



Photo by [Saw Wunna](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Supporting and Resourcing Women Working for Peace and Security in Myanmar

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

Myanmar currently grapples with a multifaceted and persistent human rights and humanitarian crisis that has spanned over two years. This dire situation has been exacerbated by the authoritarian military regime's harsh restrictions on civil society. Within this tumultuous landscape, women have emerged as vital advocates, dedicating themselves to safeguarding the rights and well-being of the Myanmar's most marginalised individuals and groups.

Since the military coup on February 1, 2021, which triggered a profound political, economic, and humanitarian crisis, women's rights organisations have taken a prominent role in civil society protests and resistance efforts. Their efforts encompass a wide range of activities, from advocating for peace and security to providing essential services, documenting human rights violations, and campaigning against sexual and gender-based violence.

Women's leadership, collective action and participation in civic space is essential for democracy and sustainable peace. As the crisis persists, increasing the access of women's rights organisations to resources, support and platforms for advocacy must be prioritised.

In August 2023 the WPS Coalition brought together activists, feminists, practitioners, humanitarian actors and those with first-hand experience working on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) issues in Myanmar to discuss the essential role that women human rights defenders have played in the country's increasingly complex humanitarian context. This briefing paper provides a summary of the key challenges identified by participants and concludes with recommendations as to how the Australian Government can increase its support for women's rights organisations in Myanmar.

New Challenges and Emerging Threats Facing Women

Women's Rights Organisations in Myanmar and the wider region are facing a range of new and emerging complex challenges across the development, peace and security spectrum. These include:

Physical and Mental Insecurity: Women face significant physical and mental insecurity when travelling in public, especially in industrial zones, which has increased since the onset of the crisis.¹ They are vulnerable to robbery, violence, and targeted criminal attacks, making it unsafe to travel alone after dark. Travelling on public transport is increasingly unsafe as organised criminals steal from, intimidate and kidnap passengers, extorting money for their release. This has forced women to travel in groups or work from home, limiting their mobility, access to services and their workplace. This chronic sense of insecurity affects the daily lives of women and girls, raising heightened safety concerns at the family level, while frustrating their participation in economic, social, and public life.

¹ See also [UN Women and UNDP, 'Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar: Women living under the Pandemic and Military rule \[Advance Edition\]' 2022, 21.](#)

Systemic abuse within work spaces: Myanmar is reported as one of the 10 worst countries in the world in terms of working conditions.² Following the coup, trade unions have been outlawed. Unionists and labour rights activists have been arrested and executed. Wage reductions, wage theft, forced and unpaid overtime, gender-based violence and attacks on civil liberties in employment particularly affect women in the garment industry, a major employer especially for young women in the country.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Women and girls face increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence, including in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, public spaces, their homes, from the military and in detention zones. Women's participation in public institutions and peace processes remains limited, and justice for victims and survivors of GBV is severely restricted.

Cyber Violence: Women in Myanmar face online gender-based harassment and threats, as the junta uses disinformation campaigns to target them. Women who express dissenting views or engage in activism are often subjected to online harassment and cyberbullying. This can include misogynistic and derogatory comments, personal attacks, and the spread of false or defamatory information about them. The harassment can be psychologically distressing and emotionally draining, with the effect of forcing some women to withdraw from public discourse out of fear for their safety.

Restricted Access to Education and Employment: Women's ability to access education and employment is significantly hindered by safety concerns, particularly in industrial zones. Schoolgirls face risks while travelling on buses, which can lead to withdrawal from school, which threatens to further entrench gender inequality. Women's vulnerability in the country's labour market and fragile economy is increasingly forcing some women into sex work in order to survive, exposing them to enhanced risks and danger.

Limited Healthcare, Psychological and Legal Support: Women forced into sex work face an increased risk of drug use, and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Women engaged in sex work are socially marginalised and lack any form of rights protection. Access to justice for victims and survivors of GBV remains extremely limited at all levels.

Patriarchy and Militarism: Myanmar's traditional society and patriarchal values exacerbate gender equality and acts to limit advances in women's rights. Restrictive societal gender norms seek to undermine women's decision-making, leadership, and participation. Women also face targeted violence from the military. The coup's impact is not gender-neutral; women are overwhelmingly exposed to sexual harassment and conflict related sexual violence, and can be denied access to healthcare, thereby increasing the risk for women who are taking part in resistance efforts.

² [International Trade Union Confederation, 'Global Rights Index' 2023.](#)

Recognising the Leadership of Women's Civil Society Organisations

Amidst a landscape where civic freedoms have significantly diminished, women's organisations in Myanmar have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience when confronted with formidable challenges.

Women's civil society in Myanmar has forged extensive alliances, collaborating with trade unions, NGOs, diaspora groups, and faith-based organisations. They are united in their call for targeted sanctions on the military junta and many call for the recognition of the National Unity Government (NUG), which includes democratically elected officials, women's organisations, youth groups, and other stakeholders.

The leadership of women's civil society has not only highlighted the challenges facing the country, but has also been essential in documenting and exposing various atrocities and human rights violations, including targeted violence against women and girls. Despite facing threats in online spaces, women's rights organisations and activists persist in their advocacy, and continue to share strategies for self-protection and resilience with activists both locally and internationally, including guidance for how to protect oneself during protests and activism.

Women-led organisations have adopted an intersectional approach, uniting women from diverse ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds. This has fostered enduring solidarity and sustained cooperation, allowing women to gain profound insights and expertise in addressing issues such as conflict-related sexual violence and navigating the terrain of shrinking civic space. These experiences offer invaluable guidance for feminist movements and other organisations engaged in the global Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

Recommendations for the Australian Government

Given the new challenges and emerging threats women are facing in Myanmar, it is essential that the Australian Government increase the support and resources it provides to women's organisations in the country and wider region, including:

Increased aid delivered through Women's and Ethnic Organisations: Channelling humanitarian assistance through women-led and ethnic organisations with extensive experience in delivering aid is most effective. These organisations are well-positioned to understand and address the diverse needs of women and marginalised communities, and can more readily pivot as needed. This approach will not only ensure more effective aid delivery but also support the localisation agenda and, specifically, locally-led crisis response.

Increased Myanmar Refugee Intake: Providing greater support for those seeking asylum and refugee status from Myanmar would provide safe havens for those fleeing violence and persecution, particularly women and children.

An increased intake of refugees from Myanmar, including the Rohingya community, would further demonstrate Australia's commitment to humanitarian and human rights principles, and protection for those at greatest risk.

Economic Empowerment and Capacity Building: Maintaining support for civil society protest movements is crucial for Myanmar's future. Additional resources to strengthen organisational capacity to continue to carry out effective campaigns and to pursue new economic opportunities in the current context are needed. Investments should contribute specifically to building women's resilience and ability to participate in promoting a more stable and inclusive future for Myanmar.

Strengthen Targeted Sanctions: The Australian Government should continue its sanctions' regime on the military junta and expand it to include additional state-owned enterprises, thereby reiterating a clear message against human rights abuse. At the same time, the Australian Government should continue to monitor the regime to ensure the civilian population is not adversely affected as a result, while maintaining and increasing aid directly to organisations serving communities.

Diplomacy and Advocacy: Australia's should focus its diplomatic efforts and leverage its influence to engage and collaborate with Myanmar's neighbouring countries to improve the treatment of refugees and halt the flow of arms into Myanmar. Advocacy on the international stage, for the protection of women's rights and the cessation of gender-based violence, is equally critical as part of Australia's foreign policy agenda.

Democracy and Peace Building Training: Australia can offer targeted training programs, including scholarships to study in Australia, focused on democracy and peace building, as part of fostering democratic change over the long term. This could empower women leaders and activists with the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Myanmar, while fostering long-term stability and strengthening local and global peace building networks.

Advocacy and Awareness: Australia has the opportunity to initiate and promote advocacy to raise international and regional awareness about the crisis in Myanmar. Collaboration among governments and civil society to amplify the voices of women in Myanmar will ensure the crisis remains in the global spotlight. Australia should leverage its position as a G20 member to influence the global response, and collaborate with other G20 nations to apply more comprehensive sanctions and isolate the junta politically and economically, demonstrating collective global action against the crisis.

Responding to Cyber Violence: Working with and supporting companies in the technology sector to counter online violence and disinformation campaigns targeting women can make a significant contribution to women's safety. Shutting down social media accounts linked to the junta that perpetuate harassment and threats against women will further safeguard cyberspace, support the protection of women's rights and reduce barriers to their participation.

Support and Consult with Women-Led Organisations: Allocating core and flexible funding to support women-led organisations and initiatives in Myanmar is essential to sustaining feminist civil society and can support

organisations with limited formal registration due to security concerns. Empowering grassroots movements through collaboration with women's organisations will support women and girls to remain resilient in this crisis, and encourage their ongoing participation in civil society. This could include capacity-building workshops, networking opportunities, and resources for psychological well-being as well as core funding.

Release of detained protesters and political prisoners: Australia should advocate for the immediate release of detained protesters and political prisoners, especially women who are subjected to sexual abuse and violence, and raise these issues as human rights violations across regional and multilateral forums.

Address gaps in arms embargo: Australia should strengthen enforcement of its arms embargo and take a leadership role in reinforcing a global response to the ongoing flow of arms that continues into Myanmar. Despite international sanctions, the junta has maintained an ability to acquire weapons through leveraging loopholes and bypassing sanctions.³ Preventing the global sale and supply of weapons and other military equipment to the junta is crucial to reducing conflict related violence. Cutting off the arms and cash flow to the military can contribute to promoting a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

By implementing these recommendations, the Australian government, alongside civil society, can play a crucial role in supporting women's participation and leadership in Myanmar in this humanitarian crisis, contributing to women's empowerment, safety, human rights and overall well-being.

Acknowledgements

The Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security would like to thank all who contributed to the convening and the development of this Briefing Paper, and in particular:

Tasneem Roc - Myanmar Campaigns Network

Nang Moet Moet - Women's League of Burma

Naw Alpha, WAC-M - Women's Advocacy Coalition Myanmar

Hnin Thet Hmu Khin – Myanmar Research Network (University of Melbourne)

³ [UN expert exposes \\$1 billion "Death trade" to Myanmar military](#). United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights.