Gender Expertise, Power, and Peacebuilding: Lessons from Myanmar

This policy brief summarizes key findings from a research project which examined the politics and effects of international gender expertise in Myanmar. The findings demonstrate that international gender expertise inadvertently shaped peacebuilding processes in ways that frequently reinforced existing inequalities. To reverse this pattern, international actors need to identify local partners beyond the “usual suspects”; simplify funding processes and provide flexible funding; better analyze and understand context and conflict dynamics; and challenge the state-centrism of international peacebuilding support.

The promotion of gender equality has increasingly been established as an integral aspect of peacebuilding. As a result, knowledge about how to understand and address gender inequality problems – gender expertise – has become increasingly important in organizations supporting peacebuilding activities, leading to the emergence of gender experts as a category of peacebuilding professionals (Kunz and Prügl 2019). This policy brief summarizes key findings from a research project which examined the politics and effects of international gender expertise in Myanmar, primarily during the period of political transition after 2011 and up until the 2021 attempted military coup d’état. International gender expertise here refers to the application of international policy frameworks and norms such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda through the activities and financial support of international donor agencies, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The research focused on understanding the roles, relationships, and power dynamics between international gender experts and their organizations; women’s organizations and activists in Myanmar; and the Myanmar state. The project was funded by the Swedish Research Council, and the research was carried out by associate professor Elisabeth Olivius (Umeå University), associate professor Jenny Hedström (Swedish Defense University) and researcher Zin Mar Phyo. The findings summarized here build on interviews with gender experts in UN agencies, international NGOs, donor agencies and embassies, and on interviews with Myanmar women activists from a diversity of organizations and regions of the country (see Olivius, Hedström and Zin Mar Phyo 2022 for more details on the material and methods of the project).

Recommendations

1. Identify local partners beyond the “usual suspects”
2. Simplify funding processes and provide flexible funding
3. Better analyze and understand context and conflict dynamics
4. Challenge the state-centrism of international peacebuilding
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Our findings demonstrate that international gender expertise frequently shaped peacebuilding processes in ways that reinforced existing inequalities: between international and domestic actors; along persistent axes of inequality such as ethnicity, class, and urban-rural location; and between the Myanmar state and actors that it perceived as critical or oppositional. These findings resonate with existing studies of other peacebuilding contexts and are not unique to Myanmar. An important question, for future international engagement in Myanmar as well as in other conflict-affected settings, is therefore how the tendency for international gender expertise to reinforce power imbalances can be countered. How can international gender expertise be applied differently, and better achieve its ambition to support the building of a gender-just peace?

In this policy brief, we put forward four recommendations for how international actors working to support gender- and peacebuilding work may rethink and improve their practices. We argue that international actors need to identify local partners beyond the "usual suspects"; simplify funding processes and provide flexible funding; better analyze and understand context and conflict dynamics; and challenge the state-centrism of international peacebuilding support. Importantly, we do not suggest that people working as gender advisers, or on WPS projects or portfolios, intentionally seek to conserve patterns of inequality. Rather, we found that such effects result from structural constraints, organizational cultures, and established ways of working. Below, we exemplify the dynamics of how international gender expertise has reinforced inequality that we have observed in our research and explain how each of our four recommendations may contribute to mitigate such tendencies.

Identify local partners beyond the "usual suspects"

The resources associated with international gender expertise were not equally accessible to all women’s organizations and activists engaged in peacebuilding work in Myanmar. While some organizations emerged as “donor darlings” and even experienced a funding surplus, others had little chance to ever access international support for their activities. The organizations who could pick and choose amongst donors were generally urban-based organizations and networks led by educated, middle-class women who were fluent not only in English but also in international peacebuilding and grant-making jargon. Those who struggled to access support were generally rural, ethnic minority and conflict-affected women. These dynamics reinforce long-standing hierarchies and forms of exclusion in Myanmar and limit the range of voices heard and needs met. This is particularly problematic as arguably the women least able to access international support are the ones most directly affected by Myanmar’s history of armed conflict.

This skewed distribution of international support partly results from dominant, narrow perceptions about what a local woman participant, or local partner organization, should look like. We found in our interviews that such perceptions often excluded groups that did not conform to Western understandings of a “proper” organization – a formally registered NGO with certain procedural characteristics (see Ta-
mang 2020 and Cardeño et al 2023 for similar findings from India and Mindanao). We also found that women activists who were seen as too critical or confrontational in their style of advocacy were dismissed as troublesome. For example, speaking about a report about conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated by the Myanmar military by a women’s alliance primarily representing ethnic minority groups, a UN representative dismissed its usefulness and impact, saying that “it was a very negative report. For the government to take them seriously they need at least some positive recommendations. So if you’re just negative and give no solutions that’s all not very good.” Such comments echo previous research findings about WPS advocacy at the UN, showing that civil society activists need to speak in a way that is “positive, hopeful, and future oriented” in order to be taken seriously (Gibbings 2011).

In contrast, local women’s organizations who primarily focused on responding to women’s everyday needs were sometimes described as irrelevant by international gender experts, who saw these organizations as not sufficiently aligned with frameworks such as the WPS agenda. This resonates with a previous study on Nepal. This study examined the types of local activists positioned by donors as the ideal type of partner able to “localize” the WPS agenda: these partners needed to be local enough to be seen as “authentic”, but at the same time act and speak in a way that made them intelligible as “one of us” within a transnational WPS community (Lyytikäinen and Yadav 2022). In practice, urban, educated women who are fluent in English and connected to the social and professional networks of international gender experts are most likely to be perceived as the right type of local partner.

In Myanmar, these dynamics reinforced the exclusion of rural, ethnic minority and conflict-affected women from accessing and shaping peacebuilding processes. To change these patterns, international actors need to challenge their own perceptions of what a suitable local partner may look like and devote more effort to identifying potential partners beyond urban centers, and beyond familiar organizational formats and already-known activists.

Simplify funding processes and provide flexible funding

As noted above, we found that despite a stated focus on “localization”, rural, ethnic minority and conflict-affected women were less likely to be seen as potential partners and access support. In addition, smaller organisations based in rural areas also faced more challenges in terms of managing international funding, which requires ample administrative capacity, language skills, time, and resources. The structural problems in funding to women’s organizations in peacebuilding contexts have been extensively documented in previous research. Funding processes are bureaucratic and administratively demanding; grants are short-term; and funding is to a significant extent steered by donor priorities, not by the priorities and needs of the recipients (Boer Cueva et al 2022, Hamilton et al 2021, Arutyunova and Clark 2013). These features of the funding system present particular challenges for small and rural organizations, like many of those based in conflict-affected areas in Myanmar.

Our interviews show that many international gender experts are aware of, or even intentional about, their exclusion of small organizations. As expressed by one gender expert, working with smaller organizations demands more from the donors: “not a lot of organisations are willing to put in a lot of money into admin costs in order to support smaller organisations.” More established organizations, well versed in donor application and reporting systems and requirements, are seen as “more easy to work with.” Therefore, as a frustrated leader of a women’s organization 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”.

Moreover, the earmarking of funding for “hot topics”, or activities already designed by donors, affects all recipient
organizations, forcing them to engage in time-consuming activities that may not be central to their own needs and priorities. Again, international gender experts are often aware of this. As one gender expert explains,

"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 organizations 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."

As core funding for the running costs of organizations is rarely provided, the implementation of WPS activities also in practice relies on a degree of unpaid labour by local women activists (Hamilton et al 2021). This reproduces a structure where international experts set the agenda, and local partners are treated as subordinated implementors or logisticians. This type of inequality is persistent in international peacebuilding and development cooperation generally, despite long-standing rhetorical commitments to local ownership and localization. Changing funding practices is necessary to move from rhetoric to reality. What is needed is to simplify administrative processes and requirements, provide language and administrative support, and to prioritize core organizational funding for multi-year grant periods. International donors invested in supporting a gender-just peace must shift the tendency where local women are treated as contractors and implementers of donor-designed programs, and instead recognize and give space to local women to set the agenda for peacebuilding.

**Better analyze and understand context and conflict dynamics**

To diversify who benefits from international gender expertise and avoid entrenching existing hierarchies, donors and peacebuilders need to devote time and resources to better analyze the conflict dynamics and power structures of the context where they work. Activists interviewed for this study told us that "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." Without a deep understanding of the local context, donors risk perpetuating the marginalization of organisations not already known to the broader donor community.

A better contextual understanding is also needed to adequately assess the potential effects of planned policies and programs, and to avoid inadvertently exposing partners to insecurity or harm. For example, in an interview a UN representative described a meeting she organized to provide input to a periodic reporting to a UN body, where women’s organizations and government officials were brought together. The UN gender expert expressed great frustration and chastised women activists for failing to speak out about abuses against women in conflict areas when they were given this opportunity. This reaction illustrates a lack of contextual understanding and sensitivity to the security risks faced by local partners. 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.

To avoid inadvertently exposing partners to harm or perpetuating the exclusion of marginalized actors and perspectives, more time and resources need to be devoted to context- and conflict analysis within international agencies. Staff who are new to Myanmar need more sensitization and training in order to avoid doing harm. Practices of frequent staff rotation in some agencies are clearly not helpful and should be reconsidered where possible. But first and foremost, for a better analysis of power, insecurity and risk, it is essential to listen to the expertise of people living in the context. Again, this is about challenging the persistent hierarchical relationship between international and local actors; who is allowed to set the agenda, and who is seen as holding valid and important knowledge?
Challenge the state-centrism of international peacebuilding support

The idea of supporting capacity building of state institutions is central to dominant international peacebuilding frameworks. But in many conflict contexts, including Myanmar, the state is a party to the conflict. Working with and through the state as default mode might therefore lead to a situation whereby international support inadvertently empowers the regime in power in its efforts to marginalize and silence critical voices or political challengers. Problematically, this tendency was clearly visible in our research into gender-focused peacebuilding work in Myanmar. Many international actors prioritized support through state-led policy architecture and funding structures, and (wittingly or unwittingly) excluded women’s organizations with a critical stance in relation to the government. As one activist lamented in her interview, "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 organizations which are close enough with those government departments or got funding from the government-supported institutions."

This activist goes on to explain that her organization, which represents ethnic minority women who have been directly affected by conflict, was denied funding by a Western embassy because her organization was not formally registered with the Myanmar state. During the period of our study, it was very common for women’s organizations in rural areas not to register because it was costly and complicated. Others, notably those affiliated with ethnic minority struggles, did not register because of valid security concerns that registration might expose them to state surveillance. Some donors have their own requirements that partner organizations need to be registered, and others choose to align with the Myanmar government’s claim that non-registered organizations were unlawful or illegitimate. In a context where the state used registration to control civil society, having registration status as a prerequisite for funding thus effectively skewed international support towards organizations seen as loyal, or as non-political, by the government. As a leader from an ethnic minority women’s alliance remarked, discussing why their partner organizations were frequently rejected by international actors: “Many of the organizations we work with 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.”

In Myanmar, the exclusion of women from conflict-affected areas was also compounded by government travel restrictions that barred international actors from visiting some areas of the country and meeting with women’s organizations there. This strategy for controlling information made it more difficult for donors to seek out a wider range of perspectives and partners, and better understand the dynamics and effects of ongoing conflict.

While the conventional assumption behind a focus on state capacity building is that this will support democratization, in reality, state-centric peacebuilding support often empowers state repression against opponents. In a context of authoritarian or hybrid governance, funding independent civil society work for democracy, human rights and gender equality directly may be a more fruitful strategy to support democratization as well as resilience to autocratic backlash, such as the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. In an era of global autocratization and democratic backsliding, it is high time to reconsider the adequacy of state-centric peacebuilding models.

Summary

This research project found that despite intentions to foster a gender just-peace, international gender expertise frequently contributed to shape peacebuilding processes during the decade of political transition in Myanmar in ways that reinforced existing inequalities. In particular, this resulted from narrow perceptions about who could be a local partner; administratively demanding funding processes and donor-driven funding; insufficient contextual knowledge and conflict sensitivity; and a state-centric approach which enabled the Myanmar government to manipulate international aid in favor of state efforts to silence and exclude critical voices. These patterns are not unique to Myanmar. Rather, these findings align with previous research, and point to larger structural and cultural problems in international peacebuilding support. Gender-focused peacebuilding work is no exception, despite its explicit aspirations to challenge power relations through the construction of a more just post-war order.

To change these patterns, we suggest that international actors need to identify local partners beyond the “usual suspects”; simplify funding processes and provide flexible funding; better analyze and understand context and conflict dynamics; and challenge the state-centrism of international peacebuilding support. These four recommendations can serve as a basis for reflection within international peacebuilding and donor organizations, prompting dialogue about how specific practices and forms of support can be revised to avoid entrenching existing hierarchies and better facilitate a gender-just peace.
Further reading

Project publications

Open access here: https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16359327302509


Other referenced research


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