

Briefing Note on Why Political Parties in Myanmar Should Try to Increase the Number of Women Political Participation and How They Can Do This



In 1995 women were only 10% of the world's parliamentarians. In that year, the UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, and described how women's political underrepresentation is a problem for democracy – i.e. despite being half the population women were only a small proportion of MPs. Further, it was highlighted that raising women's participation can help promote economic and human development, through paying more attention to women's and girls' specific needs and values, and incorporating women's experience, knowledge and perspectives into policy-making.

Since the 1995 conference there have been concerted efforts in many countries around the world to raise women's political participation, and today women are 24% of the world's parliamentarians. Whereas, in Myanmar women are currently only around 10% of MPs at both Union and State/Region levels. Within ASEAN, only Brunei (9%) ranks lower than Myanmar, and some countries are far ahead, e.g. Timor-Leste (38%), Philippines (28%) and Laos (28%).

There are multiple reasons for women's low parliamentary representation in Myanmar, including:

- Cultural norms and biases that lead most citizens to prefer male political leaders, for females to have less confidence and ambition to try and become parliamentarians, and for it to be harder for women to travel to remote areas and/or overnight.
- The difficulty of balancing family and household responsibilities that women are typically expected to perform with participating in public life.
- Military representation in parliament – women are 13% of elected MPs but only 1% of military-appointed MPs.

Another crucial reason for women's low parliamentary representation in Myanmar is the actions of political parties themselves. Political parties remain highly male-dominated, with key positions at central and Township levels of parties overwhelmingly filled by men. For example, of nine prominent Myanmar political parties recently studied by EMREF, seven had less than 20% female representation on their Central Executive Committees, and very few women are found in the most senior positions on these committees (e.g. chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary). Women's level of representation on Township Committees is also very low, especially in senior positions. And, women were less than 15% of the candidates nominated by all parties in the 2015 election. There is a fairly widespread awareness within political parties in Myanmar that

they should do more to promote women's political participation. We would like to make the following recommendations for how to do this:

- **Recommendation 1: Build party organisation and establish rules.** A key priority for parties to improve gender equality is to establish clear rules on how people get selected to key party positions, and clearly communicate these rules to all party members. Having clear rules will encourage transparency, accountability and attract more potential candidates to self-nominate or run for elected positions. Provide training to party officials about meritocratic and professional recruitment processes.
- **Recommendation 2: Expand and diversify the pool of candidates from the bottom-up.** Parties need to move away from relying on informal networks of identifying parliamentary candidates through family or community networks, and instead develop formal ways to recruit, nominate and select their parliamentary candidates. Such a process should be bottom-up – i.e. led Township-level party organisations, working with ward/village level party organisations where these are present. The process should be open, democratic, and follow clear rules.
- **Recommendation 3: Establish a party quota or targets for women candidates.** Parties should adopt quotas/targets for a minimum level of women's representation on i) key party bodies (e.g. Central Executive Committee, Central Committee, Township Executive Committee); ii) as parliamentary candidates. A common minimum level for quotas/targets for women is 30%, and for example the Chin National League for Democracy has announced that it will have a target of 30% women candidates in the 2020 election.
- **Recommendation 4: Provide financial support to women candidates.** Financial dependency on husbands is one barrier to women joining politics in Myanmar. Therefore, parties can help to reduce the financial burden by providing a small subsidy for women to self-nominate as candidates. Many Myanmar political parties have limited financial resources, and so international donors should consider funding such initiatives.
- **Recommendation 5: Improve security and provide women candidates a party aide during campaign in the rural area.** Being politically active and running campaigns is difficult, time consuming and potentially dangerous. Candidate

harassment is a problem and there are still cultural norms that can act as a barrier to women travelling at night. Given Myanmar's violent past, there is a need to establish new norm and improve security for candidates, especially for women. One way to address the security of candidates is for the parties to establish a norm of providing candidates, especially women, a party aide to accompany the candidate when they travel to campaign.

- • **Recommendation 6: Provide training to potential women candidates on practical campaign and parliamentary skills.** General trainings on women's empowerment to potential candidates do not seem to have had much impact in raising the number of women candidates and MPs in Myanmar. Instead, it is more useful if trainings to potential candidates focus on improving practical campaign skills, such as: understanding the priorities of voters in their constituencies, and tailoring campaign messages accordingly; campaign logistics; improving knowledge of key policy issues; and how to 'get out the vote'. Similarly, women candidates can improve their confidence, and gain respect from voters and colleagues, if they can demonstrate knowledge of parliamentary skills such as scrutinising

laws and policies, or analysing budgets.

- **Recommendation 7: Provide training classes and establish best practices for candidates' online activity.** While all candidates face harassment, women are more likely to face personal accusations, degrading talk and criticism about family members and their personal lives on social network platforms. Parties should consider providing training classes for ethnic and religious minority and women candidates to develop their professional online image and establish best practices to respond to disinformation, online hate and harassment during campaigns.
- **Recommendation 8: Target party resources towards constituencies that the party has a good chance of winning.** In the 2010 and 2015 elections many small parties with limited financial and staffing resources ran candidates in a large number of constituencies, most of which they had very little or no chance of winning. These parties would stand a better chance of winning more seats if first identified the constituencies in which they have the most chance of winning, and then targeted their resources towards these constituencies. As part of this process, these parties should nominate women candidates to some of their high priority constituencies.

N.b. The information in this brief is taken from a working paper recently published by EMReF, based on in-depth interviews with nine major Myanmar political parties.

You can find the paper at https://www.emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/party_building_and_candidate_selection_intraparty_politics_and_promoting_gender_equality_in_myanmar_emref.pdf