



Policy Brief

Women's Peace Activism in Post-Coup Myanmar: A Feminist Agenda for Structural Change

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Executive Summary

The resumption of military rule in Myanmar constitutes another inflection point for the work of women's organizations and the feminist agenda. This policy brief examines how the focus of women's peace activism in Myanmar on the peace process has shifted towards seeking meaningful participation in arenas beyond peace talks, while also emphasizing the message that gender equality is a crucial component of peace and democratic state-building. These new arenas include participation in the dialogue, planning, and collaborative efforts between different anti-junta organizations and the de facto governance institutions established by these opposition groups. Further, the challenges faced by post-coup Myanmar have prompted a renewed commitment among women's activists to embrace feminism.

By analyzing the experiences of women's organizations and activists in Karenni and Chin state, this paper highlights the increasing visibility of women not only within the Civil Disobedience Movement but also within the emerging structures of de-facto governance. The advancement of women's activism and the sustainability of their strategies requires from the international community both political and operational support, contextualized funding mechanisms as well as the recognition of women's organizations as actors of change.

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Key Takeaways

1. Women's activism has evolved in response to Myanmar's shifting political landscape.

Following the coup, the strategies led by women's organizations have had a catalytic effect not only in raising the visibility of women's peace activism but also in addressing gender equality as a prerequisite for structural transformation in Myanmar.

2. Neither the effects of the coup, nor the responses from civil society are gender-neutral.

Through their mass mobilization, women revealed not only the coup's disproportionate impact on women but also made explicit the relationship between militarism and the prevalence of gender inequality.

3. A significant consequence of women's mobilization following the coup is the emergence of new public voices and creative leadership among young people.

The need to mobilize against the military has led to a deep reflection upon the dynamics of the women's movement and the need to transform and revitalize its leadership.

4. Women's activism navigates the dual challenge of incorporating gender equality both in the anti-regime resistance movement and in the project of federal democracy.

The experiences of women's organizations in Karenni and Chin states are important steps in the goal of achieving meaningful participation of women in the emerging governance structures at the state level.

5. Women's organizations underscore how the solidarity of the international community can be reflected in more flexible funding and the recognition of local networks.

There is a call for donors to make funding and operational processes flexible, accessible and responsive to local dynamics.



Introduction

Several studies have demonstrated substantial benefits from including women in politics, particularly in peacemaking and state-building efforts.¹ The inclusion of women in peacemaking is not only relevant from a normative and human rights perspective regarding citizens' rights to participation, but it can also enhance the likelihood of successful conflict resolution and development.² However, on the 25th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security, an enduring challenge for feminist activists is the persistent barriers to accessing formal political processes and peace talks. Even when their presence can be secured, women often struggle to find opportunities to make meaningful³ contributions to the negotiations and content of decisions.⁴

The challenge of translating women's presence at peace negotiations to meaningful influence in the talks was commonly discussed in relation to Myanmar's slowly evolving peace process during the decade of non-military rule from 2010 to 2020. Although the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) adopted a principle of inclusivity, in practice, it failed to guarantee women's participation in formal negotiations.⁵ In response, women adopted a more politicised position within civil society organizations and strengthened their informal peacebuilding initiatives.⁶ The resumption of military rule in the country in February 2021 is yet another inflection point for women's organizations. This raises the question: What has happened to women's activism for peace and the feminist agenda in the post-coup era?

Examining how women activists have persisted in their efforts after Myanmar reverted to full autocratic rule is key to understanding the current situation of contemporary Myanmar. These experiences can also help shed light on how women activists operate in similar contexts around the world. Their efforts should not be overlooked despite challenges related to visibility and access to formal institutions. What is the nature of women's peace activism when there is no active peace process to influence? What chances do women have to mobilize in times of state and societal breakdown? What happens to women's activism that was organized during the peace process? Does it fade away or adapt into a different form?

This policy brief examines how the focus of women's peace activism in Myanmar on the peace process has shifted towards seeking meaningful participation in arenas

[1] Cornwall, A. and Goetz A. M. (2005) Democratizing democracy: Feminist perspectives. *Democratization* 12(5): 783-800; Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic literature*, 50(4), 1051–1079; Krause, J., Krause, W., & Bränfors, P. (2018). Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace. *International Interactions*, 44(6), 985–1016; Kreutz, J., & Cárdenas, M. L. (2025). The women and men that make peace: Introducing the Mediating Individuals (M-IND) dataset. *Journal of Peace Research* 62(1): 182–192.

[2] Bell, C., & O'Rourke, C. (2010). Peace agreements or pieces of paper? The impact of UNSC Resolution 1325 on peace processes and their agreements. *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, 59(4), 941-980; Longhurst, K. (2021). The women, peace and security agenda: Reflections on the effectiveness and relevance of UN security council resolution 1325. *Alternatives*, 46(2), 52-57.

[3] Meaningful participation understood as the capacity to influence decision-making processes. Paffenholz, T., Ross, N., Dixon, S., Schluchter, A. L., & True, J. (2016). Making women count-not just counting women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations.

[4] Fox-Kirk, W., Gardiner, R. A., Finn, H., & Chisholm, J. (2020). Genderwashing: The myth of equality. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(5), 586–597; Kostovicova, D., & Paskhalis, T. (2021). Gender, justice and deliberation: Why women don't influence peacemaking. *International Studies Quarterly*, 65(2), 263–276; Paffenholz, T., Ross, N., Dixon, S., Schluchter, A. L., & True, J. (2016). Making women count-not just counting women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations

[5] Khullar, A. (2019) Women's Participation in Myanmar's Peace Process, https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5610

[6] Pepper, M. (2018). Ethnic Minority Women, Diversity, and Informal Participation in Peacebuilding in Myanmar. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 13 (2): 61–75.



beyond peace talks, while also emphasizing the message that gender equality is a crucial component of peace and democratic state-building. These new arenas include participation in the dialogue, planning, and collaborative efforts between different anti-junta organizations and the de facto governance institutions established by these opposition groups.

To analyze the current women's activism in Myanmar, this policy brief builds on semi-structured interviews with activists, representatives of women's organizations and researchers⁷ as well as a growing body of literature focused on informal peace initiatives led by women at the local level, regardless of any progress in the conventional, masculinized, and elite-level peace processes.⁸ Such informal initiatives can occur in post-conflict settings and during armed conflict. This is the case in Myanmar. Importantly, these initiatives can still operate when all diplomatic channels are broken.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it outlines the evolution of peace activism by women's organizations in Myanmar, particularly from the inception of women's organizations in exile during the 90s to their ongoing initiatives. Second, it analyses the role of women's organizations in the anti-regime resistance as feminist activism. The third section examines the role of women as agents of de facto governance, illustrating this with the experiences of Karenni and Chin women's activism. The next section discusses the changes within the women's movement in terms of agenda, stakeholders, and cohesion. Finally, the paper provides policy recommendations to different actors, including policy makers, INGOs and peace practitioners.

1. Trajectories of women's peace activism

Throughout Myanmar's history, women have fought for democracy, self-determination, and human rights. However, they have also faced nearly insurmountable obstacles in having their voices fully heard. In the past, attempts to challenge the authoritarian regime, such as those by the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), often sidelined women's political views with the argument that efforts should focus on the larger political goals instead of diverting efforts into the struggle for women's rights. This was also the case in the political project of the National League for Democracy (NLD), where women's rights were also not considered a priority. Conversely, women have also strived for meaningful participation within the structure of armed ethno-nationalist movements. The Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO)⁹ have created key political opportunities for the emergence of the women's movement and have been considered essential allies in ethnic minority women's struggle for equality and peace.

[7] In accordance with guidelines on informed consent, the interviewees were previously informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary basis of their participation.

[8] Shepherd, L. (2016). Victims of Violence or Agents of Change? Representations of Women in UN Peacebuilding Discourse. *Peacebuilding*, 4 (2): 121–135. Kamenou, N. (2020). Feminism in Cyprus: Women's Agency, Gender, and Peace in the Shadow of Nationalism. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22 (3): 359–381. Cárdenas, M & Olivius, E (2025) Women-to-women diplomacy: peacebuilding amidst shifting conditions of (in) security. Handbook on Gender and Security.

[9] Ethno-national rebel organizations which have mobilised for decades across most parts of the country's borderlands. See Brenner, D. (2025). Rebel Politics after the Coup: Ethnic Armed Organisations and Myanmar's Spring Revolution. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 1–24. South, A. (2008). *Ethnic Politics in Burma*. London: Routledge.



Many of the women members of the networks were first mobilised within the structure of the armed groups, either as soldiers or as members of so-called 'women's wings'.¹⁰

During the 1990s, several new women's organizations were founded, primarily in the Thai border areas. Additionally, some older organizations evolved from merely supporting armed movements to adopting more independent agendas.¹¹ In all these scenarios, women have tirelessly challenged the assumption that women's rights are the only possible contribution they can make to the peace agenda.

The decade of transition to democracy from 2010-2020, witnessed the growth of women's organizations advocating for gender-just peace¹² and the diversification of women's political activism.¹³ Women's organizations led advocacy campaigns and provided concrete gender-related recommendations to the ceasefire negotiations. Women played informal observer and support roles and some conducted back-channel mediation between actors. Yet, the formal participation was limited in the formal negotiations that led to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015. The parties agreed to a 30 percent of women participants quota in the following peace process,¹⁴ however, the first meeting of the Union Peace Conference, named the 21st Century Panglong took place in 2016 with less than 7 per cent of women. Further, the discussions on gender equality were confined to the social sector theme revealing the lack of political will to fulfil the commitments towards women's participation.¹⁵

With the return of the military rule in 2021, civil society had to redefine their agenda and strategies, as well as to explore alternative means and arenas of peacebuilding. The subsequent popular mobilization against the coup has been violently repressed,¹⁶ triggering violations of women's rights and the widespread incidence of gendered and sexualized violence.¹⁷ Yet, the junta, or State Administration Council, has been unable to suppress mass mobilization, which is characterized by unprecedented diversity that engages all sectors of society and ethnic minorities. From general strikes of factory workers led by women, female teachers and health workers to creative protests by youth using stereotypical gender roles, women have been at the forefront of this resistance.¹⁸ Further, women have expanded their presence within the revolutionary movement to challenge the regime and transforming the societal norms that have perpetuated discrimination against women and hindered their ability to fully engage in the country's political transformation. By doing so, women embraced visions of feminist peace in which gender equality is a political and a security issue.¹⁹

[10] Cárdenas and Hedström (2020). *Gender Power, Military Resistance, and Feminist Activism*. Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research.

[11] Olivius, E. and Hedström, J. (2019). Militarized nationalism as a platform for feminist mobilisation? The case of the exiled Burmese women's movement. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 76, article 102263.

[12] Korac, M. (2016) Is there a right time for gender-just peace? Feminist anti-war organising revisited, *Gender and Education*, 28(3): 431–44.

[13] Gender Equality Network, 2019, Mra, K. K., & Livingstone, D. (2020). The winding path to gender equality in Myanmar. *Living with Myanmar*, 243–264.

[14] Muehlenbeck, A & Palmiano, J (2016). Women's Inclusion in Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Case Study. *Inclusive Security*.

[15] Hedström, J, Elisabeth Olivius, and Kay Soe (2023). "Women in Myanmar: change and continuity." Myanmar. Routledge, 220-236.

[16] Hmung, 2021; International Crisis Group. (2021). The cost of the coup: Myanmar edges toward state collapse. Briefing 167. Asia. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b167-cost-coup-myanmar-edges-toward-state-collapse>

[17] Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar. Courage amid crisis: gendered impacts of the coup and the pursuit of gender equality in Myanmar. Human Rights Council. Fifty-sixth session. 18 June–12 July 2024

[18] Loong, S. 2022. "Post-Coup Myanmar in Six Warscapes." International Institute for Strategic Studies

Myanmar Conflict Map. Accessed December 30, 2022. <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/introduction>

[19] Cárdenas, M. (2022) Exploring women's vision(s) of peace: towards feminist peace in Myanmar and Georgia?, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, vol 5, no 1, 7–23



Women's activism has evolved in response to Myanmar's shifting political landscape. Following the coup, the strategies led by women's organizations have had a catalytic effect not only in raising the visibility of women's activism but also in addressing gender equality as a prerequisite for structural transformation in Myanmar. Further, women's peace initiatives within the framework of multi-ethnic alliances such as Women's League of Burma have gained greater relevance and can play a key role in Myanmar's future.²⁰

2. Beyond the anti-military resistance: "Feminism is like democracy. Patriarchy is like dictatorship"²¹

Human rights violations perpetrated by the military following the coup include "violent suppression of protests; torture and other abuses in detention, including sexual and gender-based crimes; and unlawful imprisonment of perceived opponents of the military regime, including arbitrary detention and manifestly unfair trials."²² Women have experienced targeted violence from the military, indicating that the consequences of the coup are not gender-neutral. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma (AAPP), since 2021, 1,180 women have been murdered by the military junta, and 5,690 women have been arrested.²³ Furthermore, women are disproportionately exposed to sexual harassment and conflict-related sexual violence, and may be denied access to healthcare, thereby heightening the risks for women participating in resistance efforts.²⁴

The responses to the coup are also not gender-neutral. Through their mass mobilization, women revealed not only the coup's disproportionate impact on women but also made explicit the relationship between militarism and the prevalence of gender inequality. As Mra and Hedström argue, a "new movement has emerged that in opposing the patriarchal politics of the military takeover has also questioned conservative gender norms."²⁵

One of the trends among women's organizations and women activists following the coup is the emerging understanding of the need to protest the military as well as to stand up against the restrictive societal gender norms that facilitate its perpetuation in power. One interview participant spoke of this shift: "Since the coup, women have continued to spearhead change by challenging stereotypical gender norms that undermined the skills and capabilities of women. They have not lost their agency nor their commitment to seeing a future in Burma that is not only free from military rule but also free from patriarchy."²⁶

[20] Loong, S. (2021). Centre-periphery relations in Myanmar: Leverage and solidarity after the 1 February Coup. *Trends in Southeast Asia*, (9). Quadrini, M. (2021). Women are key to the humanitarian response in Myanmar. *The Diplomat*. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/women-are-key-to-the-humanitarian-response-in-myanmar/>

[21] Interview with activist and founder Purple Feminists, 20 November 2024.

[22] Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar. Human Rights Council. Fifty-seventh session. 9 September–9 October 2024

[23] Report Burmese Women Union.

[24] Women Peace and Security Coalition Australia

[25] Mra, K. K., & Hedström, J. (2024). "This Bra Protects me Better than the Military": Bodies and Protests in the Myanmar Spring Revolution. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 54(5), 759-780; Jordt, I., Than, T., & Lin, S. Y. (2021). How Generation Z Galvanized a Revolutionary Movement against Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup (No. 7). Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.; Mra, K. K. (2021). Women fight the dual evils of dictatorship and patriarchal norms in Myanmar. New Mandala.

[26] Progressive Voice. (2024) Women Under Attack but Undeterred - Progressive Voice



Women's organizations and activists have a comprehensive understanding of the struggle, enabling them to realise what is required to overcome the crisis. In the words of one of the interviewees: "We demand democracy, but not any kind of democracy, equal federal democracy. We demand feminist peace, not 'only' peace."²⁷ Similarly, another activist describes the anti-regime mobilization as liberating for women in their pursuit of justice. For her, the fact that "some people normalize injustice simply because they are women" highlights the need for structural changes.²⁸ Echoing this argument, an interviewee argued that:

*As frontline responders and human rights defenders, we are doing everything in our power not to return to the pre-coup status quo but to build a new future where we can fully participate regardless of our gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or other differences...This revolution is not only just against the military junta, but also against all forms of dictatorship, including patriarchal ideology, which is deeply ingrained in the society.*²⁹

A significant consequence of women's mobilization following the coup is the emergence of new public voices and creative leadership among young people. An activist and representative of the organization "Purple Feminist", created in 2018, analyses women's mobilization as a collective liberation. She argues that the need to mobilize against the military cohesively led to a deep reflection of the dynamics of the women's movement and, as a consequence, to acknowledge the need to transform the leadership by engaging with intergenerational dialogue and fostering the work of emerging young leaders. In her own words, "gatekeeping is disappearing...Older generations thought that they have to keep certain spaces, but they are now letting youth lead the revolution."³⁰ Thus, alongside the shared action resisting the military, there is also a critical assessment of what is required of the women's movement to be cohesive, representative, and therefore, more impactful.³¹

3. Women as key agents of de facto governance: The cases of Karenni and Chin women

The resistance against the military has also shed light on the discussion of federal democracy. At the state level, ethnic resistance organizations have strengthened their control in areas such as Karenni and Chin states. Although these two regions have some similarities such as being mountainous border areas near India (Chin) and Thailand (Karenni), respectively and suffering from a lack of resources for development, their conflict history differs. The Karenni States were largely autonomous in colonial times and the local rulers only agreed to join the Union of Burma in 1948 on the condition that independence was a viable future option. When that option was denied, several armed organizations mobilized in the region both around ethnic identity (besides Karenni, also other minorities) as well as ideology. Over several decades, these groups fought both the regime forces and each other while also participating in several different rebel alliances

[27] Interview activist, 26 November 2024.

[28] Interview with activist and founder Purple Feminists, 20 November 2024.

[29] Interview activist, 26 November 2024.

[30] Interview with activist and founder Purple Feminists, 20 November 2024.

[31] International Crisis Group. Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution.



with other armed groups actors in northern and eastern Myanmar. During the 1990s, the Karenni and other local groups signed ceasefires with the regime with the stated ambition to develop the area using the economic potential from natural resource extraction and border trade.

In contrast, the Chin region was more isolated and even more marginalized. The Chin national identity was formed to a large extent around the Christian faith as Baptist churches introduced education and welfare efforts. Political anti-regime activism only started after the suppression of the 1988 student movement and the subsequent elections, as several Chin had been active – and had been elected – in the democracy movement. This led to the formation of the Chin National Front (CNF), but it remained a largely non-existent military threat to the regime for decades. Its representatives were, however, prominent in the negotiations during the transition and designed many policies intended to reduce the power of the army.

In the last years, the dominance of EAO has gained momentum by capitalizing on the Myanmar military's vulnerabilities to expand their territorial control. Both Karenni and Chin's resistance has evolved not only in their military responses but also in the creation of local governance structures.³² In Karenni State, a coalition of resistance forces liberated the majority of the state's territory and established the Karenni Interim Government in 2023, integrating ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) with newly formed bodies and active representation of women, ethnic minorities, and youth.³³ In the expanding liberated areas, local administrations and public services are laying the foundations for federal democracy, despite the junta's campaign of terror against them.³⁴

In this context, women's activism navigates the dual challenge of incorporating gender equality both in the anti-regime resistance movement and in the discussion of what federal democracy entails. Further, the goal is to ensure full and meaningful participation of women in the emerging structures of power at the state level. On their journey of activism, women's organizations have advocated for recognizing how democracy, federalism and gender equality are all equally important components to shape the political project for the future of Myanmar.

Yet, the acknowledgment of such a connection, particularly by men and urban women, has not been easy, and only after the military coup, there is more awareness about the limitations in changing the political system without a structural transformation in the social norms and gender dynamics and the recognition of ethnic rights. As one of the interviewees reflected: "Before, women in urban areas didn't understand federalism totally. They thought that only democracy and human rights were important". Further, she reflects upon the challenge of incorporating gender equality into the idea of federal democracy. In her words: "Men leaders used to say, 'these women issues can come after'. But that was before, now it is seen as crosscutting. In every single issue, we need to think of gender".³⁵

[32] Ye Myo Hein (2025). Myanmar's Escalating Crisis: A Year in Review and the Road Ahead. [Myanmar's Escalating Crisis: A Year in Review and the Road Ahead | United States Institute of Peace](#)

[33] Progressive Voice. (2024) [People-Led Karenni Governance Structure Pioneers Federal Nation-State Building for Myanmar - Progressive Voice](#)

[34] Progressive Voice. (2024) [Another Year of Revolution Brings More Gains and More Sacrifice - Progressive Voice Myanmar](#)

[35] Interview Women's League of Burma, 10 December 2024.



Similarly, another interviewee reflects upon the ownership that local organizations and particularly women have gained after the coup with regards to peace efforts and the political project of federal democracy:

During 2011 and 2012, we worked so hard to bring peace and federalism in paper. Everyone was so busy in getting the perfect writing in the NCA. After the coup, people are not waiting for agreements. They are taking the issues directly, food security, health, education. Federalism is in motion. Imperfect. Yes. But people are making it work knowing that they cannot wait for NLD to declare victory.³⁶

Karenni state, as a pioneer of people-led governance structure, is a good example of how an inclusive federal democracy can be built from the ground. An activist and practitioner shared her experience working with women's organizations in Karenni state and recalls how they used different strategies, including dialogue and advocacy efforts, as well as applying pressure to the resistance government to incorporate gender equality in the political agenda and to develop a policy framework on this issue.³⁷ The Karenni Human Rights Group highlights that the development of a policy framework on gender equality can challenge the "stereotypical gender norms that undermined the skills and capabilities of women."³⁸ The goal of a more gender equal state is also incorporated into the Karenni Interim Arrangement,³⁹ which provides for a 30 percent gender quota in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.⁴⁰

Similarly, in Chin State, women's activism aimed to incorporate gender equality and women's participation as a core element within Chin's policies and legal tools as well as within their vision of federal democracy. By doing so, they have advocated and managed to draft a gender policy framework. An activist and practitioner involved in this process describes how it was possible to facilitate the dialogue between members of different tribal groups within Chin State.⁴¹ Despite numerous tensions surrounding land and political representation, among other issues, women-led community-based organizations effectively incorporated the gender policy framework into the political agenda and stimulated discussion among 84 participants (primarily men). Women, who have been critical actors in service delivery and humanitarian responses, could use this capacity to pressure and prompt the discussion: "Women were able to say, if you don't agree with each other, we cannot provide services to the people."⁴²

There is meaningful progress in the incorporation of the agenda of gender equality within the project of federal democracy. In the words of Maw Pray Myar, Chairperson of Karenni National Women's Organization:

For building an inclusive federal democracy, it is paramount that women are genuinely and meaningfully included at all levels of decision-making. Over the last year, the Karenni Interim Government has taken important steps towards gender equality by requiring at least 30% women's participation across all positions. Going

[36] Interview practitioner and activist working in Chin and Karenni State, 12 November 2024.

[37] Interview practitioner and activist working in Chin and Karenni State, 12 November 2024.

[38] Progressive Voice (2024) [Karenni Federalism-from-the-Ground-Up_Final.pdf](#)

[39] The Karenni State Interim Arrangement (KSIA) is the institutional framework that guides the operation of the Karenni Interim Government.

[40] Women's League of Burma (2025). 25 years of feminist federal stories of strengthening ethnic diversity for change. Stories of strengthening ethnic diversity for change. Available at: [wlb25years-11.69x1169in.pdf](#)

[41] Interview Chin activist, 16 November 2024

[42] Interview Chin activist, 16 November 2024



*forward, efforts towards the genuine inclusion of all marginalized populations, including women, must be strengthened in Karenni State and across Myanmar to achieve inclusive federal democracy and sustainable peace.*⁴³

However, there are still challenges to advancing women's role in the federal model, such as transforming a traditional male-dominated leadership within the ethnic groups and acknowledging power sharing between men and women. An interviewee argues that women are still in supportive roles: "Visibility is there; ownership is not yet. In the name of resistance and fighting the military regime, sometimes we play a cautious role. We still need to figure it out."⁴⁴

4. A new chapter for the women's movement

In the previous sections, I analyzed the key aspects of women activists' agenda in the post-coup period, and their goal to incorporate gender equality as a core element of a political project for the future of Myanmar. Women activists and organizations have had to reevaluate their own dynamics as women's movements while advocating for access to decision-making and gaining influence as emerging leaders, all while resisting the military.

The changes in the political landscape have shaped the dynamics of the women's movement. During the so-called democratic period, there was an opening for the expansion of women's activism in Myanmar. This led to the relocation to Yangon of many women's organizations that previously operated in exile. Such relocation had an impact on the cohesion of the women's movement, internally and externally. Exiled activists were critical of some of the organizations that returned to Yangon because of their relationships with the government and the consequent limitation on speaking out on issues such as sexual violence by military personnel in conflict areas.⁴⁵

The cohesion of the movement has also been defined by the coexistence of different visions of peace.⁴⁶ During the transition period, while some organizations, particularly those based in Myanmar, believed that the struggle for gender equality could be pursued independently of a political solution regarding overarching conflict issues, other organizations, working in exile and closer to EAOs considered that the goals of the ethno-political struggle and gender equality and ethnic equality were intertwined. However, after the coup, women's organizations reassessed their strategies and took important steps towards a consensus to pursue a comprehensive agenda that prioritizes gender equality.

The active role of women's organizations following the coup reveals a revitalized feminist activism which is prompting a shift in agendas, strategies, and their stakeholders. For instance, some interviewees acknowledge an increased interest among women activists in bridging two narratives, the rural and urban, which were previously disarticulated.

[43] Progressive Voice (2024). People-Led Karenni Governance Structure Pioneers Federal Nation-State Building for Myanmar. [People-Led Karenni Governance Structure Pioneers Federal Nation-State Building for Myanmar - Progressive Voice](#)

[44] Interview practitioner and activist working in Chin and Karenni State, 12 November 2024.

[45] Cárdenas, M. and Olivius, E. (2021) Building Peace in the Shadow of War: Women-to-Women Diplomacy as Alternative Peacebuilding Practice in Myanmar, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(3), 347–366.

[46] Cárdenas, M. (2022). Exploring women's vision(s) of peace: towards feminist peace in Myanmar and Georgia?, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5(1), 7–23.



However, differing views still exist regarding the cohesion of the women's movement. Many agree that after the coup, women's groups with various goals united to resist the military, which is reflected in the plurality of the Civil Disobedience Movement as well as in the emergence of new leadership. Nonetheless, other interviewees argue that there is still a long way to go before the women's movement becomes fully united: "We have massive solidarity. Yet, no common strategies...There is no big, consistent women's movement that can act as a peace-broker."⁴⁷

A fundamental aspect in which there is no discussion is the refusal of women's organizations to cooperate with the military regime and their call to the international community to follow suit. For instance, as May Sabe Phyu, the director of Gender Equality Network (GEN) (previously members of the Myanmar National Committee on Women) argues: "We have zero trust on the military council's promise of fulfilling human rights because we believe women's rights and gender equality only survive in a democratic system, not under military rule."⁴⁸

Final remarks

This analysis and the testimonies of women activists show that neither the effects of the military coup in Myanmar nor the resistance movement are gender-neutral. Two important lessons can be drawn from the responses of women's organizations to the coup. First, women have been at the forefront of mass mobilization and have fostered solidarity among diverse networks. Second, women's activism has not only focused on challenging the military but also aimed to prioritize gender equality as a precondition to democracy and peace, which indicates a radical rupture from the approach to the role of women in the past. Furthermore, the challenges faced by post-coup Myanmar have prompted a renewed commitment among women's activists to embrace feminism. As one interviewed activist argues: "More and more women are enhancing their responsibility as feminists...The main contribution of women to the Spring Revolution is cultural change."⁴⁹

There is agreement among interviewees regarding the increasing visibility of women not only within the Civil Disobedience Movement but also within the emerging structures of de-facto governance. As a result, men have consented to implement gender policies in places such as Karenni and Chin states. This phenomenon can be replicated in other settings. The advancement of women's activism and the sustainability of their strategies require political and operational support. Women's organizations have not experienced a tangible increase in international funding after the coup as a result of institutional regulations that inhibit support to non-officially registered organizations.⁵⁰ Furthermore, donors often neglect local networks that might be viewed as too political due to their ties with the resistance movement or for not adhering to international standards.⁵¹

[47] Interview activist, 14 December 2024.

[48] May Sabe Phyu, director of GEN cited by Khin Khin Mra. Women fight the dual evils of dictatorship and patriarchal norms in Myanmar - New Mandala

[49] Interview Purple Feminists

[50] Elisabeth Olivius, Jenny Hedström & Zin Mar Phyo Women, Peace and Security in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup

[51] Loong, Shona (2024) [How conflict dynamics in Myanmar are challenging state-centric humanitarianism](#) - IISS Myanmar Conflict Map.



Echoing this argument, an activist pointed out that:

*Donors need to make funding accessible and flexible. Needs to be reachable for grassroots communities. There is so much reporting, so much documentation...Then, you need to work for the donor, or work for the people. They need to open their eyes and see how difficult is to do this work in the middle of the war. Just giving money is not solidarity. Just giving money doesn't make agents of change.*⁵²

According to an interviewee, the operational processes from application to reporting still show a disconnect with local dynamics.

*Donor's approach to prioritize the work on capital cities is not relevant or functional nowadays. To respond to current dynamics and to start preparing for a post-conflict setting, international donors really need to engage with local actors. Sometimes donors work with organizations that cannot even go to peripheral areas and the risk appetite is too low from UN agencies and big NGOs.*⁵³

Among the interviewees, there is a common call to the international community to show solidarity by amplifying the voices of women's activism and condemning the human rights violations perpetrated by the military. As women activists reiterate: "Don't engage with the military, don't give them legitimacy."⁵⁴ Likewise, women activists urge the international community not to forget Myanmar and support civil society's efforts to "build an inclusive and resilient community now, amidst active and escalating conflict, rather than waiting until the conflict ends."⁵⁵

Recommendations

Building on the analysis of various sources and the dialogue with activists from different sectors and ethnic groups, this policy brief offers recommendations to governments, international and regional organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and peace practitioners.

1. Recognize women's organizations as equal and key actors in governance, peace efforts, and humanitarian response.

Women's organizations must be recognized as equal partners and agents of change and not merely beneficiaries of international cooperation. The initiatives formulated by states and international organizations to support women's organizations must be grounded in local knowledge and build on existing approaches and strategies developed by women's organizations. Enhancing women's organizations' ownership and agency over the projects leads to contextualized, timely and relevant international support.

[52] Purple Feminists

[53] Interview, 16 November Chin activist.

[54] Interview Kachin activist, 12 December 2025.

[55] Kamal, A & Fujimatsu, R. (2024) From humanitarian resistance to resilience. Nation-building in active conflict. Humanitarian Practice Network. Available at: [HPN Network Paper](#)



2. Provide core support to women's organizations based on the principles of flexible and adaptable funding.

Investing in the capacity building of women's organizations to ensure their continuity amidst the crisis is critical. To do so, international donors can diversify their funding opportunities, addressing not only programmatic aspects but also operational and institutional support. Investing in capacity building, strengthening networking and advocacy skills is crucial to amplify the voices and experiences of women's organizations at the grassroots level.

3. Identify and support functioning structures for local humanitarian response.

Donors are called to recognize and actively support the work of community-based organizations, and to develop more innovative approaches, particularly in the liberated areas. As this policy brief has shown, in Myanmar, bottom-up governance systems such as the one in the Karenni state offer unique opportunities for long-term interventions. By supporting initiatives at the state level, international organizations and governments can contribute to structural change through inclusive federal democracy.

4. Prioritize the protection of women human rights defenders.

Women have been at the forefront of the resistance movement, which has dramatically increased their exposure to gender-based violence. Therefore, the protection of women rights defenders must be prioritized and updated to address new modalities of threats and risks. For instance, investing in digital security and facilitating the incorporation of tools and protocols for communication and information management are key elements to ensure the holistic protection of women activists. Likewise, seeking strategic alliances within the technology sector can help counter online violence, hate speech, and disinformation campaigns targeting women.



About the Author

Magda Lorena Cárdenas, PhD in Political Science and Gender Studies. Researcher and international consultant on the women, peace and security agenda. Her research focuses on women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in different conflict settings including Georgia, Myanmar and Colombia. Further, she has also researched women's involvement in mediation efforts. Magda has also been consultant for UN agencies on the themes of women's participation in peace efforts, mediation and women's mobilisation in non-violent movements. Previously, Magda worked for the Colombian government as an advisor on human rights and the formulation of public policies.

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