

## TESTIMONIES OF WOMEN PEACE AMBASSADORS IN MYANMAR'S SHAN STATE



### Key Messages

Speaking or acting for peace in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup and the following conflict feels very different than it did a few years ago. Speaking for peace is no longer just about policy or politics, it has become an act of courage.

Women in Shan State are on the frontline of peace and survival. Women's voices are shrinking in formal politics but growing in informal peacebuilding. Women Peace Ambassadors (WoPA) build trust across divides. Their work is fragile but scalable. Their leadership may be less visible or

formal, but it is more powerful. They are mediating local disputes, organizing aid for displaced people, and supporting survivors of violence, even when no one is watching. They work not for recognition, but to serve communities that are dependent on their support.

In times of conflict and repression, WoPA's work on peacebuilding and women's rights is not only relevant but also necessary. It shows that the voices of women in Myanmar are not silent. Supporting WoPA is investing in peace!

## ■ Rationale

The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) Myanmar has set up a Women Peace Ambassadors (WoPA) initiative in Myanmar's Shan State with the goal to involve women in leadership roles on the state, regional and community level. Since the military coup of 2021, it has been challenging for women to contribute to peacebuilding efforts and ensure equal participation, yet their involvement is more necessary than ever. This paper provides the first written testimony of the activities conducted by WoPA after the military coup, and is the result of a collaboration between NIMD Myanmar and the Ethno-graphic Impact for Social Justice Project at Vrije

Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), the Netherlands. The paper primarily reflects the experiences of the various WoPA since the coup, and is based on focus groups and interviews in May 2025 with 21 of these women and three NIMD Myanmar staff members. Some of the recommendations provided are based on a subsequent discussion conducted in September 2025 with selected partner organizations of NIMD. This paper aims to reflect the experiences of the WoPA, and is not intended to depict the experiences of communities or organizations in Shan State or Myanmar as a whole.

## ■ NIMD Myanmar's Women Peace Ambassadors Programme (WoPA)

In 2019, NIMD started engaging female politicians in Myanmar's Shan State and surrounding areas as part of its women's caucus for democratisation under the National League for Democracy government. The initiative, part of NIMD's Leap4Peace<sup>1</sup> project, started with women affiliated with political parties, including electoral candidates and party chairs, in preparation for their participation in the next parliament and government after the 2020 elections. After the military staged a coup in February 2021, the project was adapted to continue with women from political parties as well as female civil society members, who gathered under the name Women Peace Ambassadors (WoPA): a community of women from Shan State contributing to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Myanmar.

The situation in Shan State and elsewhere in Myanmar has deteriorated significantly as a result of the 2021 military coup and the subsequent repression and armed conflict. Given the sensitivities after the coup, the WoPA initiative has a less overt political component and has shifted towards women's rights and participation in the broader sense. The initiative started with 17 women in 2021 and was expanded to 42 women in 2023, who are actively working in their communities or political parties. Participants are between 20-60 years old and reflect the different ethnic groups found in Shan State (Bamar, Danu, Inn, Kachin, Kokang, Lahu, Lisu, Shan, Pa-O, Ta'ang and Wa).

## ■ Addressing pressing needs and service gaps in Shan State

Myanmar's civil war and the current political landscape offer limited room for women to take up leadership roles in state- and peacebuilding efforts. A patriarchal system hinders their efforts to fully participate in politics. The WoPA initiative provides an important opportunity for trust building and peer support in the highly volatile environment of Shan State, which forms one of the centers of armed conflict after the military coup. Parts of Shan State were also hit by the earthquake of 28 March 2025 and several instances of floods that impacted some of the earthquake-affected areas. Northern Shan State and parts of Southern Shan State are also strongly impacted by violent military attacks and the resulting armed conflict between various non-state armies and the Myanmar military, the State Administration Council (SAC). A large proportion of the population is displaced due to airstrikes conducted by the SAC, landmines, and other conflict-related impacts.

1. <https://nimd.org/programme/leap4peace/>

In the current climate, WoPA not only serve as a community of political representatives, but are also the lifeline for populations affected by conflict and displacement, a large proportion of which are women and children. In situations of heightened uncertainty and economic shortages, communities are vulnerable to human trafficking, domestic violence, and child abuse. Moreover, youth are at risk of forced recruitment or arrest primarily by the SAC, but also by other armed groups operating in the area. In February 2024, the SAC enforced a conscription law which makes any youth between the ages of 18-35 (18-27 for women) potentially subject to forced recruitment to fight in conflict areas against their own people.

WoPA serve as frontline supporters in places where not many organizations and service providers are left on the ground. They play a vital role in community support as well as mediating between individuals and representatives of various armed organizations. They do so free of charge and often without compensation for their time or travels. NIMD serves as a platform to support the women with monthly online meetings and occasional in-person trainings on women's rights and gender-based violence from its office in Thailand. NIMD continues to provide mentorship and coaching to the women involved to develop strategic directions and carry out peace initiative activities. A designated project officer also communicates with WoPA individually via encrypted message channels, where WoPA share information and keep each other updated. For some political and peacebuilding training, NIMD provides materials through the MyDemocracy School <sup>2</sup> mobile application.

Although the funding for the Leap4Peace project that includes the WoPA initiative ended in 2025, the women involved are very committed to continue their community activities. Having small grants available would allow them to continue their training and mediation activities and to provide emergency assistance in conflict- and earthquake-affected areas, as they have strong networks within their communities and can operate on very small budgets. Current needs include certified training in mediation, conflict transformation, and capacity building for women and their broader communities. WoPA would be interested in (online) exchange programmes on these issues as well as receiving assistance in fundraising.

Five years on from the military coup, as a result of severely limited access on the ground, Myanmar as a whole is subject to international donor fatigue, despite continued urgent humanitarian and psychosocial needs. NIMD would like to continue its activities in Shan State and extend them to Myanmar's Dry Zone (Magway and Sagaing regions), a conflict-affected area that, unlike some of the so-called 'ethnic states', has hardly received any humanitarian support or training on women's rights. Rural areas in general are underserved due to logistical challenges, and often go without electricity for months. WoPA are particularly active in these hard-to-reach areas. Moreover, contested elections were held by the SAC in Myanmar from 28 December 2025 onwards, underscoring the urgent need for women to re-engage in the more formal political processes as well as interact with community members around political decision making and inclusion of women's voices.

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*'The future of our youth is lost.*

*Due to the conscription law our country is not safe, they need to run abroad.'*

-WoPA member

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*'In Shan State there is a different armed group every half mile.'*

-WoPA member

2. <https://mydemocracyschool.com/en>

## ■ Women as peacebuilders and mediators

Before the military coup, women in Myanmar were working towards a slow reduction of the significant gender gap in politics. According to International IDEA, the number of elected women in 2020 increased to 16 percent compared to 13 percent in the 2015 general election.<sup>3</sup> WoPA seek to increase representation of women on all levels, including politics, policy and other decision-making roles, as well as in non-governmental organizations and potential future peace-building initiatives. Women's political participation during the post-coup conflict takes many informal and concealed forms. These include community-level peace activities, legal capacity building, mediation, and occasional training and advocacy with members of political opposition parties and non-state armed groups of various ethnic backgrounds. Given the current situation, addressing humanitarian needs and assisting displaced communities remains a primary concern. WoPA frequently coordinate with religious leaders and local village heads to distribute aid and to get safely past checkpoints.

WoPA are committed to seeking justice for victims and survivors of violence, at the community level and in the domestic and private sphere. Due to the absence of formal justice mechanisms, many cases of child abuse, rape and gender-based violence remain unreported. Some WoPA step in specifically with community mediation services. As they experience the everyday impact and effects of armed conflict on a personal level, they are very committed to peace. WoPA seek to contribute to solutions at the state and national level and to combat petty crime, domestic violence and other effects of lawlessness in daily life.

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*'Militarism is prevailing, the role of women is shrinking in society.'*

-WoPA member

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*'We hardly have female local administrators like we had before. In leadership, on the political level, the role of women is almost none.'*

-WoPA member

## ■ Vulnerabilities in Shan State since the 2021 military coup

The situation in Shan State is extremely complex, with around ten armed groups fighting against the SAC, and sometimes also against each other. Many of the WoPA are themselves displaced from Northern or Southern Shan State. Safety concerns are a daily reality. Being able to meet other trusted women online or in person caters to their psychosocial as well as professional needs and helps them to assist others. It is very important for them to work in groups, as individual women find it difficult to speak out on women's rights towards authorities or representatives of political or armed groups. Many of the organizations where the women are active chose not to re-register under the SAC due to security concerns, as working under SAC oversight is considered unsafe for civil society actors. As a result, engaging with SAC-appointed

local administrators has become more challenging, and WoPA exercise caution, interacting with them only when necessary. Some actors also accuse the women of putting foreign ideas into people's heads when talking about women's rights. Political opposition parties have also been deregistered after the coup, which affects some of the affiliated WoPA.

Women's rights and gender awareness have visibly deteriorated since the coup. A lot of the progress made between 2015-2020, both at the local and the national level, has been undermined. Some WoPA also feel the local effects of changing international narratives on gender e.g. in the United States. Girls and women are particularly vulnerable to working in the sex industry or in

3. <https://www.idea.int/news/myanmars-first-post-coup-peoples-assembly-decides-30-cent-womens-quota>

scam companies, due to their lack of school access. Spillover effects like drug abuse and transmittable diseases are also noticeable in these areas. WoPA were involved in gender awareness trainings, including for men, and

referred women to non-governmental organizations for further training. Some participating women later expressed interest to become community leaders or lawyers.

### Voices from Women Peace Ambassadors

“*‘Passing checkpoints for our relief work is like hell.’*

-WoPA member

“*‘I hear the noise of the airstrikes almost every night since the military take-over.’*

-WoPA member

“*‘There is no safe place in our area, nowhere to rest or recover.’*

-WoPA member

“*‘We are often aimed at with guns when dealing with militias.’*

-WoPA member

## ■ WoPA activities after the coup

Since 2024, WoPA have initiated three approaches to contribute to the Women, Peace and Security sector at the community, subnational and national level. These three approaches are 1) Capacity Building, Awareness Raising, Research and Documentation, 2) Networking, Collaboration and Advocacy, and 3) Conflict Resolution, Protection and Support Services. Based on their experiences, expertise and influence in Shan State, each WoPA has chosen to contribute one of these approaches by initiating activities on the ground, while simultaneously contributing to the team work of the WoPA community as a whole. Due to their local networks and knowledge of local languages, they are able to impact communities beyond those reached by general support institutions which operate only in Burmese language.

Peace initiatives of the WoPA within communities have included capacity building sessions for village heads, youth leaders, and women leaders on topics such as gender-based violence, women’s protection laws, land

rights, leadership, and sexual and reproductive health. WoPA have been facilitating networking meetings with like-minded groups in Shan State to foster collaboration and identify barriers within the Women, Peace, and Security sector. They also conducted workshops to encourage dialogue among different ethnic communities and to provide mental health support. In addition, they are referring cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, and lack of access to justice to reliable service providers. They mediate local disputes and land issues, and engage in advocacy with political parties, armed groups, and relevant organizations to advance women’s rights, promote quotas, and address on-the-ground challenges.

WoPA play a leading role in coordinating humanitarian responses. They were involved in many fundraisers for local relief services after the August 2024 floods and the March 2025 earthquake. Travel to victimized areas was jeopardized by the fact that young people could be arrest-

ed at various checkpoints. Many youths, including in Shan State, have been on the run to avoid forced conscription, both by the SAC and by other armed actors in the area. WoPA communicate with local authorities and collaborate with faith-based organizations in order for their aid deliveries to be accepted. Health facilities such as hospitals were also badly impacted by the earthquake, leading to a further shortage of aid. WoPA help people in need of medical attention in places where there is no doctor. They collaborate with mobile medical health care providers, and coordinate with local communities to ensure those services reach them. They also contacted international organizations to support farmers in areas that had become unsafe due to military airstrikes and mining.

In 2025, NIMD Myanmar made significant strides at both community and subnational levels in advancing women's rights and leadership. At the community level, WoPA have

completed training curricula on women's leadership, gender-based violence and women protection laws, sexual and reproductive health. They celebrated International Women's Day with 289 participants across Northern and Southern Shan State, and conducted a range of cascading trainings and workshops on the topics of Women, Peace and Security, creative leadership, mental well-being, intergenerational dialogue and land rights, while always engaging men. WoPA also strengthened peer learning through monthly movie discussion clubs, legal knowledge-sharing sessions, career and further study opportunities. They provided humanitarian assistance to 323 earthquake-affected households, and referred over 60 cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse, discrimination and exclusion to reliable service providers across Shan State. At the subnational level, WoPA engaged in state constitution drafting consultations to ensure women's rights were represented.

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*'Women start to feel free to speak openly about gender-based violence. They felt satisfied and empowered by the discussion, even though raising these issues within the community remains difficult.'*

-WoPA member

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*'As a woman we can participate in everything, but our roles and the treatment we receive may be different. Just participation is not enough, we need to support women to take part in decision making.'*

-WoPA member

## ■ Stories of change

Between January and mid-August 2025, a total of 60 cases were referred by WoPA related to domestic violence, sexual abuse, divorce, rape, health care access, land issues, access to education, and discrimination against women.

In Eastern Shan State, three women were trafficked from a Lahu village into an area controlled by a local armed group. One of the WoPA contacted the armed

groups in the area and was able to secure their release. The women received psychosocial support, but the incident drew attention from the SAC to the WoPA who had previously been politically active after the coup.

One WoPA mediated when a non-state armed group arrested a group of youth who were seeking to flee the country to avoid forced conscription. They had

paid 2.4 million kyat for what turned out to be false border passes. Another WoPA pleaded with one of the armed groups to exempt the Lahu minority from conscription due to their small numbers.

A young woman was arrested by the SAC at a checkpoint, they wrongly claimed she was with the People's Defense Forces (armed opposition forces). One of the WoPA mediated between the girl and the SAC, using her personal contacts. After five months she was released and able to flee the country.

Another WoPA mediated when a young boy was arbitrarily detained by one of the ethnic armed organizations.

One of the WoPA saw a group of prisoners who had escaped from the SAC walk by the roadside in chains. Some had been used as human shields and were wounded. She helped them get a ride to the next village and called their family members to pick them up.

WoPA set up a facility for 400 displaced Lahu people and orphans in Southern Shan State, together with religious actors. Some were later able to return home while others remained in the facility.

Two political groups that the WoPA were involved in collaborated to reduce the number of online scam initiatives in their region.

WoPA set up a project to train over 100 youth, women and religious leaders in alternative dispute resolution. Topics covered included divorce, inheritance, and other family cases that can be dealt with at the community level. In various cases, disputes between families and between communities were solved after mediation by the WoPA.

One WoPA used her position as party secretary to bring together two armed groups that were fighting

in Shan State to reach a ceasefire agreement. She used her contact with women in the armed groups to reach out and discuss the ceasefire. The women of the different affiliated political parties joined and drew up a ceasefire policy which the armed groups adhered to, and the fighting between them stopped.

Another WoPA mediated between two sections in her political party which disagreed on their policy towards possible elections.

One WoPA was involved in the drafting process of a Shan-wide policy on education, economy, health and security for a future Shan State government.

Another WoPA from the Pa-O National Organization began reorganizing her party's women's wing, seeking NIMD Myanmar's guidance on the structure and legal provisions for its constitution.

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*'It may be a drop in the ocean, but after our training women will know ways to protect themselves.'*

-WoPA member

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*'We are minorities, some of our local women are not fluent in Burmese language. We can comfort their family members and seek adjustment for anything unjustly done to them.'*

-WoPA member

## Conclusion and recommendations

Women in Myanmar have long played an important role at the community level, and in previous years also played a significant role in formal political structures. The restrictions imposed on them since the 2021 military coup and declining external support pose risks to the position of women in Myanmar society, particularly in formal structures such as politics and conflict resolution. Nevertheless, women continue to be of vital importance for community members at the local level, including vulnerable groups such as women, children, ethnic minorities, and internally displaced persons.

Women such as the WoPA collaborating with NIMD serve

as educators, mediators and service providers in areas that are hardly served by other entities. As armed groups, notably the SAC, create acute risks to community livelihoods in Shan State and elsewhere, the role of women in informal peace processes and conflict resolution needs to be fostered and actively supported.

With the declining funding opportunities worldwide and political repression in Myanmar, the work of WoPA continues to be threatened. The following recommendations are addressed to relevant actors within and outside Myanmar that are in the position to provide positive support to their work.

### To policy makers at the (sub)state level:

- Actively include women's voices in state constitutions, and draft policies that promote women's rights, particularly among groups where women are traditionally underrepresented.
- Ensure access to shelter, health care, education, livelihood opportunities, and psychosocial support, with special attention to the needs of women, children, ethnic minorities, and internally displaced persons.
- Design policies that ensure perpetrators of violence against women, children or other civilians are referred to justice mechanisms. Consider creating a task force to combat violence against women in Shan State.
- Seek technical assistance from civil society organizations where needed for adequate policy making.

### To representatives of armed groups and political parties:

- Recognize and respect the rights of women to take up decision making positions, not only supporting roles, within armed groups and (interim) governance structures. Be willing to redistribute roles in order to accommodate this.
- Respect international humanitarian law, prohibit all forms of forced or underage recruitment, and ensure that any recruitment practices uphold civilian protection, safeguard women's and youth rights, and preserve family livelihoods and caretaker roles.
- Support fair education policies and materials that benefit children of all ethnic backgrounds and do not contribute to furthering societal divisions. Allow minorities to use their own languages in school.

## To community-based partners:

- Respect the rights of women in community mechanisms and ensure their equal participation.
- Actively invite and include men in community-based trainings on gender equality and women's rights. Design a strategy to engage men in the implementation of these rights at the village and township level.

## To international organizations and donors:

- Continue to fund the work of WoPA and other women peacebuilders even if their activities cannot always be made publicly visible.
- Push parties working on electoral politics to reveal their policies to support women's rights in general.
- Pressure political decision makers to implement relevant laws and enforce existing ones.
- Support the work of WoPA and other women peacebuilders with financial means and international capacity building, particularly in conflict areas.
- Create opportunities to expand and replicate the WoPA model across other states and regions facing conflict, such as Magway and Sagaing Regions.
- Support safe houses for women and other victims of gender-based violence; ensure their access to counselling, referral and justice mechanisms.
- Create opportunities for women in (higher) education e.g. through scholarships, including for internally displaced persons and (returning) refugees, and provide mentoring and coaching.
- Ensure a cross-border approach to aid distribution and encourage coordination between partner organizations inside and outside Myanmar without compromising their safety.

## Disclaimer

This report depicts the experiences of individual WoPA up to the time of the focus group discussions held in May 2025. The environment where WoPA operate remains fragile in the years after the coup

and political changes such as the elections that were organized by the military in December 2025-January 2026 may further influence the situation on the ground.