

# Myanmar: Civil Society Organization and Community Scoping Study

COUNTRY BRIEF



Houses and Mountains in Myanmar. Photo credit: Akhmad Jazuli, October 2023.



## AMPLIFY

AMPLIFY is a five-year Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiative that addresses the differential impacts of conflicts and human security threats on women in Southeast Asia by advancing their meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The initiative supports the implementation of ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action on WPS and focuses on Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar through policy development, civil society partnerships, and community-level peacebuilding. AMPLIFY is funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and implemented by The Asia Foundation.

**Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a global policy framework recognizing that the meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and decision-making is essential to achieving peace and preventing conflict. Guided by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, the WPS agenda's four pillars – participation, prevention, protection and relief and recovery – emphasize the need to protect and promote women's rights in fragile and conflict settings. AMPLIFY takes a WPS+ approach that applies beyond situations of conflict, addressing human security threats.**

## Country Briefs

In 2024, AMPLIFY conducted scoping studies across its three implementing countries, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar, to better understand the current challenges faced by women at all levels of society.

In Cambodia and Lao PDR, research combined community surveys, key informant interviews, and civil society organization (CSO) needs assessments. In Myanmar, interviews explored the challenges facing women's rights organizations, women human rights defenders, and activists on both sides of the Thailand–Myanmar border.

These studies were further enhanced by informal consultations with stakeholders and by a Political Economy Analysis, **Securing Women's Peace: A Political Economy Analysis of Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN, Cambodia, Lao PDR and the Philippines**, conducted in early 2025.

The country briefs that follow draw on this research to present key findings and insights most relevant for WPS programming. They are intended as a resource for CSOs, policymakers, and donors, and form part of AMPLIFY's ongoing commitment to build and share knowledge on WPS in the region.



# Myanmar

- Context of Women, Peace and Security in Myanmar
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# MYANMAR



## Context of Women, Peace and Security in Myanmar

The context of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Myanmar is shaped by decades of protracted conflict and, more recently, by the military coup of 2021, which has intensified violence and instability across the country. The coup triggered widespread armed resistance, leading to the expansion of territory controlled by ethnic armed organizations and resistance groups, and a decline in central control by the State Administration Council (SAC), now known as the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC). In this environment, women and sexual minority groups have borne a disproportionate share of the conflict's impacts in non-combat settings, including increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence/conflict-related sexual violence (SGBV/CRSV), displacement-related protection risks, loss of income and livelihoods, and reduced access to essential health and protection services.<sup>1</sup>

SGBV/CRSV and intimate partner violence have all increased since the coup, with impunity widespread and survivors facing further threats such as forced marriage or stigma. Myanmar ranks 125th out of 146 countries on the gender inequality index,<sup>2</sup> and thousands of women have been detained or killed by SSPC (formerly SAC) forces since 2021.

WPS advancement in Myanmar is hindered by entrenched patriarchal norms, limited political will, and perceptions that women's equality is the domain of women's organizations alone. Women remain excluded from most formal peace processes. However, the brutality of the post-coup period has sparked greater public recognition of women's protection and participation as security issues. Some ethnic armed organizations, including the Karen National Union and Karenni National Progressive Party, have begun integrating women's equality into their administrative and justice systems, suggesting emerging openings for locally driven WPS implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> Women's League of Burma (WLB), *The Triple Resistance: Fighting Patriarchy, Combating Dictatorship, Building Democracy* (WLB, 2024), <<https://www.womenofburma.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Triple%20Resistance%20DESIGNED%20%26%20FINALISED.pdf>>

<sup>2</sup> UN Women, *Myanmar Country Profile 2024–2025* (UN Women, 2024).



## Civil Society Organization Capacity-building and Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders

Mya is part of a women's human rights organization. She describes the post-coup landscape as one of **deepening crisis**, where women's voices **remain sidelined despite their central role** in the resistance.

Despite being on the frontlines of humanitarian response and community organizing, **women are still excluded from leadership and decision-making**. Their participation is accepted only within limited roles.

**“The revolution requires human power, and with the contribution and participation of women, the momentum of the revolution is enhanced. Male counterparts understand this fact. Therefore, they accept women ‘in their spheres.’ This cannot be interpreted as traditional masculinity and patriarchal norms shifting.”**

For many, the risks extend beyond national borders. **Thousands of women activists now live undocumented in neighboring Thailand**, where they face housing insecurity, family separation, and limited access to protection services.

**“This time of armed conflict is more severe and widespread than [when the] coup happened before. Hence, when we say the practical needs of activists, we cannot just consider the needs of activists. Because the SAC, they target the family members and close contacts...”**

Women's rights organizations and women human rights defenders in Myanmar have continued their work with courage and determination, despite facing severe risks since the 2021 military coup.

Before the coup, although their formal participation was limited, women's groups across both urban and ethnic areas actively engaged in peacebuilding, protection and justice efforts.<sup>3</sup> In urban centers, women's organizations often focused on promoting women's participation in formal peace processes. In ethnic areas, women-led grassroots initiatives and informal diplomacy, often through ethnic women's organizations.<sup>4</sup> Since the coup, many groups have shifted to **lower-visibility work**, including raising awareness of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and advising emerging interim political bodies and women's armed groups.

Civil society organizations face an increasingly dangerous environment. **Women leaders and activists are at risk** of surveillance, arrest, harassment, and even sexual violence, both inside Myanmar and in exile.

Many **women have taken on triple responsibilities**—providing humanitarian support, caring for families, and continuing their activism—often with limited financial resources, legal protections, or mental health support. Entrenched patriarchal norms continue to shape expectations, with women's contributions often minimized or dismissed, even when they hold leadership roles.

3 Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), *Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Myanmar Case Study* (CFR, n.d.), <<https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/myanmar>>

4 Cárdenas M. L. and Olivius E. 2021. *Building Peace in the Shadow of War: Women-to-Women Diplomacy as Alternative Peacebuilding Practice in Myanmar*, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(3), 347–366, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17502977.2021.1917254>>



## Internally Displaced Women and Girls

Aye Aye was forced to flee her home in northern Myanmar after violence escalated in her village. She is now living in a makeshift camp. Conditions are harsh— overcrowded shelters, limited access to healthcare, and there are no formal protection mechanisms.

For women like Aye Aye, displacement brings heightened risks. Safety is a daily concern, with increased exposure to sexual and physical violence and no privacy or secure spaces. Many displaced women carry the burden of caring for children, managing daily survival, and supporting others around them, all while coping with trauma and uncertainty.

**The needs of displaced women are often overlooked in short-term aid responses.** There is little psychosocial support, and almost no funding for safe, adequate accommodation. For those who were activists or organizers before displacement, risks like surveillance and arrest continue even in exile.

Still, women are creating informal networks of care and resilience within camps. But without sustained, flexible support tailored to their realities, including long-term safety planning, these efforts remain fragile.

Internal displacement in Myanmar has surged dramatically in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, with more than 3 million people displaced across the country as of April 2024 (UNHCR 2024). **Women and girls make up a significant portion of this population and face acute vulnerabilities** because of conflict and displacement.

The collapse of democratic institutions has been accompanied by shrinking civic space for women's rights organizations and deepening economic insecurity. These intersecting factors heighten the risks for displaced women, particularly those in ethnic minority states.

Displacement often results in the breakdown of social networks, with women and girls experiencing elevated threats to their safety and well-being. **Many live in informal or inadequate shelters** without legal protections, facing risks of arrest, surveillance, or exploitation, especially in border areas or when crossing into neighboring countries like Thailand without documentation. Displaced women and girls are also **more at risk of environmental and natural disasters**.<sup>5</sup> These conditions also have serious implications for mental health and long-term recovery.

Women human rights defenders, some of whom are also displaced, face compounding threats including extrajudicial violence, limited access to legal support, and insufficient funding.

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<sup>5</sup> The Asia Foundation, *Myanmar Earthquake and Supporting Women-led Responses* (The Asia Foundation, 2025), <<https://asiafoundation.org/myanmar-earthquake-and-supporting-women-led-responses/>>



## Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Ei Mon works with a local organization documenting cases of conflict-related sexual violence in Myanmar. Since the 2021 coup, she says, the risks facing women and marginalized identity groups have intensified, while the systems meant to protect them have all but collapsed.

**“The coup made the residents in Burmese majority areas understand the suffering and effects of armed conflict on the ethnic minority populations.”**

Areas like Sagaing and Magway, once distant from armed violence, are now experiencing atrocities once confined to border regions. Sexual violence is often used as a weapon of war.

**“Women and gender and sexual minority groups have a long history of protecting their rights, demonstrating resilience, and being at the forefront of the struggle to defeat the junta. Despite [this], there are genuine risks of the possibility of [revenge] rape and torture.”**

In both junta- and resistance-controlled areas, accountability is rare.

**“The perpetrator may be required to compensate a victim or her family with only a small amount of money or livestock... Worse, but common, the victim is killed or is forced to marry her rapist as a means of his taking ‘accountability’ or ‘responsibility’ for his actions.”**

With international justice mechanisms out of reach for many survivors, Ei Mon sees an urgent need for survivor-led support and locally grounded protection.

The escalation of armed conflict across Myanmar since the 2021 military coup has significantly **increased the incidence of conflict-related sexual violence**. These forms of violence are perpetrated by both the SSPC and some revolutionary forces. In the absence of functioning accountability mechanisms, **perpetrators often face no legal consequences**. In some cases, they may be required to pay symbolic compensation in the form of livestock or cash, or the **victim may be forced to marry the perpetrator**—particularly in areas with low trust in judicial systems. These practices reflect deep-rooted patriarchal norms and hegemonic masculinity that render women especially vulnerable in conflict zones.

Documentation of conflict-related sexual violence remains limited due to restricted access to conflict-affected areas and declining coordination among national and international organizations. **Informal justice mechanisms have expanded** in the absence of the rule of law, **but they often reinforce discriminatory norms and are ill-equipped to support survivors**. Even in areas with relatively strong community policing, such as parts of Karenni State, there are insufficient resources to detain perpetrators or deliver justice.

Although the violence has raised public awareness—particularly among previously unaffected Bamar-majority regions—structural impunity, digital insecurity for survivors, and onerous data requirements imposed by international actors continue to undermine access to justice.



## AMPLIFY's Approach

AMPLIFY Myanmar is addressing these issues by deploying a holistic and people-centered approach. The primary focus is on **women's protection and resiliency**, and it is done through engaging grassroots **women's rights organizations, women human rights defenders**, and other actors operating from the border towns of Myanmar and Thailand in the first phase. AMPLIFY will assess and closely monitor the situation inside Myanmar and will cautiously devise a strategy to engage actors inside Myanmar in the coming years.

AMPLIFY prioritizes support for **women's essential needs, organizational strengthening, and psychosocial well-being**. This is done in response to scoping study findings and in recognition of the trauma faced by women's rights organizations and women human rights defenders when working with communities in distress. AMPLIFY is piloting the provision of flexible grants and psychosocial health support and will address their safety and security needs in the digital spaces. AMPLIFY also strengthens **activist networks** and **low-visibility advocacy activities** that enable continued WPS action in the ever-changing context. AMPLIFY will also provide opportunities for women's rights organizations and women's human rights defenders to participate in regional events and learn from best practices of civil society actors in other countries.



**For more information:**

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