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Matelski, Maaïke; Nang Muay Noan

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# Grassroots Roles and Leadership Aspirations: The Experiences of Young Ethnic Women in Myanmar Civil Society Organizations

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Maaiké Matelski and Nang Muay Noan

*This research explores young ethnic women's activities, experiences, and leadership aspirations within Myanmar civil society organizations (CSOs), and the influence of the COVID pandemic on their life and work. Ethnic women working for CSOs face a number of challenges not only from various power holders but also from within their own communities and organizations. Meanwhile, they carve out opportunities for themselves as young civil society workers. Many show aspirations to become community leaders or politicians. This research was set up in collaboration with two organizations based in Myanmar. Interviews were held in July 2020 with fourteen young ethnic women who had previously been involved in women's leadership trainings, to explore how they experienced their position within civil society after completion of these programs. Apart from their ethnic and gender identities, a number of intersecting identity factors such as age, life stage, education level, and place of origin were taken into account. Differences in experiences were found not only among the known identity factors but also between individual women from different communities, and between those working on the community level and in more formal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). We end with a number of recommendations for CSOs and their partners and donors.*

**Keywords:** Myanmar; civil society; ethnicity; gender; intersectionality; leadership; women

## Introduction

Although a number of women feature prominently in Myanmar's political landscape, the country generally faces significant gender inequality. Previous studies have identified several causes for this disparity, ranging from cultural and religious influences to the pervasive role of the military. Yet, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, in-depth studies of the position of women in Myanmar have been rare. When women feature in historical or contemporary records, this is often restricted to the higher classes ([Andaya 2006](#)).

In the realm of civil society organizations (CSOs), Myanmar women have been relatively visible, particularly within border-based groups and transnational platforms, which have provided opportunities to challenge existing power relations ([Harriden 2012](#)).<sup>1</sup> Women have also been active in ethnic women's organizations, and in some cases in ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).<sup>2</sup> There have been few studies, however, on the question how women perceive their own roles within CSOs, particularly when intersecting identity factors such as age, socioeconomic position, education level, and place of

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1 For the purpose of this article, we restrict our discussion to independent CSOs, leaving out "government-organized NGOs" such as the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association. This article also does not focus on other service-oriented CSOs without the explicit aim to change societal power structures.

2 Nang Hern Kham, for example, is a "strong elite woman" who founded the Shan resistance movement against the military in the 1960s, and other Shan women also participated in the armed resistance, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s ([Ferguson 2013:5](#)).

origin are taken into account. Given the predominance of “traditional culture” as an argument to maintain the authority of men over women, and elderly over youth, one may expect that even in organizations where young women are numerically represented, they can experience feelings of subordination. Moreover, theory on civil society in general has been criticized for its “gender-blindness,” and for ignoring the realm of the family as a place where social norms and values, relations and hierarchies may be reproduced or challenged (Howell 2007). This is of relevance in Myanmar, where traditional gender relations are often perpetuated, and sometimes negotiated, within the household sphere (Harriden 2012; Hedström 2016a).

This article focuses on the experiences of young ethnic women who are active for CSOs and have participated in one or more women’s leadership training programs. It explores how they experience their role and leadership potential as young women within their organizations, which are focused on women’s rights, ethnic rights, or both. The article is based on interviews with fourteen women, conducted by a researcher who is herself a young Shan woman working for a prominent women’s organization. Data were collected during the early stages of the COVID pandemic, in the run-up to the elections of November 2020, and before the military coup of February 2021. Respondents were asked about their experiences within their organizations and communities, their roles and leadership aspirations since completing their training, and who they viewed as role models. With this study, we seek to contribute to the academic literature on the position of women and youth in contemporary Myanmar, and to complement reports on gender equality by CSOs. We also present some recommendations to potential donors seeking to

fund the activities of women's and ethnic organizations in Myanmar.

## The Position of Myanmar Women in Public Life

Despite some nominal progress and the existence of a number of high profile female politicians and other leaders, the general perception of women's emancipation in postcolonial Myanmar has not been positive (Belak 2002; Harriden 2012). Women have long been underrepresented in powerful positions in politics, government, and ethnic armed groups.<sup>3</sup> Despite successive governments' stated endorsement of international norms, women in Myanmar have limited opportunities in the formal labor market. They are typically employed in the agricultural sector and in low-skilled, often insecure positions, where they can exert little formal influence (Maber 2014).<sup>4</sup> The broad adherence to traditional views on gender norms, and their strategic invocation by local power holders, confines many women to the role of caretakers in the family, making it particularly difficult for young women to take on leadership positions within their communities (Harriden 2012). Surveys conducted in 2014–2015 found conservative views on women and gender among respondents throughout Myanmar to be higher than those of respondents in other Southeast Asian countries (Htun and Jensenius 2020). Respondents

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3 Where they have been included, women often have particular connections or are given a tokenistic role; Ferguson (2013), for example, describes how strong female leaders in the Shan armed resistance were admired but perceived as exceptional, and generally remained subordinate in rank to men.

4 Positive depictions of Burmese women's societal status as compared to neighboring countries have focused predominantly on a small group of educated urban elites (Andaya 2006; Belak 2002).

of all age groups considered men to be more capable leaders in politics, business, and other fields, preferred sons to daughters, and found university education to be more important for boys than for girls. Although universities have higher enrolment for women than for men, women have at times needed higher grades to access university than men. A study on higher education conducted by the British Council in 2013 found that universities had slightly more female than male staff, but women were generally in positions with lower salaries, and were almost entirely absent from influential positions in the ministry or university (in [Maber 2014](#)).

Women's participation in formal political processes has also remained limited, even during (quasi-)civilian rule. Although the percentage of female members of parliament (MPs) rose between 2010 and 2015, by 2018 Myanmar merely ranked 161st place out of 191 on a list of female MPs per country ([Kolås 2020](#)). One significant development in these years was the rise of female MPs originating from business or civil society careers ([Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017](#)). Significantly, female parliamentarians reported that, next to their relatives, many women disapproved of their political role because they found it inappropriate (*ibid.*). This lack of support from female voters was perceived as an obstacle by more female MPs (82%) than either cultural norms (56%) or negative attitudes of male voters (51%).

Religion often serves as a source of gender inequality in Myanmar. Women may play a significant role in religious ceremonies, but in terms of religious leadership, particularly in Buddhism, they generally have lower status than men ([Belak 2002](#); [Gibbins 2017](#)). Conservative interpretations of Buddhism, and the view of women as protectors of traditional culture and harmonious relationships, reinforce the social hierarchy that prioritizes

men in public roles, thus keeping women's roles contained to the household level, and discouraging them from speaking out against conservative gender norms (Nyein Su Mon and Saito 2018).<sup>5</sup>

The influence of Buddhist nationalism on Myanmar politics is also notable. In recent years, prominent Buddhist actors successfully called for restrictions on women's marriage rights, and those of religious minorities in particular. Four "race and religion laws" were passed by the Thein Sein government in 2015, with support from a significant section of the population (Htun and Jensenius 2020). These examples show that women's subordinate status and underrepresentation in public life are not only the result of historical cultural norms but also of the views and actions of contemporary power holders and a significant section of the electorate in Myanmar.

While research on the subordinate position of women (and youth) in Myanmar has mostly focused on the Bamar ethnic majority, studies on the role of women within ethnic and religious minority groups point toward comparable experiences (Belak 2002; Park 2021). In terms of the peace process, a 2016 paper found a number of key factors inhibiting women from participating, ranging from cultural gender norms to gendered leadership cultures (Kolås 2020). Quota were set up for women's participation in the 21st Century Panglong Conference in 2016, but these were not met; instead of the intended 30%, participation remained between 7% and 13%, and mostly

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5 A similar pattern has been observed for conservative religious interpretations among Muslims and (to a slightly lesser extent) animists and Christians of various ethnicities in Myanmar, while more equal gender relations among specific communities also exist (Andaya 2006; Belak 2002).

derived from nongovernmental parties (Pepper 2018:66). The persistence of armed conflict in the ethnic regions, moreover, has further complicated women's positions in these areas, as this comes with safety concerns and restrictions on civil, political, and socioeconomic rights, some of which carry gender-specific components (Harriden 2012). Thus, apart from gender, a number of intersecting factors influence the marginalization of certain groups of women in Myanmar.

### **Intersecting Identity Factors Contributing to Marginalization**

Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality as a lens allows us to acknowledge differences among women, and take into account the potential compounding effect of minority identities in terms of race, class, gender, and other factors (Davis 2008). The most prominent factors interacting with gender in Myanmar are ethnicity, age, and class. Armed conflict and lower levels of development in many of the ethnic states, particularly under military rule, inhibit the rights of people from ethnic minority background, including women (Harriden 2012). Education levels, for example, remain relatively low in many of the ethnic states compared to those in other regions of the country (Maber 2014:147).

As reported in multiple studies, young women in all parts of Myanmar find it challenging to get taken seriously by older men (Harriden 2012; Ma et al. 2018; Maber 2014). In situations of armed conflict, this is even more difficult, as women are often perceived to be unsuitable for fighting positions, and young women face particular risks with regard to gender-based violence. As ethnic nationalities generally face marginalization and discrimination, young women of ethnic minority



background may encounter a double or triple burden. Those living in remote areas have little access to quality education, limited employment opportunities, weak documentation status, are at risk of human rights violations, and may face financial or safety restrictions in terms of travel to more central locations, let alone abroad (Gibbins 2017; Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017).

In addition to age, a related factor is life stage, as women who marry or have children are frequently expected to withdraw from public positions (Hedström 2016b:68). Those who continue their role in activism or politics are often accused of neglecting their family obligations (Pepper 2018:69). Women aspiring leadership positions may either face a double burden by combining household with professional duties, or they may remain unmarried and continue to live with their parents in order to avoid this (Nyein Su Mon and Saito 2018). For middle-class women, hiring household assistance is another option. Yet women themselves do not necessarily see these roles as incompatible. Some even consider themselves particularly suitable for leadership roles due to their extensive experience interacting with people in their private lives, which has been referred to as “relational practices” (Gibbins 2017; Nyein Su Mon and Saito 2018). Moreover, once their children are grown, they feel ready to resume or intensify their public roles (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017).

A further factor complicating women’s empowerment is the divide between urban and rural populations. In remote or otherwise marginalized areas, populations lack access to education, information, job opportunities, and other forms of stability. Although women and youth in these areas play an increasing role in local activism, they often do so “within the frame of well-defined scripts that do not challenge power, gender and age

hierarchies” (Park 2021:561). Consequently, meaningful participation may remain absent, and unequal gender norms may be reinforced. In these rural areas, moreover, even if gender roles in farming and livelihood activities may be more equal, women still face the double burden of combining these roles with household responsibilities, and often leave community leadership to men (ibid.). Women in urban areas are often not fully aware of the lack of opportunities and the hardships endured by women in rural or conflict areas. As most civil society activities take place in the central urban areas of Myanmar, some leaders of ethnic women’s organizations have warned that women’s participation should not be only “elite women participation” (Pepper 2018:71).

## Women in Myanmar Civil Society

Compared to the government and formal politics, women have played a more prominent role in Myanmar’s opposition and protest movements (Maber 2014). Yet these women have also faced internal emancipation struggles, particularly in the context of armed resistance and the student movement. Women took part in student demonstrations, but were considered unsuitable for “military life in the jungle” when they had to flee the urban areas (Hedström 2016b:67). Similarly, EAOs relegated women to nonpolitical support positions, and kept them largely outside cease-fire negotiations (Cardenas 2020). Some women’s groups have reported that their room to address gender concerns has only really expanded since the occurrence of cyclone Nargis in 2008, and the subsequent influx of international organizations (Park 2021:565).

Ethnic minority women in particular have experienced tensions between their struggle toward gender equality and their commitment to the cause of their

ethnic group, with some becoming “simultaneous . . . supporters and critics of their communities” (Hedström 2016b:62). Ethnic women speaking out on issues of gender equality are sometimes perceived as too assertive by people in their surrounding areas (Pepper 2018). Consequently, they often seek international platforms and alliances to advance their advocacy agenda as a sort of “boomerang model” (Cardenas 2020; Harriden 2012; Hedström 2016b). However, much of the peacebuilding work in the ethnic regions is conducted by women on the grassroots level away from (inter)national attention or recognition, which prevents these women from obtaining public speaking experiences outside their own environment (Pepper 2018). Indeed, small scale research with Bamar women working in leadership positions has identified lifelong (formal and informal) learning opportunities and the availability of (particularly female) role models as important motivations for women to take up leadership positions (Nyein Su Mon and Saito 2018). We expect to find similar conducive factors contributing to the leadership potential of young ethnic women in civil society.

## **Women’s Organizations and Training Initiatives**

Various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and network organizations in Myanmar and in the border areas have started training initiatives for marginalized women in order to address the challenges they face, particularly in terms of education and employment opportunities. Typical components are capacity building, empowerment, and leadership skills. The training programs focus predominantly on young women and tend to take place in Yangon or other large cities, restricting the opportunities for women from remote areas to

participate (Maber 2014). Likewise, donors that offer funding tend to be based in Yangon and expect most activities and communication to center around this area (Pepper 2018:71). Thus, while previous research has shown that studying or training abroad significantly helps women to advance their professional career upon return to Myanmar, these opportunities are mostly available to middle-class women and to those within the reach of donors, sponsors, or NGOs (Belak 2002; Park 2021).

The Burmese Women's Union (BWU) and Women's League of Burma (WLB) are among the most prominent organizations working on women's rights and empowerment in Myanmar through advocacy work and training programs (Cardenas 2020; Hedström 2016b). After the foundation of the BWU in 1995 (around the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing) by members of the All Burma Students Democratic Front, WLB was started five years later by twelve ethnic women's organizations, amidst concerns that ethnic rights were being made subordinate to the larger women's rights agenda (Hedström 2016b; Pepper 2018). WLB therefore serves as a platform to strive toward both women's rights and ethnic rights. It aims to bring together women from ethnically diverse backgrounds in order to promote interethnic dialogue, gender equality, and women's empowerment in both the opposition movement and larger Myanmar society (Hedström 2016b). At the time of writing, it comprises thirteen women's organizations, of which eleven are ethnicity based, and two are pan-ethnic.

WLB particularly seeks to connect between various grassroots organizations focusing on women's and ethnic rights (Cardenas 2020). Although founded on the Thai–Myanmar border and in other border areas,

the organization and its members moved many of their operations to Myanmar during the political transition period. WLB officially moved its headquarters from Thailand to Yangon in 2017, which led to concerns among members that it would be further removed from populations in the border areas where conflict continued (Cardenas 2020). Many of the operations have once again moved outside the country in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup.

## Methodology

This project was set up as a collaboration between the first author (a researcher from the Netherlands, working remotely due to COVID restrictions) and two CSOs in Myanmar. The aim was to explore intersecting identity factors in civil society, and how these may influence the experiences of young ethnic women within such organizations. Partners in the research design were Salween Institute and WLB, which helped to identify a local researcher (the second author). Together, the two researchers conducted the literature review, drafted the research questions, and identified the respondents.

As a young WLB employee of Shan ethnicity, and in her capacity as Political Empowerment Program (PEP) coordinator, the local researcher was well positioned to identify and approach respondents, as a trust relationship had been established through previous contact. Out of approximately eighty alumni from the PEP, the local researcher identified those who were still active in civil society (about 85%). From these alumni, she selected respondents to incorporate based on variation in their ethnicities, organizations and levels of seniority, and their availability. Rather than selecting young ethnic women randomly, a conscious choice was made to rely

on alumni from WLB's training program, as the researchers considered the local researcher's familiarity with and access to these women of vital importance for the interviews to generate valuable insights. Moreover, the local researcher was able to validate some of the findings by comparing her own experiences as a young Shan woman active in civil society, and her observations from previous training programs. The ability to identify respondents and establish a trust relation, especially during COVID times, outweighed any possible concerns over the local researcher's neutrality. Meanwhile, the remote researcher served as an outside observer, which allowed her to ask critical questions about both the respondents' and the local researcher's experiences.

In July 2020, fourteen women were interviewed by phone in Burmese language. Respondents were between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-five years and of twelve different ethnicities. The women came of age in the ethnic areas when the country was ruled by the State Peace and Order Restoration Council (1988–2010) and thus experienced firsthand the compounding effect of being a marginalized minority in an era of armed conflict and significant political repression, including of civil society. Of the fourteen women we interviewed, eleven are active for a women's organization in one of the ethnic areas (we will refer to these as community-based organizations [CBOs]), while three work for pan-ethnic women's organizations (referred to as NGOs). In terms of formal education, about half of the respondents had partially or fully completed high school, while the other half had completed university Bachelor level. The respondents are presented in table 1 in random order.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were based on a pre-established topic list. Answers were recorded with permission, transcribed in Burmese, and

**TABLE 1.****Overview of Respondents, Interviews Conducted in July 2020**

<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Organization</b>
1	33	Shan	Taunggyi	Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)
2	35	Mon/Bamar/Karen	Yangon	Burmese Women's Union (BWU)
3	24	Karen	Karen State	Karen Women's Organization (KWO)
4	28	Inn/Danu	Yangon	Burmese Women's Union (BWU)
5	26	Pa-O	N/A	Pa-O Women's Union (PWU)
6	24	Kayan	Loi Kaw	Kayan Women's Organization (KyWO)
7	N/A	Kayan	N/A	Kayan Women's Organization (KyWO)
8	27	Kaya	Loi Kaw	Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO)
9	27	Chin	N/A	Women for Justice (WJ)
10	27	Tavoy	N/A	Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU)
11	32	Ta'ang	Lashio	Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO)
12	N/A	Ta'ang	Lashio	Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO)
13	23	Kuki	Thamu	Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO)
14	N/A	Kachin	Myitkyina	Kachin Women Association of Thailand (KWAT)

then translated into English by the local researcher and one assistant. The first author then organized and analyzed the findings. Questions were asked based on the following topics, although respondents were invited to elaborate on those issues that were of most importance to them: career path and current position in their organizations; activities undertaken in this position; challenges faced during fieldwork activities and within their communities, and the way these were dealt with; experience within their organizations and opportunity to grow; availability of support networks and role models; training experiences and needs, and the impact of the early stages of the COVID pandemic (first half of 2020) on their life and work.

## Research Findings

Although a few respondents worked for larger women's organizations, the majority of women interviewed were active at the community level. Some of them explained that this was a conscious choice to stay connected to the grassroots:

I don't like to just sit at the office and work for that. Sometimes, the organization offers that kind of opportunity for me [to take up a higher position like program coordinator] but I mostly choose the fieldwork that enables me to meet with the people. I am happy to take a responsibility such as going to meet with local people, providing training for the people, getting in touch with people and listen to them.

One woman pointed out that her organization was active in areas that received little NGO or international donor support, while another pointed out that they provided teacher training on the peace process "in remote



areas where communities lack access to information and education.”

In terms of activities, respondents worked either on community issues, or on political awareness raising, particularly among women and youth in advance of the 2020 elections. Many women indicated that they worked on domestic violence, as this was a prevalent problem in their area. As a respondent from Shan State explained, “There is a lot of domestic violence in our community. It is kind of tradition or culture [for men] to abuse their wives. So we did data collection and provided training on women’s rights and against domestic violence in the community.” Other organizations were also involved in data collection on gender-based violence, sometimes in relation to other human rights violations. One respondent was given the specific responsibility to deal with mining, and negotiate between the mining companies and communities living in Sagaing Region: “This work is not only benefiting Kuki nation, but it benefits all women in the region, I am so happy for that.”

Some of the women had gotten involved in coordination and fundraising work within their organizations. One woman explained how, upon return from her training experience with WLB, she was given the position of accountant:

I felt not satisfied for this position, because I am interested to implement projects that related to the subject that I had learnt from the training ... but after I fully understood my job, I came to enjoy it and now I am so satisfied with it, as I could make some improvement to the financial system of the organization.

For many women, participation in the training programs provided a life-changing opportunity, especially in the absence of higher education. Some women were able

to advance their position in the organization after returning from the leadership training:

Since I graduated from PEP, I feel I can take some leading role in the community or organization. Since that time, I started to practice leadership attitudes, actions and way of thinking, because I feel I also can be a good leader. I did not even finish high school so it was the most challenging limitation for my work.

However, many expressed their insecurity in meeting the expectations placed on them:

I got the responsibility as an Executive Committee member to make decisions on the organizations' policies and strategies. At first, I lacked confidence to make some discussion or decision in the meeting. Later I learned from the experience and situation, I was able to discuss and put my opinion on the table for decision making. I could see my leadership skills improve since I have an opportunity to participate in the leadership role.

This sentiment is in line with research that showed that lack of self-confidence and limited experience with public speaking are among the main inhibiting factors for women in both politics and civil society to take up leadership positions (Maber 2014; Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017). Others in higher positions, such as General Secretary, conveyed how they had to balance a leadership role with raising their child(ren) and managing family life. It was also pointed out that, due to the limited resources and staff available especially in CBOs, women informally combined multiple roles and positions.

Interviews for this study were conducted just months before the November 2020 elections. Many respondents indicated that they worked on voter education in communities, and some provided technical support for

female political candidates from their own geographical or ethnic background. They had also planned to do election monitoring, analysis of the results, and to work with elected leaders to bring them close to people in the community, representing the voice of the people in parliament through field visits and talk shows. Women were particularly aware that people in remote, rural areas were less informed about the elections and their rights as a voter compared to urban populations:

In the 2015 election, we also provided voter education for people in rural areas, we had to provide very basic knowledge like why you need to vote and how to vote. We could see that most of the women lacked interest in voting because they thought it was not related to them. For example, some people in remote areas said it was enough if the head of household went to vote, not necessary for everyone in the family to vote. So we had to explain the cause and effect why all citizens need to go to vote.

One of the organizations had established a partnership with the Myanmar Network for Free and Fair Elections, while also supporting female candidates at the village level. Although hopes were high for more female elected politicians, these were quickly dashed by the military coup of February 2021 and the cancellation of the election results. Later in the year, however, a National Unity Government was established by elected politicians and other activists, consisting of several young women and other young leaders.<sup>6</sup>

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6 The National Unity Government was formed by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw in April 2021, and consists partly of elected lawmakers. It competes for recognition as the legitimate government with the military-led State Administration Council.

### *Security Risks and Opposition to Young Women in the Field*

Since the majority of respondents are active on the community level, most of the challenges they mentioned in their work related to fieldwork conditions. These can be categorized into security concerns and opposition from local authorities. As mentioned in the literature, women in Myanmar's ethnic minority areas often face safety concerns. The most challenging part of their work, according to most respondents, was traveling in remote areas. First of all, they face general risks when operating in conflict areas:

Some areas are controlled by different armed groups. While we are on the way to the villages, we are always concerned about fighting and landmines, so it was a high risk for us. Sometimes we are just on the way, when the fighting is serious we have to turn back.

Another respondent explained that it was difficult for her as a young women to travel to remote areas, as she felt it was not secure. Neither did she feel comfortable traveling by car or boat with only women present. She was particularly concerned about security, because her work touches on mining companies and had exposed cases of corruption by local authorities: "They could kill me and my team easily on the way because we are all women." For this reason, women are sometimes prevented by family members from visiting remote or conflict areas. Studies have found that "community concerns for women's security often take the form of over-protectiveness," resulting in serious social limitations for women in their professional lives (Belak 2002:53). Research on female politicians similarly noted that they had trouble campaigning in the evening time in remote areas without electricity, which posed particular risks to

them as women (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017). Security risks thus inhibit women from taking on leadership roles that require frequent travel.

Yet security concerns are not the only issue for young women traveling in remote areas. They also encounter problems with local authorities; first, because they are not always taken seriously as young women, and second, because authorities or community members may question their presence in the area. Respondents are often asked whether their organization is registered, and threatened with disbandment if anyone finds fault with its registration status. Permission from local authorities sometimes gets purposefully delayed. When they enter the field, some get followed by the Special Police: “They always interrupt us and ask questions. Sometimes they even wait for us and observe our training . . . at least they will be aware about the prevention of gender-based violence.”

While ethnic armed groups also intervene in their areas of operations, this was perceived as less problematic:

If the areas are under control of the ethnic armed groups . . . we just inform them what we are going to do under their control areas. So there we have no problem at all. But if the place is under the government and Burmese Tatmadaw control, they are not satisfied with our activities, like training and workshop. They will try to sue us with any law that they want.

Some respondents were threatened by the perpetrators of human rights violations they sought to address, such as representatives of mining companies, or committers of domestic violence; in one case, we were told, “all the villagers did not accept us and tell us to call the victim out of the village and did victim blaming.” When our respondents negotiate with these actors, they are often not taken seriously due to their gender and relatively

young age, a disadvantage they have to struggle to overcome:

As I am a woman who is working in the CSO, when I went to negotiate with the local authorities or leaders of political parties, they just call me daughter, they give less respect to me because I was young and I am a woman too . . . To get recognized by the local authorities or leaders in the political parties, I try to build trust and introduce myself with them so they can know who I am and what I am doing to develop the community. So later on they know what I am working on and doing in the community, they come to recognize me.

Another respondent conveyed a similar example of discrimination by local authorities in areas under control of an ethnic armed group:

I have to go and request their permission, so they always tell me to call my leader or someone that has a higher position. I told them I am the highest and have the right to make a decision for this, but they do not believe me.

This discrimination was based not only on their gender but also on their relatively young age:

Most of the peace actors and leaders still discriminate women and youth participating in the peace process. Not only male leaders, but also female leaders discriminate [against] youth in decision making levels. It is just their mouth saying that they are supporting women leaders but in reality, they do not take action and there is still some discrimination.

One respondent suspected that established leaders may feel a sense of competition:

It is also maybe because of the culture in our society, most of the leaders seem scared that young leaders will have better skills than them, because they do not want to give the opportunity for the younger leaders to lead.

Therefore, it is important to consider factors within the women's own environment and organizations inhibiting their leadership opportunities.

### *Community-Based Restrictions*

Young women also face obstacles from the side of family or community members due to what they perceive as traditional stereotypes about gender roles:

For example, the village that I grew up in, the society's culture, tradition, religion and beliefs were that women should not take a leading role or go outside, and no need to learn or study. Women have to stay at home and help their parents work at home, listen to their parents, work in the farm, and have to agree with the arranged marriage by parents . . . I was the person who goes against these culture and traditions of stereotypes on women, and I went to learn and observe the living of people outside of my village for one week. When I came back to my home, many people asked did I get pregnant because I wasn't home for a week.

Some of the women who joined leadership trainings in Thailand or elsewhere outside their own communities also faced stereotypes and distrust upon return, especially once they tried to implement new ideas they had learnt on gender relations:

The village headman came and informed my parents, will you give a lesson to your own daughter or will you let us give her a lesson? That it was shameful as their daughter came and shared that kind of knowledge and issues in our village . . . So when I got home, my parents were angry with me because they are also staying under the order of the village headman.

Some women said they were not supported in their activities by their husbands, while others said their

husbands did support their work. Some also lost friends after joining a women's organization, because they were seen as "breaking the culture and the tradition." Most of the respondents eventually managed to overcome these obstacles, while also creating a new support network within their organization. This is an important transformative effect, albeit on a small scale and individual level.

### *Organizational Position and Hierarchy*

It became clear from our interviews that young ethnic women face most restrictions from the side of the government, local authorities and sometimes from within their families or surrounding community members. However, we were also interested in challenges they experience within their own organizations. When probed, all respondents working for CBOs said that the pay was very low for the work they had to do: "I would honestly say that the salary is not enough; however, since I love to do this job and want to develop the community, I chose to work on it." Some respondents, mostly NGO workers, said it was enough to live on, while most others said that the salary was not enough to provide for their families. In those cases, they relied on the income of other family members. CBO workers specifically compared their low salaries to the better pay provided by NGOs. The low pay tended to be attributed to their lack of education, as several respondents had not finished high school and therefore needed to learn on the job. Some organizations had reportedly managed to increase salaries over time.

A few of our respondents said they lacked support from women in higher positions within their organization: "They also do not really give the opportunity or the place for lower staff to improve their leadership role ... Sometimes, as an organization that provides



empowerment for women, they forget to empower their own staff.” Others said that they got a lot of support from within the organization. Especially the larger women’s NGOs had a policy to support staff financially for certain healthcare needs, providing loans during the COVID pandemic, and offering mental support.

Most respondents were interested in taking up leadership roles in their organizations, although many said they felt they needed to enhance their “knowledge, skills and experiences” first, and consequently, their self-confidence. Some also said that they had to take care of their children, and found it difficult to combine this with a leadership position or with frequent travel. A larger women’s NGO allowed children to be in the office during work time, and some employees could afford to hire a caretaker. One woman found it particularly hard to supervise colleagues who were older than her. This suggests that women within civil society develop leadership aspirations but face a number of challenges in fulfilling their ambitions, ranging from lack of support to fear of breaking cultural norms. These findings resonate with earlier research about the need for women to have ample access to formal and informal learning opportunities in order to grow into leadership roles (Nyein Su Mon and Saito 2018), as well as the suggestion that women (and youth) require active support from CSOs if their political or public participation is to have a truly transformative effect on gender relations (Park 2021:582).

### *Support Network and Role Models*

Given the various challenges faced by women in civil society, a supportive environment is vital for them to advance their societal and organizational positions (Maber 2014:152). We therefore asked respondents about the support network available to them, and whether they

had any role models in their environment or in larger society. Many respondents mentioned the leaders of their women's organizations as an example for themselves. One explained that she most valued leaders who "have a kind mind and always sympathize with other people." Some mentioned male politicians from their own ethnic group, or particular youth leaders, one of whom has since become deputy minister in the National Unity Government. Respondents referred to these role models as "having a justice mind" and being "gender-sensitive." One respondent mentioned Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

In terms of support network, while some women experienced opposition from family members, many mentioned their father or, in other cases, their mother, uncle, or a sibling, as someone who particularly supported their work. In one case, the respondents' uncle (referred to as her adopted father) serves as political leader for their ethnic group:

He is taking a position of chairman at our National Party. My father always has justice thinking and non-discrimination on his children whether sons or daughters . . . he always guides me to be able to work for a just society and for my people.

One respondent mentioned a monk who had been important for her work and education since her childhood. Some respondents receive support from partner organizations outside their own area, such as the Burma Rivers Network.

Although it often took some convincing before their parents would understand why respondents wanted to work for a women's rights organization, many parents subsequently became among their greatest supporters and advisors. This shows that young women can have

a transformative effect on cultural norms regarding age and gender within their families and communities. Once these young women manage to obtain leadership positions, they may show a different example to their children, leading to more women becoming supporting mothers or other forms of leaders.

Earlier research on women in civil society mentions the need for internships and mentoring opportunities in order for young women to access leadership roles (Maber 2014:153), while research among female MPs has noted a lack of mutual collaboration and support, especially across party lines (Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017). Indeed, what respondents mostly missed was a personal mentor or advisor. As one explained, “I think we need at least one person to support or guide me, specifically a woman like me, because I did not get an opportunity to access higher education. So it is essential and important to have a supporter or guide.” She mentioned three reasons why she did not yet have such an adviser:

First, I never ask anyone to advice or guide me, maybe because of our culture and tradition I never think about having a supporter or guide person . . . our society does not see women having the ability to lead, so they never think about supporting. I myself also forgot to think about that. I just realized this now because you asked me. Our society is male-dominated, so most people think that women do not need support. Even some women leaders, they do not want to give encouragement or support to women who are more skillful than them. It happens because we grow up under the male-dominated system.

Here, we see the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy similar to that found in other sections of Myanmar society, where women who aspire leadership positions face

opposition and lack of support, including from other women. The women empowerment training programs therefore also serve as important platforms to foster solidarity and network opportunities.

### *Leadership Training Needs and Experiences*

Respondents conveyed how important the leadership training had been for their life and work, creating new ambitions and opportunities: “After joining this training, I am always aware that I must do things that I have never done, for example, speaking in front of people,” said one respondent. “After I attended the training, I understood how important gender issues are in our daily lives. I also came to know that gender perspective in political analysis is very important,” reported another respondent. The opportunity to follow trainings in Thailand also made it easier for them to learn skills and knowledge without facing some of the challenges in Myanmar identified above.

Given our respondents’ insecurity about their own capabilities, one of the limitations mentioned was the sense that many of the courses did not go in-depth enough to master certain topics. Some said they would prefer to learn about fewer topics in more detail. Moreover, in some cases they felt they could not apply what they had learnt directly in their organization, because the organization did not know how to use their knowledge, or because they operate in very remote areas where little or no CSOs are active. It was suggested to include or expand the opportunity for alumni to conduct an internship with an organization that works on their interest area, such as peace or politics. One woman mentioned that alumni should have the opportunity to gain work experience in parliament, or with local authorities. A small number of respondents mentioned the

aspiration to become a politician themselves: “Actually, I dream to be a woman member of parliament, I want to enter into the parliament and change the policy that benefits the grassroots people, but the limitation is that I did not finish high school.” Thus, it is not lack of ambition, but lack of educational and job opportunities that restrict young ethnic women working with CSOs from fulfilling their aspirations.

Respondents especially felt ill-equipped to meet all language and reporting requirements imposed by donors, such as advanced English and project management. One respondent said that she did not feel prepared to serve as a leader: “The school name is leadership, but the curriculum does not include the subject of leadership. I think the school should include this subject in the curriculum such as characteristics of good leadership or some subjects related with leadership.”

Another respondent commented,

We are still lacking leadership skills, management skills and other capacities. I think the mother organization should support us to improve those skills. Because our organization’s mission is to empower young women, they also need to provide leadership skills for their staff ... to eliminate the culture or tradition that oppresses and discourages women to take a leadership role in the society.

Larger NGOs and network organizations on the (trans) national level were particularly relied upon to provide such skills and opportunities.

### *The Impact of COVID and the 2021 Coup*

This research took place during the early stages of the COVID pandemic in Myanmar, which put a hold on many civil society plans and activities. At the time of

our interviews, the number of COVID cases was relatively low, but travel and group activities were severely restricted. Like elsewhere, respondents primarily worried about the health impact on their environment. They also felt that the government was neglecting the health risks for local communities, particularly in the border areas. Apart from physical health concerns, several respondents worried about mental health issues, and foresaw a rise in domestic violence, primarily due to loss of income of small businesses in combination with rising food prizes. It also became more difficult for victims of violence or discrimination to reach out to our respondents' organizations.

Work-specific concerns related to the cancellation of many fieldwork projects as a result of the emerging COVID crisis, and the corresponding loss in donor funding because planned activities could not be completed: "If the donor cancels the funds, we do not have budget to conduct training and provide knowledge to the people in the community." Some respondents worried that their (already modest) salaries could be affected. Practical concerns included difficulties traveling to and communicating with those areas that did not have stable phone and internet connections, while most of the work had to be done remotely. One positive side effect mentioned of the COVID crisis was the ability of young people to take the lead in shifting to online communication, which somehow balanced the disadvantage they felt toward older people, and which, similar to the post-Nargis period, provided them with a heightened profile. As one woman concluded,

At first COVID-19 impacted on my physiology, but I think in the future if it still happening, people will have to stay in a new normal and turn crisis to opportunity, such as attend online classes. People will be more familiar with IT than before and be more skillful.

Evidently, the military coup of February 2021 and the violent aftermath have deteriorated the situation for our respondents in every respect. Although we could not reach many of them after telecommunication got disrupted and many people had to change phone numbers, we can only imagine the difficulties they must have faced since. Not only did the coup exacerbate health concerns and problems of access to carry out existing projects, but it has also created a range of serious new problems. These include further restrictions on freedom of speech and movement, and an increase in displaced populations as a result of violence in the ethnic areas. Many women have lost their lives as a result of renewed fighting, and after violent repression of anti-coup protests.<sup>7</sup> We stand in solidarity with all victims of military violence and hope that our respondents will find ways to continue with their aspirations.

## Conclusion

This research has shed light on the various obstacles and opportunities faced by young ethnic women working for CSOs in Myanmar. Young women face significant challenges in fulfilling their potential, both from within their own community or organization, and from many external forces. Studies on civil society should take a more gender-sensitive perspective with specific attention to the social roles of women within the community,

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<sup>7</sup> By January 2022, over 100 women had died as a result of military violence after the coup, according to the “Fatality List” of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners-Burma. The actual numbers are presumably much higher. The director of Women for Justice, one of WLB’s member organizations, was shot dead on 28 March 2021. See also A. A. and Gaborit (2021) on the detention, harassment, and torture of women activists after the coup.

family, and household level, as these play a significant role in their ability to take on leadership roles, whether informally or in more formal organizational settings (Belak 2002; Harriden 2012; Hedström 2016a; Howell 2007). Our data show that there are still widely held feelings that traditional cultural norms restrict young women from obtaining leadership positions. Yet, as Harriden (2012:4) warns, we must be “cautious about accepting ‘traditional’ gender roles at face value,” and explore what other intersecting identity factors and underlying power dynamics may contribute to this perpetuation of unequal power relations.

The diverse experiences of these fourteen women demonstrate that gender identities are neither uniform nor fixed; experiences differ based on age, education, life stage, place of origin, and type of employer. An important finding in this research, which resonates with the literature and with experiences in the women’s leadership training program, is that differences between individual communities may be more decisive on the space women have to break away from traditional gender roles, than any fixed category related to ethnicity, religion, or place of origin. Determinants of social status such as education opportunities, (family) income level, and marital status also play a large role. Studies about the social and public role of women, therefore, should be mindful of the specific circumstances in which the data are obtained, as views on gender roles perceived as cultural or traditional are in fact likely to vary among similar social groups in different contexts.

The women’s empowerment training programs provide important avenues for these young women which they do not find elsewhere. They help them to advance their career, while continuing to work for their communities. Young women in Myanmar, particularly from



marginalized areas, can compensate for the lack of formal education opportunities by joining these training programs. However, their career advancement depends on them being given space by colleagues, family, and community members to gain the necessary experience, and also on their personal situation, life stage, and support networks. With explicit support, individual women can have a transformative effect on gender relations, as they set new examples and may themselves become role models and mentors for other young women. Women's organizations should therefore identify ways to invest in young staff members, while being mindful of possible restrictions that young women experience within their own ranks, and seeking ways to remedy these.

In terms of livelihoods, some women can barely live off their salary, while others manage to achieve a more sustainable position. A systematic review of salary differences between NGOs and CBOs, male and female workers, urban and rural employees, and those engaged in fieldwork and office work would help to uncover potential inequalities and look for ways to address these. Women working for CBOs in remote areas are in particular need of both human and financial resources in order to achieve their full potential. Donors could play a role in this, and could also scrutinize the way that funding gets distributed between office work and fieldwork, and between CBO and NGO workers. Similarly, the (I)NGOs and (trans)national networks working with women's groups on various levels could develop policies to reduce these inequalities.

The recent developments since the COVID pandemic and the military coup of February 2021 demonstrate the risk of women in marginalized positions becoming even more disadvantaged. Apart from the human tragedy and the loss of lives and freedoms, these developments have further restricted people in Myanmar, including young

ethnic women, from reaching their leadership potential. Some donors have been flexible enough to redirect their funding to emergency relief, but the long-term aspirations of ambitious young women in Myanmar should also be kept in sight. Young women have played a notably active role in resistance to the military coup, and a new generation of activists (belonging to “Generation Z”) is playing with cultural norms. For example, the traditional idea that a man’s *hpoun* (glory or power) can be diminished by walking underneath a line of women’s clothing has been used creatively by activists hanging women’s clothes on laundry lines in public places to prevent soldiers from crossing (A. A. and Gaborit 2021). This underscores the circumstantial nature of young women’s positions in public life, and shows that traditional cultural norms are indeed subject to public scrutiny.

While this research has zoomed in on the experiences of women with multiple overlapping minority identities, we acknowledge that our respondents are not among the most marginalized in Myanmar society. They have managed to secure a certain level of education, have found their way into a CSO, and have had the opportunity to participate in one or more women’s empowerment training programs. Women in the most remote areas of Myanmar have probably not been reached in this study; the same goes for the most marginalized ethnic minorities, such as the Rohingya.<sup>8</sup> While this research was restricted to alumni of the WLB training programs, we recommend further research into the multilayered

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<sup>8</sup> WLB has recently taken steps to publicly acknowledge the fate that Rohingya women and men have faced in recent years, and pledge their solidarity; see for example <https://www.womenofburma.org/statements/solidarity-message-our-rohingya-sisters-and-brothers> (accessed March 31, 2022).

experiences of women in these most marginalized positions, particularly in the post-coup environment.

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MAAIKE MATELSKI is a social scientist from the Netherlands with a focus on human rights and development studies. She finished her PhD thesis on civil society in Myanmar in 2016, and conducted postdoctoral research on land rights advocacy in Kenya. Her research focuses on social and political activism and issues of voice, legitimacy, and representation within rights-based advocacy. She has published articles on access and ethics in ethnographic research, and co-edited a special issue of *Moussons* on the urbanization of Yangon in 2019. Maaïke currently works at the Anthropology Department of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She can be contacted at [maaikematelski@gmail.com](mailto:maaikematelski@gmail.com).

NANG MUAY NOAN is the Political Empowerment Program (PEP) Coordinator at the Women's League of Burma (WLB). She is an ethnic Shan and originates from southern Shan State, Burma/Myanmar. From 2011 to 2014, she worked with civil society organizations among

Shan communities, where she assisted with the provision of education to migrants and internally displaced people in the field of human rights, child rights, and gender issues. In 2018, she graduated as a Bachelor of Arts majoring in International Relations and Development at Rangsit University in Bangkok, Thailand. After obtaining her degree, she joined the WLB as PEP Coordinator. Her main responsibilities are managing project activities, drafting proposals for fundraising, designing project activities, networking with WLB's alliance organizations and other stakeholders, and project implementation. She can be contacted at [muaynohn@gmail.com](mailto:muaynohn@gmail.com).

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