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Themed Section: Toward a Feminist Peace

RESEARCH

Feminist peace or state co-optation? The Women, Peace and Security agenda in Myanmar

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This article engages with emerging debates about feminist peace and uses this concept to assess the ability of the Women, Peace and Security agenda to achieve gender-just change. We advance a conception of feminist peace as political conditions that allow women affected by conflict to articulate their visions of change and influence the construction of post-war order. Applying this to a case study of Women, Peace and Security practice in Myanmar, we demonstrate that features of how international aid is organised, combined with the Myanmar government's interest in excluding critical voices, limit the ability of Women, Peace and Security practices to contribute to feminist peace. This highlights the potential for illiberal post-war states to obstruct and co-opt the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and shows how the women most directly affected by armed conflict are often the least able to participate in, benefit from and inform Women, Peace and Security practices.

Key words feminist peace • Women, Peace and Security agenda • peacebuilding • gender expertise • illiberal peace • Myanmar

Key messages

- The article examines to what extent Women, Peace and Security practices in Myanmar contribute to feminist peace.
- Feminist peace is theorised as political conditions that allow women's experiences and priorities to inform peacebuilding.
- Findings show that Women, Peace and Security support is least likely to benefit the women most affected by war.
- This is compounded by illiberal government efforts to exclude critical voices.

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Introduction

> 'I think a lot of international [Women, Peace and Security] support has not modelled feminist ways of working, and they have not modelled feminist organisational development. So, you have this kind of perverse irony where you have so many entities supposedly supporting women's organisations and yet the outcome is not feminist.'[1]

Some 20 years ago, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) was unanimously adopted, marking the first international, high-level recognition of the gendered nature of war and peacebuilding of its kind. To a significant extent, this was the result of tireless, skilful, feminist advocacy within and around the United Nations (UN), and can thus be regarded as a major feminist achievement (George and Shepherd, 2016). In addition, 'UNSCR 1325 has avoided the obscurity into which many Security Council (SC) resolutions fall' (Cohn and Duncanson, 2020) by instead being followed by an additional nine SC resolutions that now form the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.[2] These resolutions are binding on states, and together with the diversity of existing guidelines, protocols and plans that guide their implementation, they make up a 'significant governing regime' with regards to peace and security (Shepherd, 2020).

Yet, despite the success of the WPS agenda in terms of its institutionalisation and diffusion (True, 2016), its impact and the ability to deliver meaningful change on the ground has been questioned. In the opening quotation, an international gender adviser working in Myanmar suggests that WPS practices not only fail to deliver feminist outcomes, but also fall short of feminist ideals in the way they are designed and executed. This view echoes a substantial body of critical scholarship on WPS, where the agenda is criticised as being technocratic, top-down and imperialist (Parashar, 2019; Cohn and Duncanson, 2020). Despite its feminist original intent as 'a civil society project that takes seriously the expertise and experience of women and women's organizations in the pursuit of peace and security' (Shepherd, 2016: 325), the integration of WPS into mainstream, liberal models of peacebuilding is often said to have dulled its critical edge and made it a vehicle for the reproduction of unequal global relations of power (Hudson, 2012; Haastrup and Hagen 2020).[3] Moreover, while many WPS scholars have focused their critique on how international paradigms of liberal peacebuilding shape the WPS agenda, this literature has largely overlooked the fact that authoritarianism is the most common form of government in post-war states (Lewis et al, 2018). As a result, the domestic, illiberal political context in which the WPS agenda is frequently implemented is insufficiently understood and theorised.

In this article, we approach WPS practice from a novel angle, bringing it into conversation with emerging theoretical debates around the concept of feminist peace

(Paarlberg-Kvam, 2019; Wibben et al, 2019; Manchanda, 2020). We contribute to these debates by advancing a conception of feminist peace as political conditions that allow women affected by conflict to articulate their visions of change and to influence the construction of post-war order in the spaces that shape their lives. To operationalise this conception of feminist peace, we draw on Nancy Fraser's tripartite model of justice as recognition, redistribution and representation (Fraser, 1997; 2008; O'Reilly, 2016). We argue that this approach makes it possible to assess the extent to which WPS practice contributes to create more just political conditions that facilitate the articulation of and mobilisation around local visions of transformation that are grounded in women's everyday lives. Importantly, this approach allows us to avoid imposing a predefined notion of what feminist peace should look like in terms of specific outcomes, arguing that this necessarily varies across space and time.

Applying this analytical approach to a case study of WPS practice in Myanmar, we demonstrate the utility of this framework for exploring how and to what extent the WPS agenda facilitates the emergence of more feminist forms of peace. Through this analysis, we advance conceptual debates on what feminist peace is and how it can be assessed, and add a new perspective to critical scholarship on the WPS agenda and its implementation. In addition, examining the case of Myanmar allows us to make theoretical contributions about the potential of illiberal post-war states to obstruct and co-opt the WPS agenda. Our analysis of the politics of the WPS agenda in Myanmar during the past decade thereby generates insights of relevance beyond this specific case. In addition, this analysis provides a timely assessment of previous peacebuilding strategies at a time when international actors are rethinking their engagement with Myanmar in the wake of the military coup that took place in early 2021.

In the next section, we develop our theoretical argument, advancing a conception of feminist peace that focuses on the political conditions of justice that make it possible for context-specific, bottom-up visions of feminist transformation to emerge and have an impact on peacebuilding processes. We then describe the context of Myanmar, the landscape of WPS practices in the country and the methods and materials we use to explore this. In the analysis, we apply our analytical framework to explore whether WPS practices in Myanmar have contributed to producing a feminist peace. In conclusion, we discuss how an illiberal, militarised political context has shaped the WPS agenda in Myanmar and limited its potential as a path to feminist peace.

Conceptualising feminist peace

Recently, feminist scholars have begun to excavate the early feminist contributions to peace research that were, at the time, written off as 'appendages' to the field (Lyytikäinen et al, 2020), while others have pointed to the importance of examining feminist activists' visions of peace in order to build more sustainable and just forms of peace (O'Reilly, 2016; Paarlberg-Kvam, 2019). These developments converge with recent calls in peace studies to develop more nuanced theoretical conceptions of peace and methodologies that makes it possible to explore them (Davenport et al, 2018; Olivius and Åkebo 2021).

As a result, the notion of feminist peace has gained increased attention, sparking debates around what a feminist theorisation of peace might look like (Wibben et al, 2019; Manchanda, 2020). While feminist peace activism and scholarship across time and space are diverse, many movements and scholarly contributions have in

common an expansive, holistic and utopian vision of peace. Peace is conceived as far more than simply the end of violence, but rather as a process that transforms multiple structures of exploitation and injustice, including gender hierarchies. These notions also emphasise how gender hierarchies and militarised masculinities are productive of violence and war (Reardon, 1993; Boulding, 2000; Enloe, 2000; Cockburn, 2010). As such, feminist thinking about peace expands on Galtung's concept of positive peace as the elimination of structural violence (Confortini, 2006).

These expansive, utopian ways of thinking about peace are normatively and politically important; 'utopian imagining' (Wibben et al, 2019: 100) is necessary to rethink peace outside the usual frameworks that pit it as the opposite to war and that maintain 'imperialist, militaristic, masculinist ideas' about what peace is and how it can be achieved (Otto, 2020). However, the utopian, expansive features of feminist conceptions of peace also make them subject to the same critique as positive peace: as being 'forever out of our reach, illusive by definition, a dream too flatteringly sweet to be substantial' (Shinko, 2008: 489). In this way, an expansive concept of peace is of limited analytical and practical utility, and a universalised, expansive vision of feminist peace may become a new hegemony that produces its own forms of domination and exclusion.

Some brief examples illustrate these risks. Feminist peace is often described as anti-militarist and anti-nationalist (Cárdenas and Hedström, 2021). In Myanmar, where feminist mobilising has emerged from within ethno-nationalist, armed resistance movements, many activists reject these ideas, arguing that armed struggle is for them, in fact, crucial for the realisation of women's freedom and rights (Olivius and Hedström, 2019). However, due to their affiliation with armed groups, they are sometimes met with suspicion by actors who do not recognise them as 'proper' feminists. Moreover, the expansive notions of feminist peace described earlier also risk discounting women's more modest aspirations, for example, consider the local women in Myanmar, who define peace as being able to rear pigs and chickens in their backyard without fear of their livestock being taken by soldiers. Indeed, by some international WPS actors, this is considered inadequate or irrelevant, as these types of immediate needs, in their view, fall short of a feminist peace agenda.[4] As these examples show, women's aspirations for post-war change are diverse and context dependent. Thus, a universalised vision of what feminist peace means in terms of specific or fixed outcomes is neither possible nor desirable.

However, alongside its expansive and utopian features, there is another key element that runs through much feminist thinking on peace. Feminists understand peace as located in the mundane spaces of everyday lives, experiences and relationships: peace is found in the everyday practices of mothering and care (Ruddick, 1995; Vaittinen et al, 2019), and in the hidden 'cultures of peace' that already exist in people's everyday practices (Boulding, 2000). Prescriptions for peace must therefore be firmly grounded in women's everyday experiences of war, violence and insecurity.

These features of feminist conceptions of peace – its utopian character and its focus on the everyday – present a tension that we argue is productive. Clearly, utopian visions cannot be universalised and, at the same time, grounded in the local, lived and embodied everyday. This means that analysis cannot start from an externally generated idea about what feminist peace should look like. At the same time, we need to know something about what feminist peace is in order to analyse and assess it in empirical

contexts. Therefore, we define feminist peace as political conditions that empower conflict-affected women to articulate and pursue visions of societal transformation grounded in their experiences of conflict and insecurity, and that allow these visions to shape post-war change. This approach avoids fixing the meaning of peace in terms of specific political goals, outcomes and policy prescriptions, and ensures that the concept of feminist peace retains an inherent commitment to the achievement of gender justice, though it is recognised that what this will mean is bound to vary across time and space. This is an approach, moreover, that foregrounds women and women's organisations as agents of peacebuilding and producers of knowledge about peace.

In our examination of the potential of the WPS agenda to contribute to feminist peace in Myanmar, we focus on whether activities and practices enable and allow conflict-affected women to put forward their own visions of peace, and if these can, in turn, inform gender-inclusive peacebuilding more broadly. To do so, we follow Maria O'Reilly (2016) in arguing that Nancy Fraser's (1997; 2008) tripartite conception of justice presents a powerful resource for evaluating peace. More specifically, it is well suited to our aim of assessing the ability of WPS practice to create conditions that allow visions, priorities and needs grounded in women's everyday lives to shape peacebuilding and post-war politics.

For Fraser (2008: 16), justice should be understood as 'parity of participation'. This requires the construction of societal conditions that make it possible for all people to be heard in social and political life. Extending this to peacebuilding contexts means that a just peace requires societal changes that make it possible for previously marginalised groups, like women, as well as groups with divergent conflict experiences and interests, to be able to articulate their visions for peace and have them inform the construction of post-war society. To create conditions of justice, Fraser (1997) argues, three intersecting remedies to existing forms of injustice are needed: recognition, redistribution and representation.

Applied to the pursuit of gender justice in peacebuilding contexts, this points to the necessity of: the *recognition* of women's experiences of conflict and their agency and knowledge as peacebuilders and political actors; the *redistribution* of material resources that practically make it possible for conflict-affected women to use their time and labour to engage with matters of peace; and the *representation* of women in decision-making and governance processes. In our analysis, we therefore use the concepts of recognition, redistribution and representation to operationalise feminist peace; these help us assess the existence of conditions of justice that allow visions and priorities grounded in women's everyday lives in a particular context to emerge and shape post-war societal change. In examining this, it is also crucial to ask which women are able to achieve recognition, redistribution and representation, and to what extent? This is particularly important to pay attention to in a context as diverse and conflicted as Myanmar, where the women's movement itself is deeply shaped by conflict histories and dynamics.

The WPS agenda in Myanmar

Myanmar has experienced armed conflict since independence from the British in 1948. Much of this conflict has been concentrated in the country's border areas, populated by ethnic minority communities,[5] some of which have fought for political autonomy and rights through armed uprisings. These regions have also harboured

thousands of displaced people living in the many refugee camps straddling the borders between Myanmar and its neighbouring countries, as well as political opposition movements active in border areas surrounding Myanmar. This was also the political environment where an organised Myanmar women's movement started to emerge. A key event was the formation of the Women's League of Burma (WLB), a multi-ethnic women's network, in 1999 on the Myanmar–Thailand border (Women's League of Burma, 2011).

In 2011, a semi-civilian government led by President Thein Sein took office, ending decades of military rule. This marked the start of a period of significant reforms, accompanied by efforts to initiate a nationwide peace process. In response, many exiled organisations and activists returned, including women's organisations, leading to a rapid expansion of women's activism and organisation across the country (Olivius, 2019). In 2015, the government and eight ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), which provided the main framework for peace negotiations (Thawnghmung, 2017). Importantly for our analysis, these reforms resulted in an influx of foreign aid and investment, including actors focusing on supporting peacebuilding and the peace process (Bjarnegård, 2020). Many of these were keen to implement or support WPS activities, and contributed to the establishment of a cadre of international gender experts (Kunz and Prügl, 2019) in Myanmar. However, on 1 February 2021, the military seized power in a coup d'état. This has led to the suspension of most government services and the evacuation of many international agencies and considerable numbers of their staff. The brutal crackdown on activists alongside the deterioration of the security situation overall has, moreover, led to increasing day-to-day insecurity and violence experienced by women's rights activists and organisations. The future of WPS practices and institutions analysed in this article is therefore highly uncertain, while the need for feminist peace is arguably even more urgent.

Both before and after the 2011 transition, international frameworks such as the WPS resolutions served as key resources for the Myanmar women's rights activists to advocate for gender justice in Myanmar (Hedström and Olivius, 2021). While some women activists preferred the government to adopt a national action plan (NAP) on WPS, some engaged directly with the government to draft a domestic framework for action. As a result, the Myanmar government did not adopt a NAP; instead, up until the 2021 coup, the government's work with the WPS agenda was framed by the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) launched in 2013 (AGIPP, 2018; Khin Khin Mra and Livingstone, 2020).

The Myanmar NSPAW is structured after the action points identified in the Beijing Platform for Action, with one critical difference: in the Myanmar version, key area number 11, 'women and armed conflict', has become 'women and emergencies' (MNCWA, 2013). This domestic policy architecture means that the implementation of the WPS agenda has taken place in a context of strict government oversight. This is in line with studies demonstrating how the Myanmar state has consistently worked to channel international aid and peacebuilding support into strengthening its hegemony over political and economic processes through illiberal means (Bächtold, 2015, McCarthy and Farrelly, 2020). At the same time, NSPAW was viewed by the women involved in its drafting process as the more pragmatic approach to implementing a WPS agenda in Myanmar, arguing that it is better to focus efforts on what is there rather than what is not (Warren et al, 2018).

The operationalisation of the WPS agenda through the NSPAW framework has been carried out at the national level through four technical working groups under the Department of Social Welfare (DSW). Each group is co-chaired by a representative of the government and one from a civil society organisation or international agency working in the country. One of these four groups focuses on the WPS agenda. As of January 2021, this group had 29 members drawn from donor governments, international organisations, relevant ministries and registered CSOs, and was co-chaired by a national women's network and UN Women, together with a representative from the DSW. Membership in these working groups must be approved by the government and requires organisations to be formally registered in the country. At sub-national levels, the government has reinvigorated a military-era structure of government-backed women's committees as vehicles for localising the WPS agenda. UN Women has worked with these structures to develop sub-national women, peace and development plans in some regions of Myanmar.

In order to explore if and how WPS practices in Myanmar have contributed to feminist peace, we undertook interviews with 11 gender advisors working for international peace and development agencies, 18 Myanmar women's right activists (working in CSOs active at the national and sub-national levels), and 11 Myanmar individuals employed or involved in government WPS mechanisms (from the DSW to local women's committees). About a third of the interviews were conducted over Zoom in English[6] by the first and second author, and were organised through existing contacts, friendships and networks. The remaining interviews were undertaken in Burmese by the third author. All interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent ahead of the interview. To protect the identity of the participants in this study, all identifying markers, such as names or precise job titles, have been removed.

The interviews were guided by questions aiming to identify and trace the politics and effects of the encounter between international gender expertise, domestic state mechanisms and women's movements in Myanmar. All interviews were conducted in 2020 and thereby do not capture developments after the military takeover in 2021.

WPS as a path to feminist peace in Myanmar?

In this section, we draw on Fraser's tripartite concept of justice to interrogate the extent to which WPS practices in Myanmar have contributed to advance feminist peace. We ask: first, 'Have WPS practices enabled the *recognition* of women's wartime experiences and post-war needs?'; second, 'Have WPS practices facilitated the material *redistribution* of resources to conflict-affected women?'; and, third, 'Have WPS practices facilitated the meaningful *representation* of women and their interests and needs in various contexts and forums, from the formal peace process to more mundane spaces of decision-making at local levels?'

Limited recognition

A key purpose of the WPS agenda is to make visible women's gender-specific experiences in war, as well as their agency during war and in peacemaking and peacebuilding. In Myanmar, the international WPS agenda has contributed to a political environment where gender issues are on the agenda. Before the 2011

transition from military rule, women's organisations founded in exile skilfully made use of international norms and policy frameworks to advance women's leadership and rights in their communities, and to call out violence and abuse against women in the conflict in Myanmar (Olivius and Hedström, 2019; Hedström and Olivius, 2021). After the transition, women in exile and in Myanmar used these frameworks to advocate for women's participation in peace negotiations. The visibility of these issues was further amplified by the arrival of international aid and peacebuilding actors, bringing with them a significant cadre of gender advisers, with the task of mainstreaming gender in peace and development support. As remarked by an experienced women's rights activist working in exile as she travelled to Yangon in 2016, 'now everyone is talking about women, peace, and security' (quoted in Olivius and Hedström, 2019: 8).

However, the recognition generated by the WPS agenda in Myanmar is limited in terms of the issues that are foregrounded and the experiences and needs that are acknowledged. In particular, past and present sexual violence perpetrated by the Myanmar army towards ethnic minority women constitutes a major area where silence and impunity continues. Despite the centrality of conflict-related sexual violence in international WPS frameworks and discourses (Kirby and Shepherd, 2016), and in the advocacy of exiled women's organisations during the previous era of military rule in Myanmar (Hedström and Olivius, 2021), it has remained a highly sensitive issue in the past decade's WPS practice in Myanmar. While the UN and some donors have raised the issue in dialogues with the Myanmar government, the formal state WPS architecture has largely excluded such discussions and made it difficult for women activists to speak out about conflict-related sexual violence.

According to many of our respondents, the silencing of conflict-related sexual violence springs from the government's unwillingness to directly acknowledge past and ongoing armed conflict. This is illustrated by the NSPAW placing WPS issues under the heading of 'women and emergencies'. This shapes what can be said and recognised in spaces where WPS activities are designed and implemented. For example, a UN representative described to us how the sensitivity of naming armed conflict became evident during a workshop where government officials and women's organisations had been brought together to supply information for periodic reporting to the UN: "We did group work. And, you know, around 'women in emergency', nobody talked about conflict.... Nobody talked about it."[7]

This experience exemplifies the silencing of armed conflict in official contexts. The surprised reaction of the UN representative also illustrates an argument frequently put forward by Myanmar women activists: "Many of the international gender experts don't understand the local context … they think all Myanmar women are the same. They are not the same."[8] In other words, with a better understanding of power relations and conflict dynamics in Myanmar, this UN representative had not expected women activists, and especially not ethnic minority activists from conflict areas, to speak out about the effects of armed conflict in a room full of government representatives. Given the still-powerful role of the military in politics and the reality of ongoing armed conflict, as well as continued militarisation in ceasefire areas (Burke et al, 2017), speaking out about sexual violence perpetrated by the Myanmar army is dangerous and, if collaboration with the government is pursued, highly taboo. This means that impunity for these abuses persists and women's organisations that seek to work with these issues are, in effect, excluded from WPS architectures and funding:

> 'Many of the organisations we work with, we focus on violence against women committed by state actors.... UN agencies do not want to upset the government because they want to continue working in the country. It is the same with women organisations in the cities too. These women organisations need to have some sort of good understanding with the government agencies. Otherwise, it is hard for them to be able to do their work. That means they have to make a choice whether to speak the truth in a very strong manner, or not speaking about the whole truth so that they can continue to operate.'[9]

Thus, the recognition of women's experiences, needs and perspectives generated by the WPS agenda in Myanmar is limited due to government interests in downplaying the realities of armed conflict. This exemplifies how the meaning of WPS can become reinterpreted when it is made useful in relation to national government agendas (Lorentzen, 2017). This effect is compounded by international actors' general gravitation towards working with the state, as well as their lack of a sufficient understanding of the power relations and conflict dynamics in Myanmar.[10] However, lacking contextual knowledge is not simply a result of ignorance. Through measures such as travel restrictions for foreigners, the government intentionally circumscribes whom international actors can work with, as well as what they can know:

> 'There are real restrictions where you can't go to this part of Kachin, you can't go to that part of Shan, you can't go to that part of Rakhine ... you know, where we're not going to be able to go into non-government-controlled areas and even not some government-controlled areas because we're foreigners. And therefore, we'll never know what's really happening, and we won't have the full picture.'[11]

To be able to go to the areas of Myanmar where women are most directly affected by conflict, international actors need to have their embassy send a diplomatic note to the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the ministry demands to "know who you are meeting with" at least two weeks in advance.[12] As a representative of a major donor explains, handing in such a list would obviously place potential partners who are critical of the government at risk – therefore, even asking for such approval is avoided, and travel to conflict areas is, in effect, rendered impossible.

The result of this is that a vast gap divides the practices and institutions of the WPS agenda from the everyday lives of many women in conflict areas. Their experiences of conflict remain silenced, and their priorities and visions for peace largely fail to inform WPS practice, as well as broader peacebuilding processes, in the country. In the words of a woman activist: 'conflict in Myanmar has not been recognized in its entirety and the WPS agenda therefore cannot be inclusive'.[13]

Uneven redistribution

Issues of socio-economic justice have remained marginalised in mainstream approaches to peacebuilding, as well as in the implementation of and scholarship on the WPS agenda (Duncanson, 2019). This has obscured how the transnational, economic dynamics of post-war reconstruction are key factors that shape the emerging peace. Set against these broader dynamics, the potential of the WPS agenda to achieve

economic redistribution and justice is already severely limited from the outset (Cohn and Duncanson, 2020). Even so, in Myanmar, the influx of a significant number of international organisations with an interest in funding women's organisations constituted a major shift in comparison to the period of military rule. Prior to 2011, political space and financial resources for civil society were limited, and donor interest in implementing the WPS agenda has thereby created a new pool of resources. While international funding is just one aspect of post-war economies, it has the potential to shift economic structures through channelling resources to marginalised groups. As emphasised by many of our respondents, funding that allows a women's organisation to rent an office, buy computers and pay its staff can make a tremendous difference to its ability to advocate for its peacebuilding priorities and impact decision-making processes. WPS activities could thereby pursue economic empowerment in a way that is 'liberating' and facilitate women's collective mobilisation to change unequal structures (Duncanson, 2019).

However, this is largely prevented by the way international funding is organised and disbursed. Funding is predominantly provided for short-term project activities, rather than core organisational funding. This means that women's organisations are kept busy as 'logisticians' for international organisations, organising meetings and activities designed by others.[14] While these activities generate sorely needed resources, this effectively undercuts the space for more long-term, strategic and feminist movement building. An international gender adviser makes this point emphatically:

> 'If I was going to put a bet in place, if we're having this conversation in ten years' time, we're going to have seen a huge amount of international activities that basically put women's organisations into a hamster wheel, just going round and round. And it's going to work really well for INGOs [international non-governmental organisations] and donors and the UN, as they are seen to be doing things, and not so well for women's organisations and certainly not for feminist movement building, which is intangible, incremental and requires long-term funding support.'[15]

This pattern is consistent with global trends, where an increased emphasis on women as important actors in peace and development has not translated into an increase in sustainable funding conducive to feminist mobilisation (Arutyunova and Clark, 2013). There have been efforts to counter this trend, however. In 2017–18, the multi-donor trust fund Paung Sie Facility operated a gender, peace and security window that provided core funding for organisational development. Assessments of this initiative emphasised its impact and potential, despite being small in scale (Paung Sie Facility, 2018). Yet, this window was discontinued as a separate funding scheme after a two-year period, and support to women's organisations was subjected to the same conditions as regular project grants. Nevertheless, this experiment was hailed as good practice by many of our respondents and demonstrates that relatively small amounts of funding can make a significant difference in terms of economic redistribution towards local women's organisations.

The preference for short-term project funding also leads WPS activities to be defined by donor priorities, rather than the needs and priorities of women affected by conflict and peacebuilding in Myanmar. This relates to the problem of 'outward-

looking' Western WPS NAPs, which position international actors as experts and valid 'knowers' in the WPS field (Shepherd, 2016). As the following extract from an interview with an international gender adviser demonstrates, international actors are aware that the necessity to comply with donor priorities to access funding result in moving local women's organisations away from working with the issues they consider most urgent:

> 'We have to support things that fit within our view of change because that's what we're reporting on and that's what our donors then report on.... And that squeezes organisations to do things in a way that may not be their preferred way of doing things. It may be one of their priorities, but it may not be the main one. You know, it may be that they just need funding.'[16]

Further, our interviews point to another major limitation in the feminist potential of WPS funding: the majority of it is channelled via the Myanmar government, large, multi-donor trust funds and large, urban women's networks, restricting resources from reaching women's organisations in rural, conflict-affected and minority-dominated areas. This is partly due to administrative, procedural features of how aid is organised. From application to reporting, managing international grants demands significant administrative capacity. For organisations struggling to buy computers or pay their staff, this is often unrealistic. Moreover, to fund organisations that need more administrative support to meet procedural requirements is more demanding for donors: "It's hard to support women at the very local level for large donors … it takes a lot of manpower on the donor side, and not a lot of donors are willing to put money into admin cost."[17] Therefore, as a frustrated leader of a women's organisation explains, donors "do not want to be busy with small groups and small grants, saying that local CSOs do not have enough capacity, do not understand procedures, do not have strong financial systems".[18]

In addition to administrative hurdles, support to local women's organisations in conflict-affected areas is also prevented by government policies that exclude organisations that are not officially registered from eligibility for funding. For small organisations in ethnic minority areas, registration is demanding and time-consuming. Registration is also an issue of personal security, as it will make staff visible to government agents and potentially expose them to reprisals. In effect, these rules constitute new ways for the government to silence critical voices. Due to the lack of contextual knowledge, and because collaboration with the Myanmar government is a priority, many donors fail to question these practices and their effects:

> 'Yes, there are many donors supporting WPS in Myanmar, but they don't assess who are working for WPS and they don't meet those local groups. Mostly, they come to the country and meet with the government and its departments. And they only reach out to those organisations which are close enough with those government departments or got funding from the government-supported institutions.'[19]

This activist goes on to explain that her organisation, which represents ethnic minority women who have been directly affected by conflict, was recently denied funding by a Western embassy because it was not formally registered. This exemplifies a

pattern where donors, because they prioritise relationships with the government, regard cooperation with ethnic minority organisations as too politically sensitive. As one donor representative explains, for this reason, they do not have "direct funding relationships with these smaller so-called 'organisations' and local activists. We can't give directly to them."[20]

Despite the potential of WPS funding to support feminist movement building through the redistribution of economic resources, this has largely failed to materialise in Myanmar. This is because of the dominance of short-term project funding focusing on priorities defined by donors, in combination with exclusionary government restrictions.

Exclusionary representation

In international WPS frameworks, the representation of women in negotiations and decision-making on matters of peace and security, captured in the WPS pillar of participation, has been one of the most prominent focal issues. In Myanmar, there has been a strong focus on women's participation in the formal peace negotiations, reflecting broader funding trends. As a representative of a national donor agency explains, "donors that focus on peacebuilding usually focus *very much* on the formal peace process".[21] While participation in the peace process has been an important mobilising issue for some national women's organisations and networks, and a strategic focus for attracting international funding, an overemphasis on this tends to obscure women's peacebuilding practices in more informal spaces and lead to missed opportunities in supporting them (Pepper, 2018). In the words of a representative of a donor organisation, there is "too little focus on the sites where women build peace every day".[22]

Beyond the formal peace process, the domestic architecture for the implementation of NSPAW is meant to provide a vehicle for the localisation of WPS issues across the country. This architecture consists of a national working group under the DSW and a structure of women's committees (WCs) at various sub-national levels of governance. At the most local levels – the township and village levels – the formal government WC structure operates through the Myanmar Women Affairs Federation, a network of local women's groups not formally part of state structures, but nevertheless used as a vehicle for the government's implementation of the NSPAW.[23] UN agencies support the WC structure, as it is considered a potential bridge between the government and 'local women'. However, our interviews reveal that average local women do not populate these committees and groups. Not unlike their military-era predecessors, activists from women's organisations and local civil society report that the WCs consist of members overwhelmingly "from government departments and wives of [men in] government departments".[24] This limits not only how well these structures can represent women across Myanmar, but also who can benefit from their work. For example, ethnic minority women, many of whom have mostly encountered the state in the form of the coercive power of the military, hesitate to report cases of violence and abuse to the WCs. As a woman activist in Shan State explains, "residents from remote areas are afraid to connect or have relationships with the government departments".[25]

In addition, local women's organisations are highly critical of the work of the WCs. Besides being seen as unrepresentative of local women, they are seen as inactive and politically ineffective. While they are, in theory, the main government bodies for the local implementation of WPS issues, local women activists argue that they do, in

fact, avoid these issues, which are perceived as too political: "They are really sensitive about peace or politics. We can't even talk about it with them."[26]

Instead, the WCs are described by activists as a loyal support structure for the government and military, performing ceremonial duties and community service, without much awareness of gender issues or any political agenda of their own. Indeed, our interviews with members of WCs confirm this. For example, one leader of a village women affairs group in Kayah State describes their role as follows:

> 'In our village, I lead the activities … especially for the welfare of the village. We do cleaning in the village and welcoming for leaders, like when generals and authorities come.…We do not have any specific design or meetings for our activities. We just do what we are ordered by the leaders. For instance, the municipality inform us what date leaders will come to the village and what we have to prepare.'[27]

An activity report from a local Myanmar Women Affairs Federation group in Shan State conveys the same impression of strong emphasis on feminised community service and public health activities, such as cleaning, support to vaccination campaigns and the prevention of mosquito-borne diseases, alongside occasional donations to individual women affected by poverty or human trafficking.[28]

Thus, the WC structure appears inept at shouldering its formal responsibility for nationwide, local implementation of the NSPAW, including government WPS policies. It provides a space for limited forms of public influence for some, primarily government-affiliated, women but does not attempt to engage with the construction of peace. Thus, this structure does not provide spaces where women's need, priorities and visions for change could be articulated and pursued in practice. Several respondents argue that the WCs attain the bulk of government support, in effect, crowding out women's organisations that are actually seeking to engage with WPS issues, but without using this space to represent women's interests in peacebuilding:

> 'The government has obligations to support not only those Women Affairs groups, but all women groups in the country. It is impossible to have real peace in Myanmar without women's participation. The voices of CSO women or rights-based women organisations are neglected or rejected, while there are no voices that come out from Women Affairs, as they are very inactive. In fact, women's groups feel so disappointed with the roles of Women Affairs and do not have any willingness to collaborate with them due to their policies and practices.'[29]

This activist from Mon State is not alone in sharing this view. An adviser from a women's organisation in Kayah State argues that this means that women from conflict-affected communities "are still left behind in implementing the WPS agenda. Women do not have space to be part of it."[30]

Conclusion

While feminist peacebuilding scholarship has developed a nuanced critique of how liberal peacebuilding constrains feminist agendas, it has largely failed to interrogate

the effects of authoritarian post-war governance or engage with emerging literature on illiberal peacebuilding (Lewis et al, 2018; Smith et al, 2020). Our analysis of the politics of the WPS agenda in Myanmar begins to address this gap and allows us to explore what the WPS agenda can become, and what it can achieve, when it is implemented in a context of authoritarian domestic rule.

During the past decade, the potential of WPS practices to contribute to feminist peace in Myanmar was severely constrained by several dynamics. First, consistent with its illiberal orientation towards securing order and stability through state control, the Myanmar government actively sought to exclude critical actors and perspectives from state-led WPS structures, which tended to reproduce conflict dynamics of ethnic majority domination and urban–rural divides. These same patterns were inadvertently reinforced by the way international WPS support was organised. Many international actors prioritised partnerships with the state and adhered to government restrictions that excluded some women from collaboration and support. Insufficient knowledge about local power relations and conflict dynamics on the part of many international actors rendered them blind to these effects. In addition, the bureaucratic and administratively demanding nature of international funding made it practically impossible for many smaller women's organisations in rural, conflict-affected areas to access support. In this way, international gender expertise inadvertently often compounded the co-optation of the WPS agenda into a broader pattern of illiberal and repressive state policies.

These dynamics were clearly visible to many women activists in Myanmar, who did not need to wait for the 2021 military takeover to see the problems with engaging an authoritarian and militarised state as the main peacebuilding partner. Organising international aid in close collaboration with the state made it hard for the women most directly affected by armed conflict and insecurity to participate in, benefit from and inform WPS practices. In the aftermath of the coup, these women are yet again experiencing the worst of the conflict. As international actors are rethinking their engagement with Myanmar, new or adapted peacebuilding strategies must be guided by the knowledge, priorities and needs of the women most affected by armed conflict in order to produce a feminist, and lasting, peace.

Notes

[1] Interview with an international gender adviser, 31 August 2020.

[2] The WPS resolutions are S/RES/1325 (2000), S/RES/1820 (2008), S/RES/1888 (2009), S/RES/1889 (2009), S/RES/1960 (2010), S/RES/2106 (2013), S/RES/2122 (2013), S/RES/2242 (2015), S/RES/2467 (2019) and S/RES/2493 (2019).

[3] For recent overviews of WPS scholarship and practice, see Kirby and Shepherd (2016) and Davies and True (2019).

[4] Interview with a Myanmar gender adviser, 12 May 2020.

[5] In Myanmar, many people identifying as ethnic minorities prefer the term 'ethnic nationalities', emphasising their claims to political autonomy, as well as the fact that a large proportion of Myanmar's population belong to ethnic groups other than the Bamar majority. Here, the term 'ethnic minority' is used, as it is more widely used beyond the case of Myanmar.

[6] One interview was conducted in Swedish.

[7] Interview with an international gender adviser, 28 August 2020.

[8] Interview with a woman CSO activist, 26 April 2020.

[9] Interview with a woman CSO activist, 26 April 2020.
[10] There are exceptions to this general trend, such as the Durable Peace Programme, which works with organisations active in conflict-affected areas of Kachin and Shan States, and highlights the importance of building peace from the ground up (see Price and Sengupta, 2020).
[11] Interview with an international gender adviser, 14 May 2020.
[12] Interview with a donor representative, 5 May 2020.
[13] Email conversation with a woman activist, 27 April 2020.
[14] Interview with an international gender adviser, 31 August 2020.
[15] Interview with an international gender adviser, 31 August 2020.
[16] Interview with an international gender adviser, 14 May 2020.
[17] Interview with a donor representative, 5 May 2020.
[18] Interview with the leader of a women's organisation, 10 April 2020.
[19] Interview with the leader of a women's organisation, 27 April 2020.
[20] Interview with an international gender adviser, 18 August 2020.
[21] Interview with a donor representative, 19 May 2020.
[22] Interview with a donor representative, 11 May 2020.
[23] Interviews with a representative of the DSW, 26 September 2020, and a representative of the Mon State-level DSW, 6 October 2020.
[24] Interview with the leader of a women's organisation, 23 September 2020.
[25] Interview with a member of a women's organisation, 26 September 2020.
[26] Interview with the director of a women's organisation, 24 September 2020.
[27] Interview with the leader of a village-level Myanmar Women Affairs Federation group, 25 September 2020.
[28] Internal activity report, on file with authors.
[29] Interview with a representative of a women's organisation, 23 September 2020.
[30] Interview with an adviser from a women's organisation, 25 September 2020.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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