

'I wanted to contribute to the peace process': Women's motivations for peace in Myanmar

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Women's civil society organisations in Myanmar were critical actors in the struggle for women's political empowerment and transformative participation in the peace process. They filled the gap between marginalised women and decision-makers. They also significantly contributed to peace in Myanmar through their informal peacebuilding activities. This paper describes some of the peacebuilding practices of women's CSOs (WCSOs) and women-led CSOs to illuminate women's agency for peace in Myanmar. It particularly focuses on state-level women's organisations to help to bring marginal voices to the fore, and to highlight women's significant but often ignored contributions to everyday peace in local communities. It also draws on such WCSOs to envoice the muted voices in the women's movement in Myanmar, contribute to diversity, and enable an intersectional understanding of women's agency for peace in Myanmar.

KEY WORDS: Women, civil society, gender, motivations, networks, peacebuilding

Introduction

In responding to armed conflict, women have multiple approaches at their disposal, including becoming peace activists and contributing to transform the conflict through peacebuilding; becoming actively involved in nonviolent resistance in support of peace; becoming active fighters or engaging in other forms of violence in support of conflict or becoming refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). As Joyce Kaufman and Kristen Williams note, crucially, 'these are not mutually exclusive categories' (2013:2). Women's responses to violent conflict can be seen as a form of political activism that occurs 'along a continuum of political activism/action' (Kaufman and Williams, 2013:2). Peace and conflict are not a dichotomous dualism but rather a range of actions available to women.

In Myanmar, while some women chose to join ethnic armed organisations or the Myanmar military in support of violent conflict (Kolas and Meitei 2019; Hedstrom 2015, 2016, 2022), a majority of them have formed or joined various civil society organisations (CSOs) in support of peace (Buzzi 2019; Cardenas and Olivius: 2021; Di Padova 2019; Nilsen 2019; Kolas 2019). The women's decisions to form or join peacebuilding CSOs or work for peace are deliberate choices and an illustration of their agency, 'sometimes driven by feminist goals' (Kaufman and Williams 2013:3) and sometimes by more conventional values. In most situations, 'the primary male patriarchal structure of political decision making excluded women from the initial decisions to engage in some form of political violence. Women respond to that situation as political actors—working for peace is one of those strategies' (Kaufman and Williams 2007, 2010).

A key question that then arises is what motivates these women to form or join peacebuilding CSOs in support of peace? To answer this question, this paper describes the motivations of women in Myanmar to form or join various peacebuilding organisations to illuminate women's agency for peace in Myanmar. It particularly focuses on women at the state-level to help bring marginal voices to the fore, and to highlight women's significant but often ignored contributions to everyday peace in local communities. It also draws on the experiences of such women to envoice the muted voices in the women's peace movement in Myanmar, contribute to diversity, and enable an intersectional understanding of women's agency for peace in Myanmar.

The paper is divided into four sections. Section one provides a definition of civil society as pertains in the Myanmar context and a classification of women's civil society organisations (WCSOs). Section two covers the methodology of the research, while section three discusses women's motivations for establishing or joining various peacebuilding CSOs. The final section is the conclusion.

Definitions and categorisation of WCSOs

There are competing definitions of civil society. However, this author adopts South's descriptive definition which refers to civil society as 'voluntary, autonomous associations and networks that are intermediate between the state and the family and are concerned with public ends' (South 2008: 13). These include a wide variety of community-based organisations (CBOs), non-

governmental organisations (NGOs), 'media and social welfare organisations', traditional and modern religious and cultural groups, and explicitly political groups (South 2008: 13).

As Petrie and South (2013) note, although the terms community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations are often used interchangeably, there are significant conceptual and practical distinctions between the two. In this paper CBOs refers to community-based grassroots membership organisations that are managed locally for the benefit of members and local communities, and they 'normally exist in just one community or a group of adjoining communities' (South, 2008: 13). Women's community-based organisations (WCBOs) as used here refers to local community-based organisations that are managed locally by women for the benefit of their members and local communities.

Methods and Materials

This paper reports on part of a broader fieldwork study conducted by the author in Myanmar between September and December 2019 as part of his PhD research project. He conducted 49 in-depth interviews with key informants and six focus group discussions with selected women from civil society groups across six locations in Myanmar. The in-depth interviews were conducted in Hpa-An in Karen State, Loikaw in Karenni State, Mawlamyine in Mon State, Myitkyina in Kachin State, Nyang Shwe and Taunggyi in Shan State, Sittwe in Rakhine State, and Yangon in Yangon Region. The focus group discussions were carried in all the six states. All participants of both the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were women as the focus of the research is women's lived experiences in relation to the peace process. Female translators were used in both the interviews and focus group discussions, except in Shan and Rakhine states, where the women demanded specific male translators that they trusted and felt comfortable with due to prior working relationships with them.

A total of 33 women's organisations were involved in this study. Of these, five were national-level, 18 were state-level, and 10 were grassroots-level organisations. Three of the five national-level organisations, including Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) and Gender Equality Network (GEN) were umbrella organisations such as an alliance, coalition or network, while two were single organisations.

Nine of the 18 state-level WCSOs were also umbrella organisations, while nine were individual WCSOs. Seven of the grassroots-level organisations could be described as WCBOs, while the rest could be viewed as local NGOs

with professional paid staff and defined budgets and programs. The majority of the state-based organisations were intra-ethnic in nature as they directed their activities towards women of specific ethnic nationalities. Others were inter-or-multi-ethnic because they worked with women from all ethnic backgrounds within a given state or region. All the national-level organisations were multi-ethnic because their activities were directed towards all women in Myanmar irrespective of their ethnic identities.

None of the 33 organisations in this study were religious or had a religious colouration.

Twenty-four of the 33 organisations were specifically women and gender focused, while the rest were generic CSOs with women's programs or led by women. For example, Nyein (Shalom) Foundation is a generic national-level CSO in the peacebuilding space. However, it was led by two women who played critical roles in the peace process as technical advisors.

The majority of the WCSOs were located in various states because that is where most of the women's peacebuilding practices occurred. The multiple armed conflicts in Myanmar prior to the February 2021 coup (Kipgen 2021; Maizland 2022; Maung Thawngmung and Noah, 2021; Noel 2022) were predominantly concentrated in ethnic nationality areas—in the various states—so the need for everyday peacebuilding activities was greater in such areas than in areas such as Yangon and Mandalay. This partly explains the concentration of the WCSOs and women-led CSOs in states such as Kachin, Karen, Mon, Shan and Rakhine States. While the 1 February 2021 coup may have slightly changed this dynamic (the February 2021 coup produced militant resistance in urban areas predominantly occupied by ethnic Bamar—a situation that did not happen during previous coups), it is generally still the case that there are acute humanitarian and emergency needs in ethnic nationality areas, where the military junta continues to focus its military might rather than in urban areas.

Some of the inter-and-intra-ethnic organisations were transborder in nature because they had offices across Myanmar's borders with Thailand and Bangladesh. This is because some of these organisations were formed on the Thai-Myanmar border or Bangladeshi-Myanmar border. For example, KWAT maintains an office in Chiang Mai because it was established by Kachin women refugees there.

Motivations for establishing or joining WCSOs

The women in this study had diverse motivations or reasons for forming or joining various WCSOs and women-led CSOs. Their motivations were as varied and unique as the women themselves.

To Promote Women's Rights, Empowerment, Gender Equality and Agency

Some of the women in this study indicated that they joined specific WCSOs to promote women's rights, their empowerment and agency, and facilitate gender equality in Myanmar. Several interview participants in multiple locations confirmed this view to me during discussions about their motivations for forming or joining specific WCSOs.

The National Advisor at AGIPP told me that:

The motivation for starting AGIPP is that mostly people portray women as the victims: victims of war; victims of violence. But actually, women are more than just victims: women have capacity; women have empowerment. If one woman is standing alone, it's not significant but a group of women gathering together, they can make something change. That's why the women's network and women's mobilisation and organisation are very important. This is why I have devoted most of my life to women's mobilisation, organisation and networking. Women are not always just victims. We are more than just victims of war and violence (Mary 2019).

Several of the focus group participants reiterated this view. For instance, the Assistant Program Coordinator of Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organisation (JCSDO) told me that she decided to join JCSDO because she wanted to promote women's rights:

For me, I used to work with MYPO, Mon Youth Progressive Organisation. When I was a youth, I wanted to participate in youth activities. So, that is why I joined MYPO. And now I joined Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organisation. I knew this organisation since we were living in the border area fighting for women and child rights. As a woman, I want to work for women's rights and children's rights; that's why I joined this organisation (Joana 2019).

The Founder of the Karen Women's Democracy Action Network (KWDAN) explained:

I have a background in healthcare and in our country, there are so many issues and so many gaps in healthcare delivery. There are also serious gaps in women's rights that need to be addressed in order to move the country forward. There are serious issues affecting women that no one is talking about ... That is why I formed the organisation to give voice to these issues that are affecting women and also to carry out the needed social work in the communities (Abigail 2019).

Lived Experiences of Armed Conflict and Desire for Peace and Development.

Other interview participants across various locations noted that their motivations for establishing or joining particular WCSOs were based on their lived experiences of armed conflict and/or their desire and commitment to peace and development.

A program staff member with the then Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) shared how her experience of armed conflict in her home village in rural Shan State motivated her to join MPC.

Because MPC was like a semi-government organisation which was taking the focal role for the negotiation process and, well, I'm from the conflict area myself, Shan State, and you know, from the rural area, so, to access education is very limited. I know the consequences of the conflict so I would like to be part of the process of finding lasting peace and I want to work as much as I can, no matter what, to participate in the peace process. Before I joined MPC as an intern, I was already a program officer in another institution but I wanted to contribute to the peace process so I quit my former job and started working at MPC as an intern (Joyce 2019).

The Director of the Capacity Development and Community Mobilisation Program of the JCSDO in Mon State shared a similar view:

... in 2005, according to the political situation, I thought that fighting was not the best option of addressing the issues because for about 70 years, we have been fighting but we have not had any success yet. But without guns, we can get the self-determination. Because, you know, now, you know more than us, I think. The Burmese military and the ruler and most Bamar people think that and they act as they are the leaders and other ethnics are ruled by them, so we don't have any equal or equity in opportunities. This is why there are ethnic armed groups. But according to the international observers, the fighting is not yielding any positive results. So, I believe that we have to find another way to peace and self-determination. We have to figure out how to get that without the use of guns (Eva 2019).

The Director of the Women's Empowerment Development Organisation in Rakhine State had a similar motivation:

I got really interested in social work and so decided to work with the Rakhine Women's Network after

2012 to help mitigate the conflict and build peace in local communities in our state. I wanted to especially promote women's role in peace when I joined the network.... My goal was and still is to help promote the involvement of women in the peace and political dialogue processes. So, that is why I decided to join the network and not to work as a teacher anymore (Grace 2019).

The majority of the participants in the first focus group discussion in Loikaw, Karenni State, said that they joined their respective CSOs to advance women's participation in the peace process particularly, and politics generally.

The General Secretary 2 of Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) observed:

I joined KNWO because myself I'm a woman and KNWO is a women's organisation. I grew up in a conflict area and in order to help my community, it is much more effective to join an organisation instead of doing it individually. Also, I joined KNWO to help address women's issues relating to the conflict and violence and to promote women's participation in the peace process, decision-making and leadership of the state. We have a lot of experience working on gender-based violence issues in the communities. Women help other women. Men don't really help and support women. Women know the feelings of women. If women are participating in the peace process and in politics, there will be more effective policies and peace. Women get pregnant but men don't. So, women know about each other but men don't. So, women need to participate in the peace process. This is why I joined KNWO to fight for women's inclusion in the peace process (Emma 2019).

This view confirms the findings of a study conducted by the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) in 2020 which found that Karen women chiefs used their agency to protect local 'communities against threats and attacks' by the Myanmar military despite the risks to their own lives (KWO 2020: 7-11).

Experiences of Discrimination, Oppression, Human Rights Violations and Violence

Women's experiences of discrimination, oppression and violence can drive them to band together to find solutions. As Porter notes, women's commitment to peace is not because they are naturally peaceful but rather because such commitments often 'emerge out of the experience of oppression, knowing what it is like to be excluded and seeking a society that is truly inclusive' (2007: 3). She

further observes that 'The common ground that draws women together usually lies in women's commitment to family and community ties and the shared urgency to pool resources and meet everyday basic needs, despite being surrounded by chaos and destruction' (2007: 5). Similarly, Cynthia Cockburn maintains that 'if women have a distinctive angle in peace, it is not due to women being nurturing. It seems more to do with knowing oppression when we see it' (cited in Manchanda 2001: 17). 'Knowing what it is to be excluded and inferiorised as women, gives them special insights into the structure of unequal relations at the root of conflict' adds Rita Manchanda (2001:17).

Some of the participants explained that their motivations for joining or forming specific WCSOs were based on their lived experiences of discrimination, oppression, human rights violations and violence. The Chairperson of Rahkine Women's Union (RWU) explained how her lived experiences of Burma military oppression drove her to join the Arakan Liberation Party and later on to start the RWU in Bangladesh:

There has been a lot of oppression of ethnic people by the Burma ruling parties and governments. For instance, my own father was used as forced labour by the Tatmadaw many times. His labour was forcefully exploited without any payment because the Tatmadaw came to the village and called for labour work. They didn't even spare old people and blind men. My father faced a lot of problems with the Tatmadaw. That is one reason why I joined the revolution. Another reason is that I had a big and beautiful garden at the time of the 1988 uprising and the Tatmadaw destroyed my garden and used the land for a barracks without any compensation payment. So, my father lost lots of things. Others in my village also lost their lands and wood plantations. There was a lot of oppression against our people, so I decided to revolt against the military government during my youthful days. This was during the days of the Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party government in the 1960s. I was angry and frustrated with the way the party and military treated my people when I was young. I wanted to destroy the Burmese parties and the Burmese military (Julie 2019).

The Deputy Director of Nyein Foundation recounted how:

... My husband was an army officer. Myanmar Army officer and he is from my father's side ethnic group. I am a mix. So, even among Kachins we have different languages. So, my mum is Jinghpaw and my dad is Longpaw. They don't share a word,

although they're the same ethnic group. And my husband is also a Christian and at that time, there was an unwritten law for the Christians in the army and government; the Christians cannot reach up to a certain government position or army position. So, within the civilian sector, once you become a director, it is the highest post for a Christian. It's not about ethnicity. It's about Christianity; religion; and especially when you have an armed group in your ethnic group. So, it's an issue of trust. They don't trust an ethnic Kachin who has an armed group in his or her area. So, there is a generalised view that every Kachin is a rebel. ... My mum, also, couldn't go for further studies. She was a very smart woman. A medical doctor and she could not go for specialisation because her brother was one of the founders of KIO. And actually, her brother had died long time ago... There was no promotion at all because we are Kachin and we are Christians Now, it's a little bit relaxed but it is still there; the discrimination against ethnic nationalities and religious minorities still exists today.... It was changed like four, five years ago. So, at that time, it was so fierce. Both of us were told: "Okay we feel pity for you." the commander told us: "We feel pity for you and you're very smart. You know, you should be promoted but because of the situation; your identity. If you change your religion and if you change your name, then the promotion will be possible." And after we decided to quit, I was thinking okay, I know how to sew. I am a very good dressmaker, so then, I was thinking okay I would start my small business. I know that there are things wrong in the system. It is because of the system and the attitude. And there is discrimination going on at every level up to date.... it is because you're not Buddhist. So, these are things that I have experienced personally; they are not a story; they are my own personal experiences. These are the things that are motivating me to participate in the peace process (Emily 2019).

Ethnic and religious discrimination is common in Myanmar. Most people of non-Bamar ethnic extraction and non-Buddhist religious backgrounds are denied employment or promotions in the public service and government-controlled organisations, as well as in business and industry based on their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability/disability living with HIV or a combination of some or all of these identity markers (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, 2017). Women, particularly ethnic nationality and religious minority women, experience compounding discriminations as their gender intersect with ethnicity and/or religion (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business 2017: 3).

Inherited Responsibility/Role

For some women, such as the founder and Executive Director of the Myanmar Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) in Yangon, the motivation was a commitment to fulfilling an inherited role from her grandfather. She explained that she established the MIGS and two other organisations to help contribute to peace, security and pave the way for the formation of a federal union due to an inherited responsibility:

Right, actually, I was born in Shan State and my grandfather was Shan State advisor for federal issues. So, yes, well, since I was three years old, he taught me about the federal issues in this country and he died when I was eight years old. But, well, the last message that he left me with was that I have to inherit this responsibility from him because he cannot finish his duty to establish a federal, democratic country. So, actually it is inherited. So, since I was young, I found myself with this enormous responsibility to help establish a formal democratic country. And actually, insecurity is a dominant issue in our Shan State, and without peace, we won't have security. If we won't have security, how can we establish a federal state? So, it drives me to study all these issues and to participate in the peace process. And then I established these organisations, so, the vision is based on my personal vision and then later on I worked together with others who can share my vision to strengthen the organisations in order to build the capacity of women but also men and young people to help shape the future of this country (Melissa 2019).

A steering committee member of Kachin State Women Network (KSWN) supported this view when she discussed her motivation to participate in political activism:

My family background, my grandparents are from the governance clan in Kachin culture called the *Duwa*¹. Most of the *Duwas* must govern their own clan or tribe. Because no one was interested in talking about politics in my family when I lived in Myitkyina, I never knew that I had this background, from my grandparents' side. My grandparents were also members of parliament during the Ne Win Era. When Ne Win seized the power in 1962, my grandfather was an MP, and he had a good relationship with Ne Win, and he gave my grandparents some gifts. So, when we grew up and saw some of these things, we wondered why no one in the family talked about politics. So, I think because politics runs in my blood, I have always wanted to learn about politics and take part in politics (Zenith 2019).

The Director of Kyun Ta Htaung Myae (KTHM) Foundation also supported this view when she was discussing her motivation for working for human rights, women's rights, and for ethnic and political rights of ethnic nationalities:

I come from a political family. My grandfather was also a politician, so nothing is new for us as a family. The intimidations and harassments are part of our lives. Traditionally, I am also from the ruling or royal clan called Sao Phan. We have always worked for the interest of our people and we have always paid the price for standing up for our people. My family background motivated me and continue to motivate me to work for human rights, to join politics and to start this organisation to fight for the rights of our people, especially women in conflict-affected areas (Memunatu 2019).

The phenomenon of women inheriting the public roles of deceased male relatives is not new in Myanmar (Harriden 2012; Loring 2018). When Aung San and other leaders were assassinated in 1947, their widows assumed temporary roles as members of parliament, including General Aung San's wife Daw Khin Kyi, who served as Myanmar's high commissioner to India from 1960 to 1967 (Mi Mi Khaing 1984:159). Aung Sang Suu Kyi's popularity, some have argued, is largely because she is seen by many in Myanmar as the daughter of General Aung San, father of modern Myanmar and founder of the Myanmar Army (Tan, 2014, p. 6). She is generally seen as continuing the unfinished work of her father in Myanmar's politics (Ellis-Petersen 2018; Silverstein 1990; Tan 2014: 6).

Inspired by Role Models

Some of the women were inspired by close family members or other women activists to join WCSOs and to work for women's rights and peace. For example, the Programmes Officer of the Myanmar Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) in Yangon explained that her boss was the source of her motivation to work for women's organisations:

I joined MIGS because of Daw Khin Ma Myo. She is one of my role models. She is on the forefront of the policymaking but also involves the community in the policymaking process. So, I really admire the work she does. Also, most of my work experience is in the area of gender; that is why I got the job after I completed a diploma course in peace and conflict studies (Zaria 2019).

A number of focus group participants corroborated this view of the importance of role models. For instance, the

Project Manager of the Mon Development Organisation (MDO) explained:

During my high school days, I got to go to learn at Nyisa and seeing the differences between my hometown community and other areas. I saw Mi Kun Chan Non as the leader and she was talking to foreigners and leading and joining the discussions, which is different from what women do in my hometown. Women are only seen as mothers, wives and taking care of the family. These are the roles women play in my community. So, I saw Mi Kun Chan Non leading and saw her as my role model. I told myself, one day I want to be like her, leading other women to fight for our rights. This made me stay after my training (Jenny 2019).

Commitment to Promote Women's Rights, Empowerment and Participation

Other women joined specific women's organisations because such organisations worked on women's rights, empowerment and participation in the peace process. For example, a young woman who worked for Kachin Women Peace Network (KWPN) explained that:

In the past, I worked for the Kachin Women Association Thailand in Myitkyina. I worked for many years in Myitkyina. Then I went for further studies to develop my skills and knowledge. Also, I wanted to experience a different setting so I moved to Yangon and decided to join a Kachin-related women's organisation. So, Kachin Women Peace Network is based in Yangon ... I joined them in 2018 because their work is also on women's issues and also about peace (Jazz 2019).

The Director of Rakahi Community Development Foundation explained:

In Paletwa there are more women than men but the women do not have any opportunities. There are a limited number of educated women in Paletwa. I can see that I'm the only one being involved in issues so I thought to myself I need to do something to help women understand their rights and the opportunities that are available so they can stand up for themselves. They can claim their rights and participate in the political decision-making process. So, I decided to form Tainga Yin Thu. Most of the women in Paletwa are really struggling. Their social and economic status are still very low (Deborah 2019).

The General Secretary of the Kayan Women's Organisation (KyWo) in Loikaw asserted:

When we look at Kayah, people are just surviving in the very remote areas. So, it is not easy for local Kayan women to assume leading roles in the communities or within organisations. So, ten years ago, we founded KyWo to empower local Kayan women to share their knowledge and experiences, especially those who have not got formal education. Due to lack of education, transport network and communication network, many Kayan communities are poor and have low educational standards. KyWo is more than ten years now. We founded the organisation in Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border but now we have moved back inside Myanmar to work closely and struggle with our local communities for their security and development (Elisabeth 2019).

The Program Coordinator of Cetana Development Foundation reiterated this view:

This organisation has contacts with the local communities and is working in the area of local livelihoods development, which is where my interest is.... My main reason for joining is the lack of job opportunities in the local communities. In my family, we are 11 siblings and only a few of them have jobs At that time, when I was young, we couldn't migrate to other countries and we didn't have rubber plantation.... Now, we have created the job opportunities for women and young people and also teaching these people how to manage their finances. There are a lot of people who earn a lot of money from the rubber plantation but they don't know how to manage the money. So, we created a micro financial management programme, where we train the local people on how to manage their finances (Wendy 2019).

Some of the focus group participants reiterated this view. For example, the Accounts Officer of Kachin State Women's Network (KSWN) recounted:

I joined the KSWN because I am really interested in women's issues relating to peace and conflict and women's participation in the peace process and in politics. Since I joined this organisation, I have learnt about the four pillars of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The four pillars include participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery.... Even though I am the accounts officer, sometimes I'm able to join some of the training activities on women and peace (Akua 2019).

Access to Justice

Other women were motivated by the need to provide legal aid and access to justice for vulnerable individuals and

groups in ethnic nationality areas, who were frequently persecuted through legal suits by government and military operatives. For example, the Director of the Peace and Justice Legal Centre said to me that her motivation for establishing the centre in 2017 was to give free legal services to poor individuals and groups.

She explained:

Initially, I worked with other people and we were just providing pro-bono legal services to poor people and groups. As time went on, more and more people joined us and the demand for our services kept increasing so we decided to form an NGO and I am the director of the NGO. We established the Peace and Justice Legal Aid Centre in May 2017. Then we linked up with the International Bridges to Justice, which has its headquarters in Geneva and we became their regional office in Shan State. Generally, my motivation is providing legal assistance and support to people who are being targeted and persecuted by the government. Most of the people we help include Shans, Pa-Oo people who are often accused of violating article 17 (1), which relates to unlawful assembly of people. These cases are often politically motivated and designed to silence people. So, I have to help these people with their cases by representing them in court and arguing their cases (Ann 2019).

While some women joined organisations focused on human rights, others worked for organisations with a focus on women's participation in political process such as the peace process. Others also joined organisations that focused on broader women's empowerment issues, including economic empowerment, political empowerment and prevention of gender-based violence.

Another key theme is that women's decisions to join specific organisations are informed partly by their lived experiences and partly by the goals and programs of particular organisations. Women are not a homogeneous group and so, while they may have shared goals or values, their individual motivations differ based on their unique lived experiences.

Concluding discussion

This paper has discussed women's commitment to peace in Myanmar by exploring their motivations for forming or joining particular WCSOs. It has revealed that the motivations of the women were as diverse and unique as the women themselves. The findings demonstrate that while peace may be the common goal for women, their motivations, which are largely informed by their lived experiences, are different and peculiar to each

woman. While some were motivated by their commitment to promote women's rights, enable access to justice, facilitate gender quality and empower other women, others were motivated by their experiences of violent conflict, discrimination, human rights violations, and oppression. Some were also inspired by their role models or had inherited the responsibility to work for peace from family members.

The paper argues that while women may have the same goal (peace), they often have different motivations for becoming peace activists, which are largely shaped by their lived experiences. While the paper is generally descriptive, it contributes to our understandings of women and peacebuilding by shedding light on women's variegated motivations for peace. Focusing on the women's motivations for peace has shed light on women's agency for peace in Myanmar and enhanced our understanding of women and peacebuilding, thus contributing to the literature on women, peace and security.

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Interviews

Names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

Abigail 2019 Interviewed in Hpa-An, Karen State, on 23/11/2019.

Akua 2019 Interviewed in Myitkyina, Kachin State, on 20/11/2019.

Ann 2019 Interviewed in Taunggyi, Shan State, on 03/12/2019.

Deborah 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 16/11/2019.

Elisabeth 2019 Interviewed in Loikaw, Karenni State, on 14/11/2019.

Emily 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 05/11/2019.

Emma 2019 Interviewed in Loikaw, Karenni State, on 15/11/2019.

Eva 2019, Interviewed in Mawlamyine, Mon State, on 19/11/2019.

Grace 2019 Interviewed in Sittwe, Rakhine State, on 10/12/2019.

Jazz 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 11/11/2019.

Jenny 2019 Interviewed in Mawlamyine, Mon State, on 18/11/2019.

Joana 2019 Interviewed in Mawlamyine, Mon State, on 18/11/2019.

Joyce 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 02/11/2019.

Julie 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 29/10/2019.

Mary 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 02/11/2019.

Memunatu 2019 Interviewed in Taunggyi, Shan State, on 04/12/2019.

Melissa 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 08/11/2019.

Wendy 2019 Interviewed in Mawlamyine, Mon State, on 19/11/2019.

Zaria 2019 Interviewed in Yangon, Yangon Region, on 10/11/2019.

Zenith 2019 Interviewed in Myitkyina, Kachin State, on 29/11/2019.

End Note

1. A Duwa refers to a Kachin chief (Shayi 2015).

Author

Godwin Yidana has worked in non-profit organisations in Africa, Asia and Australia for over 20 years with a focus on Conflict-Sensitive Development Practice and Peacebuilding and Gender.

He managed the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies' Civil Servants Programme in Myanmar in 2014-2015, where he led the training of over 500 civil servants in conflict transformation and peacebuilding across the country. He is currently completing his PhD at the University of New England (UNE), exploring women's participation in the Myanmar Peace Process through a feminist lens.

Poetry

We go through multiple doors
and a barbed gate into the compound
where dozens of youth workers
wearing duress alarms and radios
stand with legs apart, arms crossed.

They escort us to small groups of children:
the little ones are eight to twelve,
the middle, thirteen to fifteen,
the older are testosterone-filled,
and then there are the girls.

The groups are small pustules
of hatred and grief and despair:

Who the fuck is this?

What do we have to do now?

I fucking hate poetry.

Poetry sucks, man.

We step into an awkward, uncomfortable rhythm.
I read poems about kids in lock-up,
about unhappy, acting-out kids.
I give them cut-ups from Eminem lyrics
to grow into poems.

They tell tough stories about sex and dope
about being caught by the cops
about how they stole cars and cut people
and how much they hate others
especially their mothers and fathers.

Even though they hate poetry
I notice how carefully they write their words
between ruled lines,
how they colour and decorate their poems
and how they sign their names neatly
at the bottom of the page.

SHARON KERNOT