



Women's participation in peace processes in Myanmar

The participation, protection and empowerment of women human right defenders and women peacebuilders in Myanmar building women's networks at local levels and connecting women's networks with global networks



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I. Executive Summary

In the wake of the military coup d'état in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, women human rights defenders, women peace ambassadors and women peacebuilders – including LEAP4Peace partners – continue to face unprecedented challenges, worsening an already adverse environment for many women and girls. Yet, despite the tumultuous political landscape fraught with gender-based violations, failing state infrastructure, a rise in conflict-induced poverty, displacement and impunity from the military junta, women actors¹ continue to play vital roles in advocating for the participation, protection and empowerment of women. To support these efforts, it is important for the international community to provide direct and flexible financial resources and technical support to sustain women-led initiatives and advocate for the recognition and protection of women human rights defenders and peacebuilders in Myanmar. It is also critical to forge alliances with women's networks and engage with local communities, civil society organisations (CSOs) and grassroots movements to raise awareness of the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and human rights defence.

i. Perspectives and challenges

“Healing is the first step. Now the wounds are still too raw for us to bring our communities together to talk about peace.” - Woman peacebuilder

Complex political landscape: The turbulent political landscape and ongoing conflict, worsened by the attempted military coup in February 2021, has disrupted peacebuilding efforts, shifting priorities of many peacebuilders towards addressing immediate humanitarian needs and navigating heightened security risks.

Barriers to participation and recognition: Gender norms and discrimination impede women's participation. Despite repeatedly demonstrating their competencies and capabilities before and during the military coup in Myanmar, women continue to face significant barriers, especially in participating in matters related to security, home affairs and the military. Coupled with the security risks associated with these topics around peace, politics and federalism, women peacebuilders also face additional concerns about the visibility of their roles. This has created a negatively reinforcing cycle where women who participate behind the scenes are not recognised and, due to their limited visibility, it is then often assumed that Myanmar women are not at the forefront of peacebuilding processes and are not invited to important spaces. Even when women do participate, their contributions and views are frequently overlooked. Throughout the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) process, the formal peace process and in policymaking arenas, women have to exert additional efforts to ensure their voices are heard.

¹ In this paper, women actors (peacebuilders and human rights defenders) are defined as individuals who identify as peacebuilders and are dedicated to breaking cycles of violence with an emphasis on gender, peace and conflict. They are committed to delivering humanitarian assistance to the most marginalised and conflict-impacted communities in Myanmar. Members of the L4P Consortium, including GEN and NIMD Myanmar, are actively implementing programmes designed to enhance and support the role of women peacebuilders through initiatives like the Women Peace Ambassadors and Women Peacebuilders programmes.

Security risks and pressures: Women remain vulnerable to various forms of threats and intimidation, including targeted arrests, surveillance, and pressure from family members and political actors. Negative social pressures include individuals with ill intent who troll on the internet and criticise the passion and commitment of women peacebuilders in the diaspora or in Myanmar, which affects their morale and has the potential to create discouragement and self-doubt.

Access to information and resources: Limited access to information, finance and other resources hampers women's ability to fully engage in peacebuilding efforts and advocate for their rights. Some donors' anti-fiduciary risk measures are insensitive to conflict. For instance, these measures pressure women-led peacebuilding organisations to register with the junta, requiring them to disclose high-risk information to audit firms. If leaked, this information could pose a serious threat. Furthermore, the changing dynamics of conflict necessitate flexibility and strategic positioning, but strict requirements to adhere to workplans that were submitted to donors before the military coup pose a contextual challenge for Myanmar's women peacebuilders.

International support and solidarity: Women peacebuilders emphasise the importance of international support and solidarity in amplifying their voices, advocating for their rights and mobilising resources, as well as providing platforms for dialogue and knowledge sharing.

Case study: Empowering women leaders in conflict zones

Context: In recognition of the crucial role of women's voices in peace processes, NIMD partnered with GEN to focus on enhancing the leadership of women. Despite the challenges posed by the post-coup conditions, NIMD remained committed to supporting women's participation and leadership in the WPS agenda.

Despite the challenges, women peacebuilders devised ingenious strategies to overcome these barriers. In Myanmar, bank transfers pose a significant risk due to stringent surveillance by the military, aimed at cutting off resources to conflict-affected communities. Women peacebuilders, in particular, must take precautionary measures when moving resources to communities in need. Otherwise, they risk arrest on the grounds of supporting the resistance movement, even though they are serving distressed communities in dire need.

Action: NIMD and GEN faced significant challenges in identifying and engaging women participants due to security threats and targeting by the military junta.

They have persisted in their efforts, however, primarily focusing on capacity building in the first year and networking in subsequent years. Through training, seminars and interactive communication, NIMD provided women leaders with the necessary skills and confidence to take on leadership roles in their communities. GEN's Women's Peacebuilder Program unites women from a broad spectrum of regional and ethnic backgrounds, specifically targeting those at the sub-national level, to engage in collective action and share emergency response strategies. For example, a woman peacebuilder experienced a raid on her home due to her leadership role in political organising and peace education efforts amid political turmoil. Alerted by her family that military forces were after her, she and her daughter fled to safety on a scooter. Since then, returning home has become impossible, as her residence remains under surveillance.

Outcome: Despite the volatile situation, partners' efforts were effective as women leaders continued to remain active in their communities. Many women demonstrated resilience and commitment, even in the face of security concerns and personal risks.

Impact: By empowering women leaders, NIMD and GEN contributed to the amplification of women's voices in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing the prospects for sustainable peace and stability in Myanmar.

“While I was on the run, women I knew through my network and collective actions were the ones who stepped up to help me. They directed me to sources of urgent funds and provided practical support to ensure my safe arrival. These women’s networks are priceless to me.” - Woman peacebuilder from Shan State

ii. Solutions undertaken by respondents to enhance the participation, protection and empowerment of women

Women's participation in peacebuilding and advocacy: Workshops, seminars and training programmes have empowered women in leadership roles and enhanced their capacity. Women engage in advocacy efforts to promote gender equality and address systemic barriers. The Gender Equality Network (GEN) in Myanmar has held a series of training programmes and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) forums to gather women peacebuilders at the national and sub-national levels to exchange their experiences, devise solutions, and brainstorm to established gender-based violence (GBV) response systems. Another member, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) Myanmar country office, has been instrumental in facilitating an environment for women political party members to regroup, re-connect women in politics, and chart a path forward in this interim period. LEAP4Peace Consortium Partners, besides helping to sharpen the technical skills of women defenders and peacebuilders, the invaluable ripple effects included the social infrastructure for peace that was created among these women.

Women’s empowerment and resilience: Women peacebuilders have creatively delivered vital support through mental health counselling sessions, aiding communities grappling with severe mental distress due to conflict and political and economic crises. By facilitating networking activities, they foster an environment of mutual encouragement and support. Ingeniously, under the pretence of apolitical community-level activities such as yoga, Zumba and gardening, they organise activists’ gatherings. These events serve as platforms for exchanging information on the current state of affairs, sharing urgent needs, and strategising on resource allocation to the communities most in need.

Support for gender-based challenges: Women peacebuilders are also confronting entrenched attitudes among both men and some women, particularly concerning women's participation in peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, these peacebuilders are keenly aware of the resurgence of customary law amid the breakdown of civil law and the Myanmar judicial system. Customary laws, which have a profound impact on women's lives, often perpetuate gender-discriminatory practices. These laws are becoming increasingly incompatible with modern contexts, leaving women and gender minorities without protection. As a result, women peacebuilders exercise vigilance and understand that while the increased reliance on customary law may be necessary due to current circumstances, it is far from ideal for promoting gender equality and advancing the agenda for women's rights. For example, many customary justice systems in Myanmar fail to deliver justice that perpetrators deserve and also fails to deliver punishment that the perpetrator deserves in cases of sexual or gendered based violence.. Women peacebuilders reject the notion that killing a

chicken or pig as an apology for a gender-based crime constitutes justice. Even worse, survivors are often pressured to marry their perpetrators, as they are considered 'damaged goods', and marriage is seen as a way for the perpetrator to be held accountable. These are the traditional practices that women's rights defenders are actively working to abolish, even if that means that their actions carry significant risks.

“People think peace is at the national level and armed actors are talking about negotiation and ceasefire. But we need community and local-level peace too – in Sagaing Region, we are holding community dialogues, starting at a family level, and addressing the root causes of conflict.” - Woman peacebuilder

Adaptation and flexibility: Women peacebuilders have demonstrated excellent adaptation and flexibility by shifting focus to immediate humanitarian needs while maintaining long-term peacebuilding and gender equality goals.

Humanitarian assistance and response: Women peacebuilders are at the forefront of mobilising resources and coordinating efforts to ensure the efficient distribution of aid and assistance to vulnerable groups. This includes those residing in remote or inaccessible areas of Kachin, Shan State, and the Rohingya communities in Rakhine State, who face a disproportionately high risk of victimisation, scapegoating and exploitation amid the conflict. Women peacebuilders advocate for increased attention and resources from donors and humanitarian organisations to address the pressing needs of conflict-affected communities in Sagaing, Magway, Chin, Shan and Kachin States, and collaborate with local partners to enhance the delivery of aid.

iii. Best practices and innovative solutions in grassroots peacebuilding activities

Empowering women in peacebuilding: Grassroots efforts prioritise the participation, protection and empowerment of women human rights defenders and peacebuilders, recognising their crucial role in promoting peace and stability.

Peacebuilding networks and collaboration: Women peacebuilders consulted for this paper collaborate with CSOs, women's networks and community leaders, emphasising shared experiences, collective problem solving and solidarity, as well as navigating complex political dynamics.

Enhancing women's participation in nation-building processes: Efforts have focused on capacity-deepening, networking and advocacy to empower women leaders at the national and sub-national level for nation-building.

iv. Current solutions adopted by grassroots peacebuilders that need continued support from donor communities and the broader WPS community include:

- Leveraging digital platforms for virtual capacity-enhancement workshops and networking.

- Tailoring programmes to accommodate diverse needs, including those of rural and internally displaced women, is essential. For instance, some community members do not have functional smartphones. In such situations, women peacebuilders personally visit communities to conduct workshops.
- Fostering collaboration with community leaders, including religious leaders, to promote gender-inclusive peacebuilding.
- Prioritising resilience-building to mitigate the impact of conflict and displacement on women.
- Advocating for the meaningful participation of women in peace processes at all levels.
- Promoting a grassroots approach to peacebuilding and solidarity among diverse stakeholders are important elements and should be supported by donor communities.

v. Tangible action points for sustainability:

- sustained local capacity deepening
- global connectivity and exchange programmes
- advocacy and policy engagement
- resource mobilisation and support
- continued use of technology and innovation
- community engagement and empowerment
- sustained monitoring and evaluation to ensure that insights from women peacebuilders are integrated from the perspective of adaptive management



II. Introduction

Myanmar's longest-running civil war, brought on by historical grievances between the central government dominated by the Bamar majority on the one hand and various ethnic nationalities struggling for autonomy and self-determination on the other hand. Successive military regimes have attempted to consolidate power and marginalise ethnic minorities through structural and direct violence.² The dawn of 1 February 2021 marked a turning point in Myanmar's tumultuous history, which has been fraught with fragility and conflict since Myanmar gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948. The military's abrupt coup d'état in 2021 disrupted the fragile peace process built on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).³ This agreement, despite having many flaws and narrow space for civil society's participation, intended to initiate national political dialogues and pave the way towards reconciliation and stability. The NCA has, however, failed with devastating effects following the military staged coup.

The NCA follows a long line of attempts at securing peace in Myanmar. Since the 1990s, the country has been through a multitude of unilateral, bilateral and multilateral peace processes, none of which have yielded lasting peace for its diverse communities.⁴ It is well established and documented that the Sit-Tat – the Myanmar military – has been committing crimes against humanity, sexual violence, genocide against the Rohingya communities and violent repression of ethnic communities for decades.⁵ These atrocities happened against the backdrop of its transitional efforts to a quasi-civilian government and in tandem with the NCA negotiations. Following the excessive use of force against peaceful protestors after the failed coup, an armed struggle launched by some segments of the pro-democracy movement – together with long-standing ethnic resistance organisations – has exacerbated the struggle for democracy that has long existed within ethnic areas.^{6,7} The Myanmar military has intensified its indiscriminate offensives against both resistance forces and ethnic resistance organisations, targeting civilians living in the vicinity of these resistance groups. The conflict in Myanmar, which now engulfs two-thirds of the country, has led to widespread and prolonged displacement, especially among the Rohingya community. This situation includes

2 Rieffel, Lex. 2016. "War and Peace in Myanmar." Brookings. www.brookings.edu/articles/war-and-peace-in-myanmar/.

3 In 2015, the Government of Myanmar and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team/Senior Delegation (NCCT/SD) reached an agreement on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), which was endorsed by eight ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Since Myanmar has experienced the most protracted civil war, the NCA was preceded by a series of bilateral state-level ceasefires throughout the 1990s and ushered in the contemporary period. Notably, the initial set of bilateral ceasefires from the 1990s neither transformed violent conflict nor laid the foundations for sustainable peace. The NCA was part of Myanmar's efforts to transition from military rule to a quasi-civilian rule, which began in 2011. (AGIPP. 2018. Policy Brief 4: If Half the Population Mattered: A critique of Myanmar Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and Joint Monitoring Committee Framework from a gender perspective.)

5 The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar | Transnational Institute, 2024.

5 UN OHCHR. 2018. Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar - A/HRC/39/CRP.

6 Hein, Ye Myo. 2022. "One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar's Armed Rebellion." Wilson Center, Asia Program, Tagaung.

7 Maizland, Lindsay. 2022. "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict." Council on Foreign Relations.

both recurring and new displacement, with the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) surpassing 2.7 million and refugees seeking asylum exceeding 1.35 million. Out of the 2.7 million IDPs, half are women and children.⁸ Insecurities are manifesting in various forms, including an increasing number of incidents involving violence against women, femicide and gender-based crimes, alongside economic hardship, food insecurity and a rise in poverty.^{9,10,11}

In the face of this devastation, the question of women's participation in peacebuilding in Myanmar becomes even more pressing. How are women peace activists, peacebuilders and human rights defenders navigating this complex and ever-shifting landscape? To address this question effectively, it is crucial to unpack the concept of peacebuilding in the Myanmar context. Here, positive peace is not merely the absence of war, but a multifaceted reality of the absence of structural violence, including widespread destruction, ongoing atrocities and deep societal divisions. The conflict in Myanmar is not restricted to its borders alone; its ramifications extend internationally, mirroring the transnational nature of women's peace movements. As Myanmar's national peace movement aligns itself with the global movement, there is concerted effort to leverage collective strength, share strategies and engage in networking opportunities, including participation in joint activities. However, the collapse of the NCA and the coup has propelled genuine Myanmar women peace activists, human rights defenders and peacebuilders towards grassroots approaches, actively engaging in bottom-up activities in the absence of formal peace structures.

Despite strides towards inclusion, women in Myanmar encounter numerous obstacles to their meaningful participation and empowerment in political processes amid escalating conflicts and crises. These challenges are multifaceted and include societal norms that are overly protective of women, parental restrictions on their mobility, and institutionalised discrimination. For instance, when peacebuilding opportunities are happening outside the country, prohibitive costs for passport renewals for residents of certain regions like Chin, Rakhine, Mon State, Magway and Sagaing impede women peacebuilders' mobility. In addition to these barriers, systemic challenges and societal expectations undermine their contributions. Biases persist, questioning the relevance of gender equality and the unique value women peacebuilders bring to the process, especially when they are expected to only be able to talk about 'women's issues'. This situation highlights the urgent need for systemic transformation to ensure women's voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

LEAP4Peace (L4P), a consortium of organisations from Burundi, Colombia, Myanmar, the Netherlands and the UK, is dedicated to bolstering the role of women in peacebuilding and political processes in its target countries. It aims to elevate women's participation in decision-making roles and promote their involvement in peacebuilding efforts on a global scale. Over a five-year period (2021–2025), LEAP4Peace – which is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs – is implementing a multifaceted strategy, directly engaging with women politicians in the target countries and offering

⁸ Operational Portal – “Refugee Situations: Myanmar Situation.” UNHCR, 2024, reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/Myanmar-situation.

⁹ Women's League of Burma, Situation Update, 2003.

¹⁰ The Situation of Women in Myanmar Since the Burmese Military's Attempted Coup, 2023.

¹¹ Myanmar Economic Recovery Falters as Conflict and Inflation Weigh, 2023.



mentoring, training and networking opportunities to empower women as influential decision-makers in peacebuilding processes. LEAP4Peace also collaborates with civil society organisations (CSOs) and political actors, facilitating multi-party dialogue platforms and providing capacity-building support to promote gender equality agendas.

This paper aims to better understand the context of the participation, protection and empowerment of women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders in Myanmar, who are building women's networks at local levels and connecting women's networks with global networks. This paper will:

- Briefly summarise the work undertaken by the LEAP4Peace partners – GEN and NIMD Myanmar – and the experiences of both partners' implementation of the LEAP4Peace programme.
- Identify best practices and innovative solutions in grassroots peacebuilding activities (including links to politics) and provide recommendations on how to support such practices through at least one significant case study.
- Include the perspectives of women peacebuilders and their thoughts and experiences of what solutions and approaches work to improve women's participation in Myanmar.
- Provide analysis on the current systems and structures, capturing lessons on what works, including identifying tangible action points for sustainability.



III. Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used, which combined qualitative data collection methods and desk-based research. The qualitative data collection involved a series of consultations with diverse women actors including women human rights defenders, women's rights organisations, CSOs, women leaders, women's rights movements and networks, and women in politics in Myanmar. The individuals consulted are participants of GEN and NMID Myanmar. The geographic target areas of the participants include Shan State, Kachin State, Karen State and Sagaing region in Myanmar, as well as participants in exile in Thailand and the US. The ethnicities of the key informants include Kachin, Chin, Karen, Bamar, Shan, Mon and Karennie, and their religions include Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The researchers of this paper are from Myanmar (Karen and mixed ethnic identity).

Partners of the LEAP4Peace Consortium, including GEN and NMID Myanmar, are actively implementing programmes designed to enhance and support the role of women peacebuilders, through initiatives like the Women Peace Ambassadors and Women Peacebuilders programmes. In this paper, women actors (peacebuilders and human rights defenders) are defined as individuals who identify as peacebuilders and are dedicated to breaking cycles of violence with an emphasis on gender, peace and conflict. They are committed to delivering humanitarian assistance to the most marginalised and conflict-impacted communities in Myanmar.

To ensure broader participation and accessibility for stakeholders across different geographic locations, the consultations were carried out virtually and in-person. Alongside primary data collection, desk-based research was carried out on existing literature, reports, policy documents and academic studies relevant to women's participation in peace processes in Myanmar. This comprehensive review provided contextual background information and supported data analysis.

Thematic analysis techniques were employed to analyse the data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Themes and patterns emerging from the data were identified, coded and categorised to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of women in peacebuilding activities. Triangulation of data sources was utilised to validate findings and ensure the reliability and credibility of the research outcomes.





IV. Findings

Five sets of group consultations were carried out with a total of 25 stakeholders comprised of LEAP4Peace partner organisations, women leaders, women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders (24 women and one man). Two individual consultations were carried out with women human rights defenders (both women).

i. Perspectives and challenges of women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders

Complex political landscape: Women human rights defenders, women leaders and women peacebuilders, including LEAP4Peace Consortium Partners (subsequently referred to as women actors) in Myanmar operate within a complex political environment characterised by ongoing conflict, the aftermath of the military coup, and restrictions on civil liberties, grave violations against women and children, and collapse of security and other state infrastructure. This has disrupted peacebuilding efforts, shifting priorities towards addressing immediate humanitarian needs and navigating heightened security risks. Despite these challenges, women have carved out their own spaces and adopted a broad spectrum of strategies to continue their peacebuilding efforts.

Emerging policy frameworks, structures and mechanisms potentially supporting women's participation in peacebuilding: In the aftermath of the failed coup, a dichotomy has emerged in the peace support structures for women's involvement in peacebuilding efforts. On one side, the once-existent fragile peace infrastructure that marginally facilitated women's participation in the peace process has been significantly undermined and is no longer operational. Many women peacebuilding organisations have chosen to disengage from any peace initiative under the military dictatorship because of ongoing atrocities committed by the military itself.

Following the failed military coup, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), established on 8 March 2021 – which consists of elected MPs, political parties, the Spring Revolution forces (including strike groups, women's groups, a Rohingya women's group and CSOs), ethnic resistance organisations, and federal unit-based organisations – collectively developed the Federal Democratic Charter, which was announced on 31 March 2021. On 27–29 January 2022, the First People's Assembly approved the Charter with amendments.¹² Serving as the guiding document for the Interim Constitution Arrangements, the charter embodies principles of ethnic equality, democratic governance and federalism, among others. New governance institutions and structures such as the National Unity Government were formed on 16 April 2021 in accordance with the Charter¹³ and subsequently state-level federal units have been established. Despite challenges, some women peacebuilders consulted with in this study have chosen to engage with the ongoing nation-building process and its structures, notably state-level constitution drafting efforts. Women peacebuilders revealed their participation and support in the nation-building process, viewing it as

¹² IDEA (2022). Myanmar's Federal Democracy Charter: Analysis and Prospects

¹³ IDEA (2022). Myanmar's Federal Democracy Charter: Analysis and Prospects

transformative and addressing the root causes of the conflict in Myanmar. Women peacebuilders see it as offering a glimpse of hope and the potential to sustain a pluralistic platform for political dialogue, ending military authoritarianism, and providing new opportunities for forming a federal system of government. This engagement is viewed as a strategic avenue for advancing the goals of women's peacebuilding efforts within a framework that aligns with their core values and aspirations for the country. Conversely, while other women actors aspire to be deeply involved in striving for gender equality and women's rights within the policy, practices and processes of the nation-building political project, the high risk of torture and summary execution if they are found participating in the nation-building efforts has compelled them to maintain a distance. Additionally, some women peacebuilders believe that fostering a broad-based grassroots movement represents the most viable and accessible investment for them in the current political scenario.

Limited participation and recognition: Women face barriers to meaningful participation in political processes and decision-making forums, with entrenched gender norms and discrimination hindering their involvement. For instance, women from the civil society sector may be perceived as lacking the necessary political acumen to navigate the political landscape, leading stakeholders to favour individuals from political parties. Within these parties, women leaders have noted that escalated conflict, insecurities and remote work practices have intensified existing gender biases. For example, women are often overlooked in political discussions and decisions, becoming an afterthought. This is compounded by many informal dealings among male counterparts within the parties, which occur over phone calls or at teashops.

Despite their active engagement in grassroots initiatives, women's contributions are often overlooked, and their voices marginalised in political processes and policymaking spaces. While sustained advocacy efforts by women's groups have made the 30 per cent quota for gender inclusion a prevailing norm, gender bias is so deeply rooted that, although no stakeholder explicitly objects to the quota and inclusion, implicit biases and stereotypes persist. Another barrier, stemming from socio-cultural norms, is the triple burden that women carry – reproductive, productive and community development duties – unlike their male counterparts. These social expectations are exacerbated during times of conflict, taking the form of women being expected to care for the social and reproductive aspects of IDP assistance activities, while male counterparts in the community assume decision-making and leadership roles. A woman peacebuilder from Karen State shared her strategies for challenging stereotypes by demonstrating that if male community leaders trust her capacity enough to let her be in charge of IDP arrangements, she also has the right to participate in decision-making for resource allocation and other strategic decisions.

The women peacebuilders consulted underscored the importance of LEAP4Peace Consortium Partners' concerted and conscious efforts to facilitate sharing of strategies and solutions through meetings among women in politics and peace activists.

Security risks and pressures: Women actors remain vulnerable to various forms of threats and intimidation, including targeted arrests, abuse, surveillance and pressure from family members and political actors. The militarised environment of Myanmar exacerbates security concerns, forcing women to navigate risks while continuing their peacebuilding activities amid uncertainty and fear. The overall environment is highly militarised, granting armed actors both perceived and actual

power within communities. Women who provide services to survivors of sexual and gender based violence face intimidation, threats and pressures to remain silent, especially when the perpetrators are armed actors or linked to armed actors. This occurs both in IDP camps in Karenni State and in major cities like Yangon and Mandalay, where these women encounter similar challenges.

“The tightening of restrictions in 2023 has significantly limited our operational space, prohibiting the use of terms like ‘politics’ and ‘peace’ in our activities, thus redirecting our efforts towards sexual and reproductive health and rights activities and gender-based violence awareness campaigns.” - Woman peacebuilder

Constant and consistent threats, insecurities and fears nearly push them to the brink of abandoning their rights-defending work. However, their commitment remains steadfast driven by a vision for the well-being of future generations.

Despite facing significant obstacles, women actors remain undeterred. One woman recalled, *“this is an intergenerational struggle. If we do not fight against the military dictatorship this time, our younger generations will be under military boots. The military was so sure that the people would let them govern when they took over the country. Now they see a nationwide revolution.”* On a shorter time horizon, they continue to spread crucial information and provide emergency response training, as well as updates on gender, peace and security through inventive and innovative methods. Their strategies cleverly leverage social norms and gender stereotypes to further their agenda on gender, peace and security, carrying out activities covertly as well as using the existing trusted social and religious networks they had prior to the crisis, to aid the most vulnerable communities. Women peacebuilders have established emergency response protocols to ensure they can communicate with each other if the internet is cut by the military in their areas.

“Our resilience is formidable. To participate in this consultation call, I travelled to a location with internet access and charged my phone overnight during a rare moment of electricity. This effort was crucial to connect with fellow Myanmar women peacebuilders exiling in Thailand, the US and Malaysia, as these conversations are vital to me. Despite the harsh conditions, we can achieve much and forge peace amidst war. We dream of what we’ll accomplish post-conflict when rebuilding our communities. We hope the world recognises our desire for a life free of this military rule, wanting for just peace.” - Woman peace ambassador

They acknowledge that they may not personally reap the benefits of their efforts, but they find solace in the idea that the seeds of peace they plant today will benefit the generations to come. The overriding theme that consistently emerged during consultations with women across various social strata is their deep-seated bitterness towards war and conflicts, coupled with a yearning for stability and just peace, and a zeal to rebuild their country.

Access to information and resources: There is limited access to information, which hampers women's ability to fully engage in peacebuilding efforts and advocate for their rights. Internet has been cut in many of the conflict-affected townships, and the majority of peacebuilding literature is predominantly in English – with translations into Burmese becoming inaccessible. Additionally, more than seven decades of civil war in Myanmar has made it an atypical case for peacebuilding

research, particularly regarding the role of women in peacebuilding amid war.¹⁴ Yet local women peacebuilders remain hopeful. Many peacebuilding organisations have had to suspend their websites and take down their online resources, due to the military's scrutiny and harassment of peacebuilding and rights-based NGOs. Resource constraints further undermine their capacity to address the diverse needs of their communities, including access to essential services, livelihood support and psychosocial counselling. Shared anecdotes reveal that when urgent and life-saving needs arose following the recent displacement caused by Operation 1027, an ongoing military offensive in Northern Shan State, women peacebuilders had no choice but to pool their resources to cover the immediate needs of civilians. In such situations, they heavily rely on individual donors, women from diaspora communities and women peacebuilders in exile. They gather their resources to swiftly meet these needs, sending no-strings-attached funds to purchase basic necessities. Donor requirements are bureaucratic and not swift enough to address such needs; sometimes, the needs do not meet the criteria of permitted items outlined in the activities budget. This theme is another topic that women actors like to highlight. As one woman mentioned, *"Peacebuilding is a long-term endeavour with communities; trust is the most precious currency. If communities ask for life-saving assistance, we cannot explain to them that we have funding for women's leadership capacity-building activities, but not for women's dignity kits."*

International support and solidarity: Women peacebuilders emphasise the importance of international support and solidarity – from Myanmar peacebuilders and political activists in the diaspora, other women peacebuilders from neighbouring countries, and global WPS community – in amplifying their voices, advocating for their rights, mobilising resources, providing platforms for dialogue, sharing best practices, and showcasing women's perspectives on the global stage. Women peace ambassadors underscored that they have trust and confidence in fellow sister peacebuilders overseas to elevate the situation in Myanmar in international arenas by way of exerting influence on international policymaking processes. One woman expressed, *"I have complete faith in my sister peacebuilders in the diaspora, who are speaking out against the junta at great personal risk to their own families' security. We owe this channel to women in safe countries; they must continue to advocate for our communities as we focus on building resilience at the grassroots level."* This highlights the ongoing transnational, women-to-women peacebuilding efforts that persist despite conflicts, as well as the importance of maintaining connectivity between women in the diaspora and women leaders in Myanmar, to keep the exchange of information flowing.

ii. Strategies undertaken by women actors to enhance the participation, protection and empowerment of women

Women's participation in peacebuilding and transnational advocacy: Women actors in Myanmar work to improve the participation of women in peacebuilding through organising workshops, seminars and training programmes to empower women towards leadership roles. Since the attempted coup, women's rights organisations have actively provided workshops on digital security, advocacy strategy development, international justice, accountability mechanisms and ethical documentation training, in cooperation with technical women's support groups such as the

¹⁴ Cárdenas & Olivius, 2021



SafeGBVreporting Team. Digital security training is essential for safeguarding women peacebuilders from military surveillance. Women peacebuilders organise advocacy efforts to promote gender equality, address systemic barriers, and support women's participation in decision-making processes, as well as promote the WPS agenda and leadership despite surveillance and restrictions. For three consecutive years (2021–2023), women peacebuilder networks have organised WPS forums (the next forum is expected around October 2024). These events have welcomed peacebuilders from conflict-affected countries such as Syria, Ethiopia, Aceh (Indonesia) and Nigeria to share experiences, exchange protection strategies for women peacebuilders, discuss how to effectively operationalise national action plans on WPS, and plan collective efforts. In advocating for Myanmar, women's rights organisations from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries have supported Myanmar women's groups. They have staged protests and articulated their demands at the Indonesian Embassy, representing Myanmar's cause. Women peacebuilders emphasise the significance of transnational feminist or women's solidarity movements in helping to bring their agenda to the world's attention.

Women's empowerment and resilience: Women actors provide mental health counselling sessions, capacity development and networking activities. They encourage women affected by armed conflicts and vulnerable women to be resilient and recognise their capacity to create a culture of supporting each other within their communities. As part of resilience-building initiatives, women peace ambassadors have been hosting informal discussions on resilience and empowerment of young women. During times when civil rights are under threat, one woman peacebuilder highlighted the importance of empowering young women so they could share their locally rooted perspectives on security trends and concerns. Their deep understanding of their communities' struggles positions them to advocate effectively for the necessary interventions and support. Women peace ambassadors work with women from the community including those from ethnic minorities, women who lead households, women living with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQI+) groups, which provides crucial insights for inclusive peacebuilding. Additionally, resilient and empowered women can challenge powerholders and demand accountability.

Support for gender-based challenges: Women actors address GBV, discrimination and lack of support from communities and families by highlighting the need to challenge prevailing attitudes among men regarding the significance of women's participation in peacebuilding.


Discrimination takes various forms, including the unrecognised triple burden women bear within their households: the emotional labour tied to an uncertain future for their children, and the responsibility for household income when men leave home to join the revolution following the failed 2021 coup. In some cases, men have had to go into hiding for their safety. Women actors are concerned about the instrumentalisation of their participation by men within the movement. During the revolution phase, women's support lends legitimacy and is thus accepted. However, in the reconstruction stage, women may be relegated to the background. To address these legitimate concerns, women have been working to embed gender equality and the WPS agenda into the policies and frameworks of interim governance structures. Even as women ascend within these governance structures, they are often relegated to roles that are stereotypically gendered and excluded from strategic decision-making spaces. To overcome this challenge, ongoing advocacy efforts are being invested in various federal units. Women peacebuilders push for these changes



within new governance structures, stressing the need to place gender equality at the heart of nation-building efforts and to promote inclusivity by challenging existing norms.

GBV is a pervasive issue that women actors dedicate a significant amount of their time to, addressing the needs of survivors and leading prevention efforts in the Northern Shan, Kachin, Karen States and Sagaing areas. Moreover, women peacebuilders have been vigilant about the communities' increased usage of customary laws, therefore making efforts to ensure these laws are gender responsive. This focus on the gender responsiveness of customary law has led to advocacy for policy changes, which is expected to bolster a gendered perspective in customary justice mechanisms.

Adaptation and flexibility: Women actors have demonstrated good adaptability and flexibility in response to post-coup political and security challenges, by shifting focus to immediate humanitarian needs while maintaining long-term peacebuilding and gender goals. Programmes are tailored to accommodate the diverse identities, needs and contexts of women peacebuilders and human rights defenders across different regions and communities. Furthermore, Myanmar ranked second out of 187 countries in the 2016 Global Climate Risk Index, indicating its vulnerability to extreme weather events. Amid armed conflict, women actors shared that their workload encompassed responding to climate-induced challenges such as droughts, storms, floods and crop failures throughout the three years of the crisis. One woman actor shared her story of mobilising resources through her church network in Bago, Karen State, to provide assistance to flood-affected communities. She mentioned that: *"...women's leadership in disaster and conflict relief efforts is needed. If we are not involved, the emergency relief package will not address gender-specific needs such as sanitary napkins and special nutrition for lactating mothers."* As they engage in relief work, principles of conflict sensitivity and 'do no harm' are integrated into humanitarian activities, in ways that are tailored to the diverse ethno-religious composition of Myanmar's population. These adaptive strategies pave ways for a nexus approach in the areas where they operate, including Northern Shan, Kachin and Karen regions.



"When life gives us lemons, we must find ways to make lemonade. We repurposed gender stereotyped mundane activities as a political cover to raise awareness about the political state of affairs and facilitate information sharing at the grassroots level. Before beginning our activities, the military would send administrators to scrutinise our activities and topics. This necessitated extreme caution in selecting our themes and titles." - Woman peacebuilder

For example, women peacebuilders employ region-specific strategies for covert peacebuilding activities to avoid detection by local informants or military affiliates. They judiciously use the term 'peace' or avoid it, depending on the context. In communities devastated by armed conflict, they opt for terms like 'healing' and 'peer-to-peer therapy' instead of 'peace', although these initiatives are integral to peacebuilding efforts. Women actors have also leveraged technology and digital platforms to facilitate engagement and support, while recognising and addressing barriers to access and literacy. Grassroots approaches ingeniously sustain peace-related conversations through initiatives like café corners and safe spaces, where people can relatively safely exchange views on current affairs and various issues. In Myanmar, one media group is monitoring the spread and intensity of hate speech and violence incitement on social media; similar trends contributed to

the Rohingya genocide. A women peacebuilder network has collaborated with a media agency to disseminate these findings and provide training to young women peacebuilders. This training aims to equip them with the skills to distinguish between fake news and legitimate news.

Humanitarian assistance and response: Women actors provide immediate support and relief to IDPs and conflict-affected communities, particularly women and children. They deliver humanitarian aid such as food, shelter, medical care and psychosocial support to address urgent conflict-induced needs. This aid is extended to those living in remote or hard-to-reach areas. They advocate for increased attention and resources from donors and humanitarian organisations to address the pressing needs of conflict-affected communities, especially women and children, and collaborate with local partners to enhance the delivery of aid.

“When I was on the run, I was not able to contact the embassies, international NGOs and human rights lawyers in the capital, I informed my fellow women peacebuilders who did many activities with me in the past because I know that they know my situation and they can respond to my call for help.” - A woman peacebuilder recalling her journey to Thailand as she was on the arrest warrant list

Case study: Grassroots humanitarian assistance amid conflict

Context: In the midst of ongoing conflict and displacement in northern Shan State, women peace ambassadors have emerged as frontline responders, providing crucial humanitarian assistance to affected communities. Despite the challenges posed by limited resources and security threats, these women have remained steadfast in their commitment to alleviating the suffering of women and children impacted by the conflict.

Action: As one woman peacebuilder explained, *“whenever a new wave of IDPs arrive in our area, we automatically gather gender-disaggregated data – detailing the number of women, pregnant individuals, people with disabilities, and nursing children – to aid in our fundraising efforts.”* Women peace ambassadors focus their efforts on addressing the immediate needs of IDPs, particularly women and pregnant women. Despite the lack of financial support from donors, these grassroots activists mobilise resources and provide essential assistance to vulnerable communities based on their intersectional needs, playing a pivotal role in fostering peace and social cohesion at the local level.

Outcome: Despite the daunting challenges, the efforts of women peace ambassadors have made a tangible difference in the lives of those affected by conflict by addressing some of their immediate needs.

Impact: Through their deep understanding of their communities’ needs and their unique social standing in their locality, and the trust that they have garnered over time – as well as credentials accumulated due to their public services even prior to the failed coup – based on what is explained here, there is not only the fact that they are able to provide life-saving aid. But also that women offer a perspective considering the differential needs of populations - intersectionality - considering pregnant women, nursing infants, etc. specific needs. This demonstrates the transformative power of grassroots peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives, as well as the usefulness and adaptability of women peacebuilders.

iii. Best practices and innovative solutions in grassroots peacebuilding activities

Empowering women in peacebuilding: Grassroots efforts prioritise the participation, protection

and empowerment of women human rights defenders and peacebuilders, recognising their crucial role in promoting peace and stability. Initiatives such as virtual capacity-building workshops have provided lifelines to women activists amid violent repression and insecurity, facilitating connections and support despite security risks. Nonetheless, hurdles remain for rural women with limited access. Allocating emergency and flexible funding for women peacebuilders is another crucial step to ensure their safety and facilitate their transportation to secure locations. It is essential to provide support for women peacebuilders who must live in exile to avoid arrest, including stipends that allow them to continue their political mobilisation and peace activities. This support prevents their need to divert time to income-generating activities, enabling them to sustain their peace activism.

Peacebuilding networks and collaboration: Despite constraints, women's peacebuilding networks have demonstrated resilience and adaptability, focusing on youth engagement, political advocacy and community resilience amid protracted conflict and political instability. Women actors have collaborated with CSOs, women's networks and community leaders, emphasising shared experiences, collective problem-solving and solidarity, particularly in supporting IDPs and navigating the complex Myanmar political landscape.

Enhancing women's participation in the nation-building process: A woman peace ambassador highlighted the resilience of these individuals, noting their persistence despite setbacks caused by the military coup that disrupted the NCA peace process. Grassroots peace activism continues as disillusioned participants shift their focus to nation-building. This federal democratic nation-building effort addresses the root causes of conflict in Myanmar, including 'Burmanisation' – the lack of self-determination and equality among ethnic nationalities. Successful federal democratic nation-building could potentially resolve longstanding grievances, and should be seen as an integral part of broader peacebuilding. To this end, LEAP4Peace Partners member organisations are playing important roles in enhancing women's participation in nation-building at sub-national and community levels, fostering gender-inclusive environments and challenging prevailing attitudes towards women's roles in conflict resolution. Efforts have focused on capacity building, networking and advocacy to empower women leaders across diverse sectors despite security risks and limited access.

Innovative solutions in grassroots peacebuilding

- Leveraging digital platforms for virtual skill-building workshops and networking opportunities amid insecurity.
- Tailoring programmes to accommodate diverse needs, including Rohingya communities who are experiencing distress due to the proximity of armed conflict in their areas, rural women with limited literacy or access to technology, people with disabilities, and displaced people who do not have access to smart phones.
- Fostering collaboration between CSOs, women's networks, LGBTQI+ people and community leaders to address challenges and promote gender-inclusive peacebuilding.
- Prioritising resilience-building and community capacity-building initiatives to mitigate the impact of conflict and displacement.
- Advocating for the meaningful participation of women in peace processes, policy development and decision-making at all levels.
- Promoting peacebuilding initiatives under the guise of non-political activities, emphasising



shared experiences, collective problem-solving and solidarity among diverse stakeholders. Women peacebuilders engage in political organising and peace activities discreetly. Through seemingly innocuous and apolitical events like flower arrangement classes, women peacebuilders have successfully convened young women for discussions on gender, peace and security and the state of affairs in the country. These gatherings also serve as a platform for information exchange about the situation of GBV – in search for referral pathways for survivors – and also to keep women in the communities informed and connected.

V. Tangible action points and support for sustainability

i. National pro-democratic stakeholders

- The revolutionary forces from various sectors should develop a gender quota policy of at least 30 per cent for women's participation in decision-making and leadership positions.
- Eliminate the patriarchy system manifested through gender unequal ways of working, practices and attitudes, as well as all forms of discrimination.
- Ensure women representatives are involved in the constitution drafting process, and guarantee gender equality in the future constitution.
- Develop temporary special measures or affirmative actions in each stakeholder's organisation.

ii. National and international peacebuilding networks

- **Local capacity building and network formation:** Conduct targeted capacity-deepening programmes at the local level to continue to empower women human rights defenders and peacebuilders with leadership skills, advocacy techniques and conflict resolution strategies. Facilitate the formation of women's networks at the grassroots level to foster collaboration, while observing conflict sensitivity. Lobby for gender-transformative policies, legislation and funding allocations that support the participation, protection and empowerment of women in peacebuilding efforts at the local, national and global levels.
- **Global connectivity and exchange programmes:** Establish linkages and exchange programmes between local women's networks in Myanmar and global women's organisations, platforms and networks working on similar issues. Organise virtual conferences and exchange visits to facilitate cross-cultural learning, knowledge-sharing and advocacy on women's rights and peacebuilding.
- **Technology and innovation:** Continue to utilise digital platforms, social media and online collaboration tools to connect women's networks at the local level with global counterparts, enabling virtual communication, knowledge-sharing and solidarity-building. Explore innovative solutions, such as mobile applications and digital storytelling platforms, to amplify the voices and experiences of women human rights defenders and peacebuilders in Myanmar on the global stage in order to address the challenges identified in this report.



iii. Donor community and the WPS community at large

- **Resource mobilisation and support:** International donors should provide longer-term, quality, direct and flexible financial resources and technical support to sustain women-led initiatives, projects and networks. They should also strengthen partnerships with global funding mechanisms.
- **Advocacy and policy engagement:** Advocate for the recognition and protection of women human rights defenders and peacebuilders in Myanmar through engagement with their respective national and international policymakers, diplomatic missions and international human rights mechanisms.
- **Community engagement and empowerment:** Forge alliances with women's networks and engage with local communities, CSOs and grassroots movements to raise awareness of the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and human rights defence. Empower women at the community level through training, mentorship and resource mobilisation, enabling them to take on leadership roles, advocate for their rights and contribute to positive social change.

iv. ASEAN and neighbouring countries of Myanmar

- Myanmar is grappling with complex emergencies. The humanitarian crisis in Myanmar is affecting the region, making it vital for neighbouring countries to invest in effective strategies and approaches. There is a need to provide direct and flexible support to ethnic minority and women's peacebuilding organisations. These organisations assist displaced populations, women prisoners, Women Civil Disobedience Movement Members (CDMers), women activists, women from revolutionary forces, and other marginalised groups in Myanmar and its border areas.
- UN agencies – such as the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – and Myanmar's neighbouring countries should provide access to safety and protection. This should include respecting the non-refoulement principle, legal documentation and visa support to women peace activists who are in exile in neighbouring countries, as well as humanitarian needs and livelihoods support to people seeking refuge from Myanmar.
- Provide financial and technical support to pro-democracy stakeholders to promote and ensure gender inclusion in all decision-making levels and leadership roles.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks that capture the impact, reach and effectiveness of women's networks and initiatives in Myanmar, including indicators related to participation, protection and empowerment.



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Consultation 1: Gender Equality Network Coordination Unit (February 2024)

Consultation 2: Women peacebuilders from various grassroots organisations (February 2024)

Consultation 3: Peacebuilders from the Gender Equality Network (February 2024)

Consultation 4: Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy – Myanmar (February 2024)

Consultation 5: Shan State women peace ambassadors (February 2024)

Consultation 6: Woman human rights defender advocate from Myanmar (February 2024)

Consultation 7: Women peacebuilder from Mon State, Myanmar (February 2024)

