

## In Pursuit Of Peace, A War Against Women

Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi has prioritized resolving ethnic armed conflicts, but has overlooked the role women must play for genuine and lasting peace

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When Myanmar's government announced the dates for the next round of major peace talks since State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi came to power last year as de facto head of a civilian government, discussions focused on which of the ethnic armed groups would be in attendance.

But as military leaders and political representatives discuss which of the country's ethnic armed groups will be willing to show up and which could be barred because of their reluctance to sign the country's so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), one thing is certain: women representatives will be largely excluded from the event.

After almost seven decades, Myanmar's ethnic conflicts are some of the longest-running in the world. For generations soldiers on all sides have made and broken ceasefire deals while countless civilians have been killed, tortured and raped. War has ruined communities and emptied villages as hundreds of thousands have been displaced by the violence.

Throughout it all the voices of women and girls, who in Myanmar account for just over 50% of the population, have been marginalized and ignored by male leaders who purport to be defending their communities and seeking peace and progress.

Myanmar is a signatory to the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Experts, including UN special rapporteur on human rights Yanghee Lee, have recommended a 30% quota for women representatives in the peace process, advice that so far has been roundly ignored.

When Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party (NLD) swept to victory in November 2015, giving the country its first civilian government after decades of military and quasi-military rule, peace was on top of her agenda.

What was clear from the start, though, was that gender equality and recognition of the vital role women play in politics and peace was not.

Only 15% of candidates fielded by the NLD in the 2015 elections were female. Speaking shortly after the NLD's election victory, party spokesman and close Suu Kyi advisor U Win Htein said this was because "most women are not naturally confident in political situations."

When the non-elected bloc of military appointees is counted, barely 10% of Myanmar's parliamentarians are women – one of the lowest such percentages in the region.

A similar gender imbalance meant just 14% of official participants were women at last August's Union Peace Conference, according to analysis by the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP), an umbrella group of women's rights organizations.

The alliance's findings showed that 20% of ethnic armed group delegates were women (though the figure varied significantly across the different groups), but the government cohort included a mere seven women, or 9%, of its 75 official delegates.

The largely symbolic event, dubbed the 21st Century Panglong after the historic peace agreement struck in 1947 between Suu Kyi's national founder father, Aung San, and key ethnic minority leaders, was attended by then-UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon, who also mentioned the need for greater women's participation in a speech to attendees.

The event made no major advances in ending the country's many armed conflicts.

Now, with the second conference set to begin on May 24, there is no indication that there will be a significantly larger number of women involved. International conventions recognize the importance of women's participation in peace negotiations in achieving long term solutions.

While peace talks in Myanmar continue to focus on interactions between armed groups, women are more likely to experience the effects of conflict in or around their home villages. Along with children, they account for most of those living in internally displaced peoples (IDP) camps. Military impunity for acts of sexual violence in conflict remains an ongoing concern.

According to Nang Phyu Phyu Lin, AGIPP's ex-chairwoman, the alliance's representatives will be allowed to attend only as observers and will not be allowed to present at the conference. While organizations like AGIPP say they have worked behind the scenes to meet ministers, army chiefs and ethnic armed group leaders to promote their cause, a number of barriers remain to their official participation.

Gender equality advocates say traditional attitudes in Myanmar often lead to the exclusion of women from public roles of responsibility and insist that their place is "in the background." In terms of the peace process, the muted role is known as "tea-break advocacy", where women resort to lobbying male delegates while serving them tea during breaks in the official talks.

It is an attitude that permeates at the highest levels. Some have suggested Suu Kyi's failure to include a larger number of women in the peace process is a case of "picking her battles" and that she has other priorities than to challenge the commonly held view by military leaders that the talks should be conducted mainly between armed actors.

It appears that Suu Kyi is also among those who believe women – other than, presumably, herself – best serve by remaining in the background.

On March 8, while giving a talk to women entrepreneurs on International Women's Day, Suu Kyi raised the issue of women's role in the peace process, insisting that as women accounted for 50% of the population they should also bear 50% of the responsibility for achieving peace.

However, she stressed this did not mean equal representation at the peace talks table and suggested women could do their bit by paying taxes and raising "peace-loving" children.

The comments riled many gender equality campaigners. "I think she is thinking that the majority of women are like her mother – supporting politicians from behind the scenes," said May Sabe Phyu, director of the Gender Equality Network (GEN) and a recipient of the US State Department's International Women of Courage award in 2015.

Instead, seats at the peace table are reserved mainly for politicians and soldiers. Since women are a minority in politics and hold virtually no powerful military positions, the process is being steered mostly by men with guns, which arguably hardly bodes well for a lasting end

to conflict.

“Usually men on both sides are more interested in power and arguing and disagreeing over territories,” said May Sabe Phyu. “But for women, who are dealing with day to day problems in their communities, the practical things are more important than arguing over territory. To be able to start really effective discussions about issues on the ground, women’s voices are very much needed.”

Of course, it is not just up to Suu Kyi’s civilian-led government, but to the autonomous Myanmar military, ethnic armed groups, and the small number of other represented parties to support women’s participation. But as long as the government fails to set an example of gender equality in the process there is little to spur others on, critics say.

The recent ouster of former Karen National Union vice-chairwoman Naw Zipporah Sein has removed the only high-profile woman representative from the ethnic representative groups at the peace table.

In a recent interview with The Irrawaddy, a local news outlet, she described the different experiences of men and women in war and how she believed that impacted on their approaches to peace.

“If men die in battle, it is over. If they don’t die, they win. For them, it sounds simple, but for women the suffering remains like a wound. It is traumatic,” she said, referring particularly to women who suffer from sexual violence in conflict.

May Sabe Phyu echoes that view, pointing to the fact that even when deals are signed on paper during peace negotiations they are often just “promises in the air – nobody closely monitors or follows up on [their enactment].”

Women who have to live within the day-to-day realities of conflict are more likely to keep pushing for practical changes on the ground, she said.

Suu Kyi has made it clear that “peace” – or her vision of it – is her government’s main goal. Critics say that’s meant everything from the economy to human rights concerns have been overlooked as a result.

<http://www.atimes.com/article/pursuit-peace-war-women/>

Yet since her NLD government's rise to power the country has experienced some of the worst fighting in years. As the next round of her peace initiative opens, genuine and lasting peace seems a long way off, as does gender equality.