Briefing Note on Gender and Political Participation in Myanmar :

The Current Situation, Why it Matters, and How to Make Participation More Equal

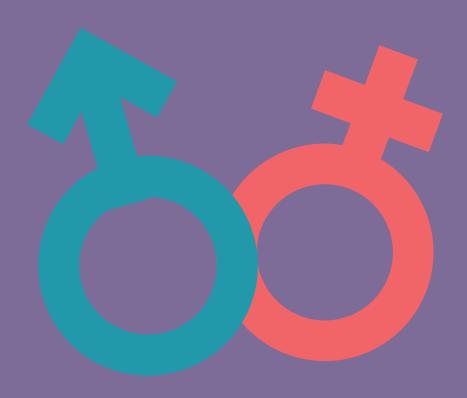Briefing Note on Gender and Political Participation in Myanmar :

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The Current Situation

Myanmar's 2015 elections resulted in women becoming around 10% of the MPs in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and across the State/Region Hluttaws. The proportion of women in Myanmar's parliaments from 2016-21 was more than double that at any time in the past. However, nine in ten MPs were still men – a highly unequal situation. Myanmar is currently ranked 167th out of 191 countries worldwide for the percentage of national MPs who are women, outperforming only one other ASEAN country (Brunei). The percentage of female parliamentary candidates for the 2020 elections is only a few percent higher than in 2015, and a dramatic increase in women's parliamentary representation following these elections is unlikely. Women are also entirely absent from top leadership positions in the Tatmadaw and only very rarely found in senior positions in ethnic armed organisations.

Ward, village tract and village level politics and administration play significant roles in residents' lives, and leadership here also tends to be highly male dominated. Men comprise more than 99% of all the ward/village tract administrators in Myanmar. An overwhelming majority of 100-household heads and local elders are also male. Two exceptions to the general tendency of extreme male dominance of leadership positions are: i) community-based organisations, where women leaders are often found in quite large numbers; ii) local committees created for the National Community Driven Development Project (NCDDP), which are mandated to have 50:50 female-male representation. Women attend public meetings at ward, village tract and village levels in large numbers but are less likely than men to actively participate in discussions. Overall, although some women are able to actively participate 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).

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 an unmatched level of popularity and even reverence among much of Myanmar's population. However, her popularity and position as national leader does not mean that women and men have equal opportunity to participate in Myanmar's politics –

daughters or widows of prominent male political leaders' becoming national leaders is comparatively common across Asia, and does not mean that gender inequality in politics and society is no longer an issue.

Some of the most important factors in explaining women's low levels of political participation include:

- Women's greater time constraints than men to become political leaders due to common expectations that they perform 'their' domestic chores and childcare, regardless of the paid work that they perform and/or their political activities.

- Cultural norms that restrict women's travel, especially at night time.

- Women's lower levels of political engagement than men (such as belonging to a political party or regularly reading political news), and being less likely to describe themselves as being interested in politics.

- Certain institutional features of Myanmar's political system that tend to favour male leadership, e.g. the first past the post electoral system, and the reservation of at least 25% of parliamentary seats for Tatmadaw appointees.

- Most political parties make only limited efforts to promote women's political participation.

Why Gender Inequality in Political Participation Matters

The low level of gender inequality in political participation in Myanmar is a problem for several reasons, including:

- A lack of opportunity to participate in politics and governance can have a direct negative effect on a person's sense of agency and well-being.

- Women and men tend to have different priorities for policy-making and budgeting, and female leaders to be more in touch than male leaders with women's priorities.

- Making participation in governance bodies more gender-equal can result in these bodies' becoming more efficient and effective.

Numerous Government of Myanmar policies have

recognised the value of making political participation in Myanmar more gender-equal , including the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, 2018-30, which Aung San Suu Kyi has described as, "the expression of our national development vision."

How to Make Political Participation in Myanmar More Gender-Equal

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:

- o 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.

- o 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.