



WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY FUNDING DYNAMICS IN MYANMAR, 2010–2020

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List of Acronyms

AGIPP	Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process	NAPs	National Action Plans
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
CRSV	Conflict-related Sexual Violence	NGO	Non-governmental organization
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization	NLD	National League for Democracy
CSO	Civil society organization	NSPAW	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
GBV	Gender-based Violence	ODA	Official Development Assistance
GEWE WG	Gender Equality Women’s Empowerment Working Group	OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
GPS	Gender, Peace, and Security	OECD-DAC	OECD Development Assistance Committee
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations	UN	United Nations
IOs	International Organizations	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
JPF	Joint Peace Fund	WPS	Women, Peace, and Security
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual	WROs	Women’s Rights Organizations

INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on funding flows for gender inclusion in peace processes and how the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was pursued in Myanmar in the period 2010–2020. Post-2021 concerns following the military takeover are considered, particularly in the recommendations for strengthening international support and the recommendations for good practice, however the primary focus is on the prior decade.

It offers those who fund or implement peace and security programming in Myanmar, and those who focus on gender equality and WPS, a critical examination of WPS practices and what those might mean for future initiatives. It primarily focuses on the challenges and opportunities in the financing of WPS efforts. This is particularly pertinent as the 25th anniversary of the seminal United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 in 2025 prompts reflection on the impact of this agenda. This will involve focusing on implementation in countries such as Myanmar, where immense potential is undermined by profound underdevelopment, persistent violent conflict and inequalities, and the failure of successive regimes to respect human rights.

Global funding for gender equality is historically uneven and limited.¹ This takes a variety of forms, including but not limited to:

- Low funding compared to the scale of the challenge.
- Activity-based funding as opposed to program funding.

- Limited or no funding for core organizational costs and development.
- Short timeframes for interventions expecting behavior change outcomes.
- Emphasis on ‘credible’ organizations, which tends to exclude less formal women’s rights groups and networks, and a preference for organizations registered with national authorities, which may be a security risk in itself.
- Uneven funding flows towards organizations based in capitals or major urban centers, versus those at the subnational level or, in the case of Myanmar, in border areas due to the extensive history of forced displacement.

In this report, we focus on these and other factors driving poor-quality WPS financing in Myanmar and inquire into the consequences. This study has several limitations:

- Length—Due to limited space, it cannot and does not cover the full complexity of this issue.
- Actors—The focus is on women’s rights organizations (WROs) and the nascent feminist movement in Myanmar and does not fully unpack the contributions of UN entities or international NGOs. This is worthy of examination in the future, which is encouraged.
- Bias—We have tried to be as measured as possible, but as practitioner-analysts the authors bring their own perspectives and experiences, and biases.

Box 1. Methodology

With so few evaluations and little exploration of what constitutes good WPS practice in Myanmar over the past decade to draw on, this analysis must rely on a combination of interviews, experiential insight, and observation. The authors conducted a literature review of WPS in Myanmar, global gender equality concerns, and aid funding dynamics. Studies of WPS in Myanmar, including this one, still tend to focus on the national level, and subnational WPS trends have received very little attention.

Fifteen interviews were conducted in person or via Signal and other online platforms, including nine with Myanmar practitioners and analysts. Interviewees are not named, for reasons of security and to encourage frank discussion. Those interviewed spanned WRO leaders and personnel, international program managers and academics, state donor representatives, and individuals working in pooled funds (present and past). The authors appreciate the insights and feedback of Myanmar and international colleagues who peer reviewed the report. The authors also drew on their own direct experiences with WPS policy and programming.

What is the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda?

The WPS agenda evolved from hundreds of years of women’s mobilization against war and militarism.² The formal Security Council agenda is linked to broader normative frameworks for gender equality and stands on four pillars: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery.³ The WPS agenda is now more expansive than ever—a strength and a challenge.⁴ In the 2010–2020 period on which this study mostly focuses, the global WPS agenda expanded, with ever more Security Council resolutions (10 and counting), National Action Plans (NAPs), high-level indicators to determine progress, and the like, all shaping policy goals. This had a range of positive and negative consequences for implementation at the national, regional, and global levels by a host of actors: civil society, international NGOs, UN entities, regional organizations, states, and philanthropic organizations.

Over several decades, many peace and security actors—mediators, donors, women’s rights specialists, inclusion proponents, and more—have posited that women’s representation and participation in all aspects of peace and security processes is the “smart” thing to do, not just the right thing. Women’s involvement is increasingly understood to contribute to durability and inclusivity.⁵ This means, among other benefits, that peace agreements hold longer and are more wide ranging, and their implementation is more credible.⁶ Indeed, peace agreement durability has emerged as a core concern in recent decades, and any variables that thwart relapse or promote longevity are being taken more seriously. This has opened more space for serious discussion about inclusion writ large in such processes. Global evidence indicates that the inclusion of women in significant leadership positions within peace processes raises the likelihood of successful negotiations and better agreements.⁷

WPS in Myanmar

In the period 2010–2015, there were certainly WPS-shaped efforts underway in the form of funding to WROs, research, training, and the like. This period might be considered the warmup to a peak when tens of millions of dollars were dedicated to WPS (exactly how much is unclear due to the paucity of data from primary and secondary donors). International focus on WPS intensified in 2015 with the prospect of a ceasefire and multiparty elections. There was

a surge of international confidence and commitments to democratization, peace and security, and liberalization in Myanmar. Put simply, this surged international confidence, interest and commitments to democratization, peace and security and liberalization in Myanmar (heightened by the vast untapped markets long locked away by Myanmar’s pariah status).⁸ With the signing of the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), foreign aid and investment grew rapidly. In the view of one Myanmar practitioner, the WPS agenda was “an opportunity to open doors.”⁹ As she recalled:

Many WROs and networks were really focused on strategic planning and high-level advocacy, but not all the funding was flexible [enough] to do this, and then the system became full of short-term funding, four- to six-month type stuff.¹⁰

A former adviser remarked:

The donor agenda was a liberal economy, a peace deal successfully attributed to Western involvement, and democracy stabilized, all in a short timeframe. The military were the elephant in the room that no one knew how to deal with. WPS was understood as women at the peace table, pushing for a Myanmar NAP over the NSPAW [the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women], and not much more.¹¹

These concerns frame several pressure points raised through this report and explored in four lessons. Some examples of typical WPS programming include:

- “Capacity building” workshops for women had the unintended consequence of reinforcing that women were less competent than men.
- WPS 101 training, frequently apolitical and short on historical context, and casting the WPS agenda as miraculously arising in October 2000 when Resolution 1325 was adopted, seemingly out of nowhere, lacking understanding of women’s long-standing anti-war mobilization around the world.
- “Awareness raising” activities, rather than empowering women and careful engagement of men, placed the onus on women to shift oppressive gender norms and secure behavior change from men.
- Descriptive research repeatedly focused on national dynamics, which were and are important to understand, but were often overstudied.

Understanding of donors

In Myanmar, the landscape of foreign aid is marked by many different types of international actors providing WPS and gender equality funding. “Donors” are understood to include both countries providing foreign aid (*primary* donors) and philanthropic foundations, pooled funds, UN entities, international NGOs, and others involved in subcontracting or partnership relationships with a funds management dimension (*secondary* donors or *intermediaries*). While the actors in the latter category may not see themselves as donors, this study views them as such because this is how many Myanmar entities often view and experience them.¹² Navigating this complex landscape raises questions about how international actors work in concert, maintain strategic coherence, and coordinate among various WPS objectives, and how they establish clear metrics for accountability and progress.

The multiplicity of donors has positive and negative effects. On the positive side, diverse approaches and funding sources can open new program possibilities

in a highly constrained context like Myanmar. On the negative side, poorly planned and ill-coordinated funding can lead to the diminution and instrumentalization of the WROs, the WPS agenda, and gender equality more broadly. If interventions are short-term, activity-based, and output driven, they are unlikely to target the deeper causes of gender inequality, and not reflect the needs and directions communities and WROs wish to take. It also places pressure on WROs to accept poor quality funding, and to enter or maintain inequitable relationships with international NGOs, UN entities etc. to access funding.

Another result of this multiplicity is “pile-on,” duplication that overwhelms civil society actors by making excessive and competing demands, particularly on a coterie of well-known WROs deemed to more credible, often exposing these individuals and organizations to the criticism of being “donor darlings.” Some of these deleterious concerns are discussed in the following section, together with examples of good practice—developments that hold promise for a revitalized approach to WPS in Myanmar.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN MYANMAR

Patriarchy is a global phenomenon that affects all cultures, societies, and nations. It is simultaneously universal and a highly effective system of oppression, that not only inhibits the potential of women and girls, but also entraps men and boys, sexual and gender minorities within deeply limiting expectations and socially-politically defined behaviors.¹³ Gender inequalities and patriarchal values are deeply embedded throughout the political and social structures of Myanmar in cultural codes, institutions, and individual mindsets. Women are acutely and disproportionately discriminated against resulting in stark exclusions that permeate public and private life.¹⁴

Women’s underrepresentation in governance at every level, for example, is outlined in box 2. Incremental gains in gender equality, however, were also observed, a testament to women’s determination even in the absence of equalizing measures such as quotas for women in formal spaces. These gains were mirrored in the highly complex peace process with its many moving parts. Yet the numerical underrepresentation of women and their constrained presence and influence in the formal ceasefire and political settlement processes highlight the male domination of decision-making and leadership, including in Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), political parties,

and the like.¹⁵ Women were poorly represented in senior roles in the international peace and security international NGOs, UN entities, senior donor roles and think tanks too.

Gender equality and women’s rights advocates in Myanmar have for decades been chipping away at damaging patriarchal beliefs, such as the mystical intrinsic power of *hpoun*. This unstable masculine “power” is vulnerable to pollution and (supposedly) dilution by women. Men can be “weakened” by the comingling of men’s and women’s garments in the laundry, for example, or by the mere proximity of a menstruating woman. Such preposterous myths, predicated on Buddhist exceptionalism, men’s “superiority,” and the devaluation of women, are major obstacles to the realization of female potential. They also trap boys and men within the permissible notions of heterosexuality, “head of the household,” and other rigid expectations.¹⁶ In Myanmar, such myths find expression in core documents such as the contested 2008 constitution, which embedded contradictions and structural obstacles for women.¹⁷ Section 348 states:

The Union shall not discriminate [against] any citizen ... based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex, and wealth.

Yet section 352 states:

The Union shall, upon specified qualifications being fulfilled, in appointing or assigning duties to civil service personnel, not discriminate for or against any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, and sex. However, nothing in this Section shall prevent appointment of men to the positions that are suitable for men only.

The myth of the “high status of Myanmar women” has also undercut gender equality for generations. It posits that there is no gender inequality in Myanmar because women are revered. The challenges they experience in life are of their own making as patriarchal oppression does not exist.¹⁸ The views of the Myanmar National Committee for Women’s Affairs, an elite Bamar-dominated group closely linked to military officials, exemplify this fallacy:

...the status of Myanmar women has always been high since the days of the Myanmar Kings. They enjoy equal rights as men.... In Myanmar family [sic] the husband provides the financial needs.... The women may go out to work for the social development; they still have the major responsibility to look after the family. One must be careful not to go against the cultural norms and values attached to our families.¹⁹

The toleration of Aung San Suu Kyi’s prominence in public life largely stems from dynastic politics and the benefits that accrue to *some* women from the high-status myth. While Aung San Suu Kyi was the de facto leader, the rest of the post-2015 Union cabinet were all male. Her influential role then, and for decades before, was seen as exceptional, but it did not necessarily result in a broader shift in societal attitudes towards women’s leadership. Negative perceptions of women in leadership persisted and, indeed, remained largely unchallenged by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Violence is rife against women and girls and sexual and gender minorities, and is manifest in all spheres, public and private. The military takeover of 2021 disrupted the first study of the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Myanmar, so quantitative data is weak. But qualitative analysis, insights from service providers, and patterns of help-seeking behavior show that GBV is omnipresent in the lives of women and girls, dogging their aspirations and self-esteem and inhibiting socioeconomic development at every turn.²⁰ The persistence of gender-based international crimes, including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), has further damaged women and girls from ethnic nationalities.²¹ Sexual violence has long been perpetrated by the Burmese military. The multidimensional crisis following the military takeover has led to increased perpetration by a range of armed actors and the growing prevalence of military use of collective punishment; arbitrary detention;

torture, including rape, in detention settings, targeting of civilians, and other gross human rights abuses.²²

The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW), 2013–2022, outlined how the former government of Myanmar planned to implement the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 12 priority areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA—this was agreed to globally in 1995 to accelerate sluggish implementation of the CEDAW). Following extensive consultation, the NSPAW became Myanmar’s first national gender equality strategy. However, the NSPAW did not align with all 12 BPfA priorities, framing the focus on armed conflict as “women and emergencies.” This framing emphasized humanitarian assistance for women in disasters, limiting WPS efforts to address the effects of armed conflict on women. This deliberate downgrading shows the challenge of translating WPS into state commitments in Myanmar even in the “reform era”. Inevitably, as with so many of the new plans, policies, laws, and regulations of the 2011–2020 period, slow implementation of the NSPAW was criticized.²³

In 2017, the Department of Social Welfare and WROs, including the Gender Equality Network, reached an agreement to align the focus on “women and emergencies” with the then government’s focus on a national peace process, bringing it closer to the WPS agenda. Various working groups associated with the NSPAW provided forums for identifying resources and priorities. A WPS Technical Working Group was established in 2018, and a policy brief outlined the WPS landscape in Myanmar and examined the national, regional, and international policy frameworks that shape WPS initiatives in this context. While the brief offered suggestions for the successful integration of these principles into the NSPAW, it is imperative to recognize that having a thorough understanding does not automatically translate into full integration or seamless implementation within the NSPAW without concerted efforts and strategic execution.²⁴

Other important developments in this timeframe weakened the rights of women and girls. The Race and Religion Protection Laws, four laws passed swiftly in 2015, severely restricted the rights of women, particularly Muslim women, and contravened CEDAW. On the other hand, the Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women Bill, drafted by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlements with support from many WROs, was never passed and remains in draft form. While gender-equality advocates pushed for international norms like CEDAW, particularly in GBV legislation, Bamar Buddhist nationalists, drawing on conservative public opinion and historical-religious perspectives, opposed such developments with impressive effect.²⁵

Box 2. Gender Equality and the Status of Women in Myanmar

A range of indicators highlight the low status of women in Myanmar. Drawing on 2019 data, the Global Gender Inequality Index ranked Myanmar 118 out of 162 countries.²⁶

Poor health outcomes for pregnant women:

- In 2020, the maternal mortality rate was 179 per 100,000 births,²⁷ significantly worse than neighboring Laos (126/100,000) and Bangladesh (123/100,000).²⁸

Gender pay gap:

- Data from 2017 indicated that annual gross income per capita was USD 2,619 for women and USD 5,093 for men.²⁹

Underrepresentation of women in governance:

- In 2020, Myanmar was ranked 160 out of 189 states globally for women's representation in parliament.³⁰
- During the NLD period, only two women were appointed as chief ministers at the subnational level, and one woman was appointed as speaker of the house in a state parliament, the first in Myanmar's history.³¹ There were no women Union election commissioners or Supreme Court judges, and just two of nine Constitutional Tribunal judges were women.
- In 2015, elected women made up just 6 percent of the Union parliament, with four holding seats in the upper house and 24 in the lower house. Additionally, only two women held ministerial positions.³²
- Only 41 out of 16,785 ward and village tract administrators were women (0.24 percent) after the first ward and village tract election in 2012; in 2016, just 88 women (0.5 percent) were elected.³³ Minor gains of about 0.1 percent were made in the by-elections of 2018.
- Women typically hold subordinate positions within nonstate armed organizations. Men often disregard the ideas put forth by women in their organizations, failing to acknowledge their capabilities.³⁴

Male-dominated peace processes:

- In the 2015 NCA negotiations, just four of 67 NCA negotiators (6 percent) were women, and they were all delegates of EAOs.³⁵
- Women's participation in the 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference (UPC) fluctuated between 13 percent in August 2016, 17 percent in May 2017, 22 percent in July 2018, and 17 percent in August 2020.³⁶
- The representation of women in EAO delegations was higher than in NLD or the military delegations.³⁷
- Only 9 percent of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee were women, with no representation at the Union level.³⁸

Lack of a contemporary law to address gender-based violence:

- The main law to address gender-based violence is the 1861 Penal Code. This defines rape as a man having "sexual intercourse" with a woman against her will, without her consent, under coercion, or with a female child of 14 or younger. Under the Penal Code, marital rape is effectively legal, provided the woman involved is over 15 years of age (raised from 13 years in 2016).³⁹

Punitive attitudes and denial of LGBTQIA+ persons:

- Homosexuality is illegal in Myanmar and punishable by incarceration and a criminal record. LGBTQIA+ organizations frequently highlighted the "under shadows or darkness" law or sections of the Penal Code that targeted trans women for arrest, sexual abuse, and financial extortion.⁴⁰ Section 377 of the Penal Code, criminalizes "unnatural sex" and is often used to intimidate, humiliate, persecute, and violate the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons.

KEY FINDINGS

This series, titled *International Peace Support and Effective Peacebuilding in Myanmar*, includes separate reports outlining perspectives on effective support for inclusive and sustained peace and security in Myanmar. Here, the focus is on WPS and the work of key actors to advance gender equality. This includes the efforts of international actors and the ways in which WPS efforts were frequently undermined by those seeking to “help”—international actors providing primary and secondary funding (through subcontracting, partnership agreements, activities, research, and the like). Given state-society dynamics in Myanmar, where the state has long been predatory and an unreliable provider of basic services to those within its (contested) borders, significant attention is paid to civil society, particularly WROs and women-led entities such as think tanks and NGOs, not because they bear primary responsibility for advancing gender equality and WPS, but because in the absence of an accountable and representative state they play vital roles in providing services, holding the powerful to account (often at great risk), identifying policy options, and gathering evidence for decision-making.

Of particular interest were efforts of Myanmar gender equality supporters to propose policy ideas and analysis to EAOs, the military, the National League for Democracy party, the media, and others involved in peace and security policy at that time. This inquiry includes how gender equality advocates can operate, with what types of funding from the international community, and how this enables or disables their efforts.

Global trends in gender-equality financing

Funding for WPS occurs on a much larger playing field of funding and programming related to development, gender equality, human rights, and peace and security, making it difficult to trace WPS funding flows with certainty. It is well established, however, that global funding for gender equality is weak and subject to considerable flux, despite the efforts of many advocates and femocrats (feminists within bureaucracies, e.g., foreign ministries, aid agencies, development international NGOs).⁴¹ There is great distance between international rhetoric and action on WPS.⁴² Concern has increasingly centered on the financing challenges to fully implement the WPS agenda.⁴³ This report emphasizes global gender-equality funding trends because of their association with most of the points being made:

- In 2020–2021, after steadily increasing for a decade, the share of official development assistance (ODA)

for gender equality reached a plateau at 44 percent. Some 40 percent of bilateral ODA had gender equality and women’s empowerment as a significant objective, while 4 percent of this considered a principal versus a significant objective per gender marker categorization (there are three categories—principal, significant, no objective).⁴⁴

- It was estimated that just 1 percent of gender-equality funding from the OECD-DAC in 2016–17 reached women’s rights organizations.⁴⁵

It is useful at this point to distinguish between women-led organizations and WROs, because gender equality efforts focus on representation as much as gendered policymaking. Women-led organizations are important to ensure that women are represented in all aspects of public life, from farmers’ collectives and industry associations to think-tanks and beyond. Women in leadership roles may or may not be feminists, and they may or may not be advancing gender equality. WROs are specifically focused on women’s rights in policy and practice, advancing gender equality at all levels of society. These organizations have diverse structures and orientations and work at different levels, from local communities to global platforms.⁴⁶ Collaborating with WROs offers distinct opportunities for international actors since these organizations typically have deep connections in their communities.⁴⁷ In Myanmar, they are also often directly involved in service delivery due to the absence of effective, nondiscriminatory state services. This combination of WROs and women-led organizations is important to ensure women are both ‘seen’ and ‘heard.’

This report cannot fully explain the global inequities in funding for gender equality. This is important to consider, but space precludes more detail in this study. A critical point, however, is that embedded in the international aid system is a damaging mix of conscious and unconscious bias that undervalues WROs and women-led organizations despite evidence of the positive effects of women’s participation in public life.⁴⁸ These undermine their potential to effect transformative change and hinder the collective efforts of WROs towards achieving gender equity and social justice. As a result, WROs often find themselves grappling with insufficient resources and support, impeding their capacity to fully address the diverse needs and challenges faced by women and marginalized communities. This reinforces a belief that WROs are forever small in scale and voluntary in nature, erasing women’s labor. The profound contributions of these WROs, and feminist movements often at the community level, remain unacknowledged.

Ahead in this report, we offer four observations as key findings:

- **Finding 1:** Too much focus on “fixing” women.
- **Finding 2:** Superficial approaches.
- **Finding 3:** Duplication, “pile-on,” and poor coordination.
- **Finding 4:** Poor-quality funding.

Examples of good practice and efforts that go against the grain are highlighted, including the “slow development” strategy of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (see box 4). In this case, this strategy helped protect a small team with an effective portfolio of workshops and trainings from a disruptive pile-on of international actors trying to meet their donor requirements for gender dimensions in peace and security projects. The team was able to focus more effectively, build trust with the organization’s members, and establish or consolidate constructive relationships with EAOs—still satisfying donor requirements, but without losing sight of the substantive goals of the Alliance. The Gender Peace and Security Funding Window of the former Paung Sie Facility (multi donor fund, see box 5), which was evaluated as an effective way to improve the quality of WPS funding, is also discussed.

Finding 1: Too much focus on “fixing” women

There is a global aversion to tackling the root causes of gender inequality, and this is also evident in Myanmar. Instead of confronting the male monopoly on power and opportunity, many international initiatives focus on “fixing” women with international funding and programming. This is predicated on a deficit approach which erroneously assumes that if (only) women were just trained then change—rather than through systemic collective effort and accountability—will occur. A 2017 study found that the women in the Union-level parliament averaged greater educational attainment than the men, yet the women were continually questioned about their qualifications, while the men enjoyed their status-quo privileges.⁴⁹ Ad hoc, input-driven forms of “empowerment” (for example, one-off trainings without follow-up support to put lessons and concepts into practice) are insufficient without also targeting restrictive gender norms and practices.⁵⁰ This approach implies that women lack skills rather than opportunities, and ignores the hurdles women must overcome to navigate male-dominated political spaces occupied by military leaders, political party leaders, high-level government officials, and EAO leaders. As one individual noted:

Myanmar is very male dominant and elite driven. While donors are rushing to fund peace, initiatives led

by men leaders in different entities such as Myanmar Peace Centre and EAOs, the inclusion principle was very superficial, and no one questioned the dominating patriarchal norms and practices in the process.⁵¹

These norms were poorly analyzed and understood. This was (and is) exacerbated by the low standards of gender-sensitive political analysis in Myanmar, especially that produced by international actors.⁵² This is further compounded by the sea of mostly white, international men with varying capabilities and expertise largely viewing conflict through a hard security lens, focusing on men as primary protagonists, and not questioning the status quo or fully analyzing forms and systems of power—a central focus of feminist analysis. This approach overlooks the diverse dimensions of conflict, undervalues women’s roles in promoting peace in all dimensions, and fails to “walk the talk” on their own organizations’ gender equality commitments. This goes far beyond the failure to consistently analyze patriarchy as a form of power.⁵³ As one interviewee reflected, “The international community failed to grasp the saturated, toxic norms holding women back.”⁵⁴ Another practitioner commented:

This had the effect of overlooking and under-valuing the many other visible and invisible dimensions of conflict, and the multiple roles of women as peace builders and conflict resolvers in “informal” spheres, and demonstrating to their male Myanmar counterparts that making rhetorical commitments to gender equality is OK as there is no real accountability for doing anything to deliver on those commitments.⁵⁵

Indeed, few international NGOs or UN and diplomatic actors—mostly men—were willing to expend political capital to engage powerful men on matters of representation and inclusion. This is exemplified by a comment from another individual: “Participation is locked in slogan, not go beyond. While everyone has reasons for this, the key reason behind is there is no sufficient strategic engagement on this issue.”⁵⁶ This aversion derives from various factors, including resistance from many men and some women who benefit from existing power structures and the perception that engaging men is challenging, time-consuming, politically inappropriate, and confrontational or best left for a later time, which rarely comes. Indeed, changing behavior in this area is notoriously difficult and often causes unintended consequences.⁵⁷ One person stated, “Male leaders generally downgrade gender and they usually considered that gender is only relevant to women and WPS is the work to be conducted by women.”⁵⁸ Another commented:

Peace talk is a political game played by senior male leaders. In the beginning of Myanmar peace process, some EAOs were so sensitive to word ‘gender’ and they even left the meetings as soon as they heard this word

during the discussion. They think gender is meaningless in peace discussion.⁵⁹

Instead, a less demanding path—one with high attribution potential (think photos on social media of events in Yangon hotels)—is to “fix” women through incessant capacity-building. This type of work can reinforce the notion that women are responsible for their own liberation and empowerment. This indicates poor nuance by international actors who largely failed to confront patriarchal norms and practices and instead placed the burden on women to change. One initiative to rebut the “where are the (capable) women” question was the 2018–19 mapping of women experts across Myanmar on a range of peace and security topics. These paper and digital maps of the of the Union, state/region, and local levels, displayed in numerous meetings including many male powerholders, providing a vivid answer to the question: there are in fact hundreds of women specialists and experts.⁶⁰

Finding 2: Superficial approaches

Poor quality WPS initiatives and programming contribute to superficial and performative implementation. This typically involves the instrumentalization of women, women’s rights, and the WPS agenda—“adding women and stirring” when it suits and neglecting the political and transformative vision of WPS when it does not.⁶¹ Interviews buzzed with the view that many bilateral donors, international NGOs, and UN entities engaged in activities solely to meet performance goals and lacked a comprehensive approach to the structural barriers to gender equality.⁶² Virtue signaling from many international actors trapped many WROs in a cycle of ad hoc, disjointed activities—workshops, trainings, social media posts, and events on key dates: March 8, International Women’s Day; June 19, International Day to Eliminate Conflict-Related Sexual Violence; October 31, the anniversary of SCR1325; and the 16 Days of Activism—with little of substance in between.

Ironically, one of the drivers of weak projects and partnerships among international actors and Myanmar NGOs and CSOs was the demand for gender inclusion in peace and security projects and in the national WPS plans of donor countries, which designated Myanmar as a “focus country” (many still do). This resulted in many international NGOs and academics seeking funds to pursue this focus in NAPs. This approach overlooked the complexities of gender dynamics in the context of Myanmar, arguably leading to an excessive focus on external WPS commitments as a core rationale. The center of gravity of WPS in Myanmar was lost: was it driven by the needs and priorities within Myanmar, or by external demands and reporting requirements?

To be sure, the development of NAPs has many positive elements—accountability, strategic coordination among national ministries, funding designation, setting goals, etc. However, there are also distinct challenges, such as the distortion of goals when international actors prioritize the expectations of their respective governments rather than working in complementary support with national and sub-national women-led organizations and WROs.

Technical depoliticized approaches overlook the broader feminist goals and principles of the WPS agenda, with its origins in transforming militarism and patriarchal oppression and recognizing women’s political agency in peace processes. Taking a political rather than a technocratic approach involves the slow grind of transcending restrictive norms and the opacity of feminist movement-building—it’s not an event; it’s not an organization! It can be difficult to turn this process into a project that can be delivered on time and on budget with measurable outcomes. Interviewees lamented that women’s rights and gender equality were reduced to a series of disparate activities rather than deep political and structural problems that waste the potential of half the population. Funding windows often included unrealistic expectations—e.g., a change in social norms in 18 months. This approach also affected what male-dominated powerholders such as EAOs “heard” from the international community: counting women in

Box 3. Gender Mainstreaming: Incrementalism or Transformation?

Since the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), gender mainstreaming has become synonymous with efforts to identify gender equality concerns in organizations, processes, and policies and to link these to effective action. It is useful to draw a distinction between “technical” and “transformative” gender mainstreaming.⁶³

Technical gender mainstreaming focuses on gender in existing processes. This approach is common and easier to implement, though ultimately less effective, because systems are not fundamentally challenged. Transformative, or agenda-setting, gender mainstreaming uses gender perspectives to transform the status quo, which makes this approach more challenging to implement but leads to faster change when done seriously.

These two broad forms offer food for thought about the approach to WPS in Myanmar over the past decade. Most efforts have arguably fallen into the first category.

meetings and events became a leading preoccupation and distraction. As one person noted:

WPS is mainly seen as technical issues and it is all about having 30 percent women’s participation in peace related activities. So many, including EAOs, try to implement women-focused activities, not trying to understand the essence of WPS agenda.⁶⁴

A peace-conference participant reflected:

The generals are bringing their wives and their female military officers to the peace conference later as they want to show that they also have women participants in their sides. But these women won’t [say] a word throughout the discussion.⁶⁵

In this swirling sea of micro-funding, poor-quality partnerships, extractive research, and turning WROs into logisticians for international events, there were efforts to turn the tide and enable meaningful participation. For example, initiatives from the Paung Sie Facility, and USAID, implemented by DAI, Inc., prioritized measures to lower the barriers to women’s participation and representation in public life, such as providing childcare, interpreters, fees for safer travel, etc. One example is highlighted in box 4.

Finding 3: Duplication, “pile-on,” and poor coordination

This report has already mentioned the concept of “pile-on.” It refers to the overwhelming demands from international actors that civil society partners, particularly WROs, undertake predetermined WPS activities or performative activities as described above. When these demands come from all directions, along with duplicative and often impossibly steep timeframes and tied to implicit power relations between donors and grantees, it interferes with women’s rights actors’ ability to stay the course toward the objectives they have set.

As noted earlier, many international actors provide both primary and secondary WPS and gender equality funding. On the positive side, this includes diverse funding sources and approaches that can open program possibilities and flexibilities in highly constrained contexts such as Myanmar. On the negative side, poor strategic, technocratic coordination and low-quality funding contribute to the instrumentalization of WROs, the WPS agenda, and gender equality more broadly. Requirements for meaningful participation could be embedded into contracts: no men-only panels (“manels”), no political analysis with a separate gender “paragraph,” or case study, etc.

Box 4. Going Against the Grain: the Development of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process

There are some examples of good practice in coordinating support in Myanmar. One is the “slow development” of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) from 2014 onwards. Under a grant from the then Peace Support Fund (before it became the Paung Sie Facility), and following demand from Myanmar CSOs, flexible pooled funding was made available for two years to establish the network. This liberated those directly involved from sourcing and managing multiple grants and enabled a phased design period, with an alliance of organizations focusing on women’s participation and gender inclusion in the peace process, before the network was launched publicly. This flexible funding also helped create space to discuss perspectives on the AGIPP from existing women’s rights groups and gender equality networks—what it would focus on, how it would add value, and the like.

The mix of core and activity-based funding kept AGIPP from losing momentum in short-term projects with international NGOs and the UN. However, as an individual close to this process reflected, “two-year funding of AGIPP was exceptional and serendipitous rather than strategic per se. We did not see that approach repeated. It was a one-off.”⁶⁶

This approach helped avoid for at least two years an unmanageable “pile-on” of international actors wanting to fund AGIPP when it could not absorb more funding or manage more activities. More partnerships with international actors would also have burdened the small secretariat team with endless activity-based interactions: workshops and training to tick boxes for outside partners. AGIPP has made many contributions, not least the world’s first feminist critique of a ceasefire. By taking a measured approach to funding volume and interactions with international actors, the team was able to focus on building trust within the Alliance, acting more effectively on gender dimensions of the peace process, establishing relationships with EAOs, and satisfying donor requirements without losing sight of AGIPP’s own substantive goals.

Interviewees consistently mentioned the “drag” on their work from lack of coordination of both a strategic and bureaucratic nature among international actors that undermined the realization of the WPS agenda. A derivation of the “fixing women” problem can be seen here, too, as primary donors (particularly) focused on coordination among WROs and NGOs rather than among themselves. As another interviewee put it, “Donors are too concerned with coordination among WROs but not their lack of coordination on their support on WPS.”⁶⁷ Lacking a coherent approach, multiple donors implemented similar projects without effective collaboration, strategic division of labor, or leveraging resources. Even colocation in the same building did not yield better coordination, according to one practitioner:

The bilateral donors are competing [with] each other rather than [coordinating], and feeling very worried to [be] left behind. Although donors are together having their offices at the Nordic house, they don’t share the information and coordinate, but compete to advance their agenda ahead of others.⁶⁸

Institutional mandates, policies, and approaches obviously matter, but so do individuals. There were motivated personnel—mostly women—in diplomatic missions, pooled funds, UN agencies, and international NGOs who certainly shifted the needle. Yet within these institutions demanding change from Myanmar organizations, WPS and gender-equality work disproportionately falls to women and fails to maximize a demonstration effect. With their absence or departure, the work falters, highlighting the need for other gender “champions” and revealing the still unmet need for real gender mainstreaming in these institutions. Box 3 offers thoughts on gender mainstreaming, in part to explain why technical incrementalism, rather than political transformation, is the main approach of international actors in Myanmar (and elsewhere).

The distinction between these two approaches helps explain why mechanisms such as the beleaguered Gender Equality Women’s Empowerment Working Group (GEWE WG) failed to gather steam on information sharing, collective planning, monitoring, and accountability.⁶⁹ It was challenging to track and evaluate the impact of different initiatives and ensure that funding was strategically allocated, utilized, and backed with the right political messaging from international actors. The GEWE WG could not ensure that other peace coordination mechanisms were held responsible for implementing transformative gender mainstreaming. The GEWE WG also struggled to focus in depth on WPS. As one individual recalled:

There is no clear mechanism for coordination on WPS and gender in [the] peace process. While there are

coordination meetings for [the] overall peace process... [In the GEWE WG], WPS issues were not coordinated nor discussed.⁷⁰

The lack of clear coordination mechanisms for WPS and gender in the peace process was a significant challenge. In the 2010–2020 period, this lack of coordination hindered comprehensive discussion and strategic planning to advance gender objectives in the peace process, and it exacerbated the fragmentation of agendas among international actors. (In more recent years this has been somewhat rectified with a WPS Donor Group, but it does not include all donors to WPS efforts.)

Finding 4: Poor-quality funding

This report has referred to quantity and quality of funding. Here the focus is on the latter and how poor-quality funding imperils effective action on gender equality and WPS and the building of feminist movements.

WPS funding in Myanmar tends to be short-term and sporadic, lacking sustained commitment.⁷¹ Funding for WPS often failed to directly reach WROs and subnational or community initiatives (in line with the global trends noted earlier). Initiatives like the Gender Peace and Security Window were of critical importance and held significant potential, had they been sustained. The decisions which ultimately ended that project represent an important example of the challenges and pitfalls of international donor support to WPS, and are critical to understand if future support is to be improved.

At its inception, the Gender Peace and Security Window represented good practice because it emphasized subnational WROs, shorter proposals, applications in various languages, and core funding and activity funding with support (learning sessions, hands-on support to staff), to set organizational development goals acknowledging the existing experience and knowledge of WROs. The Window was evaluated as highly effective yet was moved to the Joint Peace Fund (JPF) as the then Peace Support Fund rebranded to focus on social cohesion and become the Paung Sie Facility.⁷² This move was prompted by donor directives, leading to the migration of nine out of the original 18 GPS Window partners to the JPF. Flexible core support and strategic organizational strengthening in local languages to nine WROs were retained and implemented in the subsequent phase of the Paung Sie Facility. Additionally, it was extended to incorporate more WROs in subsequent calls, albeit under different program framing. Simultaneously, this approach on tailored support was honed into the Women’s Voice and Leadership initiative (another pooled fund) initially backed by Canada.

The JPF swiftly identified the ‘better’ NGOs – those who would comply with the UN fund manager’s administrative and reporting requirements, leading to the loss of the feminist focus. “Deprioritized within JPF, this eventually led to the Window’s demise, but the [Peace Support Fund] also did not advocate for it.”⁷³

Different interviewees noted that most funding was funneled through multi-donor funds, international NGOs, and private contractors because they could manage large volumes of funding, unlike many CSOs and NGOs, who are often unable to absorb large amounts of funding. Allowing multi-donor funds, consortiums, and international NGOs to manage substantial funding is well established in Myanmar as a way to outsource grant administration, pool risk, and coordinate operations. There are, of course, many good examples of effective work by such entities. Yet, some of these entities feel pressure to disburse funds and are not well prepared or willing to give funds directly to smaller organizations, concerned that they may not spend the funds fully or that they lack international NGO-type systems for reporting, budget management, etc. One respondent remarked:

In the name of WPS, a big portion of funding went to UN Women but not directly to local WROs. While WPS became a buzzword in Myanmar’s peace [process], it is so difficult to find dedicated WPS funding for local WROs.⁷⁴

Despite the focus of WPS, accessing quality funding was challenging for many NGOs and CSOs. One WRO member reflected on the perceived unwillingness of international actors to challenge the powerful men involved in the peace process to change existing patriarchal norms: “Donors are very skeptical with core funding to WROs, although they are generous to male-led entities and they don’t make any efforts to leverage male-dominated elitist groups.”⁷⁵ This exacerbates a power imbalance, as Myanmar women are left with limited resources or inflexible, short-term funding, affecting capabilities to shape and implement peace and security with a WPS focus, hindering the capability of WROs and others to seize opportunities to effect change.

Relationships, proximity, and the perceived capabilities of CSOs and NGOs all influence how international actors grant funds. Clearly, smaller CSOs are overshadowed by larger, more visible organizations, making it difficult for them to compete for funding and make their voices heard. As a member of one WRO explained:

The armed conflict actually happened in the ethnic areas, but donor’s consultations with CSOs were conducted mainly with CSOs from Yangon. CSOs who are more visible in media get more attention from donors, and their voices are heard. These CSOs are big ones, and it is challenging for smaller CSOs like us to raise our voices and compete [for] funding with them.⁷⁶

Box 5. The Gender, Peace, and Security Funding Window

There have been some innovations of note in Myanmar, including the dedicated Gender, Peace, and Security Funding Window developed by the former Peace Support Fund before it rebranded to the Paung Sie Facility. The Window designed longer-term core and activity funding to offer more stability and free organizations to focus on the work at hand. A mix of core funding and organizational support equipped some WROs to create systems and procedures to make their entities more sustainable. Additionally, increased visibility within their communities and the broader organizational capacity strengthening enhanced their ability to advocate for gender-inclusive peacebuilding. The Window was evaluated as good practice.⁷⁷ The evaluation concluded:

The Window contributed to addressing organizational capability and strategic planning gaps, and, crucially, to elevating their influence and visibility within their communities and in the wider space of CSO politics—and with that, their capacity to advance both protection and participation goals of the Gender Peace and Security agenda.⁷⁸

The explicit focus on core funding that distinguished this initiative gave WROs “breathing space,” noted one practitioner.⁷⁹ This is also illustrated by the comment of a former grantee from Kachin:

We can work on the issues of political urgency that are arising specifically in Kachin state—trafficking of women and girls, drugs, cash crops, hydropower plants.... If we were working as an implementation partner for some INGOs’ and IOs’ work plan in the Kachin areas, we would be constrained by their agenda and predetermined plan of action.⁸⁰

This highlights the importance of autonomy for WROs to address urgent issues specific to their regions without being constrained by external agendas.

There are important differences among NGOs and CSOs across Myanmar that affect the strength of their connections to international actors. For example, NGOs in South-east Myanmar have better contacts with donors than other areas due to their proximity to the Thai-Myanmar border and historical patterns of cross-border support.

These dynamics highlight the need for direct, quality funding for WROs, and the importance of diversifying

donor consultations to include smaller, less well-known CSOs, particularly those from conflict-affected areas with unique experiences of conflict, such as women-refugee-led entities, to promote better understanding of civil society. This approach can promote inclusivity and acknowledge the unique challenges faced by organizations operating in conflict-affected regions, fostering a more balanced and effective approach to allocating funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As international actors review their work in Myanmar since the military takeover, these recommendations suggest ways to improve their practice with better political analysis and programming that recognizes gendered power and patriarchal oppression as key drivers of conflict, inequality, and violence.

- 1. Core, direct and flexible funding.** While the quantity of funding matters, the quality matters more. Funding that is boxed into inflexible budget lines and prescribed activities limits the creativity needed to respond to political and programming opportunities. WROs need more direct funding, but so do movements and catalytic individuals. Investing in movements can mean recognizing more amorphous and leaderless entities and ways of working. By moving away from sporadic, short-term support and committing to sustained funding and meaningful engagement with WROs, donors and practitioners can better support feminist movement influence and gender equality efforts in peace processes and broader policymaking.
- 2. Thinking politically linked to more gender-sensitive political economy and conflict analysis.** Gender-sensitive analysis is too often seen as something apart from the “real” analysis, something that can wait until after funding decisions are made or a program is underway. It is often framed as an activity or a deliverable. Far more rigorous analysis of gender, power, and patriarchy is required for international actors to understand Myanmar. This analysis must be applied to all elements of a project or program cycle—not just design, but also monitoring and evaluation—to assess the impact on gender inequalities. Ample guidance exists for developing gendered power analyses, and there is no question of “why” or “how”; but a consistent, whole-of-organization effort is required to do it and do it seriously. If it cannot be done due to a lack of capacity in the dominant white male conflict-analyst field, then individuals and organizations should be given a timeline for improvement.
- 3. Collaboration and coordination among donors on WPS and gender-equality strategies.** Inevitably, a report of this type will urge more donor coordination, but collaboration that goes beyond information-sharing between primary and secondary donors is critical along with an explicit strategic division of labor. This would include identifying which actors have expertise, political heft, or useful past relationships that suit them to undertake specific actions. This would help weed out some of the duplication and superficial programming that plagues WPS in Myanmar.
- 4. Risk-taking by pooled funds.** As pooled funds remain the preference for many donors (until and unless large scale localization is advanced) these entities can be taking much more creative and calculated risk to provide quality funding to gender equality and WPS. This particularly requires quality funding to civil society entities—longer term, flexible, direct, and ensuring unregistered organizations are as supported as those who are registered. Part of shifting practice here involves such entities having requisite expertise on inclusion and diversity that is sound, political, and accessible across different parts of organizations – policy, operations, administration and more.
- 5. Gender-financing goals and budgeting by consortiums, international NGOs, and the UN.** Ensure pooled funds, UN and international NGO consortiums have detailed gender budgeting per international good practice. Given the human and financial resources available within such entities there are few reasons to accept gender budgeting not being done. Such actors should also have clear and measurable goals on the percentage of funding with a principal focus on gender equality and WPS flowing to Myanmar actors in alignment with localization commitments. Circumvent poor practice with budget templates with lines built in that simply needs to be filled out.

6. **Varied approaches.** If international actors persist to provide many small pots of funding for WPS and gender equality, these should at least offer a variety of administrative and due-diligence requirements rather than a one-size-fits-all approach that disproportionately burdens smaller organizations. If smaller organizations are not receiving core funding or larger sums, simpler procedures and administrative requirements should be allowed.
7. **Quality consultations.** Consultations should be conducted with nuance and sensitivity. Instrumentalized consultations linked to calendar events such as project anniversaries or UN days of observance should be avoided in favor of clear and specific goals and procedures for substantive engagement. Progress in this area would include reaching beyond major cities, beyond those who speak English and are widely known, and beyond those who already have internationalized programming. Engaging smaller more amorphous WROs will take longer, require enabling measures but is highly likely to yield more representative and credible consultations.
8. **Invest in alternatives to oppressive masculinity.** Men's identities have begun to shift since the military takeover, with changing conceptions of masculinity, more focus on "healing" from oppressive masculinity, and new thinking about what makes a "good man," which has historically been linked to defense of family and community and involvement in militarism, be that the Myanmar military or EAOs. Greater understanding is also needed of the needs of men and boys and sexual and gender minorities who have been subject to gender-based violence. Careful evidence-informed research and analysis could be conducted to anchor future programming in this area inclusive of detailed assessment of unintended consequences of flaky masculinities work and avoid promotion of faux "male gender champions."
9. **Stem the tide of insufficient monitoring and evaluation.** Few WPS initiatives have been rigorously evaluated, though the pandemic admittedly posed significant challenges to monitoring, evaluation, and learning. This impedes identification of Myanmar-relevant evidence and good practice as well as adaptation. A limited evidence base is not in anyone's interest, especially those tasked with future funding decisions and strategic investment. A robust evidence base is critical for informed decision-making and effective allocation of resources, ultimately benefiting all stakeholders involved.
10. **Future research.** Underdeveloped topics to consider investing in include subnational WPS dynamics and trends, the silence in many WPS efforts regarding the marginalization and persecution of Rohingya women and girls and ways to change this, leadership styles of displaced women and ways to support them given their frequently precarious status, and "next step" assessments for inclusive WPS in Myanmar when a democratic government is restored.

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