

Policy brief

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Women, Peace and Security in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup

This policy brief presents recommendations for how international development and peacebuilding organizations can redirect their work with women, peace and security issues in Myanmar in the wake of the 2021 military coup. In response to urgent needs, it is now critical to provide appropriate and flexible support to women's organizations; identify and work with local structures for humanitarian response and service delivery; and support new and existing forms of cross-border aid.

The military takeover on February 1st, 2021, dramatically altered the political landscape for gender equality struggles in Myanmar. During the past decade of political reforms, Myanmar women's political activism and participation grew increasingly strong and diverse (Gender Equality Network, 2019, Khin Khin Mra and Livingstone 2020). The visibility of gender issues on the public agenda was further enhanced by the presence of international organizations and donors working to mainstream gender and implement policy framework such as the United Nations Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (Olivius, Hedström and Zin Mar Phyto 2022).

The military coup abruptly put an end to ongoing activities and planned projects aimed at promoting gender equality and a gender-just peace. It placed many civil society actors and their families at risk of arrest, violence and even death, with the junta targeting women human rights defenders, female politicians, and their relatives (Women's League of Burma 2021, 2022). Thousands of people have fled or gone underground, sheltering in areas mostly or only serviced by local networks. This has forced international partners to reconsider their continued engagement with Myanmar. Finding new ways to support women, peace and security in Myanmar is now crucial to sustain gender equality gains made during the past decade, and to build on the leadership demonstrated by women in anti-coup protests as well as in humanitarian response in the context of state failure and the covid-19 pandemic (Anonymous 2021a, Khin Khin Mra 2021, Gender Equality Network 2021).

This policy brief draws on research conducted with Myanmar women's activists and with individuals working with

Recommendations

- 1** Provide context-sensitive, flexible support to sustain women's organizations, recognizing their critical role for long-term political change as well as short-term advocacy and human rights documentation.
- 2** Identify and work with existing local structures for humanitarian response and vital service delivery. In the absence of a functioning state, these are critical to survival, but often rely heavily on women's unpaid labor.
- 3** Support the ongoing reinvention of networks for cross-border aid delivery, and work with the Thai government to ensure the security of Myanmar people forced to flee to Thailand.



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gender equality and peacebuilding issues in international organizations, donor agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Interviews were first conducted in 2020, prior to the military coup. These interviews focused on relationships between women's activism, international aid, and the Myanmar state in the implementation of women, peace and security policies and programs. After the coup, new interviews were undertaken to understand the impact of the coup on previous practices and partnerships, assess new needs, and trace evolving strategies in response to the new political context. Based on this research, this policy brief outlines key priorities and suggests strategies for how international partners can redirect their work to effectively support women's rights, security, and political agency in the current political context.

Provide context-sensitive, flexible support to women's organizations

After the coup, government-led institutions and activities promoting gender equality were rendered effectively defunct. With capacity building and institutional support targeting the Myanmar state no longer a feasible avenue for international aid, international partners increasingly looked to redirect their funding towards civil society. However, as of late 2021, our interviews reveal that women's organizations have not experienced a tangible increase in international funding availability after the coup. This indicates that international donors must move from rhetoric to practice, and design new, sustainable and context-sensitive ways to shore up Myanmar's gender equality movement. Supporting women's organizations is key to sustaining gender equality gains made in the past decade, and invest in progressive change in Myanmar in the long term. Notably, research demonstrates that globally, feminist mobilization in civil society is the single strongest predictor of progressive government policies on women's rights over time (Htun and Weldon 2012).

Moreover, Myanmar women's organizations have a strong

track record of human rights documentation and international advocacy (Hedström and Olivius 2021, Cardenas and Olivius 2021, Gender Equality Network, 2019, Women's League of Burma 2011). Supporting them to continue playing these roles is now of utmost importance. External actors have limited access to information about developments on the ground in many areas of Myanmar, and local actors are therefore needed to assess immediate needs and document abuses by security forces.

Despite this evidence, it is well documented that a global emphasis on gender issues in peacebuilding and development has not led to an increase in core funding to women's organizations (Arutyunova and Clark 2013). In fact, a recent report shows that globally, only one per cent of gender-related international aid reach women's rights and feminist organizations directly (Miller and Clark 2019). In light of this, the ongoing shift towards funding civil society in Myanmar presents an opportunity to rethink established aid practices. An increased emphasis on women's organizations as key partners will only be effective if the organization of international funding is reformed, taking into account long-standing civil society criticism as well as the specificity of the post-coup political context.

Provide long-term, flexible core support. Funding should be provided in the form of long-term (minimum three years), flexible core support, as opposed to short-term, project-based grants. This allows for strategic, feminist movement building based on local needs and priorities (Houston and Norwood 2020, Boer Cueva et al 2021, Arutyunova and Clark 2013, Miller and Jones 2019). While this recommendation is not specific to the post-coup context in Myanmar, it is especially essential in an insecure and quickly changing political environment. Women's organizations must be able to use funds flexibly according to changing needs, including funding travel, safe accommodation, and asylum processes for activists and their families who need to hide or flee. After the coup, some donors have taken steps in this direction by allowing women's organizations to keep

project-based grants but use the funds in other ways; and by providing non-earmarked grants to help organizations survive. However, as one activist pointed out, being granted such flexibility cannot be taken for granted: “when it came to re-designing activities after the coup, we had to do lots of negotiation and consultation with donors”. Moreover, these efforts are mainly ad-hoc, small-scale measures, which are not sufficient to facilitate long-term strategic planning.



Photo credit: Women's League of Burma

Adapt administrative processes. International funding is generally associated with demanding administrative processes for application, audits, and reporting. This places high demands on the time, technical knowledge, and language skills of women's organizations, and tends to skew funding towards large, urban organizations, rendering the women most affected by conflict in Myanmar the least able to benefit from international support (Olivius, Hedström and Zin Mar Phyoo 2022). In the aftermath of the coup, as many women's activists are in hiding and face grave threats to their security and their livelihoods, complying with donor requirements is simply unmanageable. In response, some donors have relaxed or suspended some of their regular processes. However, our interviews indicate that donors perceive this as temporary exceptions in light of the coup, rather than necessary steps towards rethinking the organization of international aid as such.

Prioritize the security of women activists. Regular processes for the distribution of aid can also inadvertently place recipients at risk of military surveillance, arrest and violence. For example, digital communication and bank transfers will leave traces. In light of the quickly changing situation, it is critical that donors listen to women's organizations and rethink practices based on a continuous, careful, and contextual risk analysis. In a briefing paper released in June 2021, gender equality advocates in Myanmar detailed a number of measures relating to digital security and to safe practices for fund transfers and communication, which should be carefully adhered to (Anonymous 2021b). In addition, many donors have institutional regulations preventing them from directly supporting organizations that are not officially registered. It is vital to understand that in the current context, registration or renewal of registration with

the military government constitute a security risk for civil society actors. Donors should thus support women's organizations based on their potential to contribute to meaningful change, not based on their registration status, and not make demands on them that may place them at risk.

Support local humanitarian response and service delivery

The military coup has led to a large-scale failure of local governance and service delivery. Many civil servants, including health care staff, have joined the civil disobedience movement (CDM), and many military-appointed local officials have resigned in response to hostility and protests from the public. Moreover, in many conflict-affected areas, welfare services were very limited already before the coup, because of decades of war and government neglect (Hedström and Olivius 2020). The compounded effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the military coup has created a vast gap between needs and available services, resulting in an escalating public health crisis (Physicians for Human Rights, 2021).

At the local level, women's organizations and other community-based organizations (CSOs) are stepping in to bridge this gap (Quadrini 2021). Our research demonstrates that following the coup, local women's organizations have been almost entirely focusing on responding to urgent community needs, including Covid-19 response and humanitarian assistance to people displaced by armed violence. As many of our respondents emphasize, in a situation where “people are caught between the two hells of Covid and the coup”, women's unpaid care labor is essential to the survival of families and communities. At the same time, this situation strains women's capacities to the breaking point, especially as they do this work in a context of pervasive insecurity and fear: “Dalans [SAC informers] are everywhere...Therefore, women's rights activists and women human rights defenders have to run, flee, and hide for their life”. In addition, domestic violence has reportedly increased as a result of Covid-19 lockdowns and the post-coup crisis (Miedema and Aye Thiri Kyaw 2022). It is therefore vital that international partners support local structures for service delivery, while considering the safety and well-being of women first responders.

Identify and support functioning structures for local humanitarian response and service delivery.

These are likely to include women's organizations and other CSOs, as well as emerging new structures for local governance and service delivery. For example, there is evidence of the formation of local shadow councils, established to manage essential local affairs in the absence of functioning formal governing bodies (Anonymous 2021a). In areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and in areas under mixed authority, organizations engaged in service delivery are likely to be associated with EAO governance structures. In many areas of Myanmar, EAO administrative structures have been the main providers of public goods for decades. Nevertheless, it has been well documented that prior to the coup, donors focused on strengthening state capacity and were largely hesitant towards working with these alterna-

tive structures of governance, despite them enjoying significant public legitimacy (South 2018, Burke et.al. 2017). In the post-coup contexts, international donors must take the heterogeneous, complex models for local governance and essential service delivery across Myanmar into account, and support actors with the intent and capacity to mitigate an escalating humanitarian crisis.

Support the wellbeing of women first responders.

As women pick up the burden of responding to multiple crises, they are at risk of violence, exhaustion, and mental health issues. To avoid overburdening local women and women's organizations, administrative requirements for support need to be kept to a minimum, as discussed above. Moreover, to protect the wellbeing and safety of women activists, care should be taken to identify creative, context-sensitive ways to provide a measure of security through health care provisioning and insurance for activists and their families. Funding for childcare should be provided whenever needed to reduce the pressure on women activists and leaders. Protection against domestic and political violence must be ensured, for example through support to safe houses.

Facilitate new forms for cross-border aid

Prior to the initiation of political reforms in 2011, the Thai-Myanmar border areas constituted key spaces for political advocacy, as well as an operational base for the delivery of life-saving humanitarian aid to populations in Southeastern Myanmar. A more open political environment in Myanmar thereafter decreased the salience of border-based activism. Notably, a shift in donor priorities also created pressure on civil society organizations to move their operations into Myanmar to sustain funding, despite security concerns (Olivius 2019). The military coup has yet again turned the Thai side of the border into a destination for fleeing political activists, as well as communities affected by SAC aggression. However, as a long-time employee of a Western donor agency told us, past practices for cross-border aid and political advocacy cannot simply be resumed: some previous networks have "atrophied" over the past years, and the political environment in Thailand is less permissive for exile activism than it was. International actors therefore urgently



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need to act to respond to the needs of displaced people, and support democratic political opposition in exile.

Support local organizations that assist displaced people.

Local CSOs have so far taken on a key role in assisting people displaced by SAC attacks in southeastern Myanmar. For example, women's organizations in Kayah/Karen state have provided the only source of support for many displaced people in hiding. And as fighting in Kayin/Karen state intensified in December 2021, the Karen Women Organization, along with other Karen organizations, were rapidly on the scene on both sides of the border, passing out life-saving supplies and helping people cross the river into Thailand safely. As the SAC is unlikely to allow humanitarian access from the interior of Myanmar, working through experienced, local organizations based in the border areas will be the only feasible option to save lives in the midst of intensifying violence. To ensure gender-sensitive humanitarian responses, it is vital that women's organizations are not treated as implementing partners expected to deliver activities designed by other, but are recognized and promoted as leading actors in assessing needs and determining priorities.

Work with the Royal Thai Government to ensure the security of displaced people

crossing the border into Thailand. Urge the Thai government to keep their borders open, and not push back people seeking protection, and to allow humanitarian organizations access to displacement sites. Closely monitor how displaced people are treated, and how their needs are met in displacement holding sites and at the border.

Facilitate the reinvention of the border as a space for democratic opposition.

As open political opposition and much civil society activism is currently too dangerous to engage in from within Myanmar, the Thai border areas are yet again of key importance for the mobilization of democratic political forces. Women's organizations and other CSOs who are now operating from a precarious position in Thailand should be actively supported, and international actors should pressure the Thai government to allow temporary residence for activists fleeing from Myanmar.

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