Gender Considerations with Policymaking, Budgeting, and Public-Service Delivery**

Political parties, and government bodies at all levels, generally have little idea of how to make budgeting and public-service delivery more gender responsive, or why this would be desirable. As a result, these aspects of governance typically do not promote gender equality, and often reflect existing gender inequalities in Myanmar society. Over the last few years, GEN, WON, and many of their member organizations have been involved in policy advocacy on a number of issues, with varying levels of success. However, hitherto, GEN and WON members have had little involvement in budgeting and public-service delivery.

### **4.3: Potential Approaches to Increasing Gender Equality**

#### **4.3.1 Increasing Participation in Decision-Making**

As demonstrated in various international cases, increased participation can be achieved when the political will exists. In Myanmar, a considerable number of “local development funds” or other, similar types of funds have been introduced at the subnational level. As yet, the NCDDP is the only program that includes a strong commitment to raising the equality of participation in all places, although in some locations local authorities, INGOs, constituency MPs, and Myanmar civil society are making efforts to promote the equality of participation in other funds.

#### **4.3.2 Altering Budget Allocations**

The government can also improve the gender equality of budgeting by increasing allocations to the “social sectors” (i.e., health, education, and social welfare). Increasing the share of the budget that goes to these sectors would also be popular with many men, and the need for considerable investment in these sectors to catch up with international levels of spending and standards of service provision is clear.

#### **4.3.3 The Role of the Ministry of Planning and Finance**

The Ministry of Planning and Finance currently has a low level of authority in planning and budgeting, and its role should be increased, to help ensure fiscal discipline and to make it easier to align budget allocations with policy priorities. As this change (hopefully) takes place, this ministry will play a key role in determining whether budgeting is used in a way that promotes gender equality or not. Although most senior positions in the Ministry of Planning and Finance are still filled by men, this ministry has a higher proportion of women than the average ministry, and a considerable number of women are found in positions such as director and deputy director at the Union level, and township officer. This relatively high level of female representation may make it easier to interest this

ministry in using budgeting to promote gender equality. Although the high proportion of women employed in the Ministry of Planning and Finance may increase this ministry’s interest in using budgeting to promote gender equality, there is currently a low level of awareness of gender issues in this ministry, and little experience with the technical skills needed to analyze budgets from a gendered perspective. The World Bank already plans to provide financial and technical assistance to this ministry to help it raise the voices of women and minorities in local-level, bottom-up planning, and build the capacity of the Budget Department to conduct gendered analysis of public spending.

#### **4.3.4 Opportunities and Challenges for Engagement by Myanmar Civil Society and INGOs**

Until now, CSOs, Myanmar NGOs, and INGOS working on gender equality issues have had limited interaction with ministries other than MoSWRR. Under the new government, there are likely to be more opportunities for these member organizations to engage with ministries, and this represents an avenue to advance gender equality through policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery. The new Parliament may present more opportunities for engagement, but these organizations need to build their technical capacities regarding budgeting and public-service delivery issues.

#### **4.3.5 National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women**

The NSPAW, among other things, repeatedly calls for more participation by women in the development and implementation of government policy, and for the allocation of sufficient budgetary, human, and material resources by government and non-governmental organizations for the activities and policies described in the plan. Although it has had little effect due to its non-binding nature, with sufficient government commitment and a well-designed implementation strategy, NSPAW could be an important guiding document affecting policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery.

## FIVE: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Participation in the governance of Myanmar remains highly gender unequal. The low level of female participation, together with the widespread lack of awareness of the relevance of gender issues, also acts as a barrier to more effective and equitable policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery. The following suggestions include key ideas for the government, political parties, Myanmar civil society, and international development partners to promote citizen participation, and gender equality of participation in particular, in the governance of Myanmar.

### For the Government of Myanmar

- GoM should implement the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women.
- GoM should consider expanding the use of quotas for female representation in governance bodies. Quotas could be applied to one or more of the following: Union MPs, state/region MPs, elected township committees, village tract administrators, and village tract and village-level development committees.
- To promote democratization and improve the quality of local governance, GoM should:
- Restore the position of 100-household head/village head in rural areas.
- Introduce direct elections for the positions of village tract administrator and 100-household head/village head, with one vote for each adult in the constituency.
- Introduce rules for ward/village tract and village-level authorities stipulating a minimum level of engagement with the public.
- In community-level development projects, GoM and non-governmental organizations should take concrete steps to promote equality of participation in the local decision-making forums that are created.
- Possibly working with non-governmental organizations, GoM should provide trainings for local officials to help them change attitudes and behaviors in ways that promote the participation of all citizens in public meetings.
- To increase budget transparency at Union and subnational levels, GoM should:
- Release more budget data to CSOs and the public in easy-to-understand formats.

- Clearly communicate, to CSOs and citizens, which individuals, communities, and government bodies are responsible for making decisions on policy and budgets, especially at local levels.
- GoM, with the assistance of international development partners, should continue to improve the quality of budget data that is collected, and pay particular attention to gender differences as they collect data on budget outputs and outcomes.
- GoM should increase budget allocations to the “social sectors” – health, education, and social welfare. The need to increase allocations to social welfare is particularly acute.

### For International Development Partners

- International donors, international financial institutions, and UN agencies should support implementation of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women.
- International and Myanmar organizations should collect better data on (1) citizen participation in decision-making and citizens’ preferences on policies and budget allocations, and (2) the impact of their programs, and they should make their data and analysis more readily available to other organizations and individuals.
- Donors should provide funding for exposure visits and knowledge-exchange forums for subnational governance actors.
- Using existing data, international financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, and UN Agencies should help GoM to begin integrating gender considerations into policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery at both the Union and subnational levels.

### For Political Parties

- Political parties should create and implement policies increasing the gender equality of participation in their parties. They may wish to adopt quotas to ensure a minimum level of female participation in their central committees and central executive committees.
- Political parties should seek technical support from international development partners and Myanmar civil society for how to integrate gender considerations into policy, budgeting, and public-service delivery.

For Myanmar Civil Society

- Organizations providing leadership training to women leaders should offer more trainings focused on specific technical issues.
- Organizations working on women's rights and gender equality should expand their recent efforts to engage men, and donors should seek to fund such work. Given the present state of uncertainty about what works, knowledge sharing will be particularly important in this area.
- Non-governmental organizations working on gender equality should increase their engagement with GoM and political parties. In order to influence budgeting decisions and support effective policy implementation, it is particularly important to build relationships with the Ministry of Planning and Finance.
- Individuals and organizations conducting research on participation and decision-making in governance in Myanmar should work to integrate gender with other key factors, such as age, socioeconomic class, family background, ethnicity, religion, and geographical location.

## SIX: KEY QUESTIONS AND FURTHER READING

### Discussion Questions

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current system(s) of local governance in Myanmar with regard to promoting gender (in)equality?
- What key institutional barriers pose challenges to female participation in Myanmar's governance bodies? What national-level structural changes are required to integrate gender considerations into the Myanmar government's policymaking, budgeting, and public-service delivery?
- How should local governance actors build on recent reforms and decentralization to enhance gender equality in Myanmar?
- What are some of the risks that would follow from Myanmar's gender equality measures, especially with a government significantly influenced by the military?

## Further Reading

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