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The Contribution of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Advancing Women's Political Participation and Effectiveness:

A Case of the Mon Women Movement in Myanmar

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Abstract

After decades of oppressive military rule, Myanmar is making strides towards a more inclusive democratic society. However, there are many challenges which need to be addressed to secure unprejudiced inclusion of all segments of Myanmar society. Women, who represent marginally more than fifty percent of the population, have been missing a seat at the decision-making table. Although the patriarchal military government gave way to a popular government which is led by a female State Chancellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, women continue to face a myriad of obstacles in participating effectively in politics. Civil Society Organizations have been active in trying to increase women's participation in politics and governance, as well as push for gender equity. A women movement, which has grown out of these efforts, also faces shortcomings which stunts its potential. This paper reveals a need for the government to embrace the movement and act accordingly as the guardian of democracy to secure women's political effectiveness.

Women's political participation and effectiveness

"In the end, women's access, presence, and influence in decision-making forums is shaped by public constructions of women's rights as citizens"

Ann Marie Goetz (2003, p.72)

Inclusion of women in political leadership is not only a prerequisite for a functional democracy but is also a matter of efficiency in governance. As noted, women bring into their leadership roles unique perspectives, networks, skills and abilities[1], and broaden policy agendas[2]. Although women are increasingly participating in political leadership, their participation falls short of the 30% minimum gender quota recommendation by the United Nations. In 2015, only 43 countries had reached or surpassed this target for parliamentary representation: 70 countries had less than 15% women in the lower or single houses of national parliaments, with no women representation in five countries[3]. Efforts to increase women's political participation, however, need to be coupled with efforts to secure their political effectiveness. In light of historical and persistent cultural and institutional constrains to gender equity, political effectiveness is only achieved when women's 'voice' translates to policies addressing these constraints.

As acknowledged by the United Nations, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have made significant contribution to the "work of increasing women's participation in decision making at all levels of society"[4]. Their contribution is notable in Indonesia, Liberia, Haiti, and Mexico, among other countries. In Indonesia, for instance, CSOs were central in the building of a women's movement which resulted to institutionalization of a 30% electoral quota. In Mexico, CSOs led the '2% + More Women in Politics' campaign which saw increased compliance to the electoral code's provision for political parties to avail 2% of party funding for political training for women. These cases reveal the significance and potential of CSOs in enhancing gender representation in politics and monitoring gender-equity provisions.

CSOs in Myanmar have been instrumental in the growth of a women's movement through which they advocate for women's political participation as well as for gender-equity policy provisions. CSOs have had to navigate challenging terrains over the years, from decades of repressive military rule to violent confrontations between the military (*Tatmadaw*) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) in minority ethnic states and regions[5]. In addition, gender-equity CSOs have worked, and continue to work, contrary to accepted patriarchal norms which support men's domination in leadership positions from the village-level to the union-level[6]. Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's high profile as the leader of the political party in power (the National League for Democracy), the State Counsellor, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the head of the President's Office, and the chair of high-level committees in charge of the peace process at the union-level and in Rakhine state, the profile and impact of the Myanmar women's movement remains low. Nonetheless, the Myanmar women's movement is slowly, but surely, reshaping public constructions of women's rights as citizens.

This paper assesses the contribution of the women's movement in Mon state, essentially consisting of gender-equity CSOs, in advancing women's political participation and effectiveness within the state and beyond. For insight into the background of the women's movement, the paper will first examine the gender dynamics in Myanmar, and the historical and current context in which CSOs operate. The third and main section is divided into subsections where the role of the women's movement is assessed. The conclusion draws from the main findings and makes recommendations on what gender-equity CSOs and the government can do to maximise outcomes on women's political participation and effectiveness. Information presented in this paper was gathered through documentary analysis and key informant interviews with MPs in

the Mon state parliament, Mon political party leaders, and gender-equity CSOs' leaders in Yangon and Mwalamyine between April and July 2017.

Map of Myanmar*

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* Note: Yangon, which used to be the capital of Myanmar, is located in the south with Mwalamyine to its east.

Women and power in Myanmar

Gender plays a significant role in the division of labour in Myanmar. Culturally, women are home makers while men are decision makers: A tradition which is not limited to the private sphere. Even the constitution perpetuates this tradition and cultural understanding by referring to women as mothers and legitimizing gendered division of labour in civil service appointments[7]. Despite the government's official position that women do not face any barriers for equal enjoyment of rights[8], reality reveals otherwise. Socialized and institutionalized gendered traditions have manifested into today's economic, social, and structural barriers for females.

In Myanmar, one in every four or five people has an income which is below the national poverty line[9]. Women are disproportionately under-employed, and mostly work in the informal sector and on low-paying jobs, partially due to occupational segregation by gender. Women have limited access to productive assets and land due to their economic disadvantage as well as cultural biases with regards to inheritance. Although fifty percent of employed women work in the agricultural sector[10], they lack ownership and control to land. This vicious cycle of economic disadvantage perpetuates economic dependency of women and affirms the position of men as heads of households, deepening gender inequality.

Women in Myanmar are silent victims of gender-based violence. Domestic violence is viewed as a family matter and those seeking formal redress are met by social stigma. In addition, marital rape is not illegal in Myanmar. Women living in conflict areas are more vulnerable due to the risk of sexual violence by armed forces. While lack of judicial independence and judicial corruption constrains access to formal justice, customary justice mechanisms discriminate against female victims by placing emphasis on community justice. Marriage between perpetrators of rape and survivors as well as financial compensation to rape victims, for instance, are common in Kachin, Chin, Kayah, Mon, and Shan states[11]. As it has been reiterated elsewhere, gender-based violence is a "manifestation of and a tool to maintain gender inequality"[12].

In Myanmar, gender inequality is most evident in political leadership, even from its early attempts at nation building. The National Convention, which was formed in 1993 as a mechanism to shape the transition from military to civilian rule by drafting of a new constitution, did not include any women as of 1996[13] and in 2006, only 6.2% of its delegation were women[14]. Apart from Aung San Suu Kyi, there are currently no other female ministers in the 22-member union cabinet. In fact, there have only been four female cabinet members since 1920[15]. In the ongoing peace process, women's broader voice has been limited to "tea break advocacy"[16], despite of Aung San Suu Kyi's profile as the chair of high-level committees in charge of the peace process at the union level and in Rakhine state. In parliament, although women's participation has increased in comparison to the previous government, women hold only 13% of the seats[17].

Women's effectiveness in political leadership, however, is not only limited by numbers but also by the extent to which their voice translates to policy change and gender equity. In state administration organizations and government ministries, gender segregation of occupation and ministries is visible. Women are typically in low- and mid-level positions, and largely get into high-level positions in 'non-strategic' ministries[18]. Even in the judiciary, where female judges marginally outnumber their male counterparts, female judges at the High Court and Supreme Court are very few. In addition, the role of female judges at the district- and township-level courts is at times limited to administrative work[19].

Women have, nonetheless, not been passive recipients of political spaces availed to them, but rather have been active in their push for women's visibility and gender equity through Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

Civil Society Organizations in Myanmar

Civil Society Organizations[20] (hereinafter, CSOs) have gone through a metamorphosis over the years to adapt to changing political contexts in Myanmar. Traditionally, civil societies have been organized at the local level as religious groups with an aim of addressing community challenges such as poverty. Formal association can be traced back to the 1900s, with vibrancy of civil society being noted to have emerged following Myanmar independence in 1948, albeit limited to urban, non-conflict areas[21]. This vibrancy was, unfortunately, lost during the military rule ushered in by the military coup of 1962. The 1988 pro-democracy uprising, nonetheless, opened space for civil society activism for many segments of the society: Even housewives came together to form the All-Burma Housewives Association. The introduction of the 1988 Association Act, however, marked a return to CSOs repression. The Act mandated CSOs to register through the Ministry of Home Affairs: A process which was used to limit association. Subsequently, the military government formed government-controlled NGOs and co-opted with some of the formerly independent CSOs. The Myanmar Nurse and Midwife Association and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association were among the former, and the Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurial Association was among the latter.

In the ethnic areas, activities of CSOs found legitimacy by associating themselves with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and filling service-delivery gaps left by the government. Due to the armed conflict which drove residents from Mon state, CSOs largely operated in Thailand in mid to late 1900s. After the 1995 ceasefire agreement was signed between the military government and the New Mon State Party (NMSP), many CSOs returned to Mon state. Over the years, CSOs operating in Mon state have merged their developmental work with political advocacy. For Mon CSOs, increased advocacy has largely been around ethnic rights including the right to use Mon language in schools. It was still difficult for CSOs to get registration in the late 1990s and some operated under the guardianship of religious organizations. Women CSOs existed to address unique needs of women in conflict and post-conflict Mon State. The Mon Women's Organization, which is the most vocal gender-equity organization in Mon State, emerged as a women's unit of NMSP in the 1980s and worked closely with the EAO before becoming an independent organization.

The 2008 Cyclone Nargis created space for CSOs to thrive as they proved to be crucial first responders in light of poor government-response and the government's resistance to international humanitarian intervention. Their efforts to support those affected by the cyclone were, however, not free of the military government's repression[22]. The 2010 quasi-military government brought in a new era for CSOs which saw increased freedom of association and expression. In 2012, pre-production media censorship was abolished and in 2014, the Association Act was amended to remove restrictions on non-registered CSOs. Political prisoners arrested by the previous regime were released, including the Nobel-prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. These reforms, however, coexisted with continued repression through arrests of journalists and activists under outdated laws such as the 1923 State Secrets Act. In addition, the Telecommunication Law, whose defamation provision criminalizes criticism of the military leadership and government, was adopted in 2013.

As euphoria for democracy built in the country ahead of the 2015 elections, the role of CSOs was noted to be crucial for the final push to a democratic transition[23]: Their role does not stop at supporting the civilian NLD's ascent to power. CSOs represent diverse interests which deserve articulation in a democratic society and CSOs can also prevent government abuse by acting as watchdogs as well as enhance political participation through civil education. The anticipation on the potential significance of CSOs during the term of the new popular civilian government has, however, been disappointed. There is persistent mistrust between the government (which includes military officials) and CSOs. In addition, the government has not embraced the role of CSOs. It is even noted that previously expanded spaces for CSOs "seem to be shrinking under the NLD government"[24]. Official censorship has been replaced by self-censorship due to close scrutiny, intimidation, and legal action under the now-popular Telecommunication Law[25]. Under this law, there is a new generation of political prisoners[26].

The function of CSOs as representatives of varied interests in the society has been undermined further by their exclusion from the ongoing peace process. Only the government, military (the Tatmadaw), Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), and political parties are recognized as parties in the political dialogue. The peace dialogue structure has had the impact of limiting the women's voice. Traditionally, women have played little to no decision-making role within the organization of included parties. Conversely, women's active and leading role in peace-building and developmental CSOs is noted to be unique and significant[27]. Due to their exclusion from the formal peace process, CSOs have sought to work along the sidelines as EAOs' technical advisers, commentators, and independent civilian ceasefire monitors; with the latter facing government scrutiny[28].

Gender-equity CSOs[29], like other CSOs in the country, have adapted to a variety challenges and opportunities over the years. One of their adaptation mechanisms has been establishing networks at state and union levels. The Women's League of Burma (WLB) which was founded in 1999 was among the first union-level women's network. While women organizations operating in the various states largely operate along ethnic lines, union-level networks present platforms where ethnic barriers to the women movement in the country are broken. The WLB's membership, for instance, includes the Burmese Women's Union, the Kachin Women's Association, the Karen Women Organization, and the Shan Women's Action Network, among other organizations. Other union-level networks include: The Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON), the Gender Equality Network (GEN), and the Alliance for the Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP). While their focus is mainly on national-level advocacy, these networks also advocate for gender equity at the international level through submissions of shadow reports to the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) committee.

Although, the growing women's movement in Myanmar is largely limited to CSOs with exclusively female membership, other CSOs are joining in the cause for gender-equity. The democratic space which opened up with the gradual withdrawal of military rule as well as the growing awareness of women's exclusion in the country's decision-making institutions have played an important role in galvanizing the women's movement in Myanmar. The proposition and subsequent adoption of the 2015 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law, which restricts marriage based on religion, also kindled the movement[30]. The women's movement in Myanmar has been instrumental in advocating for women's participation in leadership as well as for gender-equity in legal and policy provisions.

Contribution of the Mon women movement to women's political participation and effectiveness

"We need to hear women's voices so we want them to enter into the position of leadership role in the civil society groups, administrative bodies, and as parliamentarians."

Mi Cherry Soe,
Co-founder, Mon Women Network[31]

In Mon state, CSOs collaborate on gender-equity issues essentially through partnership with the Mon Women Organization (MWO) and/or through membership in the Mon Women Network (MWN). In turn, these two organizations join national alliances: The MWN is a member of the Alliance for the Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) and the MWO is a member of the Gender Equality Network (GEN). The Mon women movement has been notably active in supporting inclusion of women into decision-making positions as well as pushing gender-equity issues up in official policy agenda. While the former ensures that the women's voice is able to politicize gender-equity issues, the latter triggers better responsiveness of women's needs from the public sectors. Anne Marie Goetz (2003, p.29) asserts that these two aims are essential for women's political effectiveness to be realised.

Breaking barriers

Gender-equity CSOs are working towards breaking traditions, cultural barriers, and stereotypes which hinder women's inclusion in national, state, and local leadership positions. Since men have traditionally been the sole decision-makers, women are still not viewed as being ideal leaders but rather as home makers. Although perceptions are changing in Mon state, traditional thinking is still evident. Research conducted by the Mon Women's Organization ahead of the 2015 election revealed persistent gender stereotyping which hinder women from moving into leadership positions. Of 204 people interviewed, from 6 of the 10 townships in Mon state, 54% believed that women should be single to participate in politics or decision-making roles[32].

To challenge such gender stereotypes, CSOs active in the Mon women's movement[33] have integrated gender sensitization in their programming. Even CSOs which do not target female beneficiaries such as the Mon Youth Educator Organization and the Mon Cetana Development Foundation, take part in gender sensitization workshops organized by the Mon Women Network. Exchanges on gender issues within the network have inspired some CSOs to introduce gender-equity policies, such as a gender quota, within their organization. Min Seik Rot of the Mon Youth Educator Organization confessed to Heinrich Böll Stiftung Myanmar (hereinafter, hbs) that the introduction of a quota system was met with resistance at the beginning, especially from its male membership[34]. One of the points of contention was that women required "extra attention" when it comes to their security and comfort especially when implementing projects in remote areas. The organization resolves this concern by assigning women to projects which did not require the "extra attention". Over time, the quota became accepted as a standard requirement in the selection process for membership and leadership positions. While this gender segregation in the selection process continues to limit women's leadership capacities, this compromise has proven useful in increasing female leadership. It goes without saying that it is only after CSOs have internalized the essence of gender equity that they can advance the same in the communities in which they operate.

With regards to project implementation within the community, the proximity and, possibly, local legitimacy of CSOs has paved the way for sincere and open engagement. Mon CSOs have an advantage of being close to the people at the grassroots both in distance and trust which has been built over the years. The Mon identity proudly embraced by Mon CSOs has arguably contribute to their legitimacy in the Mon society. In addition, the Mon Women's Network provides a platform for bigger CSOs to work with local village women groups hence building the former's network at the grassroots level. Partnership between the network and community gatekeepers, such as monks through the Mon Young Monk Association, has allowed CSOs access to a broader audience on the ground. A Mon monk informed hbs that, "Sometimes they (women CSOs) cannot go in some villages. If they want to conduct trainings in some villages, they face difficulties organizing and even going there. They call the monk leader and we organize the event for them. After that it is easy and they hold the training, but we have to go together"[35]. Currently, the Mon Women's Organization operates in over thirty Mon villages. This proximity has in turn served to enhance the reach and, possibly, the effectiveness of gender sensitization programming by gender equity CSOs.

The efforts of the Mon women's movement are, however, constrained by limited engagement of men and non-Mon people in Mon state. Although CSOs acknowledge the importance of engaging men in breaking gendered barriers in the community, men are largely left in the margins of the women's movement. In addition, people with non-Mon identity in Mon state, including Bamar, Kayin, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Shan, and Pa-O ethnicities, are not active in the women's movement. Although the study did not give much insight on why this is the case, one interviewee cited the language barrier as a challenge to engaging with the various ethnicities.

Figure 1:

A gender sensitization workshop organized by the Mon Women's Organization (MWO) in Mwalamyine, Mon State, in June. The MWO has been active in mobilizing gender-equity organizations and women's groups to join the Mon Women's Network. The organization is also active at the union-level advocacy. The vice-chairperson, Mi Kun Chan Non, shared with hbs an analogy which is central to conceptualizing gender equity: "Men in Ethnic Armed Organizations (such as the New Mon State Party), when asked to consider gender, always ask 'can you carry a sack of rice?'. We tell them that the main goal is to bring the rice to the other area. So we will do that. We will open the bag, divide it into smaller portions and take it to the other side in trips."

Grooming and advancing local leadership

Gender equity CSOs act as training ground for future female leadership as well a male leadership which is gender sensitive. They also offer mentorship for aspiring leaders in communities. Mon women CSOs not only create a new awareness on gender issues but also strengthen the leadership capacity and skills of its leadership and membership, which is predominantly female. While its programmes include education and training, women health, and sustainable development, the Mon Women Organization's main aim is to empower women to take on leadership roles[36]. These interconnected programmes are indeed linked to leadership capacities. Just like education and skills training, good health and economic empowerment enhances women capacities and offer a foundation for building confidence of women to take on leadership positions. Mi Kun Chan Non, the vice-chair person of the Mon Women Organization, observes that for capacity-building to translate to women's participation in politics, women require actual leadership experience for application[37]. Subsequently, in addition to grooming future leaders at the organizational level, Mon CSOs are working towards expanding leadership spaces for women.

In Mon state, as in other states and regions in Myanmar, female leadership in local administration is very limited. In 2014, only 42 of the 16,785 villages in Myanmar had female village and ward administrators, with none in Mon state[38]. The number of female village and ward administrators increased to 88 in 2016[39], increasing the percentage of women in village leadership to only 0.5%. In Mon state, only three women were elected as village administrators, making the female leadership in the 1,675 villages and village tracts in the state to stand at 0.18% of total village leadership[40]. Nonetheless, this marginal inclusion of women in local administration leadership can partly be attributed to efforts made by the Mon women movement.

The limited women leadership at the local level has been a concern for the Mon women movement. In addition to the limited number of female village administrators, there is no woman at the township level leadership in the ten townships in Mon state[41]. The Mon Women Network has held meetings with members of the General Administration Department (GAD) to advocate for measures to allow for women's leadership. The GAD remains reluctant to the idea of women inclusion in local administration[42]. The Department, which is headed by an unelected township administrator, is a dominant player in local administration and development[43]. Since the GAD falls under the purview of military-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs, it is predominantly male. In 2014, there was no female township administrator in the country[44]: In Mon State, there has never been a female township administrator[45]. Although village and ward administrators hold the lowest position in the GAD, they are a key bridge connecting communities to basic public administrative services. In 2012, village and ward administrator positions were transformed from appointed to elective positions. This transformation increases the possibility of women inclusion in local leadership.

To address concerns about women requiring a special support mechanism in a role which requires one to "stay awake all the time"[46], the Mon Women Network has had to act as a guarantor to future female leaders by promising the GAD that the Network would support women who are appointed or elected into leadership[47]. One challenge which female village administrators face is working at night because in the Mon culture it is not considered proper for women to go out at night. Female village administrators are, therefore, forced to look for a male company when an urgent case comes to their attention at night. Another challenge faced by those who have children, is that of balancing work and family duties. This is largely because

of lack of a child-care system. Determined to address this challenge, a CSO leader started running a child-care centre which caters for the different needs of women in terms of varying working hours[48].

Mi Jalon Htaw, one of the three female village administrators serving in Ta Ra Nar village, has roots in the Mon women movement and acknowledges that women and youth CSOs were her greatest support in her aspiration to be a local leader[49]. Mi Jalon Htaw did not campaign but throughout the selection process in 2016, the Mon Women Network lobbied for her[50]. Her victory also represented victory for the Mon women movement. One of the co-founder of the Mon Women Network proudly shared his joy with Hbs, "She (Mi Jalon Htaw) is a model woman for the country and for the Mon people"[51]. Although the 'guarantor' approach has the potential of creating a dependency on the Network, it also underlines the potential of a strong and organized women movement in women leadership at the local level.

Her election has not only demonstrated to other women the potentials of women in leadership but has resulted to women issues moving up in priorities at the village level. This is a significant achievement because village administrators have been distinguished as the gate keepers to courts, police, and official administrative process[52]. Women leadership at this position, therefore, has the potential of improving accessibility of public services to women as well as promoting gender justice. Mi Jalon Htaw sadly noted that cases of violence against women, including domestic violence, were not reported during the previous male-dominated administrations[53]. She shared her enthusiasm in her work and informed hbs that she receives two or three cases of gender-based violence on a daily basis. Using her mandate as a peace maker and law enforcer at the village level, she mediates such cases and depending on the gravity of the case, she can take cases to the police. For women survivors, a safe house and psychological care are availed. Mi Jalon Htaw continues to be ally of the Mon women movement and even talks to a USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) MP who comes from her village on the issue of gender based violence and advocates for a policy to address this problem. Mi Jalon Htaw's case demonstrates that female leadership drawn from, or inspired by, the women's movement can significantly advance gender equity.

Figure 2:

Mi Jalon Htaw, Ta Ra Nar village administrator attending to a villager in her office. She is one of the three female village administrators serving in the 1,675 villages and village tracts in Mon state. She told hbs that her work entails handling "everything that happens in the village, from general administration to resolving conflicts". Her demanding work can begin as early as 5am and end as late 1am. She, therefore, never switches off her mobile phone.

Getting women into parliament

Apart from pushing for female leadership at the village level, the Mon women's movement has made efforts to get women into the Mon State Parliament. Since members of parliament are the law makers, having women in parliament would raise the concerns of women to policy level where they can be articulated in legal and policy instruments. Politicization of women's voice at this level is undermined by low numbers of women in the state and national parliaments. Currently, female MPs take only 13% of parliamentary seats[54]. Although this is an increase from the 4.7% in the previous parliament[55], women's representation remains significantly below the critical mass of 30% recommended by the United Nation. The Mon State Parliament did not have any female MPs during its first term, between 2011 and 2015. In the current parliament, there are six female MPs who account for 26.1% of the elected MPs, and only 19.4% of the total 31 parliament seats[56]. Although not a satisfactorily representative, this development opened a crucial space for women's voice. In addition, the Mon State Parliament was the first regional parliament to select a female MP to serve as a parliament speaker[57].

A point of concern for Mon women movement with regards to parliamentary representation has been the constitutional provision which guarantees 25% of unelected parliamentary seats to the military[58]. Since the military is predominantly male, military appointees to the various parliaments have consequently been predominantly male. It is not until 2014 that the military appointed its first female MPs. The two appointed female MP, nonetheless, represented only 0.4% of the 431 seats reserved for the military[59]. In 2016, this number was only increased by one[60]. At the regional level, in Mon state, the military has never appointed a female MP. The Mon Women Organization has raised these concerns at the union level in collaboration with other CSOs and hopes for a change in the constitution "to ensure that gender equity is guaranteed"[61].

With regards to increasing women's representation in parliament, the Mon Women Network has primarily focussed on the electoral process where it lobbies for voters to elect women as parliamentarians. In 2015, the Mon Women Network supported the candidacy of nineteen Mon women from the Mon National Party, the All Mon Regions Democratic Party, and the Women's Party (Mon). These were women who had a connection to the Mon women movement either as members or friends of the Mon gender-equity CSOs, including the chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization. Members of the Mon Women Network went with the candidates from village to village during the campaign period and offered both moral and technical support[62]. Given the challenges which women have to overcome such as intimidation, moral support from the women CSOs likely eased the campaign process significantly for the female candidates. However, none of the nineteen women were elected into parliament[63]. This outcome has been attributed to the division of the votes of the Mon ethnic people between three political parties and enthusiasm for the change to inclusive democracy which was promised by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party[64]. All the six current female MPs are members of the NLD.

Advocacy in parliament

Despite the potential of politicizing gender issues in collaboration with the first female MPs in the Mon state parliament, there has been limited interaction between the MPs and Mon women CSOs. A CSO leader confessed to hbs that their interaction entails getting together on Mon Women's Day and International Women's Day which the Mon Women Network organizes[65].

Among the factors hindering this partnership is the distrust of the Mon gender equity CSOs towards the NLD party. Like most ethnic minorities in Myanmar, the vision of the Mon ethnic people is self-determination. While not in their main agenda, CSOs operating in ethnic states share this vision with respective Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and ethnic political parties. Most CSOs members active in the women's movement had previously worked with the EAO New Mon State Party (NMSP) or/and Mon political parties[66]. Although the NLD party's election manifesto promised equal rights for ethnic groups and supported the idea of self-determination[67], the NLD-led government has not openly supported the demand by Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) for self-determination. Self-determination has become a point of contention in the current peace process. Some interviewees expressed doubt on the commitment of the government to fulfil the promises it made during the election period. This mistrust has arguably created a distance which inhibits meaningful collaboration between CSOs and the female law makers on issues around gender equity.

Mon gender-equity CSOs are also reluctant to approach the female MPs because of lack of prior rapport. A member of the Mon Women Network explained to hbs: "If we would have succeeded (in getting into parliament the female candidate the Network had supported), then we would be more familiar and talk with them (female MPs)". While having insiders from the movement as MPs would have translated to smooth collaborations, bias against 'outsiders' is a significant shortcoming of the Mon women movement. For a relationship to be built between the CSOs and MPs, efforts to overcome this bias need to be complemented by transparency and openness to engage by MPs and political parties. In Mon state, NLD party procedures to setup meetings with CSOs have been a point of discouragement. One CSOs member informed hbs that as soon as the new MPs took their seats, the CSOs organized a dialogue session to advocate for gender consideration in the state cabinet but the NLD MPs (61% of Mon state parliament) were denied permission to attend[68]. The cause for gender equity requires these challenges to be addressed so as to extend the movement to the policy level.

The Mon women movement has, over the years of policy advocacy, accumulated experience and expertise which would be useful for the new female MPs, all of whom are new to parliamentary politics. Having women in parliament does not automatically translate to gender equity laws and policies. For political participation to be effective in Mon state, and Myanmar at large, female MPs requires as much support as can be afforded because they are faced with the odds of low numbers and limited political experience. CSOs in Mon state also have the advantage of having an extensive reach on the ground and ethnic-connectedness, especially in villages resided by Mon ethnic people[69]. Collaboration would, therefore, ensure that the women's voice presented in parliament is more representative.

Female MPs have, nonetheless, expressed to hbs their confidence in their ability to address gender issues in parliament[70]. Despite regretting that it is only the female MPs who discuss issues affecting women, they plan to raise the issue of gender-based violence, particularly child rape, in the next parliamentary seating (in September 2017)[71]. A women representative who works for Judiciary is currently also organizing a women caucus so that the female MPs can discuss on how to address the issue of gender-based violence. The UN Women is also engaging with the female MPs on the issue of women, peace, and conflict[72]. These efforts likely have the full support of the pro-gender-equity female parliament speaker who, on being selected as speaker, pledged to do more on women's affairs[73]. The enthusiasm from the female MPs displays openness of the MPs to champion the gender equity agenda: an agenda that could be pushed further if collaboration with the Mon women movement is forged.

Party discipline and loyalty is a significant challenge to representation of varied interests of Myanmar citizens in parliament. The NLD party, which holds approximately 77% the total elected parliamentary seats country-wide[74], has been accused of restricting the freedom of MPs to act in the interests of the people who they represent [75]. The challenge of NLD party discipline has also been cited as a challenge to collaboration between the female MPs and the CSOs. A CSO leader in Yangon informed that, "The main problem (in engaging with MPs) is that the elected members are influenced by their parties and hence influenced by their party principles. So now, some members of parliament do not want to attend every invitation by the CSOs". As the vice-chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization noted, "Some of them (female MPs seating in the Mon state parliament) are good but they have to listen to orders from the top, which is the problem. They can't do whatever they think is best". Indeed, it has been noted elsewhere that "the space for women representatives to act other than in the line with their party policies and party discipline is likely to be much reduced" where party identity is strong[76].

The introduction of a 30% gender quota system, as advocated for by gender-equity CSOs, for instance, is not in line with the leading party's policies. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the NLD-party, is not supportive of the idea. Her stand is that women participation in leadership positions should be determined by their qualifications[77]. Gender-equity CSOs believe that women's barriers to political participation, notably cultural and social norms, need to be countered by proactive policy measures[78]. A renowned women's rights advocate, who is now a female MP under the NLD party, acknowledges the need for a quota system, but notes that gender inclusion is a "delicate matter that requires a careful approach"[79]. Although the issue of a quota system was raised in the parliament in 2015 by a female MP from the Arakan National Party (ANP), the issue was silenced[80]. This silence is unlikely to be broken in the near future, even with female MPs, of whom 88% are NLD party members[81]. Since all the female MPs in Mon state are members of the NLD party, formation of a women caucus is unlikely to build leverage for discussing the issue in the state parliament. This, however, should not preclude collaboration of CSOs and the female MPs on issues of common interests.

Figure 3:

Three of the six female parliamentarians in the Mon State Hluttaw (Parliament).

Female parliamentarians represent 19.4% of the total parliamentary seats in Mon state. This is a jump from 0% female representation in the previous Mon State Parliament.

The three parliamentarians expressed to hbs confidence in their ability to contribute towards gender equity in their new roles.

Photo edited by Winston Szeto

Advocacy in party parties

As in many political parties operating ethnic areas in Myanmar, political parties in Mon State are largely formed along ethnic cleavages. Since 2010, there have been two major Mon political parties, the Mon National Party (MNP) and the All Mon Region Democratic Party (AMDP). Although the vision of the MNP and the AMDP are similar, the former distinguishes itself by calling for abolition of the 2008 constitution as opposed to amendments. In the 2015 elections, due to the support garnered by the NLD, the Mon parties lost seats in the regional parliament. Currently, there is only one AMDP parliamentarian representative, down from sixteen in the previous government[82]. The MNP has three parliamentarian representatives, two in the state parliament and one in the upper house of the Union parliament[83]. As lamented by a Central Committee member of the AMDP, contrary to the previous parliament, the Mon parties do not currently have political leverage to address ethnic issues[84]: 87% of MPs in the Mon state parliament are NLD members and Military appointees. Given the popular vote to the NLD, even the national-level ethnic parties' coalition, the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation, does not have leverage. Since the new government took power, however, the popularity of the NLD has declined, especially in ethnic areas[85]. The relevance of ethnic political parties is, therefore, likely to increase in subsequent governments. Consequently, the relevance of women in these parties in shaping the country's agenda will increase.

Political parties present an important entry point for women's movements to increase women's participation in political leadership. The Inter-Parliamentarian Union and the United Nations describe political parties as "the gatekeepers to the advancement of women in politics"[86], and as "instrumental in producing future leaders"[87], respectively. In fact, low numbers of women parliamentarian worldwide is attributed to lack of female leadership in major political parties[88]. While the Mon gender-equity CSOs have had little contact with the NLD, they have taken advantage of their proximity to the Mon political parties to advance women's inclusion in the parties' leadership. Women leadership in both parties is wanting. On the one hand, the AMDP has no woman in its 21-member Central Executive Committee (CEC) and has only six women in its 65-member Central Committee (CC)[89]. The MNP, on the other hand, has five women in its 10-member CEC and thirty-one women in its 96-member CC[90]. Female leadership at the state-level within the AMDP and MNP, therefore, represents 7% and 34% of party leadership, respectively.

The Mon women's movement has been pushing for a gender quota system in the political parties. Since there is no legal obligation for political parties to have any gender quota, the introduction of such a system is voluntary and entirely depends on its demand by party leadership and membership. The MNP is noted to be more-women-friendly than the AMDP in terms of selection criteria[91]. In addition, the party has a two-year strategic plan aimed at increasing the number of youth and women in the party in the next party elections in 2020. It is arguable, that political competition between the two Mon parties has resulted to the demand for a more inclusive policy.

Mi Kun Chan Non noted that although lobbying by the CSOs has enhanced gender consideration by the political parties, women in leadership are still seen as a token as they their voice in the party remains unheard[92]. One of the female AMDP CC members, Mi Lawi Han, informed hbs that although female party membership has increased over the years, their knowledge in politics is limited. At times, she noted, the female members "just serve tea, coffee, and water" and "do not give their suggestions and ideas" at the village and township meetings[93]. In the MNP, despite the strength of women leadership, men are still preferred when fielding electoral candidates. One of the female MNP CEC member lamented, "They (party leadership) say equality but when it

comes to the reality where a woman has to compete with a man for a position, they say, 'You are a woman, you do not have experience. It is not time for you to work. Let him work'"[94]. The challenge for the Mon women's movement is, therefore, not only to increase the number of women in party leadership but also ensure that the female membership and leadership participates effectively within the parties.

Mi Lawi Han, who is also in the steering committee of the Mon Women's Network, encourages women to be proactive in the party and lobbies for inclusion of women at the high leadership in the party. Her strategy is to get more women into the party's township-level leadership so that in the long-run female leadership can increase at the state-level. This has involved liaising with CSOs to sensitize party leadership and membership. Mi Lawi Han expressed disappointment in the discrimination she faced from the community as a female candidate running for a parliamentarian seat in 2015, despite her 23-years' experience working for the Mon-cause with the New Mon State Party. During her campaigns, for instance, when invited for dinner by supporters, she would be served dinner in the kitchen while her male counterparts would eat in the dining area. This points to a socially-constructed challenge for women's entry into politics, and to the need for a change in gendered perspective starting from the party membership.

While not among the major parties in Mon state, the Women's Party (Mon) has the potential of changing the landscape for women's participation in politics. The Women's Party (Mon) has no ethnic affiliation and is the first all-women party to be registered in Myanmar. It was registered in 2015 with the hope of uniting women in the country and increasing women leadership in the union government. The four candidates fielded for upper and lower house parliamentary seats were not voted in. In fact, the party did not have much support in Mon state: it got between 100 and 800 votes each in the areas it competed in[95]. Since its inception, the party has faced challenges relating to internal capacity and lack of support externally. At the time of formation, only one of its 15-member central executive committee had any political experienced[96]. The party was also subject to intimidation by the Union Election Commission and criticism by Mon political parties[97].

Mon gender-equity CSOs supported the candidacy of women fielded by the Women's Party (Mon) in 2015 but this collaboration has since disappeared. The party has in fact become weaker over time, with six of its founding members resigning in late 2016. One of the members who resigned noted that, "We do not set any specific work projects in our party. We do not have meetings nor have met one another and talked. In terms of the work (at the party), nothing happens"[98]. Mi Kun Chan Non informed hbs that the Mon Women Network has attempted to engage with the party in many occasions without the party heeding to the Network's suggestions[99]. While not part of the Mon women's movement, the Women's Party (Mon) and the movement share the fundamental cause of enhancing gender-equity. The party has the potential of acting as a model to be replicated in other states in Myanmar if gaps in capacity needs and community engagement are addressed. Gender-equity CSOs could contribute tremendously in this transformation. Conversely, the strength and reach of the Mon women's movement could also be enhanced by collaboration with the Women's Party (Mon) because the party presents a platform which transcends ethnic identity.

Engagement with the New Mon State Party

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) is not a political party but rather an Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) which does not compete for political positions. The EAO administers part of Mon State and has departments which act like government ministries. The NMSP, as part of the United Nationalities Federal Council, is negotiating with the government for a peaceful settlement of the long-standing conflict. The NMSP envisions the introduction of a federal system in Myanmar which respects the principles of self-determination and equal rights for all ethnicities[100]. This vision, which is in line with the vision of other EAOs, has to some extent gained legitimacy in current peace dialogue and national building process[101]. While the NMSP does not currently have any role in the official political life, it plays an important role in the national building process through participation in the peace dialogue. It also has administrative powers in areas under its control in Mon state. While it is unclear how a federal system would look like in Myanmar, it is likely that the significance of EAOs will increase as ethnic states and regions gain more autonomy.

The Mon Women Network has been active in lobbying for women leadership within the NMSP. Given the importance of the NMSP in the peace negotiations, the Network acknowledges the importance of gender equity in the EAO. Mi Kun Chan Non noted that, "They (the New Mon State Party) are the main stakeholders that we work with because they are on the table (of the peace negotiations) all the time and they do not have women leaders." There is currently only one woman in NMSP's 27-member Central Executive Committee (CEC), with no woman serving in the Central Military Committee. In 2006, the Mon Women Organization started advocating for a quota system within the NMSP. Although this idea was not embraced, CSOs' efforts resulted to the election of a woman in the Central Executive Committee (CEC). CSOs have also been pushing for Mi Sar Dar, the only women in the NMSP CEC and a member of the Mon Women's Network, to be included in the delegation team at the Union Peace Conference. One of the Network's members believes that without CSOs' persistence in advocacy on this, she would never have had the opportunity to attend high level meetings[102].

CSOs are involved in NMSP's administration work as collaborators, observers, and watchdogs. Mon Women Organization successfully pushed for a female administrator in NMSP court system and CSO's inclusion in the court system administered by NMSP. Women can now feel free to "participate, listen, ask questions in front of the inspector, and present evidence"[103]. The successful lobbying of the CSOs can also be attributed to the presence of female leadership in NMSP. Mi Sar Dar, who been active in the Mon women's movement, also served in the NMSP justice system as a judge in 2014. CSOs are also involved in the work of NMSP's Mon National Education Committee: They contribute to about one third of the committee's seats, with Mi Sar Dar as the committee director[104].

While this presents CSOs' successes with the NMSP, Mi Sar Dar informed hbs that women's membership in the NMSP has declined over time over the years[105]. She notes that women prefer to work with political parties and CSOs. A case in point is the formation of the Mon Women's Organization as a women's wing of the NMSP and then later becoming an independent organization. The flexibility in working hours has been sighted as an advantage of working with CSOs[106]. Mi Jan Dae Non of the MNP informed hbs that among the reasons of women preference to political parties is the possibility to effect change through formal politics and the support availed by CSOs and the Mon Women Network.

While it is important to enhance women's participation in formal politics, gender equity considerations are crucial in the NMSP as an administrative organization in Mon state whose

legitimacy in official governance is likely to increase in the future. A member of the Mon Cetana Development Foundation told hbs that when they notice a significant challenge or service gap in the community, they usually lobby for the EAO to review it: The NMSP sometimes collaborates with CSOs in addressing the issues that they have raised[107]. The NMSP has seemingly embraced the role of CSOs in Mon state hence presenting an opportunity for gender-equity CSOs to do more in increasing the number of women in the EAO's leadership. As Mi Sar Dar told hbs, "I am normally hesitant to speak out (within the NMSP Central Executive Committee) because I am the only woman. If there is another woman, it would be easier to work together and raise a suggestion or idea". While numbers should not be the sole focus of CSOs, advancement of gender equity concerns through the NMSP would be limited without the numbers.

National-level advocacy

"I was among the founders (of Mon Women Network). We came together and saw that working within our organizations does not give us enough voice. On advocacy and lobbying, it is better to work with the network. The Mon Women Network is representing Mon gender-equity organizations and it joins AGIPP at the national level. (In) advocacy and lobbying, we can get a louder and broader voice"

Cherry Soe,

Co-founder, Mon Women Network

At the national level, as mentioned earlier in the paper, the Mon women's movement joins the national movement in the call for gender-equity considerations in the peace process and governance. The main national networks through which Mon CSOs actively does advocacy are the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) and the Gender Equality Network (GEN). The Mon Women's Network in a member of the AGIPP: The vice-chair of the Mon Women Organization, a member organization of the Network, is the current chairperson of the AGIPP. The Mon Women's Organization is also member of GEN. Both organizations conduct policy research hence engage in evidence-based advocacy at the national level. The AGIPP focuses on increasing women's participation in the ongoing peace process and ensuring gender issues are considered in the peace building dialogues and outcomes. The AGIPP, for instance, is pushing for the establishment of a gender policy committee to oversee the implementation of the gender quota provision of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement's Framework of Action[108]. The Gender Equality Network (GEN) targets broader gender issues such as female political leadership, gender-based violence, and gender mainstreaming in the media industry. GEN is involved not only in national-level advocacy but also international advocacy for women's rights in Myanmar. The organization presents periodic shadow reports for the consideration of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee).

AGIPP and GEN are involved in the ongoing implementation design of the 2013-2022 National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW). The NSPAW is an umbrella policy document which aims at addressing crucial issues around women rights such as decision-making, institutional mechanism, livelihoods, health, violence against women, the media, economy, and environment. Since the new government took over, the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs has been reorganized and women associations, CSOs, and UN agencies have been included as members of the Committee's working group. GEN and AGIPP

will be co-chairing in the technical working groups on gender mainstreaming, and women, peace, and security, respectively[109]. Through these networks, the Mon women's movement has been able to extend its advocacy for gender equity beyond Mon state.

The top-down drafting and implementation process of the NSPAW has necessitated CSOs to join national networks in order raise for their voice and those of grass-root women in such national policy decisions. When asked about Mon CSOs' engagement with the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), which is in charge of the development and implementation of the NSPAW, a CSO leader acknowledged that that the Mon Women Network is not working with the DSW in Mon state but only engage with the department at the national level[110]. In fact, there hasn't been any discussion about the implementation of the NSPAW within the state: Such discussions have not been initiated by the DSW or the state parliament. Female parliamentarians in Mon State Parliament informed hbs that they used to discuss about the NSPAW at the union-level in the country's capital but that these discussions have not been extended to the state-level.

Although CSOs have found a way to navigate the centralised processes, the top-down approach reveals a lost opportunity for grass-root participatory processes which would be instrumental in engaging communities on gender equity debates and in the process possibly influence gendered perspectives which act as barrier to gender equity.
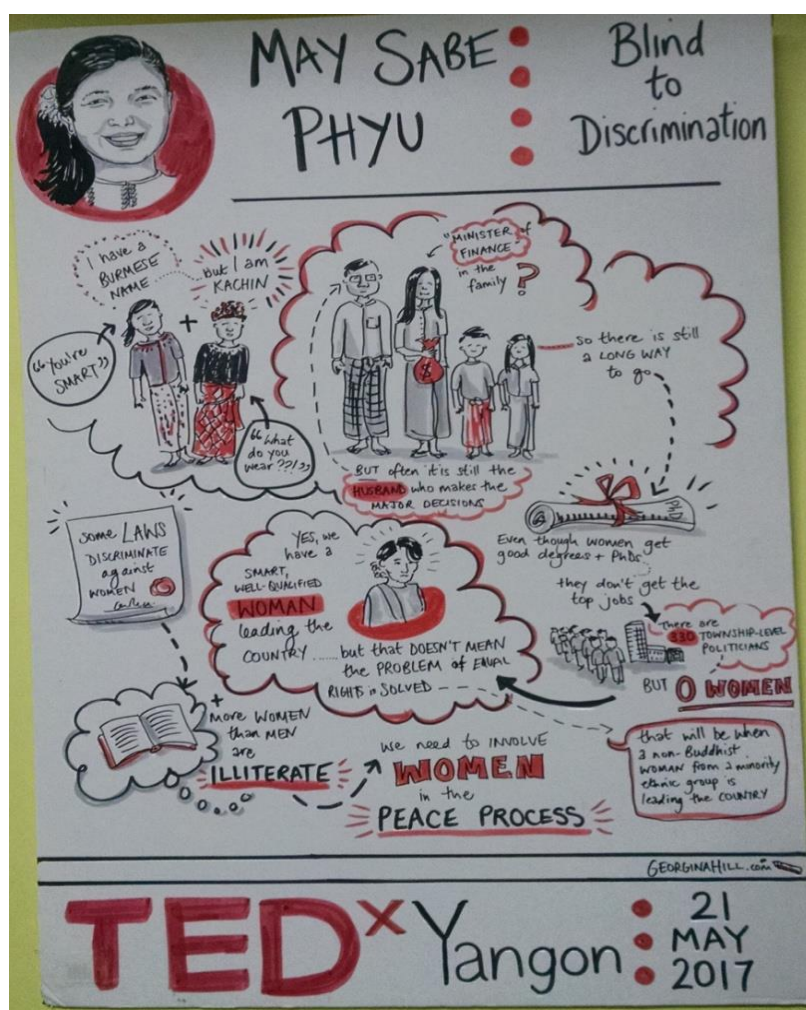

Figure 4:

This is a photo of a poster hanged on the wall of the Gender Equality Network (GEN) offices in Yangon. It graphically explores gendered myths and stereotypes as well as realities and demands for gender equity.

Gender-equity CSOs in Myanmar hope that the most powerful woman in government can be instrumental in championing gender equity.

As Daw Khin Lay Nge, Director, Phan Tee Eain, put it:

"Now we have a very, very powerful woman in government (referring to Aung San Suu Kyi). They (some male government officials) think one woman is enough. This is not meaningful participation for women. I wish she could do more than what she is doing (for gender equity)".

Conclusion

This paper reveals that the role of CSOs in advancing women's political participation and effectiveness in Myanmar merits close examination and acknowledgement. To get women into leadership positions, the Mon women's movement applies a dual-strategy where both the demand and supply for women leaders is stimulated. With regards to demand, gender-equity CSOs work towards breaking cultural and social barriers to women's entry into leadership positions by sensitizing community members on gender issues and implications of gender stereotyping. In addition, the movement also lobbies for gender considerations in male-dominated institutions such as the General Administration Department (DAG), the state parliament, political parties, and the New Mon State Party. With regards to stimulating the supply of women leaders, gender-equity CSOs mentor and motivate women to take on leadership positions. In the last elections, the Mon Women Network went to the lengths of supporting the candidacy of some women who choose to run for competitive administrative or parliamentary positions.

Political participation and political effectiveness are two sides of the gender-equity coin. Both aspects are essential to ensure that inclusion of women contributes to a functional democracy as well as the efficiency of governance. This begs not only the question of numbers but also of the degree to which the numbers translate to policies which address gender disparities. To achieve the latter, the Mon women's movement has pushed for women who are part of, or friends to, the movement to join leadership. The case of the Ta Ra Nar's village administrator demonstrates that this approach can indeed be effective in advancing gender equity. Further, the Mon women's movement has joined women's movements from different states and regions to form what can be referred to as a national women's movement. This strategy has enabled Mon CSOs to enhance their voice in the call for more women in political leadership at the union- or national-level. In addition, this has also allowed them to navigate highly centralized legal and policy processes.

The study also brought to light shortcomings which undermine the impact of the Mon women's movement. The aspiration for a federal system of governance and self-determination, primarily advanced by the New Mon State Party and the Mon political parties, create a backdrop on which the CSOs operate. In addition, CSOs involved in the movement identify as Mon-ethnic organizations. Consciously or unconsciously, this has limited the reach of the movement to Mon-ethnic communities and Mon-ethnic institutions. Political difference between the Mon CSOs and the leading political party, the NLD, has created a tension which has constrained meaningful interactions between the Mon women's movement and female MPs in Mon state, all of whom are NLD members. These interactions are also constrained by party discipline and policies which inhibits the accessibility of NLD MPs to CSOs. Consequently, movement remains largely limited to Mon CSOs and some female members of Mon political parties.

For the Mon Women' movement to have greater impact on women's political participation and effectiveness, the movement needs to expand its circle by looking beyond ethnic and political differences and consider how to engage with 'outsiders'. This could involve creating a gender-equity caucus, modelled to the Indonesian Political Women's Caucus, where CSOs, parliamentarians, members of parliaments, scholars, and the media among other actors, can work together towards the common goal of ensuring meaningful inclusion of women in the country's leadership. For such a model to work, however, the leading political parties need to be willing to engage with CSOs. The NLD, which holds 77% of the total elected parliamentary seats and 88% female-held parliamentary seats country-wide, and all female-held

parliamentary seats in Mon state, particularly needs to allow for such engagement. To this end, Aung San Suu Kyi needs to heed to the voices of women and champion gender-equity. The argument that qualification should be the only factor to consider in electing and appointing leaders ignores the cultural and structural challenges which women face to obtain political leadership experience. In order to overcome these challenges, proactive policy measures are necessary. The government should consider introducing a quota system for political party nominations or earmarking political parties' budget for women political leadership trainings, as in the case of Mexico, or both. The goal should be to enhance both the political participation and effectiveness of women.

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[1] United Nations Gender Theme Group, 2016, p. 153

[2] Marilee Karl, quoted in Colleen Lowe Morna (Ed.) (2004). Ringing up the changes: Gender in Southern African politics. Gender Links. Johannesburg.

[3] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015, p.121,122

[4] United Nations, 1990. Resolutions and decisions of the Economic and Social Council, E/1990/90. New York: United Nations.

[5] Myanmar has more than one hundred ethnic groups, each with unique traditions and culture. Bamar (also known as Burmese) is the most dominant group, with Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan nations being the biggest minority groups. Administratively, Myanmar is divided into seven states and seven regions, namely: Kachin State, Kayah State, Kayin State, Chin State, Sagaing Region, Taninthayi Region, Bago Region, Magway Region, Mandalay Region, Mon State, Rakhine State, Yangon Region, Shan State, Ayeyawady Region, Union Territories (Naga self-administered zone; Danu self-administered zone; Pa-O self adminsted zone; Pa Laung self-administered zone; Kokang self-administered zone; Wa self-administered division within Shan state)

[6] In this paper, union-level will be used interchangeable with national level to mean the highest level of societal organization in Myanmar where different ethnicities or nationalities are brought together under the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

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[8] See the Myanmar government's 1999 and 2007 reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Retrieved from: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm and Opening remarks of H.E. U Maung Wai, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar at the sixty-fourth session of the CESAW committee. 2016, July 7. Retrieved from: http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs22/Myanmar-CEDAW-2016-07-Myanmar-Statement.pdf

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[11] UN Gender Theme Group, 2016, p.145

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[16] Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 12

[17] Phan Tee Eain. 2016, p.7

[18] 'Non-strategic ministries' here refer to those ministries which do not have significant political or military significance. Some ministries under this category are also stereotyped as feminine. In 2014, ministries with 30% or more of women in high-level positions were ministries of: science and technology; social welfare, relief, and resettlement; culture; education; health; labour; rail transport; cooperative; national planning and economic development; and border and national races. Source: Central Statistics Organization. (2014). Percentage of female employed in state organizations and government ministries. Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development. Retrieved from the Myanmar Information System: http://mmsis.gov.mm/statHtml/statHtml.do

[19] Justice Base, 2016, pp.34-35

[20] Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) here refers to all organizations working on public issues, entailing both registered and non-registered local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).

[21] International Crisis Group, 2001, p.3

[22] See: Human Rights Watch. (2010). "I want to help my own people": State control and civil society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis. New York.

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[25] The 2013 Telecommunication Law's section 66 (anti-defamation provision) is vaguely worded and has been abusively applied to discourage criticism, especially towards military officials. See: Human Rights Watch. (2017). Burma: Repeal section 66 (d) of the 2013 Telecommunication Law. Joint statement by 61 Human Rights Organizations. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/29/burma-repeal-section-66d-2013-telecommunications-law
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[31] Personal interview with Mi Cherry Soe, co-founder of the Mon Women Network and spokesperson of the Jeepya Civil Society Development Organization. 2017, June 15

[32] Mon Women's Organization. (2016). Perception of community members on women's participation in politics. (Mon State) p.55

[33] The term 'Mon women's movement' does not imply a movement which is exclusive to Mon-ethnic organizations but rather a movement which can include a broad range of CSOs and individuals based in Mon state.

[34] Personal interview with Mon Seik Rot, Programme Coordinator of the Mon Youth Educator Organization. 2017, June 15

[35] Personal interview with Ven Kumara. Member of the Mon Monk Association. 2017, June 16

[36] Personal interview with Mi Sar Yar Poine, Programme Coordinator of the Mon Women Organization. 2017, June 15

[37] Personal interview with Mi Kun Chan Non, vice-chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization and chairperson of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. 2017, June 17

[38] Röell E., 2015, p.1

[39] Personal interview with Mi Jalon Htaw, administrator of Ta Ra Nar village in Mon state. 2017, June 16

[40] The number of villages and village tracts in Mon states were obtained from MIMU's (Myanmar Information Management Unit) Place Codes Dataset. Retrieved from: http://themimu.info/place-codes

[41] Personal interview with Mi Kun Chan Non, vice-chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization and chairperson of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. 2017, June 17

[42] Personal interview with Mi Kun Chan Non, vice-chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization and chairperson of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. 2017, June 17

[43] The General Administration Department's principle functions are: land administration; excise administration; collection of four kinds of tax; structural settlement of villages and towns; rural development; formation and registration of organizations and associations; conferring honorable titles and medals; and functions on restriction of transferring the immovable properties. For more on the mandate and role of the GAD, please see: Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Matthew Arnold. Administering the state in Myanmar: An overview of the General Administration Department. (2014). MDRi & the Asia Foundation.

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[45] Personal interview with Mi Kun Chan Non, vice-chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization and chairperson of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. 2017, June 17

[46] While the capacity to fulfil the duties of a village administrator is not dependent on gender, it is important to note the broad mandate that this position comes with. According to the 2012 Ward and Village Tract Administration Law, a ward/village administrator needs to fulfil thirty two functions and duties on areas including the maintenance of community security and peace, and law and order.

[47] Personal interview with Mi Kun Chan Non, vice-chairperson of the Mon Women's Organization and chairperson of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. 2017, June 17

[48] Personal interview with Mi Cherry Soe, spokesperson of the Jeepya Civil Society Development Organization. 2017, June 15

[49] Personal interview with Mi Jalon Htaw, administrator of Ta Ra Nar village in Mon state. 2017, June 16

[50] Personal interview with Chan Lawi Marn, co-founder of the Mon Women Network. 2017, June 16

[51] Personal interview with Chan Lawi Marn, co-founder of the Mon Women Network. 2017, June 16

[52] Justice Base, 2016, p.12

[53] Personal interview with Mi Jalon Htaw, administrator of Ta Ra Nar village in Mon state. 2017, June 16

[54] Phan Tee Eain, 2016, p.7

[55] United Nations Development Fund. (2015). Human Development Report: Work for Human Development. P.226

[56] Minoletti, P, 2016, p.8

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