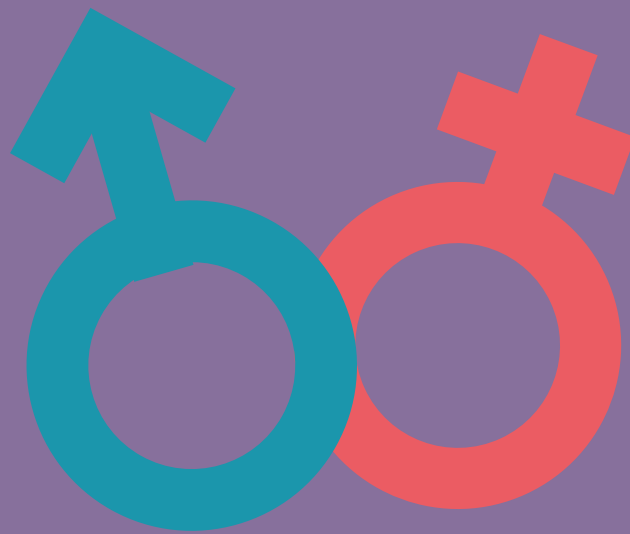


# Gender and Political Participation in Myanmar



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# Abbreviations Used in This Report

10 HHs	=	10 household heads
100 HHs	=	100 household heads
ANP	=	Arakan National Party
CBO	=	Community-Based Organisation
CC	=	Central Committee
CEC	=	Central Executive Committee
CNLD	=	Chin National League for Democracy
EAOs	=	Ethnic Armed Organisations
EMReF	=	Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation
FGD	=	Focus Group Discussions
GoM	=	Government of Myanmar
KSDP	=	Kachin State Democracy Party
LNDP	=	Lisu National Development Party
MNP	=	Mon National Party
MSDP	=	Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, 2018-30
NCDDP	=	National Community Driven Development Project
NLD	=	National League for Democracy
PNO	=	Pa-O National Organisation
SAZ	=	Self-Administered Zone
SNLD	=	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
TEC	=	Township Executive Committee
TNP	=	Ta'Ang National Party
USDP	=	Union Solidarity and Development Party
W/VTAs	=	Ward/Village Tract Administrators

## 1. Introduction

This synthesis report presents key findings from a three-year research project conducted by Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF), examining gender and political participation in Myanmar.<sup>a</sup> Specifically, this synthesis report covers:

- Why gender equality in political participation matters (Section 2)
- Women's and men's level of participation in politics (Section 3)
- Factors that shape women's and men's opportunities to participate in politics (Section 4)
- The role of political parties and other governance institutions in promoting or limiting gender equality in political participation (Section 5)
- The costs and benefits of running for election and being a leader. (Section 6)
- Conclusions (Section 7)
- Key recommendations for: Myanmar political parties; the Government of Myanmar; international donors, Myanmar civil society organisations, and international development organisations (Section 8)

The information in this report is primarily taken from three EMReF working papers. Working Paper 1 is an in-depth study of how nine major political parties in Myanmar are structured, how they recruit parliamentary candidates, and the consequences this has for the gender equality of political participation in Myanmar. Working Paper 1 also looked at the experiences of women and men as candidates and as MPs.<sup>1</sup> Working Paper 2 examines the gender equality of participation in politics at village tract, ward, and village levels.<sup>2</sup> Working Paper 3 will be published in December 2020, and will present evidence from a large-scale survey on gender differences in political attitudes and behaviour.<sup>3</sup> These working papers are available to download from the EMReF website: <https://www.emref.org/en/publications-reports>

Working Paper 1 is based on a total of 72 interviews conducted in late 2018-early 2019 with i) candidates in Myanmar's 2015 parliamentary elections; and ii) party officials in key decision-making positions – such as Central Executive Committee members or Township Chairpersons. The nine parties included in this study include the six parties that won the most in parliamentary seats in the 2015 election,<sup>b</sup> and the most electorally successful parties representing the Kachin, Lisu and Mon ethnic groups.<sup>c</sup> Working Paper 2 is based on a total of 98 interviews conducted in late 2019 in Ayeyarwady Region, Mandalay Region, Mon State and southern Shan State, with ward/village tract administrators (W/VTAs), village leaders, 100 household heads (100 HHs), 10 household heads (10 HHs), ward/village elders, and other community leaders; and 99 focus group discussions (FGDs) with local residents. Working Paper 3 will present evidence from a survey of over 2800 people, also conducted in late 2019 in Ayeyarwady Region, Mandalay Region, Mon State and southern Shan State.

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<sup>a</sup> This report was compiled by Paul Minoletti, with contributions from Aye Lei Tun, Elin Bjarnegård, Michelle Dion, Pausa La Ring, Netina Tan, and Meredith Weiss. The information in this report is primarily drawn from a series of working papers published by EMReF and authored by: Aye Lei Tun, Elin Bjarnegård, Khin Myo Wai, Paul Minoletti, Pausa La Ring, Guillem Riambau and Netina Tan. EMReF and the authors would like to give our thanks to International Development Research Centre for funding all of these papers, and the research project that they came from.

<sup>b</sup> I.e. the National League for Democracy (NLD), Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Arakan National Party (ANP), Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), Ta'Ang National Party (TNP), and Pa-O National Organisation (PNO)

<sup>c</sup> I.e. the Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP), Lisu National Development Party (LNDP), and Mon National Party (MNP).

## 2. Why gender equality in political participation matters

It is now 25 years since the UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing (1995). This meeting of global leaders spurred an unprecedented push for gender equality in a number of areas. Specifically, the conference highlighted women's persistent political underrepresentation as a democratic problem as well as a hurdle for economic and human development. Since this conference, many countries have made concerted efforts to increase the number of women in politics, and for example, the percentage of the world's parliamentarians that are women has more than doubled, from 11% in 1995 to 25% in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Participating in public life is an aspect of peoples' agency, and therefore the ability (or inability) to participate in politics and governance can directly affect their well-being.<sup>5</sup> The benefit that participation has on participants' well-being depends heavily on the quality of participation – if participants have the opportunity to actively contribute to discussions and genuinely influence decision-making then their participation is likely to be welfare enhancing, but if 'participation' simply entails attending meetings with no opportunity to influence decisions this is much less likely to be the case. Indeed, if people are required to give up their time for activities such as attending meetings, but are unable to influence the decisions being made, 'participation' may even reduce their welfare.

Research from many countries shows that men and women typically have different priorities for policies and budgeting.<sup>6</sup> New research on Myanmar shows that it is also the case here.<sup>7</sup> Female leaders tend to be more responsive than men leaders to the preferences and needs of women.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, improving the gender equality of participation in governance bodies should typically result in policy-making decisions becoming more equitable, as these governance bodies become less biased towards the needs and preferences of male citizens. One example of this is that among the MPs and candidates interviewed for our study, women were more likely than men to mention gender-based violence and gender equality as issues that ought to be debated more in parliament.<sup>9</sup>

Studies from South Asia have found that making participation in local governance bodies more gender equal can result in these bodies becoming more efficient and effective. For example, village councils in India that are led by women typically provide more public goods, of equal quality, at a lower price than village councils that are led by men.<sup>10</sup> Further, community forestry groups in India and Nepal that have more gender equal participation have increased compliance with the rules created by these groups, and a higher rate of growth of forest cover.<sup>11</sup>

The value of making political participation in Myanmar more gender equal has been recognised in numerous Government of Myanmar (GoM) policies, including the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, 2018-30 (MSDP), which is described by Aung San Suu Kyi as, "...the expression of our national development vision."<sup>12</sup> Strategy 1.5 of the MSDP is to, 'Increase the ability of all people to engage with the government', and specific targets to measure progress in meeting this aspiration include: i) the proportion of seats held by women in union and state/region parliaments; the percentage of candidates for union and state region parliaments that are women; and the percentage of W/VTAs that are women.<sup>13</sup> This EMReF synthesis report tries to explain why there is currently so much gender inequality in political participation in Myanmar, and what can be done to change that, including making progress towards these MSDP targets.

This report primarily focuses on the gender equality of political participation in Myanmar. However, there are various other personal characteristics that can affect people's opportunities to participate in politics, such as age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion and geographical location. These differences are referred to at some places in this report, and in Working Papers 1-3.

### 3. Women's and men's level of participation in Myanmar politics

#### 3a) Overview of Political Bodies and Actors in Myanmar

Politics is a way of changing people's lives, and democracy is a way of making fair decisions about people's lives. As Aung San made clear, politics is not just government activities, and should not only be something performed by elites: "Politics means your everyday life ... It is how you eat, sleep, work and live, with which politics is concerned."<sup>14</sup> In a democracy, political decisions concern any issue that citizens think is of importance to their lives, and participation of all groups and types of citizens should be promoted to make sure that these decisions by political leaders and political bodies are responsive to citizens' needs and preferences. Political participation includes not just participation in parliaments and party politics, but also civil society activities, community-based organising, participation in meetings, joining demonstrations, voting in elections, and contacting political leaders about issues of interest. Myanmar's Union or National Parliament is collectively referred to as the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, and is comprised of the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house) and the Amyotha Hluttaw (upper house). The Pyithu Hluttaw is designed to have 330 MPs that are elected by the people and 110 MPs that are appointed by the military. The Amyotha Hluttaw has 168 elected MPs and 56 MPs that are appointed by the military. Myanmar's State/Region Hluttaws vary dramatically in size, but all also reserve 25% (or slightly more) of seats for military appointees.

Myanmar's subnational administrative structure is comprised of 14 states/regions, 74 districts, 330 townships, and 16,753 wards (urban) and village tracts (rural).<sup>15</sup> Most village tracts are comprised of more than one village, and there are a total of 63,938 villages.<sup>16</sup> All district level officials are unelected, as are most township level officials, including the most powerful leaders. Whereas, the community-level positions of W/VTA, 100 HH and 10 HH are all elected. Public meetings of some kind were described as occurring in all of the wards and villages covered in our study. In some wards and villages such meetings are only held for organising religious and social occasions (e.g. celebrations for specific religious days, novitiation ceremonies, and/or funerals); whereas in other villages and wards community meetings are also held to discuss local development and service delivery issues.

Despite some limited moves towards decentralisation over the last decade, formal legal, policy-making and budgetary powers in Myanmar remain highly centralised at the union level.<sup>17</sup> However, in practice, decision making at ward/village tract and village level has a large impact on citizens' lives. W/VTAs and 100 HHs are the main elected leaders at community level in the GoM political and administrative system. W/VTAs and 100 HHs act as key interlocutors between ordinary people and higher levels of the state; are actively involved in the provision of local security, basic administration and other public services; and are typically highly trusted by local residents. Much public-service provision in Myanmar is organised and funded either entirely at local levels by local community organisations acting independently from the state, or by these organisations working in conjunction with the state village/village tract/ward and/or township levels. Thus, although the vast majority of GoM's budget is centrally controlled, much of the de facto revenue collection and service delivery is decided at local levels – research suggests that households in Myanmar may contribute twice as much money to non-governmental and semi-governmental service provision, than they pay in formal taxation to GoM.<sup>18</sup> In addition to being a vital political and administrative unit for organising government and non-governmental service provision, wards and villages are also the locus of many social and religious activities, and how these activities are organised has a large impact on residents' lives.

Myanmar's 2008 Constitution guarantees a considerable political role for the Tatmadaw, including: preserving at least 25% of seats in Myanmar's parliaments for military appointees;

the ministers of Home Affairs, Defence, and Border Affairs being appointed by the Tatmadaw rather than by the President; and the Tatmadaw having veto power over constitutional change. As well as its role in politics and as a security actor, the Tatmadaw also has a considerable informal role in Myanmar's economic governance.<sup>19</sup> In some parts of Myanmar, ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) play significant roles as service providers and governance actors, providing services such as education, health, justice, security, mining and forestry management, land registration, and agricultural promotion.<sup>20</sup> Militias that are aligned with the Tatmadaw can also play a significant role as governance actors, although the scope of their activities is often narrower than that of EAOs. The presence of Tatmadaw units, EAOs and/or militias can affect local governance arrangements.

International aid to Myanmar is small relative to GoM's own revenues, or to citizens' contributions to their local communities' own provision of goods and services.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, international financial institutions, UN agencies, and international and national NGOs also have roles as political actors in Myanmar.

### **3b) Women's and men's statistical representation in Myanmar politics**

Myanmar's 2015 elections were generally peaceful, and less affected by vote-rigging and corruption than the 2010 elections. However, 500,000 Muslims (most of whom were Rohingya Muslims living in northern Rakhine state) were denied their previous right to vote, and around 500,000 other voters (largely from ethnic minority areas) were not able to vote due to security reasons or electoral authorities not being able to check voter lists.<sup>22</sup> Thus, although the election was largely credible and open in most of the country, the opportunity to vote was not universal, and this is set to also be the case in the 2020 elections.

The 2015 elections resulted in women becoming 10.5% of MPs in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, up from 4.9% at the end of the previous parliament, and only 2.7% immediately after the 2010 general election in 2010.<sup>23</sup> Across all of the State/Region Hluttaws women became 9.7% of MPs, up from less than 3% in the previous parliament.<sup>24</sup> There is considerable variation between different states/regions in the level of women's parliamentary representation – for example, in the Mon State Hluttaw women are nearly 20% of MPs, but in the Chin State, Kayah State and Rakhine State Hluttaws there are no women MPs at all.<sup>25</sup> As a result of the 2017 and 2018 by-elections women's representation in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw fell to 9.9% of MPs (9.7% in the Pyithu Hluttaw and 10.3% in the Amyotha Hluttaw).<sup>26</sup>

Although barred by the constitution from becoming President, Aung San Suu Kyi operates as the de facto leader of the elected government – the first woman to hold such a powerful position. However, Aung San Suu Kyi is the only female cabinet member at national level, and 13 out of 14 of Myanmar's current state/region Chief Ministers are male.

The proportion of women in Myanmar's 2016-21 parliaments is more than twice as high than at any time in the past.<sup>27</sup> However, it is still extremely low by international standards – as of 25th September 2020, the IPU's global database indicates that Myanmar ranks 167 out of 191 countries for the level of women's representation in the national lower house.<sup>28</sup> Across Asia, the average proportion of women MPs in the national lower house is 20.1%, i.e. double the level in Myanmar.<sup>29</sup> Within ASEAN, only Brunei (9.1%) ranks lower than Myanmar, and some countries are far ahead, e.g. Timor-Leste (40.0%), Philippines (29.5%) and Laos (27.5%).<sup>30</sup>

The average proportion of candidates that were women across all parties and independents in the 2015 election was around 13%.<sup>31</sup> Five of the parties studied in Working Paper 1 had above average proportions of female candidates (MNP, LNDP, SNLD, NLD and KSDP), while



four of the parties (TNP, USDP, ANP and PNO) were below average. Women's participation as both total candidates and elected MPs was strikingly low in ANP, PNO and USDP. Preliminary data for the 2020 elections, indicate that the proportion of total candidates that are women has increased slightly, to 15.6%.<sup>32</sup> Preliminary data indicate that parties such as SNLD (29%) and NLD (19%) continue to have a higher than average percentage of women MPs; while USDP (10%) and PNO (14%) continue to be below average.<sup>33</sup>

Women are under-represented in key decision-making structures within Myanmar's political parties, such as the Central Executive Committee (CEC), Central Committee (CC) and Township Executive Committees (TECs). For example, across the nine parties studied in Working Paper 1, only two parties had over 20% women as CEC members (KSDP and MNP), while two parties had only 5% women on their CEC (ANP and TNP). In all of the parties covered in this paper, the majority of senior CEC positions (e.g. chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer) are held by men, and in two parties all of the senior CEC positions are held by men (PNO and USDP). Further, previous research found that only three of the 91 parties that competed in the 2015 election had a woman in any of the most senior positions within the party (e.g. leader, deputy-leader, or chairperson), and only one of these parties won any parliamentary seats in that election – the NLD, which has Aung San Suu Kyi as chairperson.<sup>34</sup>

The 2012 Ward/Village Tract Administration Law introduced elections for the position of W/VTA. 100 HHs and 10 HHs are also elected. Despite a gradual increase in the number of female W/VTAs since elections were first held for this position in 2012, women are still less than 1% of W/VTAs across Myanmar.<sup>35</sup> No data has been published on the proportion of women and men in the position of 100 HH and 10 HH. However, impressionistic evidence from our fieldwork indicates that a large majority of 100 HHs are men. Men also appear to be the majority of 10 HHs, although women are much more frequently found in this position than as W/VTAs or 100 HHs. Comprehensive data is not available on the proportions of ward/village elders and community-based organisation (CBO) leaders that are female and male. However, impressionistic evidence suggests that there are very few female elders, but quite large numbers of female CBO leaders. Committees at local level tend to be male dominated,<sup>36</sup> although an exception to this are the committees created for the National Community Driven Development Project (NCDDP), which have a quota mandating 50:50 female:male representation.

In previous surveys on Myanmar, men are somewhat more likely than women to report attending community meetings.<sup>37</sup> Whereas, in our FGD and interview data it was typically suggested that more women than men attend public meetings at ward/village level. More consistently, both survey data and our interview and FGD data find that people aged 18-34 are less likely than people aged 35 and above to attend local meetings.<sup>38</sup> Our interview and FGD data indicates that young women are particularly likely to be excluded from participation in local decision making.

The Tatmadaw has appointed only a very small number of women as MPs, and the top positions within the Tatmadaw are all occupied by men. A small number of women have occupied senior roles in certain EAOs, but senior positions in EAOs and militias also tend to be very male dominated.

### **3c) Women's and men's active participation in Myanmar politics**

In our survey, women reported statistically significantly lower levels of political engagement than men on almost all of our measures, e.g. interest in politics; how often they discuss politics with friends; likelihood to be political party members; likelihood to have contacted local leaders in the last year; and frequency of following news about politics. Men are around twice

as likely as women to report being members of a political party, and to say that they are very interested in politics. The one form of political engagement that does not have a large gender gap is voting – although women are slightly less likely than men to report having voted in the 2015 elections, the gender gap is small and is not statistically significant.

A number of our local interviewees and FGDs said that women tend to speak less than men in public meetings. None of these interviewees or FGDs said that women consistently talk more than men in meetings, although two interviewees said that women might speak more than men for certain topics, such as microfinance and informal moneylenders, and certain social and religious ceremonies. Participants in FGDs with women were more likely than participants in FGDs with men to describe having a lack of agency in meetings, for example saying that:

“In all meetings [in our ward], most of the attendants just simply sit and listen and then they go back home.” (FGD with women aged 35 and above, southern Shan State)

Although large numbers of women attend ward, village tract and village level meetings, they are less likely than men attendees to participate actively in discussions. Leadership positions in most governance bodies at this level are dominated by men. Overall, although some women are able to participate actively in local decision making, women are disproportionately likely to experience the ‘downsides’ of participation (e.g. sacrificing their time to attend meetings), without experiencing the ‘upsides’ (e.g. being able to influence decision making and feeling empowered). This dynamic was summarised by one of our FGD participants:

“During meetings, more women than men attend, but women rarely participate in discussion, only men do. Men have more status and respect than women.” (FGD with men aged 35 and above, Mandalay Region)

Data has not yet been collected on whether the female MPs elected in 2015 have participated more or less actively in parliamentary debate and decision making than their male counterparts. However, evidence from the 2011-16 parliament indicates that at that time women were slightly more likely than their male counterparts to ask ‘starred’ questions in parliament.<sup>39</sup> How actively female and male MPs participate in parliamentary decision making in Myanmar, and what issues these female and male MPs prioritise, are important avenues for future research.

## 4. Factors that shape women's and men's opportunities to participate in Myanmar politics

### 4a) Age, education, labour force participation, ethnicity, religion, occupational background, rural-urban differences

As noted above, young adults are more likely than older people to be excluded from decision making in Myanmar. The median age of all Pyidaungsu Hluttaw MPs elected in 2015 was 55 years, with minimal gender difference in this.<sup>40</sup> The median age for local leaders interviewed in our study was fairly similar – 49 years for females and 52 years for males. Therefore, people aged over 55 and over make up more than half of MPs, and people aged 50 and over probably make up around half of local leaders. This compares to people over 50 making up less than 30% of the general population that are old enough to vote (i.e. those that have completed 18 years of age or more).<sup>41</sup> There are also minimum age requirements for certain leadership positions, and for example: Union ministers must have attained at least 40 years of age, Amyotha Hluttaw MPs at least 30 years of age, and Pyithu Hluttaw MPs and W/VTAs at least 25 years of age.<sup>42</sup>

According to the parliamentary candidates and party officials interviewed for our study, their parties are more likely to want their candidates to be well-educated than to have any other characteristic. In Myanmar's general population, women are more likely than men to hold an undergraduate degree, master's degree, or a PhD.<sup>43</sup> Among Myanmar's MPs, women are also disproportionately likely to be highly educated, and for example: 23% of women but only 9% of men elected to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw in 2015 hold postgraduate degrees; and 11% of women but only 4% of men elected to the State/Region Hluttaws in the same year hold postgraduate degrees.<sup>44</sup> Given that in Myanmar's general population women are more likely than men to be highly educated, educational attainment should not pose a barrier to women's participation in parliamentary politics. However, women in Myanmar, and especially older women, are more likely than men to have received little or no education<sup>45</sup> – this can be a barrier to them becoming leaders at local levels, and to actively participate in community meetings.

Only around 10% of women and less than 5% of men elected to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw in 2015 were not active members of the labour force immediately prior to running for election.<sup>46</sup> Somewhat similarly, among the local leaders interviewed for this study, 88% were active in the labour force in addition to performing their local leadership role. Both parliamentarians and local leaders have a considerably higher level of labour force participation than Myanmar's general population, suggesting that it is difficult for those that do not perform paid work to become leaders. This is a barrier to women's political participation – 77% of working-age men but only 54% of working-age women are active members of the labour force.<sup>47</sup>

The sectors of employment that MPs are drawn from are not very representative of the population as a whole, and for example only around 15% of male MPs and 5% of female MPs come from an agricultural background, compared to 50% of women and 53% of men in Myanmar's labour force.<sup>48</sup> Whereas, the local leaders interviewed for this study had occupational backgrounds that were much more representative of the general population, with 54% employed in agriculture, and many of the others working in other common sectors of employment such as wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food services, and manufacturing.

Our interview data suggests that public participation in local decision making tends to be

more frequent and meaningful in rural than urban areas. For example, 100 HHs in rural areas are more likely than 100 HHs in urban areas to say that holding public meetings was one of the primary ways in which they made decisions for the community. Similarly, nationwide surveys conducted in 2014 and 2016 found that rural residents were more likely than urban residents to report that they sometimes attend ward/village-tract/community level meetings.<sup>49</sup>

We do not have exact data on the ethnic composition of MPs or for Myanmar's general population, but the proportion of MPs elected in 2015 that are Bamar and non-Bamar appears to roughly correspond to the proportion of the population that is commonly thought to be from Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic groups – i.e. Bamar being around 60-65%. Further, the three ethnic minority groups that probably have a larger population than any others account for the largest shares of non-Bamar MPs, e.g. Shan (6.5% of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw MPs), Rakhine (5.7%), Kayin (4.7%). In terms of religious groups, the Christian minority are overrepresented among the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw MPs, and the share of MPs that are Buddhist roughly corresponds to the share of the general population – i.e. close to 90%. Whereas, there are zero Muslim MPs in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw or any of the State/Region Hluttaws, despite Muslims making up more than 4% of Myanmar's population.<sup>50</sup> Further, as noted in Section 3b, in the 2015 elections around 500,000 Muslims were denied their previous right to vote. In the 2015 elections the NLD and other major parties had no Muslim candidates, but for 2020 the NLD has two Muslim candidates running in winnable seats,<sup>51</sup> so we may see a return of Muslim MPs to Myanmar's parliaments for 2021-26. However, parliamentary representation of Muslims is likely to continue to be considerably below their share of the national population.

It is important to note that numerical representation in parliamentary bodies does not automatically entail 'substantive representation', i.e. whether policy making and the style of governance is responsive to the needs and preferences of different groups of people.<sup>d</sup> For example, although ethnic Bamar are not overrepresented among MPs, many ethnic minority leaders feel that decision-making within the top-down hierarchical governing party (NLD) is controlled by a small Bamar elite that pays insufficient attention to ethnic minority interests.<sup>52</sup> One example of how this can affect legislation can perhaps be seen in the 2018 amendment to the Virgin, Fallow and Vacant Land Law, which facilitates land grabbing from farmers throughout Myanmar, but tends to have particularly negative effects on many ethnic minority communities.<sup>53</sup> Further, the Tatmadaw continues to wield significant influence over policy-making and implementation in Myanmar, and is widely seen to focus on Buddhist and Bamar interests.<sup>54</sup>

#### **4b) Family connection to politics**

Around 60% of the party officials and around 40% of the parliamentary candidates interviewed for this study have at least one family member that had been involved in politics before they chose to enter politics. Female parliamentary candidates and party officials were more likely than their male counterparts to have a family member that had been involved in politics. Having a father that had previously been involved in politics seems to have a strong effect on women's likelihood to become involved in party and parliamentary politics. An extreme example of this in the Myanmar context is Aung San Suu Kyi; it is extremely unlikely that she would have reached her eminent position in Myanmar politics if she were not the daughter of Myanmar independence hero Aung San.<sup>55</sup> The vast majority of women that have become national presidents/prime ministers or led democratic uprisings in south, south-east and east Asia have been the daughters, wives or sisters of prominent male political leaders that have been assassinated, executed, or imprisoned by political opponents. This phenomenon has occurred in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.<sup>56</sup> Family members' involvement in community activities

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<sup>d</sup> For example, different ethnic and religious groups, young and old, women and men, rural and urban, rich and poor.

also seems to inspire and facilitate people to participate in leadership at community levels, and female local leaders are much more likely than male local leaders to say that their family member(s) had inspired them to engage in community affairs.

#### **4c) Background in politics or public life**

70 of the 72 parliamentary candidates and party officials interviewed for this study had some form of experience in politics or public life prior to their current position, e.g. as members of political parties, candidates in previous elections, participants in major protest movements, members of ethnic armed organisations, members of social or religious groups, and/or as teachers. The likelihood of our local leader interviewees having a background in community leadership varied considerably according to their position. Only 1 out of 23 W/VTAs did not have prior experience in community leadership positions, whereas for more than half of 10 HHs and other community leaders, this was their first community leadership position.<sup>57</sup>

#### **4d) Cultural and social norms and attitudes**

There is quite a large body of existing research showing the importance of cultural norms and biases in limiting women's opportunities to participate in politics in Myanmar, highlighting aspects such as:

- Most people in Myanmar prefer male to female political leaders.
- Women have less confidence than men to try to become political leaders.
- Women report lower levels of interest than men in politics, and lower levels of political engagement.
- Cultural norms make it harder for women to travel to remote areas and/or overnight
- Time constraints arising from the expectation that women continue to perform 'their' household chores and childcare responsibilities regardless of their role in the labour force and/or as political leaders.<sup>58</sup>

These existing findings were all supported by our interview, FGD and survey findings, and further, we found that:

- Although most families are supportive of leaders' political activities, when family members do criticise leaders' participation in politics this criticism can be shaped by the gendered roles that males and females are expected to perform within the family. E.g. males tend to face criticism for neglecting their business/income generating activities, whereas women tend to face criticism for neglecting their housework or not spending enough time with their children (see Section 6 for further details).
- Women are commonly considered to be less able than men to act in security roles, due to norms around women being out at night and concerns over their physical safety, and this is a significant barrier to them being chosen in local leadership positions such as W/VTA and 100 HH.
- The language that local female and male leaders use to refer to their role in promoting peace and security differs. When our local leader interviewees were asked to describe their most important role, women were nearly twice as likely as men to say promoting local unity and harmony. Whereas, only male interviewees described their most important

role as being ensuring order/enforcing rules/maintaining local security/drug issues.

- Women face greater time constraints than men to become parliamentarians, party officials or local leaders. However, it is not clear whether women or men face greater time constraints for attending local meetings – men are more likely than women to be busy with paid work or to have migrated away from their community for job opportunities, whereas women are more likely to be time constrained due to the greater level of time that they spend on unpaid domestic work and childcare.<sup>59</sup>
- Among our local leader interviewees there are quite large gender differences in their perceptions of what skills and abilities had helped them to get their leadership position. It can be suggested that these differences frequently arise out of women and men needing to prove they do not belong to a certain stereotype that is associated with being either female or male and which is seen as a barrier to being an effective leader. For example, men in Myanmar are considerably more likely than women to drink alcohol and use drugs,<sup>60</sup> and to be perceived as corrupt.<sup>61</sup> And, our male interviewees were much more likely than the female interviewees to mention their sobriety or personal integrity as relevant skills or abilities that helped them to get chosen as leaders. Meanwhile, leadership is widely associated with maleness in Myanmar, and women were more likely than men to mention their leadership skills as relevant skills or abilities that helped them to get chosen as leaders.
- Our survey found that around 40% of respondents thought that men make better political leaders than women, with only 9% thinking that women make better political leaders than men. Similarly, around 48% of respondents thought that men make better business leaders than women, with only around 11% thinking that women make better business leaders than men. Although Myanmar people's reported preference for male leadership is similar for the business and political spheres, the percentage of leaders that are women that we actually see in business and politics are extremely different. The World Bank's Enterprise Survey finds that 41% of firms in Myanmar have a woman as the most senior manager – this places Myanmar as the 4th highest out of the 136 countries for which data is available, only behind Thailand (65%), Cambodia (57%) and Lao PDR (43%).<sup>62</sup> The cultural preference for male business leadership in Myanmar does not translate into highly gender unequal patterns of who becomes business leaders. This suggests that a fairly widespread cultural preference for male political leaders is not one of the most important factors in limiting women's political participation.
- Across all of our survey questions, there were no institutions or authority figures for which men report higher levels of trust than women. Women have statistically significantly higher levels of trust than men in the state/region government, political parties, the civil service, the military, the police, the W/VTA, and education professionals. Women also report higher levels of trust than men in the national parliament, but this is not statistically significant. Women and men report approximately equal levels of trust in the president.
- In stark contrast to trust in institutions, authority figures, and how the 2015 election was conducted, women report significantly lower levels of trust than men in people from outside their village/ward, people of another religion, and people of another ethnicity. Women are also less likely than men to be comfortable with having someone of another religion as their neighbour. Women also report lower levels of trust than men in other people from their village/ward, albeit that this gender gap is not statistically significant. Across all of our survey questions, there were no groups of non-high-status people for which women report higher levels of trust than men. Our survey results clearly indicate



that men and women have different relationships and attitudes to formal institutions, authority figures as well as to other societal groups. We do not yet understand why this is the case, but intend to investigate these findings further in the forthcoming Working Paper 3.

- Political parties have a key role to play in promoting or limiting women's participation, and most parties have done little to increase women's representation as parliamentary candidates or in senior positions within the party. This issue is explored in more detail in Section 5.

Cultural norms and social attitudes have a powerful effect in shaping which types of people are able to become political leaders. However, these are not fully prescriptive, and some individuals are actively challenging them. For example, one female 10 HH from Mandalay Region described how:

"Some men do not like women to be level with them. However, I can compete with men, am not afraid of anything, and I can go everywhere at any time, even at midnight." (Female, 10 HH, Mandalay Region)

Cultural norms and social attitudes also vary between different places and ethnic groups, and are subject to change over time. Myanmar is experiencing rapid social change, as access to information and communication technologies has dramatically increased, and the economy has expanded and changed in structure. Further, role models can help to change people's perceptions of their ability to participate in politics. Although Aung San Suu Kyi's background is unique and not something that can be emulated by other women, her previous position as the most prominent leader of Myanmar's democracy movement and now the de facto leader of the elected government, has given a number of women the inspiration and confidence to participate in politics. If more women become MPs, local leaders, and senior party officials there will be more female role models for other women and girls to be inspired by, thereby further contributing to making political participation more gender equal.

#### **4e) Financial barriers to becoming a leader**

Campaigning for election to parliament is expensive, and this expense may possibly pose a bigger barrier for women than men to run for parliament. However, previous research on Myanmar suggests that differences between parties are more significant than candidates' gender in determining whether financial costs are a major barrier for potential and actual candidates. A few larger and well-established parties such as NLD and USDP are able to provide adequate financial support to candidates, but many smaller parties provide little or no financial support to candidates.<sup>63</sup> Some of our interviewees also mentioned that the salary received by MPs is too low, but we do not have any clear evidence on whether this has a differential impact by gender.

Financial cost is generally not a significant barrier for people to get chosen as local leaders – i) none of the 10 HHs, elders or other community leaders interviewed for our study had to spend any money to get their position; ii) only a minority of W/VTAs and a very small minority of 100 HHs had to spend any money to get their position, and those that did spent fairly small amounts. However, as described below in Section 6, being a local leader, and especially a W/VTA, can be expensive, and the knowledge of this is likely to deter some potential candidates. However, again, we do not have any clear evidence on whether this has a differential impact by gender.

#### 4f) Institutional factors

Institutional factors have a considerable negative impact on women's participation in both parliamentary and local politics in Myanmar. The military-drafted 2008 Constitution still reserves a minimum of 25% of seats in all of Myanmar's parliaments for military appointees, and very few military appointees are women. Further, Myanmar uses a first past the post electoral system for its elected MPs, and international comparative evidence demonstrates that this form of electoral system tends to result in fewer female MPs being elected than typically occurs under proportional electoral systems.<sup>64</sup> At local levels, the electorate for the positions of W/VTA, 100 HH and 10 HH is comprised of one vote per household – this limits participation in the electoral process, and particularly negatively affects women, as most household heads in Myanmar are men.

Myanmar was under one party rule by the Burma Socialist Program Party from 1962-88, and this regime party was led by a military general (Ne Win), and many of its subordinate political and administrative leaders were also drawn from the military. From 1989-2010, Myanmar was ruled by a military junta. This long-term militarisation of public space tended to reinforce broad cultural concepts of male authority and superiority, to the detriment of women's political participation, and the effects are still felt today.<sup>65</sup> Further, the long period of military rule resulted in men occupying almost all senior positions in the civil service and in local leadership (such as township administrators and W/VTAs). The existing male dominance of these positions acts as a barrier to women's entry, due to: i) role model effects – women are less likely to have the confidence to try to become something that very few other women are already doing; ii) incumbents will often have some influence over who replaces them, and men's work and social networks are largely comprised of other men.

### 5. The role of political parties and other governance institutions in promoting or limiting gender equality in political participation

Our survey evidence suggests that men are around 1.5 times more likely than women to report being interested in politics, and around 1.25 times more likely than women to think that they have the ability to participate in politics. The gender gap in people's reported interest in and confidence to participate in politics is much smaller than the gender gap we see in political leadership – for example, men are around 9 times more likely than women to be an MP, and more than 100 times more likely than women to be a W/VTA. Section 4 described various factors that contribute to the male dominance of political leadership positions in Myanmar, with some of the most important being: women facing greater time constraints than men to become political leaders due to expectations around unpaid domestic work; limitations on women's travel, especially at night time; and certain institutional features and historical legacies of Myanmar's political system that tend to favour male leadership. In this section of the report we discuss another key factor in explaining women's low level of parliamentary representation, which has received relatively little attention in previous research on Myanmar – how political parties operate internally, including how they recruit candidates, and how people are appointed to key 'gatekeeper' positions within the party.<sup>66</sup>

In Myanmar's 2015 elections voters' choice of who to vote for was largely based on their support for a particular party, rather than candidates' gender or other individual characteristics.<sup>67</sup> Voters' behaviour may change somewhat for the 2020 elections, but most voters are still likely to vote along party lines. This highlights the importance in the Myanmar context of understanding who parties recruit and how they recruit them, if we want to understand the



different opportunities that women and men have to become MPs.

In theory, the 'standard process' used by most parties in our study for nominating candidates to the Pyithu and State/Region Hluttaws in the 2015 election was for the township level party to arrange a candidate election process, after which the nominated candidates would be sent to CC and CEC level for scrutiny and then approval/rejection. However, the extent to which parties followed the 'standard process' in selecting their State/Region and Pyithu Hluttaw candidates varied considerably:

- Interviewees from LNDP, NLD and TNP described their party consistently following the 'standard process'.
- Interviewees from MNP, PNO, SNLD said that when township-level bodies of their party were unable to find enough candidates, they would deviate from the 'standard process' and the central party would appoint candidates instead.
- KSDP was disorganized, which seems to have resulted in the 'standard process' not being followed – instead, direct appointment by the central party and candidates nominating themselves unopposed seem to have been widespread.
- ANP followed the 'standard process' for choosing candidates for State/Region Hluttaw elections, but used a cooperative process between township and central level party for choosing Pyithu Hluttaw candidates.
- USDP interviewees gave highly inconsistent descriptions of the respective roles of township and central level party committees.

For choosing candidates for Amyotha Hluttaw, most parties had to choose candidates for some constituencies that covered more than one Township. Parties differed in how they chose their Amyotha Hluttaw candidates:

- PNO and SNLD had the central-level party lead the candidate selection process.
- In the NLD this process was led by the state/region level party.
- ANP and USDP had cooperative processes between central-level and the relevant townships.
- This issue did not affect MNP, as all of the Amyotha Hluttaw constituencies they competed in were in single townships only.
- For KSDP, LNDP and TNP our research did not collect clear information on how Amyotha Hluttaw candidate selection differed from Pyithu and State/Region Hluttaw candidate selection.

Parties' township chairpersons typically have a key role in the candidate selection process. For most parties, the key body for candidate selection at the township level was the TEC itself. However, this was not the case for NLD and USDP. For the 2015 elections the NLD created a separate committee/selection team in each township, that was described by one of our NLD interviewees as comprising of, '...some TEC members, ordinary members and elder respectable people in the township.' The USDP also had dedicated candidate selection teams at township level, as well as at district and state/region levels.

CECs and TECs have a vital role in candidate selection, and in some parties CCs also play an important role. The low level of female representation in these bodies, especially in key decision-making positions, was described in Section 3. Evidence from other countries shows that when senior positions within parties are primarily held by men, this tends to reproduce male dominance. This sends a symbolic and discouraging signal to women.<sup>68</sup> Further, people in senior party positions have the most direct say over who it has appointed to positions within the party, and they exert a great deal of influence over policy priorities and internal party culture.<sup>69</sup> Evidence from various countries and political contexts demonstrates that male gatekeepers will tend not just to select men successors, but that they also tend to protect the existing internal party culture and the existing practices.<sup>70</sup> Such a status quo benefits insiders who know the rules of the game, but is a barrier newcomers, including women.<sup>71</sup> When there are more women in senior positions, more women tend to be nominated and selected as parliamentary candidates and to senior positions within the party,<sup>72</sup> and new party priorities may emerge.<sup>73</sup>

There is not a perfect relationship between i) how parties are organised and how they arranged their candidate selection; and ii) the proportion of female candidates that the party had in the 2015 elections. However, we do see a general pattern – four of the five parties in our study with the highest percentage of female candidates in the 2015 elections had fairly bottom-up candidate selection process (e.g. LNPD, MNP, NLD and SNLD). Party history, and the implications this has for leader's political views and the institutional culture of their parties, also seems to matter. Three of the parties that had both relatively high numbers of female candidates and fairly bottom-up candidate selection processes participated in the 1990 elections, were then pushed underground for most of 1990s and 2000s, and can be categorized as highly pro-democracy in their policy positions (i.e. MNP, NLD and SNLD). Whereas, the two parties in our study that are most closely linked to military organizations and have probably the least democratic outlook of the parties in our study – PNO and USDP<sup>e</sup> – had very few female candidates, and very low levels of women's participation in their parties overall.

Cultural differences between ethnic groups may also explain some of the difference in women's representation within parties – for example, Pa'O and Rakhine culture tends to be highly patriarchal,<sup>74</sup> and the ANP and PNO both have very low levels of female participation. However, such cultural effects do not fully determine women's level of participation, and for example Kachin society has traditionally been highly patriarchal,<sup>75</sup> but KSDP did not have particularly low levels of female participation either as candidates or within party structures. Overall, parties' histories, political outlook and institutional culture are probably more important for the level of women's political representation than traditional gender relations within the ethnic group(s) that parties represent.

Our research found evidence to suggest that a minority of parties may tend to assign women candidates to constituencies that they have a low probability of winning. This behaviour was reported by an interviewee from USDP, and is supported by statistical evidence showing that women were 6.1% of this party's total candidates in the 2015 election, but only 2.6% of their winning candidates. It can also be noted that PNO appointed only male candidates to the 10 constituencies that are elected from the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone (SAZ), with PNO winning all of these parliamentary seats in both the 2010 and 2015 elections. Whereas, the PNO's only female candidate in the 2015 elections was appointed to a constituency outside of the Pa-O SAZ, and in both 2010 and 2015 PNO failed to win any seats in a constituency outside of their SAZ stronghold.<sup>f</sup> However, most parties do not seem to be systematically assigning women to

<sup>e</sup> N.b. the PNO is closely connected to the Pa-O National Army/People's Militia Force, and the USDP is closely connected to the Tatmadaw.

<sup>f</sup> N.b. although note that for the 2020 election a woman has been selected as PNO candidate for one of the 10 constituencies in the Pa-O SAZ, with Nang Kham Bwar running as PNO's Pyithu Hluttaw candidate for Hopong Township.

less winnable seats – across all parties and independent candidates in the 2015 elections, women were 13.5% of total candidates and 13.6% of successful candidates for the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw.<sup>76</sup>

Only one (male) interviewee thought that their party had an effective policy to increase the number of female candidates in the 2015 election. And, only two interviewees (both male) thought that their party had got the gender balance about right for their list of candidates. Nearly 60% of our interviewees said that their party had some kind of plan or policy to try and raise their number of female candidates for the 2020 election. Interviewees who mentioned such policies typically gave vague answers, or if being specific, mentioned workshops or trainings for potential and actual women candidates. Although workshops and trainings can sometimes be beneficial, their level of impact is variable, and in some cases non-existent. Further, these are often organized and/or financed by external organizations, so tend to involve limited effort or financial contributions by the party. However, for the 2020 election the SNLD, as well as the Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD), adopted a target of having 30% female candidates.<sup>77</sup> The SNLD almost met their target, with 29% of their candidates for 2020 being women,<sup>78</sup> compared to 18% in 2015. By adopting a target and working hard to meet it, SNLD have considerably increased their number of women candidates, and this approach is a much stronger attempt at raising women's participation than participating in workshops or trainings. However, less than 10% of CNLD's candidates for 2020 are women,<sup>79</sup> that highlights that simply having a target is not enough – parties must work hard to make it a reality.

Myanmar's first past the post electoral system means that a quota law requiring that all parties have a minimum percentage of candidates that are women may be ineffective – parties that are not strongly motivated to raise women's participation could simply allocate many of their women candidates to constituencies that they have little or no chance of winning. Other forms of legislative quotas can be considered, such as creating new constituencies that reserve seats for women MPs, but these would require constitutional change. In the absence of such change, Myanmar political parties that are interested in raising women's participation should adopt strong targets for the percentage of their parliamentary candidates that are women – the SNLD in 2020 provides a successful example of a party adopting a target of having 30% women candidates, and successfully increasing their number of women candidates so that they met this target. Parties that win control of the union or state/region governments should appoint women to ministerial positions. Further, mandatory quotas could be beneficially applied to committees at township, ward/village tract, and village levels – this approach has already been demonstrated by the NCDDP program.

## 6. Costs and benefits of running for election and being a leader

Myanmar spent more than five decades under military rule, experiencing widespread oppression of political opposition and armed conflict, and politics here has long been recognized as a potentially dangerous activity. Some of the party officials and parliamentary candidates interviewed for our study had previously spent considerable time in prison as a result of their political activities. Cultural norms around acceptable behaviour and risk taking for women and men, meant that women, and especially mothers, were discouraged from participating in opposition political activity during the period of military rule.<sup>80</sup>

Most of the parliamentary candidates that were interviewed for our study seemed to think that the personal costs of their political involvement had outweighed the benefits. Candidates from smaller parties were particularly likely to think that the costs of their political participation had outweighed the benefits. All of the parliamentary candidates that described experiencing benefits to their life as a result of the political improvement were those that had been successful in the 2015 election – none of the nine unsuccessful candidates for this study described their political involvement resulting in any improvements in their lives. Among interviewees that described their political involvement as giving benefits, these were largely related to increased self-respect and/or increased respect from others.

A number of female and male parliamentary candidates described sacrificing spending time with their families as a result of their political involvement. Women seem to feel a higher level of guilt than men over this sacrifice. Women politicians are also more dependent than men on support from their families and partners – probably very few women have been able to have a political career without the support of their families, whereas this seems to be possible for at least some men who say that their wives have disapproved, and sometimes for several years. Myanmar's parliaments do not provide any childcare facilities for their MPs or other parliamentary staff, which is a barrier to women with young children becoming MPs.

Around 40% of the local leader interviewees described facing some difficulties or challenges in their home life as a result of their participation in community life. Women were more likely than men to describe facing such challenges or difficulties. Further, there are gender differences in the types of difficulties or challenges mentioned by those that said yes to this question – around 85% of males but only around 45% of females mentioned financial issues/ impact on their business or income; whereas 50% of females but less than 30% of males described having less time for family life, social life or having to work unsociable hours.

Most of the local leader interviewees that mentioned that participation in community life had resulted in them having less time for family life or social life, having to work unsociable hours, and/or a negative impact on their livelihood, spoke of their own feeling of concern or regret over this. However, some local leader interviewees specifically described facing opposition from, or arguing with family members over this issue. The nature of opposition by family members can be shaped by the gendered roles that males and females are expected to perform in the family: four male interviewees specifically described their wife criticising them or arguing with them due them spending too long on community leadership activities at the expense of their business/income-generating activities; but one female interviewee mentioned her family being opposed to her becoming a 10 HH as they thought it would leave her with no time for housework, and another female local leader said that she had been criticised for neglecting her children so she can participate in her voluntary work. Whereas, no female interviewees mentioned family members objecting to them neglecting business/income-generating activities, and no male interviewees mentioned being criticised by family members

for neglecting housework or childcare. In this case, a gendered analysis of what is not mentioned in opposition to political activity is as revealing as what is mentioned.

Quite a few of the parliamentary candidate interviewees mentioned financial difficulties as a result of their choice to become politically active, and campaigning for election to parliament can be expensive (see Section 4e). Many parliamentary candidate interviewees said that their political activities had meant that they could spend less time on personal business/income-generating activities, and were also expected to care for constituents. Some female candidates were clearly dependent on the financial support of husbands and relatives, and this was sometimes mentioned as a prerequisite for their political career. Further, as also noted in Section 4e, some MPs feel that their salary is too low to meet their needs.

Although less than 10% of our local leader interviewees described having to use their own financial resources to get selected for their position, almost half of them said that they had to use their financial resources in their role of being leaders. W/VTAs (more than 60%), followed by 100 HHs (more than 50%) were the types of leader most likely to describe having to use their own financial resources in their role as local leader. Of the interviewees that specified the costs that they face in their role, by far the most common were costs associated with travelling for meetings or other purposes.

More than half of the parliamentary candidates interviewed for our study described facing some form of intimidation or harassment during the 2015 election campaign. We did not observe any gender differences in the likelihood of candidates to experience harassment or abuse, but there do seem to have been differences in the type of harassment experienced, with women being more likely than men to face personal accusations. By 2015 around 22% of Myanmar's population was using the internet,<sup>81</sup> and online harassment was commonly experienced by our female and male parliamentary candidate interviewees during their election campaigns. Internet use has risen further since 2015, and online harassment is therefore likely to increase in the further in the 2020 elections. The rise in online abuse may be exacerbated by restrictions on physical movement on parliamentary candidates and voters as part of GoM's COVID-19 containment efforts, that are likely to encourage all kinds of political-related activity to move online. Although less common than verbal or online harassment, a small number of candidates in 2015 faced death threats or physical attacks on themselves or those helping their campaign.

Only around one quarter of the elected local leaders interviewed for this study reported experiencing intimidation, harassment, or strong competition as part of their election process. Further, none of our local interviewees reported violent threats or physical violence occurring. Therefore, it seems that local leaders are less likely than parliamentary candidates to face harassment or intimidation as part of their election campaign, and when this does occur it is less likely to be the most serious forms of intimidation or physical danger. However, it is worth noting that relative to male local leaders, female local leaders are disproportionately likely to have experience harassment as part of their election, and in some cases this harassment was clearly gendered. For example, a female W/VTA said that:

“I was insulted by some people because they prefer to have a male ward administrator. Therefore, there were big problems during the election.” (Female, W/VTA, Mon State)

## 7. Conclusions

Since the reintroduction of parliamentary elections in 2010, Myanmar has had an increase in the percentage of parliamentarians that are women. Similarly, since the introduction of elections for the position of W/VTA in late 2012, there has been an increase in the number of women W/VTAs. However, in the parliament of 2016-21 women were still only around 10% of Myanmar's MPs, and women are still less than 1% of W/VTAs. Comprehensive data is lacking, but very few women are found in: key leadership positions within political parties (at central, township, or any other levels); leadership positions in the Tatmadaw, EAOs or militias; or as village/ward elders or 100 HHs. It is more common for women to be 10 HHs and ordinary members of party committees, but men are probably still a majority in these positions. Women are more likely to be found as leaders in CBOs and NGOs than in other political institutions.

Aung San Suu Kyi's unique personal history paved the way for her to become the figurehead of Myanmar's pro-democracy protest movement in the late 1980s, the long-time leader of the NLD, and now the de facto leader of Myanmar's elected government. Throughout, she has enjoyed a level of popularity among much of the population that is unmatched by any other politician in this period. However, her popularity and position as national leader does not mean that women and men have equal opportunity to participate in Myanmar's politics – if her father had not been Myanmar's independence hero it is implausible that she would have had the career that she has had. As described in Section 4b, daughters or widows of prominent male political leaders becoming national leaders is a common feature of Asian politics, and the presence of such a leader does not mean that gender inequality in politics and society is no longer an issue.

During the parliaments of 2016-21 the NLD has had a majority in the Amyotha Hluttaw, Pyithu Hluttaw and in 12 of 14 State/Region Hluttaws. Even in the other two states (Rakhine and Shan), NLD has chosen the chief minister. Although NLD's vote may decline in 2020 relative to 2015, they are still expected to win a majority in the Union level hluttaws,<sup>82</sup> and will also probably win a majority in most State/Regions Hluttaws. As such, they are the predominant force in Myanmar's electoral politics. NLD had a slightly higher percentage of candidates that are women than the average for all parties in Myanmar. However, aside from Aung San Suu Kyi, senior gatekeeper positions at the top of the party and in the Union government executive are largely filled by old ethnic Bamar men. Given the highly hierarchical and top-down nature of the NLD, decision-making is largely controlled by ASSK and the old Bamar men close to her. The Tatmadaw is the other major force in Myanmar's national politics, and is entirely led by men, most of whom are also Bamar.

Quite large numbers of women and men have a preference for male political leadership over female political leadership, and we see a similar preference for males as business leaders. This suggests that a preference for male leadership is probably not one of the main causes of the very low numbers of women we see in political leadership positions in Myanmar – unlike in politics, women are found in large numbers in business leadership positions. Factors that appear to be more likely in women's low level of participation in Myanmar's politics include:

- Women having less engagement in politics and confidence to become politicians than men.
- Cultural norms that restrict women's travel, especially at night.
- Time constraints on women due to the expectation that they perform 'their' household chores and childcare responsibilities regardless of their paid work or political activities.

## Gender and Political Participation in Myanmar

- Institutional factors at union, state/region and local levels of Myanmar politics that favour men relative to women.
- Most political parties not taking strong steps to promote women's participation.
- Several legacies of military rule from the 1960s-2010s – e.g. a general militarisation of public space, an 'incumbent effect' for senior positions in the civil service and local leadership, opposition political leadership having been dangerous and therefore seen as particularly unsuitable for women, and the roles of W/VTAs and 100 HHs being strongly focused on security provision.



## 8. Key Recommendations

Working papers 1 and 2 in this series made a number of recommendations for actions that political parties, GoM, local leaders and international donors can take to promote greater gender equality in political participation in Myanmar. Key recommendations from these papers and a few new recommendations are summarised below.

### Political Parties

- Establish clear rules on how people are selected to fill key party gatekeeper positions and to stand as parliamentary candidates. Thoroughly publicise these rules to all party members.
- Establish a target of 30% female candidates in parliamentary elections. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy substantially increased their percentage of female candidates between 2015 and 2020 by adopting such a target and working hard to achieve it. Other parties could emulate this model for future by-elections and national elections. Parties should also introduce targets for women's representation on their central executive committees (CECs), central committees (CCs), and township executive committees (TECs).
- Provide a small subsidy for women to self-nominate as candidates.
- Improve security and provide female candidates with a party aide during campaigns, especially in remote and/or conflict-affected areas.
- Provide trainings and establish best practices for candidates to campaign with social networks and develop an online presence. Particularly ensure that women, ethnic minority and religious minority candidates have access to these trainings.

### Government of Myanmar

- Restore voting rights to all of those who had them removed in 2015, and facilitate the return to Myanmar of the refugees currently living in camps in Bangladesh and Thailand.
- Introduce direct elections for the position of ward/village tract administrator, with universal suffrage for all local residents aged 18 and above. Consider also introducing universal suffrage for elections for 100-household head and 10-household head positions.
- Expand the use of quotas mandating minimum levels of female representation from NCDDP to other committees at the township, ward/village tract and village levels.
- Work to change cultural norms that largely exclude women from roles as security actors, including continuing to work to increase the number of female police officers.
- Provide convenient and high-quality childcare facilities for MPs and parliamentary staff in the Pyidaungsu and State/Region Hluttaws.
- Expand the provision of high quality pre-schools and kindergartens in villages and wards throughout Myanmar.
- Introduce elected township governments, and then assign significant decision-making and revenue-collection authority to this level of government.

### Local Leaders:



- Clearly inform local residents of when meetings will be held, and what will be discussed.
- Ensure that meeting attendees have a chance to speak and to respond to the information provided. Particular attention should be given to encouraging women, and especially young women, to speak.
- Ensure that ideas and feedback from public meetings are properly incorporated into local leaders' decision-making. One practical way to do so could be to add a compulsory agenda item for leaders' meetings on weighing ideas and feedback from public meetings.

### **International Donors, Myanmar Civil Society Organisations, and International Development Organisations**

- Provide funding for:
  - Smaller parties to help them provide a small subsidy to women who self-nominate as candidates.
  - Training classes for parties and candidates on how to utilise social media to develop an online presence and campaign effectively.
  - Training classes for parties and candidates – and especially ethnic minority, religious minority and female candidates – on how to respond to disinformation, online hate and harassment during campaigns.
- Prioritisation of which parties and candidates to support should be influenced by both whether they have a realistic chance of winning parliamentary seats, and parties' own financial resources (giving preference to parties that do not have large financial resources already).
- The extent to which the selection of members is democratic and systematic varies not just between parties, but also within them – for example the NLD can be characterized as having a democratic and systematic process for TEC and CC selection but not for their CEC selection. This highlights the need to pay careful attention to each party's processes if working with parties to raise women's participation – for example:
  - If parties have township-level systematic processes that follow instructions issued by the central party, which at least a large majority of townships consistently follow, there is high potential to work with the central party to issue rules, guidelines or targets for the township level. Such an approach is less likely to be effective absent such precedents.
  - If CEC and/or TEC selection processes are strongly influenced by certain individual party leaders, those leaders need to be convinced of the importance of promoting gender equality within party structures, including on the CEC and in TECs.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> [Accessed 25th September 2020].

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<sup>32</sup> Preliminary EMReF analysis of the candidate list published by UEC on 8th September 2020, indicates that women are 15.6% of all candidates.

<sup>33</sup> Author's calculations based on database supplied to authors by International Republican Institute (IRI), that was taken from the candidate lists published by UEC in September 2020. We would like to thank IRI for sharing this data with us.

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- <sup>47</sup> Central Statistical Organisation, UNDP, and WB, *Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017: Socio-Economic Report* (Nay Pyi Taw & Yangon: Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry, UNDP and WB, 2020), p.72.
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- <sup>56</sup> Mark R. Thompson, 'Female Leadership of Democratic Transitions in Asia', *Pacific Affairs*, 75.4 (2002), pp.539-41. N.b. since Thompson's article was published Yingluck Shinawatra (sister of exiled Thaksin Shinawatra) became prime minister of Thailand, and Park Geun-hye (daughter of the assassinated Park Chung-hee) became president of South Korea. One exception to the general trend is Tsai Ing-wen, who was elected prime minister of Taiwan in 2016 and continues to hold this position – she does not come from a political dynasty.
- <sup>57</sup> N.b. this analysis was not included in Working Paper 2, but has been added here.
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<sup>77</sup> Hein Myat Soe, 'Shan Party Emphasises Women, Youth Candidates', *The Myanmar Times*, 2020 <<https://>



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