Now and the Future

Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World

Myanmar Briefing

1. Introduction

In partnership with Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), EMReF and ActionAid undertook research in Myanmar to better understand the context-specific and global impacts of COVID-19 on gender, peace and security, and to develop policy and programming responses which account for the impact of COVID-19. The research methodology was based on the beyond consultations tool, which included a literature review and pulled out evidence from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with a wide range of civil society organisations across Myanmar. A national learning launch was further conducted to update and validate the findings. These findings highlight that the impact of COVID-19 is exacerbating existing gender inequalities around women's and girls' leadership, protection and economic opportunities, as well as conflict and insecurity.

The situation in Myanmar has evolved since the publication of this research, following the recent events since 1 February 2021.[1] ActionAid and EMReF still support the findings and recommendations in this report which remain relevant despite the contextual changes in Myanmar.

2. Summary of findings

The findings demonstrate that against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchal norms and practice, vulnerability to natural hazards and complex conflict dynamics, COVID-19 has devastated many communities and further exacerbated gender inequality.

A key finding centres on the inhibiting barriers for women, and their organisations, to access decision-making positions and processes, as well as their ability to influence within these

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[1] ActionAid International (2021) 'ActionAid responds to political crisis in Myanmar', https://actionaid.org/news/2021/actionaid-responds-political-crisis-myanmar

structures once access is granted.[2] Despite women representing most frontline responders during times of crises in Myanmar, the formal governing mechanisms and decision-making structures established to manage response and recovery planning have low levels of women's representation. Women's and girls' rights actors and civil society actors have launched advocacy campaigns over many years to try and secure women's representation in the political space through quotas, and within political dialogue and peace negotiations.[3] Deeply entrenched norms and beliefs that men make more effective political representatives and leaders have exacerbated the exclusion of women's rights organisations (WROs) during the COVID-19 response, and the intersecting needs of women and girls have not been addressed.[4] The pronounced challenges among women and girls during COVID-19 call for the government to step up with more meaningful engagement with WROs and formulate more gender-responsive strategies that sufficiently address the current issues women and girls face.

Women and girls across Myanmar have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, with lockdown measures and the economic impact of COVID-19 contributing to a surge in intimate partner violence; trafficking; and sexual violence and harassment. Women and girls have struggled to access support and specialist services, including for their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and mental health. In addition, the closure of schools meant that girls have been at higher risk of different forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. Several participants expressed concerns over the increasing levels of child, early or forced marriage as a result of growing pressures on families.

The report further highlights unpaid care burdens as a significant source of stress for women and girls, alongside concerns about the security of their livelihoods, and access to food and healthcare. The restrictions put in place to curb the spread of the pandemic, such as the closures of schools and lockdown measures, have created additional hours of childcare. This, coupled with women's over-representation in informal employment, has resulted in many women losing their access to income and employment (especially as the garment industry workforce is overwhelmingly female in Myanmar; an estimated 90 per cent).

The concern that the government is not supporting its female workforce adequately was echoed by participants for this research study on multiple occasions. Participants emphasised that women and girls are: often less likely to access secure livelihood options, shelter, or food and water for their families; exposed to the risk of multiple forms of violence; and have largely found themselves unable to access secure employment. A new economic recovery plan, the Myanmar Economic Recovery and Reform Plan (MERRP) is currently being developed. Nevertheless, engagement and coordination with civil society and non-state actors as part of these plans have been limited. A main critique of the plan is that it supports local businesses to retain men in the workforce (under the impression that they are the main breadwinners of households), and inevitably leaves women workers more

[1] ActionAid International (2021) 'ActionAid responds to political crisis in Myanmar', https://actionaid.org/news/2021/actionaid-responds-political-crisis-myanmar

[2] O'Neil, T. and Domingo, P. (2016) 'Women and Power: Overcoming barriers to leadership and influence', Overseas Development Institute, https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resourcedocuments/10443.pdf

[3] Ibid.

[4] EMReF (2020) 'Gender and Political Participation in Myanmar', https://www.emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/gender_and_political_in_myanmarenglish_online.pdf

vulnerable to the risk of downsizing. As a result, the new plan is seen to be exclusionary with a disproportionate impact on women workers. There is a need to be even more responsive to gender equality in economic opportunities.

The report emphasises that the impact of COVID-19 has been particularly felt by women and girls in conflict-affected communities and that there has been an increase in reported cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence in camp settings. The report highlights high levels of impunity, with quarantine centres not adequately supporting the needs of women and girls, and saw increased incidences of sexual assault being reported.[5] Women and girls living in conflict settings may be more likely to experience negative impacts on their mental health and COVID-19 has intensified tensions and prejudices against ethnic and marginalised communities in conflict-affected areas – especially for displaced women and girls.

There is a need to recognise the additional threats of COVID-19 in conflict-affected communities, which include internet restrictions and the threat of arbitrary arrest for alleged association with the Arkan Army.[6] This has further impacted the freedom of movement and humanitarian support for conflict-affected communities within Myanmar. The impact has been especially harsh on those living in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps and informal IDP settlements, as armed clashes and lockdown restrictions have reduced the availability of effective humanitarian aid, support services, COVID-19 testing kits, and accurate information on the virus (because of the internet ban). Humanitarian actors have renewed calls for access to these communities and ceasefires (as sporadic fighting continues in other parts of the country). The research underlines the need for the government response plans to more closely consider the burdens faced by women and girls in conflict.

In many ways, COVID-19 has highlighted, and further entrenched, gendered inequalities, as well as systemic and structural exclusion and violence. This threatens to further destabilise gains the country has made and jeopardise social cohesion within Myanmar.

3. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Women's leadership (part 1). The government of Myanmar and the international community should increase the representation and decision-making power of a diverse group of women and WROs within formal COVID-19 response and recovery mechanisms, at both national and local levels. To support a sustainable, gender equal and peaceful society during and 'post-COVID', these investments should be accompanied by a commitment to strengthen women's leadership within the country's ongoing peace process and political settlement. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 6 in the country report.)

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[5] Myanmar Times (2020) 'Groups urge more safety for women after rape at quarantine centre in southern Shan State', https://www.mmtimes.com/news/groups-urge-more-safety-women-after-rape-quarantine-centre-southern-shan-state.html

[6] ActionAid Myanmar (2020) 'Reporting on Myanmar's COVID-19 First Wave and Its Impact on Civic and Political Space', https://myanmar.actionaid.org/sites/myanmar/files/publications/Reporting on Myanmar%27s Covid-19 First Wave and its Impact on Civic and Political Space_0.pdf

Recommendation 2: Women's leadership (part 2). The government of Myanmar and the international community should reshape local partnership approaches by meaningfully shifting power and resource to a diverse group of local women and WROs. This should be accompanied with a firm commitment to prioritise the needs of diverse women and girls and to meet those needs through dedicated funding and by opening up space for collective women's rights organising. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 10 in the country report.)

Recommendation 3: Violence against women and girls (VAWG). The government of Myanmar and the international community should prioritise and invest in integrated and holistic women-led, community-based programming approaches that both prevent and respond to VAWG exacerbated by COVID-19 (including partner and non-partner violence; parental violence; trafficking; and child, early or forced marriage). These efforts must be accompanied by dedicated investment in the legal and judicial system for VAWG, to challenge the entrenched culture of silence and impunity in Myanmar. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 13 in the country report.)

Recommendation 4: Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). The government of Myanmar and the international community should ensure that mental health and psychosocial support (including specialist trauma health services) are integrated and resourced as part of a comprehensive public health response to COVID-19. This should involve specific consideration of vulnerable groups of women and girls in both conflict and non-conflict areas, including: internally displaced women; pregnant women and lactating mothers; single (young) women and girls; divorced women; women from minority groups; women-headed households; widowed women; older women; and those with pre-existing mental and physical disabilities. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 19 in the country report.)

Recommendation 5: Women's livelihoods and economic rights. The government of Myanmar and the international community should ensure that the gendered impact of COVID-19 informs priority investments in women's livelihood opportunities and social protection within COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 22 in the country report.)

Recommendation 6: Conflict and displacement. The government of Myanmar and the international community should recognise the specific experiences and needs of women and girls in the conflict-affected states in Myanmar and provide tailored and contextualised responses to support them. These efforts should be accompanied with ongoing advocacy in support of a ceasefire, including working with, and funding of, civil society and WROs, to continue with their important activities to support this work. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 25 in the country report.)

4. Partners

Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF): EMReF is an accredited nonprofit research organisation dedicated to carrying out studies in the fields of livelihoods, governance, political economy, social relations, gender, politics, rule of law and justice. Its purpose is to provide information and evidence-based policy recommendations for different stakeholders such as international organisations, CSOs, political parties, media, private sector, parliament and government agencies which are working on equitable and inclusive socioeconomic development and promoting democratic governance in Myanmar. EMReF has been extending its role in promoting political awareness and participation of citizens and CSOs in policy-making through providing reliable and trustworthy information on political parties and elections, parliamentary performance and development policy issues. As a current foundation step, EMReF has been developing an information mechanism which includes three main functions – collecting information, analysing it and distributing it to the public via social media. Meanwhile, EMReF has been using other conventional measures, such as providing social research training to young people, local CSOs, political parties and elected MPs, in order to promote the practice of collecting reliable evidence and using it in developing and evaluating policies.

ActionAid Myanmar: In 2006, ActionAid started working in Myanmar, with a specific focus in 12 states and regions of the country. ActionAid Myanmar focuses on four key areas of work: 1) Women's rights, with a focus on women's economic empowerment and social enterprise; 2) Emergencies, specifically cultivating women's leadership and representation in humanitarian responses; 3) Resilience, with a focus on sustainable and resilient agriculture, as well as disaster and conflict vulnerability reduction and resilience; and 4) Governance and youth, working towards strengthening civil society participation and action. ActionAid Myanmar uses a human rights-based approach within all its programming to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable – particularly women and youth in conflict-affected areas – are heard. ActionAid Myanmar works with women-led CSOs and networks to protect civic and political rights, as well as to ensure that women's and girls' points of views are included in the country's democratic journey.

ActionAid UK: ActionAid UK is an international charity that works with women and girls living in poverty. Their mission is to achieve social justice, gender equality, and poverty eradication by working with people living in poverty and exclusion. As a proud member of the ActionAid International Federation, ActionAid UK supports the federation on mobilising resources, influencing for change and supporting humanitarian action. In 2017, ActionAid UK launched a five-year strategy to help achieve this, *Together, with women and girls*, with a focus on: 1) Significantly reducing the risk of violence against women and girls; 2) Fighting for women's equal rights to economic opportunities; and 3) Prioritising women's and girls' rights and leadership in humanitarian crises. ActionAid UK's vision is for a just, equitable and sustainable world in which every person enjoys the right to a life of dignity, freedom from poverty and all forms of oppression.

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS): GAPS is the UK's women, peace and security (WPS) civil society network. It is a membership organisation of NGOs in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. It was founded to promote WPS, including United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. GAPS promotes and holds the UK government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.

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