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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE SUBNATIONAL GOVERNANCE OF MYANMAR

PAUL MINOLETTI

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ONE: INTRODUCTION

Despite the formation of state/region governments and efforts to deconcentrate governance processes since 2011, Myanmar's system of governance remains highly centralized and is overwhelmingly composed of men. As some authority is transferred to subnational governments, leading to an expansion of local decision-making and the roles of local authorities, understanding the nature of women's participation in subnational governance institutions and processes is essential.

This briefing explores these issues with three principal questions in mind:

- What proportion of key decision-making positions at the subnational level of governance are occupied by women?
- Does women's participation in subnational governance structures matter?
- What are the barriers and enabling factors affecting women's participation in governance structures?

Analytical work done in other parts of the world has shown that increased women's participation in the political, social, and economic life of a country can lead to significant improvements in the equity and effectiveness of policies, to the benefit of all stakeholders. In Myanmar, women account for only 4.42 percent of MPs in the National Parliament.¹ This figure is extremely low compared to other countries in ASEAN and globally. At the

subnational level, women's representation is even lower than at the national level, with women accounting for only 2.83 percent of MPs at the state and region level, 0 percent of administrators at the township level, and 0.11 percent of village heads. Women generally have a secondary role within Myanmar's various armed groups and their associated political parties, and their participation is also typically limited in other political parties and religious organizations. The exception to this is that women's participation is highest within civil society, with women often occupying senior positions with real decision-making power.

This briefing presents evidence that strongly suggests that women in Myanmar differ from men as to which governance issues are most important, giving greater priority to healthcare, education, sanitation, and microfinance. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that women decision-makers in Myanmar are more responsive than male decision-makers to women's priorities, raising a number of implications for the male-dominated governance institutions of Myanmar.

This briefing outlines women's participation in the various forms of subnational governance in Myanmar, discusses why women's participation matters, and identifies the barriers and enabling factors affecting their participation. Evidence presented is drawn from focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, data from the General Administrative Department (GAD), literature from comparative international contexts, research from local organizations such as the Gender Development Initiative (GDI), and a host of INGOs, including ActionAid, CARE, and Oxfam.

¹ To be revised as per results of November 2015 general elections.

TWO: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MYANMAR'S GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

In February 2016, a new Parliament will convene, and in March a new government will form as per the results of the general elections held in November 2015. The data presented below is reflective of the situation under the incumbent government, and thus will require revision when the new administration enters into power.

As seen in Table 1, women's participation in formal governance structures is very low.² In the 2010 national elections, women accounted for less than 4 percent of the candidates. Women's low representation among MPs carries over into their low representation as ministers – of a total of 33 ministries, only two

are led by women (the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement).³ As shown in Figure 1, women's representation in Myanmar's National Parliament is extremely low compared to other ASEAN countries.⁴

Women's level of representation in the most important decision-making positions is even lower at the subnational level than it is at the national level.⁵ There are six states and regions (Chin, Kayah, Kayin, and Mon states, and Sagaing and Tanintharyi regions) that do not have any female MPs. The state and region parliaments that have women ministers are Kachin State (minister of social affairs; minister of Shan national race affairs), Yangon Region (minister of finance), and Ayeyarwady Region (minister of social affairs).

Table 1: Women's Representation in Myanmar's Union-LEVEL Parliament⁶

	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.

² As Table 1 shows, women currently make up less than 6 percent of the total elected members of Myanmar's lower and upper houses. When military appointees are accounted for, women's representation falls to 4.42 percent. Women are particularly poorly represented in the upper house, accounting for only 1.79 percent of representatives in that chamber.

³ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/burmas-government-appoint-second-woman-minister.html> [accessed 10 May 2014].

⁴ *Myanmar: Women in Parliament 2012*. (Yangon: Phan Tee Eain (PTE) and The Gender Equality Network, October 2012).

⁵ Women account for only 25 of the 883 MPs across the states and regions (2.83 percent). And they account for only four of the 169 state and region ministers (2.37 percent).

⁶ Note that in eight constituencies it has not been possible to hold elections, hence the discrepancy between the number of constituencies and the number of elected members. Adapted from *Myanmar: Women in Parliament 2012* (Yangon: Phan Tee Eain and The Gender Equality Network, October 2012).

Table 2: Women’s Representation in Myanmar’s State and Region Parliaments⁷

State/Region	Elected MPs (N)	Elected MPs Who Are Women (N)	Women as % of Elected MPs	Military MPs	Total MPs	Women as % of Total MPs
Mon	23	6	26.1%	8	31	≥19.4%
Yangon	92	18	19.6%	31	123	≥14.6%
Ayeyarwaddy	54	10	18.5%	18	72	≥13.9%
Sagaing	76	14	18.4%	25	101	≥13.9%
Magway	51	8	15.7%	17	68	≥11.8%
Bago	57	8	14.0%	19	76	≥10.5%
Kachin	40	5	12.5%	13	53	≥9.4%
Kayin	17	2	11.8%	6	23	≥8.7%
Tanintharyi	21	2	9.5%	7	28	≥7.1%
Mandalay	57	4	7.0%	19	76	≥5.3%
Shan	103	7	6.8%	39	142	≥4.9%
Chin	18	0	0.0%	6	24	≥0%
Kayah	15	0	0.0%	5	20	≥0%
Rakhine	35	0	0.0%	12	47	≥0%
Total	659	84	12.7%	431	884	≥9.5%

Source: See Table 1

2.1: Women’s Representation in Non-Government Governance Institutions

After formally excluding them for more than 50 years, in October 2013 the rules were changed to allow women to join the *Tatmadaw*.⁸ Nevertheless, it seems highly unlikely that women will fill any senior positions in the medium term. In non-government armed groups and their associated political parties, women have limited roles, and they are generally excluded from positions of power.⁹

As is the case in most countries, women’s level of activity and leadership in Myanmar is higher in the spheres of civil society and

community activism than in “formal politics.”¹⁰ Women in Myanmar generally tend to have strong representation in CBOs, LNGOs, and INGOs. Moreover, in village-level committees established by development actors, female representation can be high, though influence is often still low. Men disproportionately hold key decision-making positions such as chairperson and secretary. It is also important to note that women are typically much less vocal in committee meetings than men, which diminishes their ability to influence decisions.

The Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) and the Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWAF) are nationwide government-linked organizations that

⁷ Nixon, Hamish, Cindy Joelene, Thet Aung Lynn, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Matthew Arnold. 2013. *State and Region Governments in Myanmar*. Yangon: The Asia Foundation and Myanmar Development Research Institute – Centre for Economic and Social Development. Data found on pages 55 and 92. It is important to note that this data is for government-controlled areas of Myanmar only. N.b. The author regrets that he does not have any relevant data at the district level that can be included in this table, but what is here was given to the author by GAD, 5 March 2014.

⁸ “Armed Forces to Open Doors to Women,” *Mizzima*, 17 October 2013. <<http://www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/myanmar/item/10361-armed-forces-to-open-doors-to-women/10361-armed-forces-to-open-doors-to-women>> [accessed 22 May 2014].

⁹ However, there are a few exceptions: Naw Zipporah Sein (general secretary of the Karen National Union) is the most prominent, but Mi Sardar (central committee member of the New Mon State Party), and Maw Oo Myah (religious and cultural minister of the Karenni National Progressive Party) are also worthy of mention. The coordinator of the Kachin Women’s Peace Network, May Sabe Phyu, works to increase female participation in the peace process, and the Kachin State Democracy Party states that almost half of their members are women.

¹⁰ Andrea Cornwall and Anne Marie Goetz, “Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives,” *Democratization*, 12 (2005), 788.

focus on addressing the needs of women¹¹ and providing opportunities to take on decision-making roles at the community level and above. However, one interviewee stated that the majority of MWAF and MMCWA staff are chosen because of who their husbands are (e.g., village administrator, township administrator, state/region chief minister), rather than on merit.

Women account for nearly 40 percent of judges in state and region courts, and nearly 50 percent of judges and judicial officers at district and township levels. This suggests high levels of women's participation in the judicial system at the subnational level; however, further research is needed to add both qualitative and quantitative data on the role of women in the judiciary.

2.2: Why Women's Participation in Governance Structures Matters

The World Bank's 2012 *World Development Report* convincingly argues that the ability to have a voice in society and public policy is a crucial aspect of women's agency. Following Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's pioneering work on "capabilities," agency is held to have intrinsic relevance for women's individual well-being and quality of life, with a person's ability to make effective choices and exercise control over their own life being a key dimension of well-being.¹² Not only is choice significant, but ensuring that women's voices are heard is essential from an *equity* perspective. Women's ability to contribute to governance decision-making also matters from an *efficiency* perspective: (1) Women typically have greater knowledge than men on issues pertinent to their daily lives (including, but not limited to, child-rearing, family health, education curricula), enabling them to contribute vital knowledge to the decision-making process; and (2) involving women (or other excluded groups) in the decision-making process increases compliance with the decisions/rules that are made.¹³

2.3: Women's and Men's Governance Preferences

Research in Myanmar has suggested that women tend to be focused on the household sphere and meeting basic family needs, whereas men are oriented towards the public sphere.¹⁴ More specifically, women are reported to be more interested in healthcare, sanitation, children's education, day-to-day livelihood

and family income needs, and microfinance, whereas men are reported to have greater interest in more general or abstract political concepts such as power and the Constitution, business, and physical infrastructure such as roads and electricity.¹⁵ Some of these differences in preference are described below.

Time Use: Previous studies of Myanmar indicate that women's income-generating activities tend to be smaller in scale and located closer to home than men's, and that they have more responsibilities for caring for the family.¹⁶ The gender differences in governance preferences reported in some of the interviews and FGDs carried out for this paper broadly reflect these differences in time use. In 71.9 percent of households across Myanmar that do not have a source of drinking water on their own premises, a female aged 15 or over was found to be the person usually responsible for collecting water.¹⁷

Social Relations, Crime, and Intra-Household Behavior: Rape often goes unreported, and of the rape cases that are reported, many are settled out of court, meaning that the perpetrator is not subject to criminal conviction. Most communities in Myanmar expect women to adapt their behavior to the threat of rape (real and perceived) rather than taking measures to address and eliminate it. Indeed, in certain communities in Myanmar, a single woman who is raped is expected by her family/community to marry her rapist, on the grounds that, since she is no longer a virgin, she is no longer marriageable. Spousal rape is still not a crime in Myanmar.

There is much scope for governance actors in Myanmar to act proactively on these issues. A key objective stated in the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women is to eliminate all violence towards women and girls, and the Department of Social Welfare is currently working together with the Gender Equality Network to draft anti-violence-against-women laws. Sexual harassment of women is common in Myanmar, and in many communities in Myanmar domestic violence is still tolerated to some degree. Domestic violence is frequently regarded as a private, intra-household matter in Myanmar, and is often socially legitimized; as such, some may argue that this issue is unrelated to governance.

¹¹ MWAF's mission is "to promote the welfare and advancement of women with the aim to enable them to participate fully in the national development." MMCWA's mission is "to serve Myanmar society by improving [the] health and well-being of mothers and children with the aim to improve the quality of life of the people."

¹² Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Random House, 1999); Amartya Sen, "Development As Capability Expansion," *Journal of Development Planning* 19: 41-58; The World Bank. 2011. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington: The World Bank: pp. 151-52.

¹³ Bina Agarwal, "Participatory Exclusions, Community Forestry, and Gender: An Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework," *World Development* 29, no. 10 (2001): 16, 36-38; Elinor Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996): 1079.

¹⁴ N.b. Gender is far from the only factor that influences governance preferences. Other factors can include social status, income, ethnicity, religion, age, and rural or urban residency.

¹⁵ Interviews: IKC3, IKC10, INP2, INP5, IYN.

¹⁶ Roisin Furlong, "Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Economic Advancement in Myanmar: A Discussion Paper Exploring Women's Participation in Agricultural and Fishing Markets in Myanmar" (Yangon: Oxfam GB Myanmar, 2012): 9, 14-15; The Gender and Development Initiative, *Gender-Based Constraints in Rural Areas and Women's Empowerment in HDI of UNDP Myanmar* (Yangon: Gender and Development Initiative, 2011): 21-28; Annami Löfving, *Women's Participation in Public Life in Myanmar* (Yangon: ActionAid, CARE, and Oxfam, October 2011): 8-12.

¹⁷ N.b. Yangon (43.5 percent) is the only state or region where adult females are not the person usually collecting water in the majority of households that do not have a source of drinking water on their own premises. Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health, and UNICEF, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2009-2010* (Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health and UNICEF, 2011), pp.34, 90.

Myanmar statutory law stipulates the equal division of property between descendants, regardless of gender. However, in practice, customary law is frequently permitted to override statutory law, and with only very rare exceptions, women in Chin and Kachin communities do not receive any inheritance whatsoever.¹⁸ Laws that prevent women from divorcing, or result in them having little or no property after divorce, seriously reduce their bargaining power within the household.¹⁹ Cultural and social norms related to divorce are highly sensitive, and certainly not all women in Myanmar would support a reduction in social/cultural practices that punish women who divorce, but encouraging debate on the equity implications of the current status quo is important.

2.4: How Does Female Representation Affect Governance Decision-Making and Behavior?

Among the female village-level committee members and leaders interviewed by ActionAid et al., two of the most common reasons they gave for why it is beneficial to have female involvement in decision-making forums and leadership roles were to be able to speak for themselves and to represent and work for other women's needs, and to act as a counterweight to men's power. This limited evidence suggests that female decision-makers in Myanmar may be more responsive to the priorities of women citizens than male decision-makers are, but further study of this issue is needed.

METTA Development Foundation, a national NGO that works with local communities across Myanmar, has found that the higher the level of female participation in the communities they are working in, the more successful the projects tend to be. A number of interviewees expressed a view that women's input into governance decision-making delivers benefits because women pay greater attention to "detail." Other positive traits identified in interviews and FGDs carried out for this paper as being associated with women leaders included higher levels of motivation than many of their male colleagues; being less confrontational and better at negotiating solutions that satisfy all parties; having greater sincerity and kindness and "seeing reality more"; women village heads having a better relationship with villagers because they are able to organize them in a "gentle" manner; and women village heads being "more patient and accurate."

Women who are appointed to positions within centralized and authoritarian parties, and whose position is dependent on the actions of powerful individuals within that party, are unlikely to be able to challenge the policy preferences of the leadership. If the party leadership in these cases is male dominated, women are unlikely to respond to the preferences of female constituents.²⁰ Political parties can take actions to enable women to gain political experience, for example by instituting internal quotas for decision-making positions within the party, and ensuring that women's access to these positions does not depend on familial or personal relationships. Civil society actors can also provide training to women specifically focused on providing them with the skills to enter, or move up in, the political system.

The limited evidence available for Myanmar, together with international experience, suggests that women in decision-making positions are likely to be more responsive to the preferences of women, and may also deliver benefits in terms of efficiency.

2.5: Barriers and Enabling Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Governance Structures

Education, skills, and experience: The IHLCA 2009-10 survey data suggests that, although women in Myanmar are more likely than men to have very low levels of educational attainment and to lack basic literacy and numeracy, formal educational attainment is not a significant reason for their low levels of participation in governance.²¹ While females living in rural areas have considerably lower educational attainment than females in urban areas, this is also the case for males, and there is no major difference in the gender gap for educational attainment between urban and rural areas.²² Women's lack of experience in occupying public decision-making roles appears to negatively affect their participation. NGOs offer women in Myanmar a rare opportunity to gain experience in public decision-making roles, as well as access to training in specific skills.

Intra-household bargaining power: Women's bargaining power within a household is important for their ability to participate in governance, and a correlation between income and decision-making power within the household has been found in many countries.²³ In Myanmar, men are often opposed to female

¹⁸ Interviews IKC7, IKC8, IYN4. In interview IKC8, the interviewee mentioned that there were a few exceptional cases where Kachin women had inherited family wealth. In all of these cases, it was because the only son/all sons were drug addicts and so could not be trusted to use the inheritance wisely. For Chin women not having the right to inherit, see Matthew Smith, "Myanmar's Economy Needs Human Rights Reforms," *Huffington Post*, 2013 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-smith/myanmars-economy-needs-hu_b_4347843.html>.

¹⁹ Esther Duflo, "Women Empowerment and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50 (2012): 1072.

²⁰ Andrea Cornwall and Anne Marie Goetz, "Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives," *Democratization* 12 (2005): 784-88.

²¹ For individuals in the survey aged 20 and above, 84.6 percent of females had never attended school, only slightly lower than the 87.4 percent of males. Of those who did not attend any formal schooling or had completed no more than the first standard, females (7.4 percent) were considerably less likely than males (19.1 percent) to be able to easily pass a test of basic literacy and numeracy. Among the individuals surveyed who had attended formal schooling, females (26.4 percent) were more likely than males (19.1 percent) to drop out before the fourth standard (i.e., fail to complete primary school). However, females (17.1 percent) were slightly more likely than males (16.1 percent) to complete the tenth standard (i.e., high school). And females (11.3 percent) were also more likely than males (8.1 percent) to hold a bachelor's or higher degree.

²² All figures on educational attainment are from data kindly provided by Andrea Smurra, who extracted the figures from the original data set for the IHLCA 2009-10 household survey.

²³ For example, see Cheryl R. Doss, "Is Risk Fully Pooled within the Household? Evidence from Ghana," *Economic Development & Cultural Change* 50 (2001): 124-25; Esther Duflo and Christopher Udry, *Intrahousehold Resource Allocation in Cote d'Ivoire: Social Norms, Separate Accounts and Consumption Choices* (New Haven: National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2004): 33-35; Greta Friedemann-Sánchez, "Assets in Intra-Household Bargaining Among Women Workers in Colombia's Cut-Flower Industry," *Feminist Economics* 12 (2006): 247-69.

members of their household getting involved in community/public decision-making, and so women who are totally economically dependent on men can often have their participation curtailed. Norms and laws that result in women having few or no assets and reduce their opportunity to earn reduce their bargaining power within marriage.²⁴

Time constraints: Females in Myanmar are typically expected to perform most household tasks, and in many communities men are unwilling to share this work if women are engaged in income-generating activities or community/political activities outside the home. Women in Myanmar, unlike men, can face criticism from the wider community if they prioritize business or political activities. There is also generally a strong expectation among male household members that women must complete all of “their” household tasks, and that participation in community/political affairs should not lead to neglect of these tasks, or an expectation that other family members will do them.²⁵

Women’s time constraints are a bigger barrier to their involvement in village administration offices than in most other village-level governance activities. The survey by ActionAid et al. found that the time requirement for those with positions on village peace and development councils was significantly higher than for village-level CBO work, with almost half of the village peace and development council members in the survey having to work at least 32 hours per month, and most positions on the village peace and development councils being unpaid.

In Kachin State, and most probably in some other areas in Myanmar as well, a phenomenon referred to as “absent men” is quite common. “Absent men” refers not only to men who are physically absent from the household, but also to men who are physically present in the household but are unable to contribute to, and indeed often extract from, household income due to their drug addiction, putting greater burdens on women.²⁶

Restrictions on women’s travel: Fear of rape and sexual harassment seriously inhibits women’s long- and short-distance travel and participation in recreational activities. Many subnational governance roles in Myanmar include travel requirements, and so restrictions becomes a barrier to participation.²⁷

Cultural and religious norms: In Myanmar, Buddhist women are considered spiritually inferior to men. The concept of *hpone* is important. *Hpone* is an abstract quality that all men are believed to possess that places them on a higher spiritual level, and while certain women are also considered to possess *hpone*, it is to a much lesser degree. Men’s loss of *hpone* is feared, and it is thought that certain behaviors by women can reduce or pollute men’s *hpone*. Certain household practices, such as washing and ironing women’s and men’s *longyis* together, or women repairing a roof, are held by many to reduce men’s *hpone*. In Christian communities, the impact of religion on women’s participation varies, but Christianity seems to offer women greater opportunity for engagement in public life than traditional animist culture.

Confidence: Many interviewees noted that women’s lack of confidence is a significant barrier to their active participation in governance. Moreover, various traditional proverbs in Myanmar reveal attitudes that see public speaking and decision-making as a male preserve. The norms embodied in these sayings can be expected to affect women’s confidence²⁸ and psychological studies show that negative stereotyping has a significant negative impact on individuals’ performance.²⁹

Perceptions of, and responses to, women leaders: Gendered norms can also affect how women who are in decision-making roles are perceived and responded to (which can in turn affect women’s willingness to take on decision-making roles). In all states and regions surveyed by ActionAid et al., they found some men who were opposed to women being leaders, with this sentiment particularly strong and widespread in Rakhine State and northern Shan State.³⁰ This research found that among the committee members and leaders interviewed across their surveyed areas, the dominant view of leadership involved firm decision-making by an individual who is educated, intelligent, and well-informed, and these qualities are typically associated with men. Some women surveyed rejected this model of leadership, instead emphasizing the need for thoughtfulness, listening skills, and consultation, and these qualities are typically associated with women in Myanmar. The second model of leadership was largely rejected by men, who saw this decision-making style as time consuming and ineffective.³¹ Women in Myanmar can also be marginalized in meetings because of the perception among some males that they are too talkative or gossipy and so cannot be trusted with important information.³²

²⁴ Duflo, “Women Empowerment and Economic Development,” 1072; The World Bank, World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development: 160-61.

²⁵ Löfving, *Women’s Participation in Public Life*, 60. In Kayin culture it has traditionally been relatively common for men to help with domestic work according to the needs of the household, although even here there are strong norms against men washing women’s clothes, and household tasks are still mainly performed by women.

²⁶ The IHLCA survey found that Kachin State has the second-highest proportion of female-headed households (25.0 percent) of any of the states and regions in Myanmar, marginally behind Yangon Region (25.2 percent). As high as this figure is, it is likely to considerably understate the number of Kachin State households with absent men.

²⁷ Brenda Belak, *Gathering Strength: Women from Burma on Their Rights* (Chiang Mai: Images Asia, 2002): 53, 71; United Nations Commission on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, *Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women - Myanmar* (2008) 6.

²⁸ A traditional Kachin saying is that “when men talk a lot they will bring more profit; when women talk a lot they will bring more damage.”

²⁹ The World Bank, World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development: 175.

³⁰ Löfving, 30.

³¹ Ibid, 33.

³² Ibid, 22, 26, 63.

The effect of women leaders on other women's participation:

Previous studies of Myanmar have also found that local women leaders cite the existence of female role models as a reason for getting involved themselves.³³ Having other women to work alongside of in leadership roles can also encourage more women to take on these roles. Women committee members interviewed by ActionAid et al. who worked on all-women committees or mixed-gender committees that had more than one woman described the climate of mutual understanding and cooperation they felt with other women committee members. Globalization, and the increased awareness of practices in other countries, was mentioned by interviewees as a major cause of the increased acceptance of women's leadership among certain segments of Kachin society.

Deliberate interventions and external shocks: Several interviewees mentioned the positive impact that non-state actors have had in promoting women's participation in public life in Myanmar. Interviewees from CARE Myanmar, another international development NGO working in Myanmar, and METTA described how the various trainings and capacity building activities provided by their organizations over extended periods of time to women in their target villages have enabled those women to take on a greater role in community decision-making.³⁴

External shocks to communities can also increase women's leadership opportunities. ActionAid et al. found that male respondents in Ayeyarwady Region were more likely to see the

benefits that female leadership could bring than men in other Buddhist areas. They think that this difference may be attributable to women in this region having had considerable involvement in community work in the wake of the destruction caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008.³⁵

Quotas: One potential way to increase women's participation is government-mandated quotas that reserve a minimum number of seats for women at given levels of government (e.g., ward administrator, village tract administrator, state or region MP, etc.), or that require political parties to field a minimum percentage of women candidates in elections. Two members of the ASEAN community, Indonesia and the Philippines, have already introduced such laws, as have many other Asian countries.³⁶ Myanmar's National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women calls for quotas, but aside from the Ministry of Welfare, there appears to be little interest in implementing them.³⁷

Quotas can be classified into two broad categories: (1) a reservation-of-seats system, whereby a certain number of seats are reserved solely for women; and (2) a reservation-of-candidates system, whereby each political party must field a minimum percentage or number of women candidates.³⁸ Quotas have now been introduced in many countries around the world, raising the number of women in government.³⁹ The reservation-of-seats system tends to be particularly effective in this regard.⁴⁰ If a quota system is to be introduced in Myanmar, it is essential that it be designed carefully, to ensure that gains are maximized.⁴¹

³³ Gender Equality Network, *Taking the Lead: An Assessment of Women's Leadership Training Needs and Training Initiatives in Myanmar* (Yangon: Gender Equality Network, September 2013): 11; Löfving, 27, 55. For instance, FGD participants in Kayin State believed that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's prominent leadership position and behavior was an inspiration for female village heads in their state.

³⁴ Interviews IKC4, IYN5, IYN12. N.b. The authors of this paper do not have the necessary information to assess how much impact these interventions have had.

³⁵ Löfving, 31-32.

³⁶ For details of the quota system in each of these countries, please see Appendix 4 of the full report, *Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar*.

³⁷ U Soe Maung, union minister at the president's office, has rejected the need for quotas in Myanmar, claiming that they are unnecessary given that there is traditionally very little gender discrimination in Myanmar compared to other Asian countries.

³⁸ Huma Haider, "Helpdesk Research Report: Effects of Political Quotas for Women (Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, 2011): 1.

³⁹ Aili Mari Tripp and Alice Kang, "The Global Impact of Quotas on the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (2008): 339-40, 355.

⁴⁰ Haider, 4.

⁴¹ Further research is required in this regard to apply the relevant international lessons learned to Myanmar's particular context.

THREE: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Women account for only a very small percentage of key decision-making positions at all levels of Myanmar's subnational government. The *Tatmadaw*, non-government armed groups, and many political parties currently offer limited opportunities for women. The subnational governance institutions that offer the greatest opportunities for women's participation are CBOs, LNGOs, and INGOs: within these organizations women are represented in considerable numbers, and occupy key decision-making positions. Within the village-level committees that LNGOs and INGOs create, women have much greater levels of participation than they do in village administration offices, although men still disproportionately fill the highest leadership positions within these committees.

A number of barriers and enabling factors for women's participation in governance have been identified. Many interviewees emphasized training, in both specific practical knowledge and skills, and more generally for women's confidence building and gender awareness, as highly beneficial for increasing women's confidence and ability to participate. Women who are already in leadership positions were shown to be able to directly increase women's participation by selecting them for other decision-making positions, and can play an important indirect role by inspiring other women and girls to become leaders.

Women's participation in governance appears to be increasing, and cultural norms among certain segments of the population are changing to become more accepting of women in public leadership roles. However, women's participation remains very low outside of civil society, and many barriers remain. Especially strong resistance to women's leadership has been found in the spheres of politics, religion, and many traditional cultural activities and societies. Entrenched social, cultural, and religious norms also mean that women who are in governance can face resentment from men and have difficulty getting their voices heard.

Women and the peace process

Following the partial signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) on October 15, 2015, government and ethnic representatives are currently drafting a framework for a political dialogue that will look to reconfigure the country's system of governance.

Women remain largely excluded from this process, and this will likely have ramifications for the dialogue. For instance, as ceasefire negotiations thus far have dealt with military and territorial matters, talks between the EAGs and the government have been dominated by male representatives. As the scope of the political dialogue includes a reconfiguration of the political system, however, it is vital that negotiators address issues affecting all Myanmar citizens, both men and women. The framework of talks

and the agenda are being negotiated by various stakeholders, and due to the skewing of gender participation in favor of men, issues pertinent to women are at risk of receiving inadequate attention. These issues, including the provision of social services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and microfinance, are themselves vital areas for development in Myanmar.

As greater democratic space opens up in Myanmar, it is reasonable to expect that civic engagement will increase for both men and women. However, if decision-making positions in formal governance structures remain unattainable, women's public roles will probably continue to be largely confined to the civil service or civil society organizations. This imbalance may be particularly pronounced at the political dialogue, whereby civil society participation may be very limited. If both the government and the EAGs do not address the gender imbalance in governance institutions, it will entrench the divide.

Recommendations

Quotas: Within subnational government, the elected positions of state and region MP and village administrator are particularly suitable for a quota system. Other quota systems should also be explored.

Gender awareness training: Women across Myanmar need training in relevant, specific skills, and more needs to be done to deliver effective gender awareness training to men. It is essential that there is information sharing between organizations providing gender awareness training to men about which approaches work, and which do not, in Myanmar's various geographies, ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Training to men should address sharing the burden of household work; providing encouragement from their household and the community for women to take on public roles and expand their social networks; and the need to reduce gender-based violence.

Skills and leadership training: Training offered by the government and non-government actors must be made equally accessible to women. Important considerations in this regard include ensuring that trainings are offered at times when women are able to attend, and if long distance travel is required, that safe means of travel and accommodation are provided.

Monitoring and evaluation with gender participation in mind: Monitoring and evaluation are needed to assess which policies are most effective for increasing women's participation, and what difference women's participation will make to the behavior of subnational governance institutions.⁴²

Further research on women and governance: Important topics for research include, but are by no means limited to, the impact of women's participation on governance decision-making and behavior; the barriers to, and factors enabling, increased women's participation in governance; how the phenomenon of "absent

⁴² Crucially, the results of such assessments ought to be made publicly available unless there is a compelling reason not to do so.

men” in Kachin State and elsewhere impacts women’s participation in governance; and whether proposed legislation is responsive to women’s governance preferences.

Improve basic infrastructure: Most pressingly, ensuring that more households have electricity would reduce women’s time constraints. Efforts to increase the number of households with access to electricity in Myanmar should be supported by all actors seeking to improve women’s well-being and participation in public life.

FOUR: KEY QUESTIONS AND FURTHER READING

Discussion Questions

- What are the long-term implications for Myanmar if women's participation in governance institutions, especially in bodies involved in the political dialogue, does not increase?
- Looking forward, what will be the major barriers to increased female participation in governance institutions in Myanmar? What are some of the ways in which these barriers can be overcome?
- What lessons can be learned from international examples of deliberate steps that have been taken to increase female participation in governance?
- How can EAGs and government bodies foster greater female participation in the peace process and the political dialogue?
- Are quotas the right way to achieve greater participation? If so, at what levels of governance, and in what ways, should quotas be introduced?

Further Reading

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