

Women's Involvement in Politics in the Mon, Kayin and Tanintharyi Parliaments

*Barriers to improving representation and strengthening
democracy*

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Dedicated to all of the women MPs and political leaders of Myanmar and around the world, and all the women making fighting and sacrificing to become political leaders. May we break down barriers so that future generations of women and minorities are accurately represented in halls of power everywhere.

With special thanks to the MPs who shared their valuable time, expertise and opinions with us. And with deep gratitude to the women MPs who spoke so openly about their own challenges and experiences. We think your stories will inspire the reader as much as they inspired us.

List of Acronyms and Terms

AMRDP	All Mon Region Democracy Party
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
GoM	Government of Myanmar
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

Tavoy – an ethnic group indigenous to the Tanintharyi region, speaking a unique dialect of Burmese

Kayin/Karen - ethnic group accounting for 7% of Myanmar's total population, represented by several EAOs

Mon - ethnic group accounting for 2% of Myanmar's total population, represented by New Mon State party EAO

Pa'O - ethnic group accounting for 3.8% of Myanmar's total population, with communities in Mon and Kayin states

Introduction

Since 2015, the Government of Myanmar (GoM) has for the first time in many decades come under the control of a fairly elected party and its leader Aung Sun Suu Kyi. This power change helped to open up both national and state parliaments to dialogue and collaboration with national civil society actors and international support to strengthen democracy. It is recognized by stakeholders that a strong democracy is the key to stability and therefore a key to peace. A strong democracy is based on representation, including (but not limited to) ethnic minority groups and women. Building a strong and functioning democracy in Myanmar means women and women from ethnic groups must be present in parliaments, as ministers, and other leadership positions within government.

We have chosen to focus the study on participation of women and ethnic minorities for two reasons. This study focuses on three State Hluttaws (parliaments) in Southeastern Myanmar: Mon and Kayin (Karen) states and Tanintharyi region. All three regions are still presently divided between control of GoM and ethnic-armed organizations (EAOs), and areas where up to three governing bodies share control. Peace processes in these three states are on-going, and highly dependent on ethnic groups gaining guarantees that they will be able to design and affect policies that govern them. By uncovering barriers to participation of ethnic minorities in these parliaments, we hope work will be done to remove these barriers, increase the representation of ethnic minority groups in the state parliaments, and strengthen both democracy and chances for long-term stability in our communities. Presently, only 4 seats out of all 3 state parliaments belong to ethnic parties. Additional ethnic minority MPs are present in parliament under NLD, however as NLD members they are often not viewed by ethnic activists as representing ethnic minorities interests in parliament.

The second reason is that in all three states, discrimination against women is endemic. Women have difficulty owning and inheriting land, are discouraged from participation in public life, have fewer work opportunities and are paid less than men, have little access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and are at very high risk of experiencing violence both within and outside of their homes. Civil society organizations and women's groups have worked very hard in these areas and have raised awareness, but they are limited in effectiveness without strong legislation and policy to base their work on. Better representation of women in these parliaments means better representation of these key issues that affect women, and higher priority put on these issues. In 2016, it was reported that around 51% of Myanmar's population was women. Although current parliament gender-balances are encouraging, full representation requires an increase in numbers of women Members of Parliament.

This report operates under the assumption that better representation of women within parliaments is inherently positive and is a necessary component of achieving true gender equality and democratic representation. To challenge any remaining skepticism on this point, there is data that suggests that parliaments with more women MPs are more likely to pass and implement gender-sensitive legislation (Asiedu et al, 2018). This is critical in a context like Myanmar where entrenched gender discrimination must be tackled from every angle. Women MPs are not only likely to be advocates for women, they are also more likely to consider the needs of children when making policy decisions in what UNICEF calls the "double dividend of gender equality" (UNICEF, 2007). Not only is it critical for women to be involved in decision making in parliaments, it is important for them to simply be there and be visible to other women. In the same way that seeing a likeness of one's self portrayed in media has an effect on one's self-image and capabilities, seeing and knowing that there are women MPs and leaders is critical to changing social attitudes and inspiring more women and girls to set ambitious political goals (BBC America, 2018).

Methods

This study conducted interviews with 29 active MPs and one former MP, selecting 10 MPs each from Mon State and Tanintharyi Region. The Kayin state group consists of 7 active MPs, 1 former MP and 2 national level MPs who are women with Kayin heritage. In each parliament, we spoke with all women MPs, and selected male MPs who were interested in speaking with us about this issue. This report, therefore, reached all 9 active women MPs in the three states, one former MP and 2 national level female MPs. We extended our research to these additional female MPs to gain better insight into the challenges facing women MPs of mixed ethnic backgrounds. Interviews were carried out by Mi Cherry Soe, an experienced researcher and well-known advocate for women's rights, and Min Arkar Tet, a popular young artist in Mon communities who frequently uses his talents for awareness-raising purposes for various Mon CSOs. 25 of the interviews were carried out in person, with both researchers present and recording their own notes and impressions of what the interviewee was sharing. Interviews were loosely structured, based on a set of questions designed to encourage MPs to speak freely and offer information and stories as they desired. 5 MPs were unavailable for in-person interviews, and were connected with over the phone instead.

The 12 women MP's interviews were longer than the men's so we could gather more information about their backgrounds, careers and political journeys that led them to the position of MP. We asked more information about their personal lives, challenges, experiences with discrimination and opinions about being an MP. During these interviews, our artist-researcher listened for repeating themes, especially from the women. He then created illustrations based on these repeated themes, to be used for community advocacy and awareness raising with the end goal of promoting women's political participation and access to leadership positions.

Information gathered during all 30 interviews was recorded into a database dividing information based on the different states and by gender. In order to respect the privacy of public figures we did not record information based on each individual's responses, and will be using the broader data set to conduct an analysis. We have gone out of our way in this report to protect relative anonymity of responses, which may in some places result in vague language being used. This report is designed to support our MPs and pinpoint areas where future cooperation between civil society and parliament might be possible rather than to accuse and alienate.

Parliament Backgrounds

Mon State

The Mon state Hluttaw consists of 31 total seats. 8 are military appointees. Of the 23 remaining elected seats, 19 belong to NLD, 2 belong to the Mon National Party, 1 to the All Mon Region Democracy Party and 1 to USDP. 3/31 total seats (including appointed military) are held by ethnic parties. 6 seats are held by women, all members of the NLD. The Speaker of the parliament is a NLD woman and the Deputy Speaker is the single AMRDP representative. From Mon State parliament, we interviewed all 6 women MPs and 4 male MPs, including the 3 ethnic party representatives. The remaining male NLD candidate is a member of the state Women and Children's Committee. Mon state parliament has a Women and Child Committee that some of the men MPs sit on, so we made sure to include these male MPs in the interviews. In addition to the 3 ethnic party members, we interviewed 3 women representatives from the NLD that have at least mixed or partial ethnic minority identities, including the woman appointed Pa'O Minister and 2 women with Mon backgrounds.

Kayin State

The Kayin State Hluttaw consists of 23 total seats. 6 seat are military appointees. Of the remaining 17 seats, 13 are held by the NLD, 3 by the USDP and 1 by the Kayin People’s Party. 1/23 total seats belongs to the Kayin People’s Party. 2 of the NLD seats are held by women. In Kayin state we interviewed both active women MPs, and included a recently retired woman MP and two Karen women serving as NLD MPs at the national parliament (Upper House). The former MP was an MP from 2010-2015 with the Kayin People’s party, but lost the election in 2015. The three non active state level MPs were included to make our feedback about the challenges facing women parliamentarians more robust. In addition to the 1 ethnic party representative, we interviewed 4 NLD MPs with at least partial Kayin identity (3 women), 1 Pa’O (woman), and 1 Mon (man).

Tanintharyi Region

The Tanintaryi Region Hluttaw consists of 28 total seats. 7 of these are military appointees. The remaining 21 seats are all held by NLD. No seats were won by ethnic parties. One NLD seat is held by a woman MP. Of these NLD MPs we interviewed, 1 woman and 3 men have at least partial identities as Tavoyan ethnic minority, and 1 man at least partial Kayin identity.

The data: Similarities across 3 parliaments

The ages of the MPs we interviewed were spread evenly between younger and older than 50. All MPs interviewed said that their election campaigns relied heavily on personal financing. In all 3 parliaments, all the women MPs told us they had received training on gender, while only 7/18 male MPs did, evenly spread among the parliaments so that no more than half of the male respondents in any one parliament had received gender training.

<i>Gender training received?</i>									
	Mon		Kayin		Tanintharyi				Total
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total F	Total M	
Yes	6	2	5	2	1	3	12	7	19
No		2		3		6		11	11

All 30 MPs told us that women’s participation is important, and 28 MPs mentioned that building capacity of women was important, but 23 (including 8 women in two states) said that parliament should not create any policies designed to encourage more women MPs. In line with this, only 1-2 women in each parliament (and none of the men) support the creation of a quota system to ensure a minimum level of women’s participation in parliament and leadership roles. Across all three parliaments we also saw a lack of strong opinion about affirmative action policies in general, with at least 4 MPs in each parliament (including women) not able to give an opinion either way.

<i>Is affirmative action a positive measure?</i>									
	Mon		Kayin		Tanintharyi				Total
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total F	Total M	
Yes	1	2	2	2	1		4	4	8
No	2		1	1		5	3	6	9
No comment	3	2	2	2		4	5	8	13

In each parliament, over half of MPs responded that women's home and family burdens were a barrier to becoming politically active, including a majority of the male MPs. 3 women disagreed that these burdens were a barrier to political participation. An interesting point to note in connection with this is that while all 18 male MPs are married, only half of the women MPs are married, having either never married or having outlived their husbands. All 30 interviewees noted that security concerns were a barrier to women becoming MPs.

<i>Home and Family burdens a barrier to political participation?</i>									
	Mon		Kayin		Tanintharyi				Total
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total F	Total M	
Yes	4	4	4	4	1	5	9	13	22
No	2		1	1		2	3	3	6
No comment						2		2	2

The Data: Differences between Parliaments

The majority of women in all three parliaments responded that there should be more women MPs. Only in Mon state did the majority of men agree with this. In Tanintharyi, only one man agreed.

<i>Should there be more women MPs?</i>									
	Mon		Kayin		Tanintharyi				Total
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total F	Total M	
Yes	5	4	4	2	1	1	10	7	17
No	1		1	1		8	2	9	11
No comment				2				2	2

Nearly all of the women MPs, except two in Mon state, think it's more difficult for women to become MPs than men. While all male MPs in Mon state agreed, only 1 in Kayin and 2 in Tanintharyi agreed.

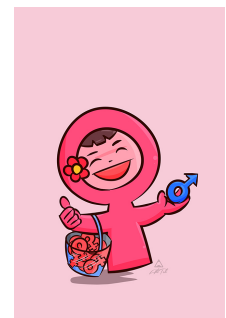
<i>Is it more difficult for women to become MPs than men?</i>									
	Mon		Kayin		Tanintharyi				Total
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total F	Total M	
Yes	4	4	5	1	1	2	10	7	17
No	2			4		4	2	8	6
No comment						3		3	3

As noted above, the majority response to affirmative action was uncertainty. However, in Mon and Kayin states, it was supported by several MPs, including 2 men from each parliament. In Tanintharyi, only the sole woman MP supported it, while none of the men did.

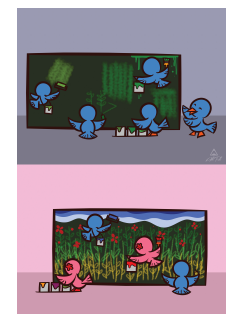
Common themes addressed by women MPs

The following themes were gathered by our researcher-artist during interviews with the women MPs, and converted by him into images aimed at increasing awareness of communities about women MPs, the positive impact they have on parliaments, and the challenges they face. The illustration style softens anything that may come across as too critical, and is a very popular medium within our beneficiary communities.

1. Women don't support women as leaders, and often support men to be leaders instead.



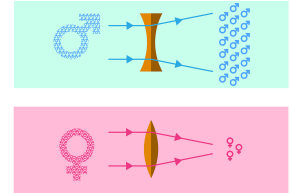
2. The voices of women in a parliament create fuller and more diverse conversations and perspectives on policy topics.



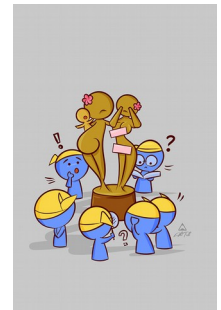
3. Women have many more home and family responsibilities than men that make it difficult for them to become involved in politics.



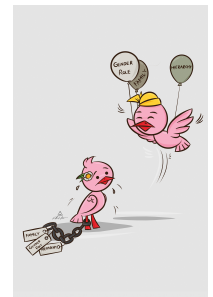
4. There are very few women Political Representatives in Myanmar compared with how many women there are in Myanmar. The perspectives and voices of men are amplified while the perspectives and voices of women are muted.



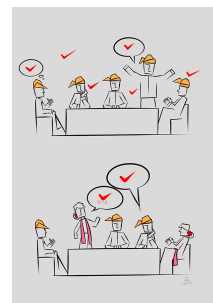
5. There are many challenges, issues and problems unique to women that men are unable to understand on their own. An All-male parliament would not be able to make policies to address these unique issues.



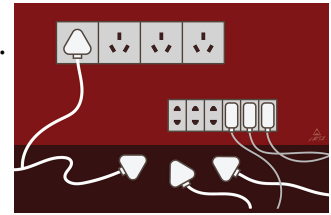
6. Entrenched cultural discrimination gives the advantages to men to rise and succeed while locking women into non-political roles.



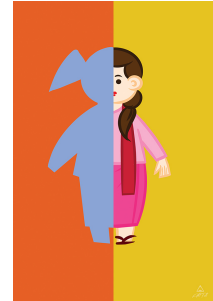
7. Women MPs are able to challenge the gender normative status quo within parliaments.



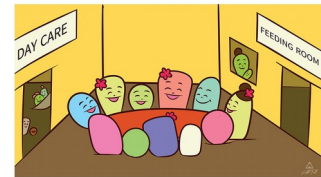
8. It is much easier for men to access positions of power than it is for women. The bar is set higher and they must work harder.



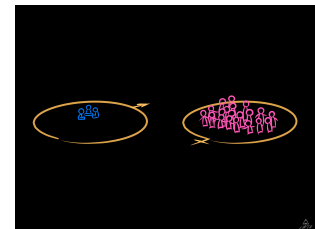
9. There are many issues which women view more sharply and with additional details than men. Examples include understanding better the impact on women, children and families of land rights, labour or environmental legislation.



10. Parliaments are not currently woman (or child) friendly, and could be improved with establishment of daycare and nursing rooms for parents of young children.



11. Women MPs and political leaders are at higher risk from personal security threats than male counterparts, but are given no additional protection. Both women and men said it was dangerous for women to become MPs, and the women suggested that special measures be taken when they have to travel or be away from family.



Discussion

There are some barriers to becoming an MP that affect both men and women. Nearly all of the MPs we spoke with have at least a Bachelors degree. They all told us that their campaigns were at least partially financed by their own personal funds, if not entirely personally financed. This means that all of our interviewees are members of a privileged enough socio-economic class to attain post-secondary education and have enough savings, or a wealthy enough network to be able to self finance. None of our interviewees mentioned language barrier as a challenge. This is significant in Southeastern Myanmar, where a large number of communities use only their ethnic language, such as Mon, Kayin or Pa'O. Language barriers are a consistent challenge for these communities in trying to access services including healthcare, the legal system and even local government procedures like land registration, all of which can only be done in Burmese. It is again a privilege to not be affected by such language difficulties, and it may show the difficulties faced by more marginalized groups in becoming politically active.

Now using a gender lens, we notice immediately that all of these parliaments have a significant majority male MPs. We even extended the parameters of our search for women MPs to former and national level women in order to get a better sample. It is also clear that there is not consensus among MPs that there should be a goal of increasing the number of women MPs in parliaments, despite strong research suggesting it strengthens parliaments, democracies and quality of policies being developed. 11 of the MPs, including 2 women, believe that male MPs alone are able to make decisions about policies unique to women (reproductive and maternal health, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, etc). Despite not directly agreeing that there should be more women MPs, 23/30 MPs did think having more women MPs led to more robust and diverse discussion within parliament. The reason for this discrepancy is that MPs who did not think there should be more women MPs were concerned about the capacity of women who might become MPs, believing that there are not currently enough women qualified enough to become MPs. We see this reflected in the high number of MPs agreeing that more focus should be put on increasing the capacity of women (all except 2), and in the low numbers with a positive outlook on quotas or other affirmative action policies. Although this question was not asked directly, we might infer that the majority of MPs do see value in more women present in parliaments on the condition that they are sufficiently qualified and capable.

It is interesting that not all of the women felt it was more difficult for women to become MPs than men. Those who did not agree it is more difficult felt that women could just as easily become MPs if they worked hard. They also did not think that women's roles in families and homes were a barrier to entering politics, again despite significant evidence to the contrary (Sein Lett et al., 2017). These opinions were based on their own journeys into politics, and we noted that they had access to a great deal of support from families in pursuing politics. Revealed not through their answers to direct questions, but through their descriptions of their career and life path, it seems likely that these women MPs are underestimating, or even attempting to be modest about how hard they have worked throughout their lives to reach their current status as MPs. Looking at the men's answers to these questions, we find that 6 male MPs simultaneously acknowledge that women's home and family burdens are barriers to political participation while disagreeing that it is more difficult for women to become MPs. These interviewees pointed to the successful women leaders in their parliament, implying that the presence of these few women in parliament served as proof that women could just as easily become MPs. In contrast, in the parliament with the highest representation of women, all four men recognized home and family burdens as barriers to political participation and agreed that it is more difficult for women than men to become MPs. This correlation between working with more women MPs and being more aware and understanding of challenges facing women may be a causal

relationship we hope is explored in future research. Although all the women MPs have received training on gender, at most half of the male MPs interviewed in each parliament had. Without such training, exposure to women colleagues may be their only opportunity to confront gender inequality issues in their own lives.

Despite 100% consensus from interviewees that women's political participation is a good thing, 28/30 mentioning the importance of building the capacity of women, and with a majority also agreeing there should be more women MPs, 23 MPs did not think they needed to design any policy measures to encourage more women to become MPs. This was a surprising result. Even if MPs did not agree with affirmative action policies, they also did not see any connection between their power as policy-makers and building women's capacity or encouraging more women's political participation in general. It is also possible that they do not see any clear connection between building women's capacity, encouraging women's political participation in general and increasing the number of women MPs. Either way, most of our interviewees understand it is an issue to be worked on, but that it is an issue for somebody else to solve. They do not see increasing women's political participation as a policy issue, and this is an important point for local CSO and international NGOs alike. It highlights the need to ensure that trainings and advocacy are focused clear policy recommendations, not vague statements about women's political participation. Civil society may need to start focusing on advocating for policies other than (or in addition to) affirmative and action, such as setting up training for women political leaders (to build capacity), giving logistical and financial support to village development committees and townships to implement outreach activities with community-level women (for political participation) or even setting up a job-shadowing program for young graduates interested in politics and ensuring 50% of the young graduates are women. These are only a few examples of types of policies that could be used to encourage women's participation in politics, leading to more qualified women to run as MPs.

Women MPs had some valuable ideas about making parliaments more woman-friendly, and we believe that nobody could have more expertise in this area than themselves. Childcare is a constant concern for mothers in Myanmar, and it is often difficult for working mothers to find reliable or affordable childcare for their children. The idea to create spaces within the parliaments designed for children, or for nursing, is something that can be formed into policy and advocated for within parliament. The concern over safety and security of women MPs, voiced by both the men and women, is also an issue that each parliament itself can work to remedy by taking measures to improve security in the MPs housing areas, providing better assistance for travel, or even giving trainings and briefings on security more frequently. Ideas for solving these accepted problems can be introduced as policy, which would then make it easier for women to become MPs. These issues may be somewhat easier to tackle, as they are internal and procedural, than the broader and more entrenched barriers women face.

Conclusions and Take-aways

Male MPs are not consistently receiving gender training the same way women are. There is some room to improve their understanding of gender inequality and realities facing women and politically active women.

MPs need clearer ideas about specific policies that could increase women's political participation and encourage more women to run for office. While they agree that capacity of women should be built, none had an idea of specific policy that could be developed to support this. Advocates can focus on developing more specific proposals for them to consider.

Women who become MPs either have fewer home and family burdens, or have a great deal of support with them from family and husband. Men MP's support from their wives is assumed.

MPs, including women, do not support any measure like a quota system or affirmative action. The reasons for this seem to be rooted in the idea that this would result in unqualified and incapable MPs in office. Activists might focus in the future on raising awareness of how many qualified women there already are. Activists might also choose to focus on advocating for policies other than quota systems, such as political internships for young women, a special campaign fund for women candidates, or training programs for politically active women.

There may be an opportunity for advocates to work with Parliaments, especially women MPs, on how to make parliaments more woman-friendly by making changes to accommodate their responsibilities to family, and to ensure safety and security.

Activists and advocates can develop projects, programs or policy proposals with the goal of developing women's capacity to be able to participate in politics and become leaders, including as MPs, in order to gain the support of parliaments, possibly even in partnership or with financial support.

We have carried out this project to raise awareness about not only the existence of women MPs and political leaders among our beneficiary groups, but also to raise awareness of barriers that politicians themselves might have the power to eliminate. Based on the information we gathered during these interviews, we think that there is great potential for MPs and women's political participation advocates to work together to encourage parliaments to design policy to facilitate and increase women's political participation. Many MPs care deeply about this issue, and are expressing interest in supporting capacity building for women political leaders. We hope that going forward, and especially in the next election, that we will see an increase in the number of women and ethnic minorities at the Union, State, Township and Village Tract levels so that discussions and decisions continue to become more diverse, robust and representative.

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