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15 Women in Myanmar

Change and Continuity

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Throughout dramatic political shifts in Myanmar's recent history, from absolute exclusion of women from positions of power during military rule, to a semi-civilian government with a female de facto head of state, and back to military rule yet again, many patterns of gender inequality in Myanmar have persisted (Women's League of Burma, 2008; Women's Organization Network, 2016). While Myanmar is home to numerous ethnic groups with diverse cultures, norms and traditions, the work of women activists and scholars has nonetheless revealed widespread patterns of discrimination against women (Ikeya, 2011; Harriden, 2012). At the same time, the decade of political transition between 2011 and 2021 brought about significant changes in legislation as well as public perceptions relating to women's rights and in the conditions for women's civil society activism and political participation and influence (Hedström and Olivius, 2023; Khin Khin Mra and Livingstone, 2020).

This chapter provides an analysis of change and continuity in terms of both opportunities and challenges for realising women's equality in Myanmar. Taking the situation of women during military rule before 2011 as a starting point, the analysis next moves on to exploring women's experiences of the transition and their attempts at leveraging political openings for gender equality up until 2021. Finally, the effects of the 2021 military coup on women's mobilisation, security and access to rights is discussed, before concluding with a discussion of future challenges and opportunities for women's rights in Myanmar.

Military Rule to 2011: Repression and Resistance

From the coup in 1962 until the ushering in of a new quasi-democratic government in 2011, Myanmar was under military rule. In the aftermath of the 1962 coup, the most immediate effect on gender equality related to the enactment of strict pronatalist policies (including severely restricting access to family planning methods) and changes to military recruitment policies, under which female candidates could no longer join active army service (Spiro, 1977). The new administration became staffed by personnel drawn from the military, and this largely remained true across time and administrations (Fenichel and Khan, 1981). This means that women's opportunities to influence public policy were, at best, very limited. The official view espoused by the new regime was one of male dominance in the public sphere

and of women's duty to reproduce the population within the private sphere (Burma Socialist Programme Party, 1966).

Notably, a rhetoric about Burmese women's 'inherent equality' with men – first used during the independence struggle to delegitimise colonialism – resurfaced (Ikeya, 2011; Tharaphi Than, 2014) and became a means through which the military regimes attempted to achieve legitimacy in both the international and the national arena. As an illustration of this, the official statement from the Myanmar delegation at the United Nations Fourth World Congress for Women in 1995 not only espoused the official view that women in Myanmar enjoyed equality with men but suggested that other countries could in fact learn from Myanmar's experience (Soe Myint, 1995). Burmese women's reputed equality became a means for demonstrating the nation's progress, while discounting any need for international intervention (Ikeya, 2011).

Disastrous economic policies led Myanmar into being designated as a 'least developed country' in 1987 (Maureen Aung-thwin and Thant Myint-u, 1992). Economic mismanagement resulted in chronic underdevelopment, high levels of food insecurity and widespread poverty (Belak, 2002). Although there is a lack of reliable data relating to how poverty affected women in Myanmar, the 1973 and 1983 censuses provide important snapshots of how gender and poverty are interrelated. Strikingly, both the 1973 and the 1983 censuses reveal a significant gender gap in both illiteracy rates and labour force participation, with most women reportedly engaged in unpaid household duties (Maung, 1986, 1997). This demonstrates that women in Myanmar had less access to the labour market, spent more time on unpaid household duties and most likely had less socio-economic wealth than their male peers.

Unequal access to and influence over legislative matters was reflected in the near-total absence of legislation focused on addressing and rectifying violence against and discrimination of women, creating a climate and a practice of impunity for gender-based violations (Thin Thin Aung and Williams, 2009).¹ Women's groups and international human rights organisations documented how during the period, women in Myanmar were subjected to grave forms of gender-based violence.² This was particularly the case in rural parts of the country, where armed conflict severely impacted on women's access to human rights and gender equality.

Although women were, by and large, absent from formal positions of power, women were active across oppositional movements (Harriden, 2012). As political activists, women organised student-led demonstrations protesting the military regime, and as members of non-state armed groups, women joined military ranks to fight the dictatorship. These movements afforded women more opportunities than formal politics. While women were mostly found in supporting roles, making up the base as opposed to the leadership, it is important to recognise that women's involvement, whether as supporters or leaders, was indispensable to oppositional campaigns (Hedström, 2022).

Many women rose to prominence during the 1988 uprising. In the aftermath of the crackdown on the demonstrations, previously urban-based women activists fled to rural conflict-affected areas, where they were exposed to the impact of armed

conflict on women's human rights. This ultimately resulted in women leaders setting up the Women's League of Burma (WLB), a multi-ethnic women's movement which mobilised women along the country's borders and in ethnic areas to assert their rights collectively. Despite their critical role in both armed and non-armed oppositional movements, women were excluded from participating in negotiating the ceasefires agreed to between the military regime and the leadership of ethnic armed groups (Hedström, 2013; Lahtaw et al., 2014).

International advocacy around abuses of women's human rights in ethnic minority areas became an important platform for action at this time, as opportunities to push for change inside the country were very limited. By documenting gender-specific impacts of armed conflict on women, such as trafficking and sexual violence, women's groups were able to challenge and contest the government from the relative safety of neighbouring countries. Through participation in the reporting process for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and in particular advocacy around sexual violence committed by government soldiers against ethnic minority women, women's groups created a narrative about women's human rights abuses that countered the government's official rhetoric and that led to international pressure, including sanctions, being leveraged against the Burmese regime (Hedström and Olivius, 2021; Cardenas and Olivius, 2021).³

The government's concerted efforts to maintain the chimera of women's 'inherent equality' despite evidence to the contrary appeared in the formation of a number of different government-controlled organisations (so-called GONGOs) in the early 2000s. The previously existing Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MCWA) was re-established, and following participation at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the government founded the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs (MNCWA), and a few years later, the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF). At the same time, the Unlawful Associations Act prevented independent women's organisations from operating openly in the country. Data from the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPPB) shows that between 1993 and late 2010, 174 women were imprisoned for their independent political activities. The leadership of the GONGOs were, moreover, mainly made up of the wives of senior military commanders, while lower-based membership were, at times, forcibly recruited (Women's League of Burma, 2008). As a result, official activities seemed to be more committed to the creation of an impression of the government's purported dedication to women's equality, rather than to the creation of actual equality.⁴

In May 2008, Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar. The devastating consequences of this disaster were compounded by existing gendered discrepancies. According to the United Nations, around 140,000 people died. The majority of those killed were women and girls. In the aftermath of the cyclone, civil society organisations reported an upsurge in domestic and sexual violence, women's malnutrition and critical reproductive health issues. It also led to an increase in household poverty, which pushed vulnerable women into unsafe migration and work patterns, including forced labour, trafficking and sex work (Women's Protection Technical

Working Group, 2010). In this way, women's restricted access to economic, social and political resources and opportunities prior to the cyclone aggravated their experiences of the disaster. However, the cyclone also gave rise to significant civil society mobilisation that would later flourish under less repressive conditions after 2011 and was the impetus for the formation of what would become an important women's rights movement active in urban Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

That very same year, 2008, the country's third constitution came into effect. The drafting process had been a drawn-out affair from which women were, by and large, excluded. Most delegates were handpicked, and the process was guided by an overarching mandate to produce a "'constitutional' template for military involvement in all aspects of the body politic" (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Global Justice Centre and Leitner Center for International Law and Justice, 2015). Only 35 women out of a total of 702 delegates contributed to the process (Thin Thin Aung and Williams, 2009). In response, women in oppositional movements actively took part in an alternative constitutional drafting process, where they advocated for quotas and a gender-inclusive language to ensure women's participation across all aspects of governance (Women's League of Burma, 2006). The shortage of women's voices in the formal drafting processes is felt in the 2008 Constitution, which included several problematic provisions, including section 352 which notes that "nothing in this section shall prevent appointment of men to the positions that are suitable for men only"; sections 109, 141 and 161 enshrining (male) military power across critical areas of decision-making; and section 381 providing soldiers with impunity for crimes, such as sexual violence, committed in conflict areas (Ministry of Information, 2008).

The effects of this gender order carried over to the new regime. As Myanmar entered a new phase with the elections in 2010, the previous regime's complete lack of institutional support for women's equality meant that women in Myanmar experienced widespread economic and political marginalisation and exclusion. Nonetheless, both inside the country and on the borders, women were mobilising for change.

Thein Sein and the USDP: A Transition for Women?

The 2010 elections ushered in a new government, yet one in which women were – again – largely absent. Among elected representatives to parliament, only 6 per cent were women. At the state/regional-level parliaments, the numbers were even lower: women won 3.8 per cent of seats. The military quota, functioning in effect as a quota for men, skewed the numbers further (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al., 2017). Yet a rhetoric about Burmese women's inherent equality continued to be promoted throughout U Thein Sein's rule and remained the official position taken by the government in its engagement with and participation in international fora related to women's advancement.

However, civil society activists took advantage of government promises for democratic reforms in the country. The years immediately following the 2010 elections saw a number of high-profile returns of previously exiled political activists.

Laws pertaining to freedom of expression and peaceful protest and assembly led to an increase in political space. The number of independent organisations operating inside the country grew substantially, including women's organisations (Zin Mar Aung, 2015; Olivius and Hedström, 2020). The opening of the country after the reforms facilitated a series of critical 'bridging activities' between exiled and inside women activists, which culminated in 2013 in the national Women's Peace Forum, the first such event to be held inside the country. The forum became a milestone in the building of a more united, yet diverse, national women's movement, at which women across the country agreed on a set of common recommendations for advancing women's equality in Myanmar (Women's League of Burma and Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar, 2013).

Importantly, policy advocacy targeting the government directly opened up as a new avenue for women's groups to push for change. Whereas women in oppositional movements had previously been critiquing the government from afar, they now found themselves invited to high-level meetings with government officials in the country's capital. The focus of much of this advocacy was clustered around the need for new legislation advancing the rights of women. In particular, the Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women (PoVAW) bill and the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) emerged as two areas of focus, and initially optimism was high around the ability of the women's groups to effect change in these two areas. However, it soon became clear that the government had little interest in advancing women's rights. The PoVAW bill was never passed, and while NSPAW was launched, the government did not dedicate a budget for implementation (Aye Thiri Kyaw, 2023).

An ambitious peace plan announced by the U Thein Sein government in 2011 and initially focused on bilateral agreements morphed into a nationwide ceasefire process in 2013. Women's participation in the peace process became an increasingly salient theme for women's organisations, with international funding directed towards increasing the number of women in this process. Despite much international focus and the efforts of women's groups, actual participation and influence of women's activists in the peace process, whether these women were representing the government, civil society or ethnic armed groups, remained low during U Thein Sein's hold. The institutions guiding both the bilateral agreements and, later, the nationwide process were 'almost exclusively male dominated', with an extremely low percentage of women participating officially (Hedström, 2013; Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process, 2015). When invited, women were mostly asked to comment on social issues, reaffirming essentialist notions of women's roles and responsibilities. The determination to keep women out led men to perform some remarkable theatrics. At the first Panglong Conference, women participants reported that their input from discussions was deleted from the proceedings or their microphones were cut off when speaking. At other meetings, older men would simply remove their hearing aids when it was women's time to speak.

At the same time, fighting resumed in many ethnic minority regions, with devastating consequences for women and girls living in these areas. In 2014, women's groups released a report detailing over a hundred incidences of rape, including

gang rapes, committed by government soldiers in conflict-affected areas (Women's League of Burma, 2014). In northern Myanmar, where some of the most persistent fighting took place, over 100,000 people were displaced, the majority women and their children. Displaced women and girls were exposed to a multitude of insecurities, such as domestic and sexual violence, severe malnutrition and reproductive health issues (Gender Equality Network, 2013b). In former conflict areas enjoying relative stability, commercial expansion as well as development interventions often created new insecurities, as large swathes of farmland were appropriated for purposes such as commercial plantations or the construction of dams and roads. As women were rarely formally the owners of the land they lived on, land grabbing affected women disproportionately (Faxon, 2015; Hedström and Olivius, 2020).

Moreover, state repression and communal violence against Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar, spurred by an increasingly belligerent Buddhist nationalism, worsened severely. In 2012, anti-Muslim riots in Rakhine State forced 150,000 to flee their homes amid horrific human rights abuses. Most of those who fled became internally displaced, confined to squalid camps in Rakhine State, while some managed to cross the border into Bangladesh, seeking shelter in already cramped existing refugee camps. In addition to violence and abuses targeting Rohingyas indiscriminately, Rohingya women were also subjected to gender-specific abuses such as rape, sexual exploitation and trafficking (Abdelkader, 2014; Olivius, 2017).

The rise of radical Buddhist nationalism as an increasingly salient political force in Myanmar also came to pose a new form of challenge to the advancement of women's rights and gender equality more broadly. In 2014, allegedly in order to protect race and religion, the government drafted four bills that had been proposed by the Organization for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, also known as MaBaTha, and the 969 Movement. One year later, the Parliament passed the four Race and Religious Protection laws: the Religious Conversion Law, the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law, the Population Control Healthcare Law and the Monogamy Law. These laws limit women's freedom to make decisions relating to marriage and reproduction, and particularly target Muslims and Muslim-dominated regions (Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists, 2015). In response, women's groups joined forces to collectively oppose the legislation on the grounds that it violated women's human rights and did not comply with the CEDAW principles that Myanmar has committed itself to realising. Further, women's groups warned against the potential of these laws to be used against religious minorities (Walton et al., 2015). Despite new challenges such as these laws, as the 2015 elections came near, optimism for women's activism remained high, as the new elections offered women a platform for contesting the abuse of women's rights in Myanmar.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

In 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won the national elections. The number of female parliamentarians doubled, and Myanmar got its first (de facto) female head of state (Minoletti, 2016).

However, in the run-up to the elections, female candidates confronted a confluence of gender-specific challenges restricting their abilities to stand for elections on an equal footing to men. Women's relative poverty in comparison to men, the lack of institutional training or guidelines advancing female political candidates and societal norms framing men as natural leaders while positioning women as uniquely responsible for family welfare were just some of the obstacles female candidates faced (Gender Equality Network, 2015, 2017; Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al., 2017). Only about 40 per cent of female candidates received any kind of funding to assist with their campaigning, and many women found it hard to undertake campaign travelling. Female voters in particular distrusted other women who engaged in what they deemed inappropriate political behaviour (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al., 2017), echoing findings from a 2014 survey in which just over 70 per cent of (both male and female) respondents believed that men made better political leaders than women (The Asia Foundation, 2014). Women's responsibilities for household duties, evident in the country's substantial labour force gap (Ministry of Planning and Finance and the World Bank, 2017), impacted women's experiences of the campaign trail, with female candidates, and later elected members of Parliament, attempting to balance their domestic duties with political duties. In short, whether in political office or not, women were still primarily positioned as uniquely responsible for caring for their families, and new openings for participation in politics did not change this gendered division of labour.

However, outside of formal politics, national women's activism expanded significantly as state institutions became more welcoming towards women's groups. This signified a considerable departure from the focus on international advocacy that had dominated their approach during the years of the military rule when it was not possible to advocate for women's rights independently and openly inside the country. Border-based and exiled organisations kept gradually returning, although some retained 'one foot in exile', with disagreement and conflicting positions on the feasibility and timing of return (Olivius, 2019). Yet as donor funding shifted towards supporting organisations based in urban and central Myanmar, ambivalent women's groups were in effect increasingly pushed to move inside the country (Olivius and Hedström, 2020). The presence of international peacebuilding actors seeking to support women's rights and participation in the peace process reinforced the shift towards collaboration with the state, as they often prioritised the strengthening of state institutions and adhered to government regulations imposed upon civil society organisations, which rendered many small, oppositional or ethnic minority-dominated organisations invisible or ineligible for funding (Olivius et al., 2022a).

Women living in conflict areas continued to suffer military abuses, including sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors, yet international audiences were becoming less receptive to these gender-based concerns. As noted with some despair by a women's activist, 'there is less and less interest in the lives of the people who are in the conflict areas'.⁵ In this context, women's activists from ethnic minority organisations maintained the need to openly call out state-sponsored sexual violence against women in conflict areas. However, for reasons of personal security as

well as political strategy, being outspoken on these issues within Myanmar was not yet possible. Thus, while a growing presence of women's activism in Yangon enabled women's organisations to engage with processes of policy change and work with state structures in new ways, for ethnic minority women, their 'return' and rapprochement with the state came at a price. While there were a few years of relative freedom for civil society under U Thein Sein, leading to optimism regarding increased political space for women's activism in Myanmar, activists experienced a narrowing of this space under the NLD government.⁶

Moreover, despite the presence of a democratically elected government with a leader widely regarded as a human rights advocate, state-sponsored violence against ethnic minority civilians, including horrific sexual violence against women, reached new levels during this period. The already difficult situation for the Rohingya population in Rakhine State deteriorated dramatically after Rohingya militants attacked a border guard post on 9 October 2016. In response, the Burmese military initiated a 'security operation' allegedly aimed at catching Rohingya militants, but resulting in widespread violence against Rohingya men, women and children as well as massive destruction of property (Human Rights Watch, 2017). A 2017 report by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, based on interviews with Rohingya who had fled Rakhine State after the beginning of the crackdown in October 2016, details dreadful accounts of summary killings, arson, sexual violence and torture (OHRCH, 2017).

Although the scale and intensity of abuses against ethnic minority civilians were specific to the Rohingya genocide, the patterns of the abuses were similar to those carried out by security forces associated with the Burmese government in other areas of the country throughout the country's civil war. Despite generally low public sympathy to the plight of the Rohingya community in the country and among government officials, this period saw interesting examples of women's solidarity. For example, the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) issued several statements condemning sexual violence against Rohingya women. Citing the frequency of rape and other abuses committed against women and girls in Rakhine State, KWO stated that "[w]e are deeply pained by these reports, which revive memories of similar horrors endured for decades by women in our communities at the hands of the Burma Army. [. . .] Our hearts go out to the Rohingya women and their families at this time" (Karen Women's Organisation, 2016). In a context of widespread dehumanisation of the Rohingya community, this expression of cross-ethnic identification and solidarity was significant and testified to the potential of women's activism to bridge conflict lines.

The peace process initiated by U Thein Sein and institutionalised in the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) continued under the auspices of the new NLD government. A first meeting of the Union Peace Conference, named the 21st Century Panglong, was held in Naypidaw during the fall of 2016. The representation of women was low, less than 7 per cent, and women's organisations criticised the process for its failure to include civil society generally and for its exclusion of some ethnic armed organisations that had not signed the NCA.⁷ A second Union Peace Conference was held in May 2017. Again, the participation of women was

low, despite the nominal acceptance of the principle that at least 30 per cent of participants should be women. Women's participation, as well as discussions relating to gender equality or to women, was also confined to the social sector theme. Very few women were involved in discussions relating to the political, economic, security or land and environment sector, and policy proposals in these sectors rarely included a gender perspective (Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process, 2017). Thus, within the framework of the official peace process, women and gender issues remained marginalised, with many key aspects of the peace-building process treated separately from women's rights.

However, while women's efforts to gain formal representation met with numerous challenges, women's activists and organisations utilised back-channels to informally influence the process, for example, as technical advisers to ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and through "tea break advocacy" (Pepper, 2018). In addition, women's peace-building practices at the community level extended far beyond formal negotiations, as women's groups organised a wide range of community peace-building trainings that were essential to local conflict resolution and relationship building, contributed to greater local political awareness and built capacity for political activism and representation in peace negotiations and policymaking. Further, the women's movement itself embodied and exemplified a political order characterised by ethnic equality, dialogue and peaceful coexistence through alliances such as the WLB, Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar and Gender Equality Network. In addition, skilful use of international frameworks and norms, such as CEDAW and the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda, has long provided women activists with key resources and arenas for influence (Cardenas and Olivius, 2021). In this way, women's activist networks across the country contributed in critical ways to community-level dialogue and political mobilisation, preparing the next generation of women human rights defenders to advocate for their rights.

After the 2021 Coup: Resistance, Backlash and Multiple Crises

In the November 2020 elections, an unprecedented number of women competed for parliamentary seats: one in every six candidates was a woman. In Shan State, where the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy introduced a gender quota – the first political party in Myanmar to do so – women accounted for 19 per cent of all candidates (Raynor and Clark, 2020). The NLD similarly put forward a record number of female candidates. As the party increased its share of votes, winning 396 seats in the upper and lower legislature, the percentage of elected women in the National Parliament grew from 6 per cent 2015 to 13 per cent in 2020. However, the military-aligned main opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), alleged electoral malpractice, and in the wee hours of 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military assumed power via a coup in order to, in their words, ensure a "genuine discipline flourishing multiparty democratic system" (Kipgen, 2021), arresting the country's first female head of state, Aung San Suu Kyi, and reinstating a fully androcentric leadership.

Within days, the streets of Yangon and other major cities swelled with protest. Women in the garment industry organised many of the early demonstrations, arriving by bus from their factories located in city outskirts to lead protests. Female teachers and students, health care providers, human rights activists and labour union leaders emerged as a powerful force of protest, with reports estimating that as many as 60 per cent of participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement were women and girls. The Women's Alliance Burma (WAB) was formed as a protest coordination group joining together a diversity of women's organisations and forms for activism. Although the resistance movement was in many respect leaderless, ethnic minority women came to the fore as figureheads, rallying protestors in Yangon and other major cities, infusing the anti-coup movement with demands for a future federal Myanmar inclusive of ethnic and sexual minorities and women's rights (Loong, 2021).

The initial stages of the anti-coup movement were characterised by its creativity, as young protestors dressed in drag and cosplay; choreographed dances; and displayed LGBTI flags and creative cartoons insulting the military, and in particular, Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military junta, who responded by chastising female protestors for wearing "indecent clothes" or for being "emotional and loose" (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2021). Notably, many of these protests deployed gendered superstitions to resist military rule, including using women's *htameins* "as a first line of defence" because in Myanmar, women's skirts and undergarments are believed to deprive men of their prowess (AAPPB, 2022). Drawing on the experiences of earlier protest, including the 'Panties for Peace' campaign that the exiled women's movement created in 2007, demonstrators erected make-shift barricades made out of women's underwear and menstrual pads as a way to mock the military and prevent its movement, resulting in the junta passing an emergency law criminalising public display of women's underwear and sanitary products on roads (Khin Khin Mra and Hedström, forthcoming).

Within a month, the military scaled up their responses and began a violent crackdown on the anti-coup protests. A young woman, Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, was the first protester to die after being shot in the head by military snipers in Mandalay, and in the first year alone, over 100 female protestors were killed by military forces (AAPPB, 2022). Imprisoned protestors, both male and female, faced gender-based violence, including sexual abuse, with female detainees reportedly denied access to maternal health care, sanitary products and water to take care of their hygiene (WAC-M & WLB, 2022).

The prominent role of women in the resistance to military rule is the result of women's mobilisation over several decades, in particular as the decade of political reforms enabled women's groups and networks inside the country to expand their activities, focus and reach. The military coup abruptly put a stop to any activities seeking to engage with policymaking and governance or to openly campaign for women's rights. Along with other activists and oppositional politicians, women human rights defenders were especially targeted by post-coup arrests and crackdowns. As a result, thousands of people, including many prominent women

activists, fled the cities, sheltering in rural areas or crossing the border into Thailand. (Progressive Voice, 2021; Olivius et al., 2022b; WAC-M & WLB, 2022).

Alongside increasing violence and mass displacement, the coup has also led to a large-scale failure of local governance and service delivery. Many civil servants, including health care staff, have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and many military-appointed local officials have resigned in response to hostility and protests from the public. Moreover, in many conflict-affected areas, welfare services were very limited already before the coup because of decades of war and government neglect. The compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup have created a vast gap between needs and available services, resulting in an escalating public health crisis alongside the political and economic crises unleashed by the military takeover. This has accentuated an uneven gendered division of labour, as women's care burden has increased steeply, constraining their access to employment opportunities and health services. As in the past, when households face a lack of income and food, women are more likely to be the ones eating less and last, often compelled to sell personal assets to help their families survive (Agatha Ma and Kusakabe, 2015; UN Women and UNDP, 2022). Reports note an escalation of domestic violence as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns and in the post-coup crisis (Miedema and Aye Thiri Kyaw, 2022), and women fleeing either poverty or military attacks are facing sexual harassment by border guards.

In these difficult conditions, women's organisations have been key to humanitarian assistance and local service delivery. In particular, ethnic minority women were able to draw on previous experiences of providing both leadership and lifesaving aid in rural areas affected by conflict, where women's networks could reach remote and dangerous parts of the country to deliver materials, urgently needed as displaced communities are lacking access to shelter, clean water, food and health services (Progressive Voice, 2021). Women face gender-specific challenges while in displacement, with reports noting an increase in premature and underweight births and infant mortality (WAC-M & WLB, 2022). However, the women's groups that have stepped in to fill these gaps in essential services have not had their funding needs met by the international community (Olivius et al., 2022b) and face a variety of difficulties in organising, including direct threats and attacks, and the absence of functioning and stable communication channels, infrastructure and safe houses.

Women have also featured in the defector movement, with wives to men serving in the state military publicly encouraging their husbands to defect from the armed forces (Kyed and Ah Lynn, 2022). While the military junta initially claimed to want to continue working with the nationwide peace process, the aftermath of the coup has seen an increase in armed clashes and the emergence of new armed organisations called People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and Local Defence Forces (LDFs). Most of the PDFs/LDFs are anti-military and typically include both men and women. Notably, one group, the Myaung Women Guerrilla Group, formed in late 2021, is solely made up of women and girls.

Thus, the coup has compounded gendered insecurity and inequality across the country. At the same time, the widespread public involvement of women in the leadership of non-violent protest movements and the relatively large number of

women included in the National Unity Government (NUG) and its parallel governance structure set these protests apart from previous popular uprisings. About a third of appointees to the NUG are women, and women's networks are acting as advisers to the interim National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), where they have advocated for and advise on how to design, implement and fund policies and procedures engendering gender equality and human rights values in a future federal democratic Myanmar. As a result, the Federal Democracy Charter, unlike Myanmar's current Constitution, commits to "ensure fundamental rights, gender equality and the rights of ethnic minorities" (Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process forthcoming). While it remains to be seen how these promises would translate into policies if the NUG actually had the power to implement them, these political commitments point to the growing acceptance of a more inclusive political vision for Myanmar. Thus, in the midst of multiple crises, spaces and opportunities for the advancement of women's rights have been seized by women's groups and networks. In addition, women's rights organisations continue to provide services which are essential to the welfare and survival of marginalised communities.

Conclusion

The 2021 military coup threw into sharp relief the stubborn persistence of militarised and male-dominated politics in Myanmar. Throughout a decade of partial democratisation, the 2008 Constitution ensured that the military retained a powerful role in governing Myanmar and, as argued by many feminist scholars and activists, a culture privileging a masculinised conception of leadership has remained strong. Despite political shifts over time, the exclusion of women from political power has largely endured, and women's lives have continued to be shaped by gendered insecurities ranging from intimate partner violence and lack of legal protection to conflict-related gender-based abuses and disproportionate poverty along with overwhelming care labour.

However, the way in which resistance to the coup has unfolded also testifies to the significant gendered transformations that have taken place in Myanmar over the decade of political transition leading up to the coup. Women's visibility and leadership in the resistance against military rule are the result of the growth and increased diversity of women's activism over the past decade, and the way protest tactics have explicitly challenged gender norms reflects widespread changes in public attitudes and perceptions regarding gender. In contrast to previous public protests against military rule, resistance movements are not only rejecting direct military rule but also a culture where power is concentrated with older, ethnic Bamar men. Reflecting more egalitarian political ideals, anti-coup resistance has included previously marginalised groups such as women, youth, ethnic minorities and queer people. To an extent, this is also reflected by the parallel government structures and policies of the NUG, where women's organisations work towards the abolishment of authoritarianism. Arguably, the need to unite against the military has pushed ethnic majority politicians and democracy activists to be more inclusive, leading both women and ethnic minorities to be comparably well represented in the NUG.

Thus, while the coup has closed down many avenues for women's activism and for formal political efforts to realise women's equality and rights, the diverse and inclusive nature of the anti-coup movement has created hopes for the emergence of a more egalitarian democracy movement and political culture. This demonstrates that the fundamental cultural and political changes of the past decade cannot easily be rolled back and will continue to shape Myanmar irrespective of political leadership.

Notes

- 1 In Burma, formal equality provisions found in the 1974 Constitution were undermined by the lack of attention to women's substantial equality, as well as by practices that discriminate against women. Moreover, legislation identifying, addressing and rectifying gender inequality are absent. There are, for example, no laws or legislation against domestic violence or rape in marriage if the wife is under 14 years of age. Under customary law, discriminatory practice pertaining to marriage, inheritance and gender-based violence weakens women's claim to gender equality (Gender Equality Network, 2013a). In areas under the control of non-state armed groups, legal authority is further fragmented by the existence of parallel legal systems (UN Women and Justice Base, 2016).
- 2 See www.womenofburma.org/reports
- 3 In 2002, the Shan Women Action Network (SWAN) published a report detailing human rights abuses perpetrated by the Tatmadaw against ethnic Shan women, called License to Rape. This was the first report released by a women's group under the WLB umbrella specifically focusing on sexual violence committed by government soldiers and framing that violence as a weapon of war. The impact was huge: the report was used as the basis for a position paper submitted to the UN, after which the regime felt compelled to respond and ended up sending their own investigative team to Shan State. After the publication of the report, other WLB women's groups began documenting and releasing reports on women's human rights violations in ethnic minority areas. See <http://womenofburma.org/publication> for more information about the reports.
- 4 This led the CEDAW committee to remark on the near-total absence of government-allocated funding going to these organisations and its practice of employing well-connected women rather than experts (CEDAW, 2000).
- 5 Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 7 November 2017.
- 6 Interview with women's rights activist, Loikaw, Myanmar, December 2018.
- 7 Interviews with women's activists, Chiang Mai and Yangon, December 2016 and January 2017.

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