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THE FUND FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS

Lessons Learned in the Pursuit of Gender Justice and Feminist Practice in Burma

By Lisa Houston and Ginger Norwood

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Authors' Foreword

The international catastrophe of COVID-19, along with global protests against racism and police brutality have dominated international news at the time of writing this report. The COVID-19 pandemic exposes the weakness of the health system in Burma (also known as Myanmar), which for decades has been nothing more than neglectful. The crisis has also further shown the Burmese military and government's glaring disregard for the wellbeing of its people, especially Indigenous peoples. Human rights abuses, military impunity and forced displacement continue during the pandemic as they have for decades; there is even evidence that the regime is taking advantage of the pandemic to further restrict people and expand the power of the military.[1] Internationally, donors are faced with choices about how best to respond both to the pandemic and the call for an end to systemic racism. Burma's Indigenous, or ethnic, movements for peace and justice recognize the complexity of the crises and the holistic and intersectional approaches that these crises demand. Now more than ever, there is a need for a feminist approach to funding that supports those movements.

The continued abuses and violence by Burma's government and military increase vulnerabilities and severely limit the ability of Indigenous leadership to protect and provide for their people. The Indigenous health systems, trusted in their communities and with access to conflict-impacted areas, are the best-placed option to provide vital services and respond to immediate needs, but they are severely undermined by the Burma government, under-resourced and need to be supported. Without a structural power analysis, humanitarian aid will likely be predominantly channelled through international non-governmental organization (INGOs) and the government systems. Such aid is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable people in ethnic areas and could inadvertently cause harm by undermining the local health and social support systems on which people in the ethnic states depend.

[1] Progressive Voice (2020) A Nation Left Behind: Myanmar's Weaponization of COVID-19 https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final_PV-COVID-19_Report-2020.pdf

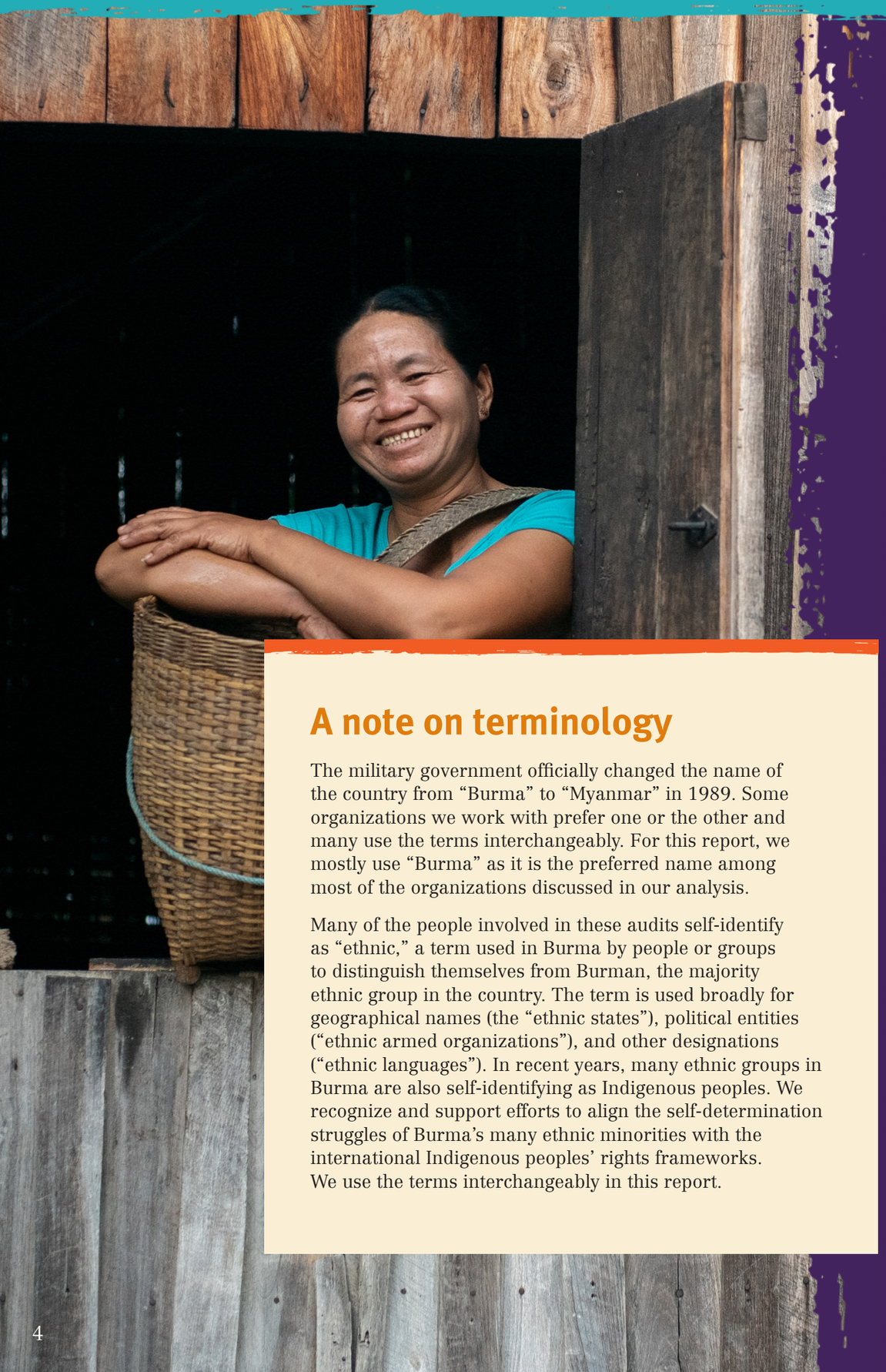
Such impacts would have long-term ramifications, particularly for women. Reproductive health rights in ethnic areas already have some of the world's worst indicators. There is global concern around the pandemic's impact on women including reductions in women's access to health services and the need for support for victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). At times like these, support for local social services are critical to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Donor support for Indigenous, community-based pandemic responses is essential for both vital service provision and the longer-term sustainability of federal governance and health systems.

The recent global protests against anti-Black racism are a hopeful reminder of the power of movement building and the importance of an intersectional analysis of critical social justice issues. Widespread acknowledgement of systemic racism and new possibilities for restructuring institutions are suddenly commonplace. The 2020 crises have laid bare the glaring inequalities across the world caused by entrenched structures designed to benefit the few. They highlight the urgent need to listen to the voices of the oppressed and take action with them to redress gross abuses of power. They have made apparent the risks that activists are willing to take in defence of their values and beliefs and for the very survival of their communities.

Feminist funding entails long-term, flexible core support, respect for partners' choices on how best to meet the needs of their communities, support for movement building and advocacy and a contextual and power analysis driving all decisions This approach to funding bolsters sustainable activism that can challenge the myriad threats of structural inequalities, including a pandemic.

- Lisa Houston and Ginger Norwood

Photos: Community members and activists from Karen Women's Organization and Kayah Earthrights Action Network | Credit: Robert Mentov for the Fund for Global Human Rights



A note on terminology

The military government officially changed the name of the country from “Burma” to “Myanmar” in 1989. Some organizations we work with prefer one or the other and many use the terms interchangeably. For this report, we mostly use “Burma” as it is the preferred name among most of the organizations discussed in our analysis.

Many of the people involved in these audits self-identify as “ethnic,” a term used in Burma by people or groups to distinguish themselves from Burman, the majority ethnic group in the country. The term is used broadly for geographical names (the “ethnic states”), political entities (“ethnic armed organizations”), and other designations (“ethnic languages”). In recent years, many ethnic groups in Burma are also self-identifying as Indigenous peoples. We recognize and support efforts to align the self-determination struggles of Burma’s many ethnic minorities with the international Indigenous peoples’ rights frameworks. We use the terms interchangeably in this report.

A Message from The Fund for Global Human Rights and Inter Pares

Inter Pares and the Fund for Global Human Rights both hired the authors of this paper to conduct gender and feminist audits. The authors’ reflections on that work, as articulated in this paper, have reinforced our views on the importance of a feminist approach to grant making and helped us learn about the challenges and the best ways to practice our values. While the analysis and views in the paper are those of the authors, we heartily endorse their recommendations and we hope that others involved in grant making will find as much value in these reflections as we do.

About the Authors

Lisa Houston and Ginger Norwood both have over 20 years of experience working on the Thai-Burma border with organizations in Burma as well as internationally. They have extensive experience with project and program evaluations and have carried out extensive research, assessments, and reviews around gender and human rights. Women’s rights, refugee rights, and Indigenous people’s rights have been a central focus of much of their work, analyzing gender as a cross-cutting dimension in an intersectional framework. They are both trained facilitators of group processes and have conducted trainings on a range of relevant issues including gender, women’s leadership, feminist practice, women human rights defenders security and wellbeing, organizational and strategic planning, and development.

Comments from Partners

“As an Indigenous women’s organization living and working in the conflict-affected areas of Burma, we know that KWO [Karen Women’s Organization] still is in the process of developing our feminist approach. We see this as a long and purposeful journey. We welcome others to join us on this path. I have never read a report like this before about the situation here. The two authors really have got it right! As I read, I thought, ‘Yes this is what KWO does! This is what we need people to understand.’”

– Naw K’nyaw Paw, General Secretary, Karen Women’s Organization

“A feminist movement has not developed in Naga areas yet. There are some discussions among political parties, cultural committees, students and youth organizations, but they are all theoretical, not based on the day-to-day. IPP [Indigenous Peoples’ Partnership] wants to see more feminist funding because a feminist approach will strengthen movements and expand networks. But it has to be innovative, adapted to the local realities. The report covers important lessons learned and recommendations fit with what we want to see for the Naga people. I hope that the donors will take up the recommendations and will understand the historical women’s movement in Burma when they design their strategies.”

– Ke Jung, Director, Indigenous Peoples’ Partnership

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I. A Brief Feminist Analysis of Burma

Many of the conflicts in Burma seem intractable and human rights abuses continue unabated. This report argues that greater support for feminist approaches to these problems will bring about better outcomes. In recent years, the severe violence against the Rohingya has drawn unprecedented international attention. The best and most systematic international analysis of the egregious abuses against the Rohingya has recognized the same patterns of abuse nationwide, with disproportionate levels directed against Indigenous peoples, especially women. Ethnic people make up at least 40% of Burma's population, many of whom have endured armed conflict throughout their lives. For them, the military represents the Burmese government, responsible for the ongoing land confiscation, laying of landmines, forced portering, forced relocation and torture. Military sexual violence against Indigenous women is well-documented. The government program of forced assimilation of ethnic and Indigenous peoples has always been a part of the government's national vision. At the same time, Indigenous women face intersectional discrimination. They have less access to formal education and some of the worst indicators in reproductive health and domestic violence. The burden of family and household care falls to women as many men have to leave villages to fight or avoid conscription. Further, Indigenous women lack any significant political representation at both the village and national levels.

Sustained shifts toward peace and democracy in Burma — after decades of militarization, Burmanization and authoritarianism — depend on strong, Indigenous- and women-led movements for change. All of the ingredients already are there in civil society organizations and activists who have challenged corruption and complacency, called for an end to armed conflict and analyzed the negative impacts of decades of military rule. Women activists have demanded to be heard in the peace process, called for accountability for sexual violence and rejected the dominant development model that ignores local communities' rights. Now, even as those forms of violence persist, they also face additional challenges of operating in a context where a façade of peacebuilding and democratic reforms masks the continuity between the present circumstances and those five decades of military rule.

In recent years, an increasing number of women's organizations and other civil society activists in Burma have recognized this challenge and built on their years of promoting a women's rights approach to develop an intersectional feminist analysis. This approach provides a framework to analyze power and the structural causes of oppression and violence that reveals the legacy of military rule. Likewise, some organizations are beginning to identify with an Indigenous peoples' rights agenda, as it reflects their own experiences of multiple forms of discrimination linked to their ethnicity and oppression of their rights to their own cultures, land practices and languages.

Despite these developments, too few donors and international organizations support women's movements, and in particular the ethnic women's movement. There is a need for the donor community to address the dramatic imbalance of resources and to champion activists and groups that take on great risk by speaking truth to power. The preference that many donors and INGOs still hold for working directly with the government, or with civil society organizations that curry favor with the government, undermines the legitimacy of activists whose approach challenges state and military power. Genuine change in Burma requires donors to shift to prioritizing and valuing the work of social movements by supporting those who call out the abuse and denial of basic freedoms that the current government promotes.

II. Rationale and Methodology

We were hired by the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) and Inter Pares to conduct Gender and Feminist Process Audits with selected partners working in Burma.

The audits included ten organizations, ranging in size from four to several hundred staff, and based in Yangon, Loikaw, Pyay, Sittwe, Mae Sariang and Chiang Mai, with operations in Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Rakhine States, the Naga Self-administered zone, in Central Burma and Sagaing Region, as well as in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. The groups included women's organizations, as well as groups focused on human rights, land rights, media, Indigenous peoples' rights, community organizing and social inclusion. While our analysis comprises a small sampling of the robust civil society in Burma and its borders, we believe the findings are relevant and applicable for the broader movements for social justice in the country. We come to this conclusion based also in part upon our several decades of work experience with civil society in Burma.

For each audit, we analyzed gender within a feminist, social justice and human rights context, evaluating what needs to change — within the organizational structures and within programming — at micro and macro levels to promote more equitable, inclusive and rights-based processes and outcomes.

These processes brought to light a number of insights and key lessons that we, FGHR, and Inter Pares want to share with other donors supporting change in Burma.

III. Feminism and Women's Movements in Burma

1. Feminism as a Concept

"Explicit in Myanmar language, the mis-translated term for feminism is 'Women's desire to limit and even surpass male power and privilege', and therefore there exists a strong backlash against the term, against feminists, and against feminist movements from both men and women."[2]

In both mixed gender organizations and women's groups, people spoke about the stigma the words "feminist" and "feminism" carry in Burma. Feminists are seen to be women who are "extreme", hate men, are arrogant and believe in women's supremacy. Feminism is considered a threatening Western concept that goes against the religious and cultural values of Burma.

There is not yet an agreed on and widely used term for feminism in the various languages spoken in Burma. Words which translate as "women's equality-ism", "women's perspectives" and "woman-ism" are commonly used in Burmese and ethnic languages, in addition to simply using "feminism" in English. It is challenging, and potentially a barrier, for mainly rural and remote grassroots women's organizations to depend on foreign words which can be seen as alienating and elitist in their own communities. It should be noted that for many ethnic women, even Burmese language terms are foreign and elitist.

CREA, a Global South feminist organization, provides a four-dimension definition of feminism, which includes theory, social change strategy, analytical framework and daily practice.[3] Despite the stigma and stereotyping surrounding the notion of feminism in Burma, many activists proudly identify as feminist and clearly articulate common feminist themes and practices in their work that align with these four dimensions. In the audits, these included promoting women's leadership and participation in all spheres; solidarity with other marginalized identities; addressing the root causes of injustice; speaking out against all forms of oppression, especially those caused by decades of militarization; and challenging one's own internalization and use of power in daily practice. We also found that while some civil society organizations may not identify as feminist, we readily identify their intersectional analysis and reflective practices as such. One activist in an audit interview summed it up as: "We oppose dictatorship, injustice and all forms of oppression. We don't just work for equality, but also justice. We want to get rid of patriarchal society."

The terms "women's equality" or "gender equality" are more widely used and accepted, but many initiatives do not address issues of structural oppression, state violence or patriarchal power. The focus is on advocacy for law reform and awareness raising in communities on domestic violence, sexual harassment and other gender based violence.[4] White ribbon campaigns, 16-days of activism campaigns that advocate for the end of domestic violence against women, and feminism that affirms the traditional roles of women are now generally accepted and get widespread participation.[5]

Feminist activism works for gender justice — to transform structures of power that uphold injustice and patriarchy and address the intersectional impacts on all marginalized identities. Feminist activists recognize that law reform, gender mainstreaming, women's leadership or gender balance within unjust systems alone will not lead to true equality or lasting peace. A feminist approach to Burma must challenge the dominant and extremely patriarchal institutions of the military and Buddhist sangha, for example. But feminist activism comes with risks. Activists and organizations truly speaking truth to power face threats and isolation. They also risk jeopardizing their funding and donor support.

2 Shunn Lei, Pyo Let Han & Tharaphi Than. (2018). *Feminism in Myanmar.* academia.edu/39870383/Feminism_in_Myanmar

3 creaworld.org/publications/achieving-transformative-feminist-leadership-toolkit-organizations-and-movements

4 Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing. (Aug 2019). Feminism in Myanmar. library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15624.pdf

5 Shunn Lei, Pyo Let Han & Tharaphi Than. (2018). Feminism in Myanmar. academia.edu/39870383/Feminism_in_Myanmar

2. A Historical Look at Women's Movements in Burma

Because Burma was largely cut off from the rest of the world by the isolationist policies of the dictator General Ne Win from 1962 to 1988, and remained relatively closed until the late 2000s, the organizing, resilience and growth of women's movements, especially on Burma's borders, is not well known among donors and other international actors now involved in the country. This historical perspective is essential for understanding present-day dynamics, as it helps explain contemporary efforts to strengthen cross-ethnic solidarity, to link advocacy around sexual and gender-based violence to the political context of armed conflict and to urge an analysis of Burma's women's movements outside of the dominant paradigm that assumes that national leadership and strategies will come from the largest city, Yangon, or from the seat of government in Naypyitaw. This historical review re-centers the historical record at Burma's borders and reveals a decades-long effort that remains dynamic and visionary today.

While the women's movement inside the country was largely underground until 2011, on Burma's borders, it has been vocal for decades. Some women's organizations have been active since as far back as 1949. Formed predominantly around ethnic identity, these groups often initially focused on humanitarian services for their communities.

In 1999, many of these groups founded the Women's League of Burma (WLB) — a space to learn from one another and act in solidarity. Members of WLB and the coalition itself brought critical issues to international attention, including military violence against women and specifically the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Their work had a prominent human rights focus with a considerable body of reports, mainly documenting military atrocities against women and linking human rights abuses to big development projects in ethnic areas.

In 2002, the Shan Women's Action Network co-produced a report with the Shan Human Rights Foundation titled "License to Rape." The report was the first of its kind, documenting 173 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence, involving 625 girls and women, committed by Burma's army in Shan State between 1996 and 2001. The publication brought unprecedented international attention to Burma, and for the first time, women were at the forefront of Burma's democracy movement.

Prior to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, there was little room for civil society organizations to operate in Burma beyond simple charity work and aside from faith-based organizations, few women's organizations were able to operate openly inside the country. The government set up their own civil society organizations to represent women's issues, including in international fora, such as Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) or Myanmar Women's Affairs. "These organizations were pitched as aiming to promote women's roles at all levels, but their goal of 'preserving Myanmar culture' only aimed to strengthen traditional and patriarchal notions of femininity and never intended social or political change."[6] WLB had been supporting a broad range of trainings for women in ethnic states and had documented sexual violence and other human rights violations for nearly a decade. In its 2008 shadow report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), "In the Shadow of the Junta", WLB challenged the military regime's efforts to hold up the MMCWA and MWA as indicators of how well women in Burma were doing. WLB's report highlighted the militarization of these groups.[7] That same year, the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis was a catalyst for setting up civil society organizations as the state failed to provide any significant relief to affected communities.

The official end of Burma's decades-long military dictatorship a few years later triggered donor engagement with the country and again the formation of new community organizations. In 2012, the Gender Equality Network (GEN), which grew out of joint advocacy efforts for cyclone affected women, expanded their advocacy focus to policy change regarding violence against women, women and labor rights and women's participation in politics and peacebuilding.[8] As the country opened, there was an immediate effort to bring issues facing women out into the public, to increase the pressure for law reform and to change public attitudes towards women. Internet availability also created new spaces for open discussions and awareness raising.

6 Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing. (Aug 2019). Feminism in Myanmar. library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15624.pdf

7 womenofburma.org/statements/shadow-junta-cedaw-shadow-report-reveals-systemic-gender-discrimination- burma

8 Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing. (Aug 2019). Feminism in Myanmar. library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15624.pdf

As the country opened, women's groups inside the country and those operating from the borders made efforts to collaborate. Work on the CEDAW shadow reports, which had begun with border groups, provided opportunities for joint advocacy. Networks like GEN Myanmar and later Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process held high profile women's forums, conferences and dialogues in Yangon. During this time, reports on the status of women and gender justice were published from inside the country by GEN Myanmar and the Gender Development Institute, as well as international organizations, and many organizations began providing gender and women's rights trainings. In 2014, WLB took the brave step of holding their first press conference inside the country with their most recent report on military rape.[9] While it looked like space was opening to tackle crucial issues, including addressing military abuse and state violence, in subsequent years, restrictions on public forums and intimidation and arrests of activists have once again limited the possibility for outspoken critique from organizations based in the country.

In preparation for the 2015 elections, several organizations trained politicians on women's rights. While the 2015 elections led to the largest number of women ever elected to public office, women's representation remained abysmal at 13.6% and 13.7% in the lower and upper houses of Parliament, respectively, and just 9.7% of the total MPs in state and regional parliaments.[10]

The government has launched several policies which are supposed to tackle gender inequality, including the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013– 2022) and a draft Protection and Prevention of Violence Against Women Bill. Yet, at the same time, it passed the Race and Religion Protection Law which has institutionalized violations of the CEDAW convention to which Myanmar is a signatory. While women's groups united in opposing these laws, activism faded after the laws were approved.[11]

The genocide against Rohingya saw a more intense application of tactics the military has used for decades against women, particularly targeting ethnic women, across the country. Domestic and international actors have recognized these abuses against Rohingya women, documenting them and calling for them to be addressed. For example, in November 2017, the committee monitoring the implementation of CEDAW made an almost unprecedented request for the Myanmar government to report specifically on the situation for women and girls in Northern Rakhine State.[12] In 2018, the report "Rape By Command" was published by Kaladan News, documenting hundreds of cases of rape and sexual violence against Rohingya women and girls during the 2017 attacks.

Despite extensive documentation, the government has refused to acknowledge the sexual violence committed against Rohingya, going so far as to publicly denounce the "fake rape".[13] The government-appointed Independent Commission of Enquiry, established in 2018 to investigate the allegations of human rights violations in Rakhine State, was determined by the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar to not meet the standards of an "impartial, independent, effective and thorough human rights investigation".[14] According to Human Rights Watch, the Commission's report "shockingly denies the military's widespread use of sexual violence, and fails to hold senior military officials responsible".[15] Yet, neither embassies nor Yangon-based CSOs have publicly criticized the Commission's legitimacy or findings. Crucially it has been ethnic women's groups who have spoken out on the most difficult, high risk and contentious issues in Burma. They are the ones who have raised their voices most loudly against the ongoing abuses by the military.

9 burmapartnership.org/2014/11/if-they-had-hope-they-would-speak-the-ongoing-use-of-state-sponsored-sexual-violence-in-burmas-ethnic-communities-2

10 Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing. (Aug 2019). Feminism in Myanmar. library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15624.pdf

11 Ibid

12 hrw.org/news/2018/05/24/myanmar-deadline-report-rape-rohingya-un

13 bbc.com/news/magazine-39204086

14 UNHRC. September, 2018. "Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar*" Page 18.

15 hrw.org/news/2020/01/22/myanmar-government-rohingya-report-falls-short.

They have highlighted the promotion of sexual violence by the military and exposed the role of the military in the drug trade. Ethnic women's groups have led advocacy efforts to recognize the impacts of Burmese government policies on human trafficking. They have also brought to light military connections to big development projects which have resulted in mass displacement and increases in the frequency of human rights violations in ethnic areas.[16]

Ethnic women's movements have been highly responsive to the needs of their communities through service provision. They demonstrate an impressive commitment to capacity building and leadership development, human rights documentation and analysis and solidarity with others facing the multiple forms of oppression that Indigenous peoples in the country face. A recent example of this was the statement from the Karen Women's Organization speaking out against the systematic and brutal attacks on Rohingya people, at a time when few civil society organizations dared to speak out or worse, seemed to be in solidarity with the government's own racist response to the Rohingya suffering.[17]

The ethnic women's movement is distinct from the more mainstream Yangon-based movement, in that it generally focuses on the intersectional discrimination that Indigenous peoples face and the impacts of a protracted conflict and forced process of assimilation by the Burmese government. In contrast, the Yangon-based women's movement often fails to acknowledge ethnic oppression or the goals of self-determination, making true solidarity efforts a challenge. Too often, the attitude of the Yangon women's movement towards their sisters in the ethnic states is patronizing, with a sense that they need the better educated women from central Burma to "go out and help the poor, ignorant hill tribe people". This failure to recognize the power of Indigenous civil society is too often also reflected in INGO and donor programming.

Despite the perceptions of donors and Yangon-based groups, Indigenous women activists feel there is not yet a comprehensive nationwide women's movement, nor do they see the current women's movement as particularly feminist. Concrete examples of a lack of feminist practice, even among women's organizations, include: organization leaders trying to be "heroes" rather than sharing power; Yangon-based groups including ethnic women's groups in donor proposals as project implementers without consulting them; CSO practices which make villagers dependent on NGOs; Burman women activists not acknowledging/seeing the intersectional oppression faced by Indigenous women; and, the lack of solidarity with Rohingya. Ethnic women's organizations generally identify more with an ethnic women's movement that does not include the Yangon groups.

16 Examples include: taangwomen.org/2011/10/25/still-poisoned, kwhro.com/stop-damming-the-chindwin, kachinwomen.com/no-justice-for-ongoing-burma-army-crimes-in-northern-shan-state-briefing-paper-by-the-kachin-womens-association-thailand, shanwomen.org/reports/43-high-and-dry, karenwomen.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/state20of20terror20report.pdf

17 burmalink.org/karen-womens-organisation-press-statement-burmese-military persecution-rohingya-people

IV. Feminist Funding

Sweden was the first country to announce a feminist foreign policy in 2014, Canada followed in 2017 with a Feminist International Assistance Policy and this year (2020) Mexico launched theirs, becoming the first country from the Global South to do so. It has increasingly become the norm for donors to have a gender equality or "investing in women and girls" strand to their funding. However, very little of these donor funds reach grassroots women activists or women's rights organizations who are the key players in developing feminist or social change movements. The vast majority of the funds are generic, allocated without a feminist lens or power analysis. The money is often focused on singular issues without a cross sectional analysis of the lived realities of the people who are working to effect change.

According to "Towards a Feminist Funding Eco-System", a 2019 report from the Association of Women in Development, "A remarkable — and disturbing — 99% of gender-related international aid fails to reach women's rights and feminist organizations directly. Three-quarters of the funding never leaves development agencies themselves, and the remaining money that does goes almost entirely to mainstream CSOs and INGOs."[18]

In other words, only 1% of gender funding is reaching the women's rights organizations fighting for systemic and fundamental changes in women's lives. A review of financing for women's rights in 2013 found that the combined income of the 740 women's organizations surveyed worldwide was just $130 million USD, compared to the annual income of Save The Children, which was $1.4 billion USD at the time.[19] Women's rights organizations are too often seen as small and local, when in actuality their extremely limited ability to mobilize resources is a fundamental factor in the scope of their work. Funding for Indigenous peoples' rights has seen increases in recent years, but these funds also often fail to reach Indigenous women's organizations, and proportionally Asia and Africa are significantly underfunded.[20]

Among activists, the current notion of a feminist foreign policy is seen as hypocritical, as governmental policies and practices continue to condone and perpetuate various forms of oppression. These critiques are true in the context of Burma. As one audit interviewee explained: "All the funding pouring into Burma on gender equality is not addressing the structural issues of violence against women. Nordic countries are 'gender-washing' their self-serving engagement in Burma."

18 awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/awid_funding_ecosystem_2019_final_eng.pdf

19 issuu.com/awid/docs/20140819-wtl-complete

20 awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/a-call-to-action-status-of-funding-for-indigenous-women.1-94.pdf

Another example of potential hypocrisy is the lack of response to the ruling on provisional measures from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the genocide case against Myanmar by countries that claim to be promoting gender justice in Burma.

In late 2019, Gambia brought a case against Myanmar at the ICJ for allegedly violating the Convention on Genocide and the evidence submitted included examples of horrendous sexual violence against Rohingya women. Canada and The Netherlands recently announced they would join Gambia in the case. Not only have other countries not joined, but they have not responded at all. The lack of diplomatic action appears to some like tacit agreement with the Myanmar government's denials of the claims put forward during the trial, a far cry from a feminist approach. Despite the ICJ ruling and the UN Fact Finding Mission's call for the isolation of Burma's military, there has been little change in the level of engagement with the regime.

Donors are keen to focus on gender mainstreaming. But few and far between are those who will support grassroots (often women's rights) organizations tackling the brutality of the military regime and the abuses against women or the link between large-scale development projects and their impacts on the environment, Indigenous ways of life and on women. Many Indigenous women's organizations are unable to access funds because they are not based in Yangon and they have decided not to register. (Registration can severely restrict their ability to carry out their work due to demands to de-politicize their work to qualify for registration, among other factors.) Donors appear to prefer to focus their work on larger, registered organizations, taking on safer and sanctioned approaches to gender mainstreaming and gender equality. Donors committed to feminist funding need to make the effort to identify partners beyond the mainstream.

While cynicism around the re-labelling of foreign aid policies as feminist is well-justified, the shift in labels is encouraging. A declaration of feminist principles can provide an opportunity for a more sophisticated level of interrogation as to how well governments are performing in the promotion and practice of challenging systems of oppression. It can open avenues for more dialogue on how these principles should be applied in practice, both internally and in funding programs.

Donors genuinely committed to feminist funding believe in fundamental structural change to address the root causes of social, political and economic inequalities. As Astraea Foundation, which has close to 40 years' experience of feminist funding, states, "It is our responsibility to redistribute money as a mechanism toward redistributing power, so movement agendas are controlled by activists, organizations, and communities".[21] Redistributing power for fundamental structural change requires the funding of feminist movements.

New dynamics between donor and recipient are needed for the realization of gender justice, moving away from the charity model of the benefactor and the needy, to acknowledging the interdependence of the two. Too often, INGOs and donors require local organizations to define their gender strategy, while the INGO or donor fails to define and share its own. A new relationship is possible with mutual accountability, the sharing of self-reflections, as well as critical analysis and response to the power dynamics of donor and change-agents.

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21 astraeafoundation.org/microsites/feminist-funding-principles

V. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

1. Make Long-term and Flexible Commitments

Feminist work is not a quick predictable project. Funding needs to be provided through multi-year, flexible core funding to organizations addressing root causes of oppression. Direct funding to grassroots and feminist organizations and movements gives them the ability to react to the ever-changing circumstances — especially for those working in high-risk security settings — and the ability to prioritize the myriad of community needs. Grassroots activism is underfunded globally, with funding too often focused on policy or legislative change. Feminist donors should focus on process as well as results and must recognize that fighting for structural change is a lifelong goal.

2. Model Best Practices

When donors can share their own gender justice policies and strategies, gender budgeting priorities and feminist principles, it shows a genuine commitment, promotes mutual respect, challenges the dominant aid paradigm and can serve as a resource for partners wanting to develop their own model. The ways in which Inter Pares brings their feminist practice into relationships with partners, including consensus decision making and transparency in reporting, was named by a partner during an audit as "inspiring, and yet sadly extremely rare."

3. Promote Feminist Leadership

Political will and genuine commitment of the leadership is crucial to promoting gender justice within organizational cultures and programming. Prioritizing gender equality and equity initiatives — recruiting women, capacity building — potentially takes staff time and organizational resources that organizations are reluctant to allocate, even when the need is recognized and the will is there. Where organizations show a political will but lack the resources to carry it forward, donors can see it as an opportunity, and responsibility, to support strategic action planning around gender justice and feminist initiatives within organizational and programmatic plans.

4. Support the Institutionalizing of a Feminist Approach

Participatory organizational policy development is vital — particularly policies such as anti-sexual harassment, codes of conduct, a gender policy with an explicit inclusion of LGBTQI rights and formalized commitments to recruit and promote women into leadership positions. Donor insistence on policies has led to many organizations in Burma having documents in place but there is rarely accountability to uphold the policies from within the organization. Policies are often written in English and without Burmese translation because the sole reason for the document is to meet donor requirements. Ownership over policy development is crucial for formal policies to have any effect on organizational cultural shifts and accountability. This means donors need to invest in slower and more inclusive processes when an organization is ready and willing to do the work. An internal process for monitoring the implementation of the policies is also crucial.

5. Support Cross Border Programs

When a government is the oppressor there is a need for organizations to work in creative ways that protect their security. Organizations working to address structural change face specific risks, and often need to adapt their modalities — donors must respect this creativity and risk mitigation. Donors should support local civil society regardless of where they are based and whether or not they are registered, and this may also mean supporting cross-border work. In the case of Burma in particular, border-based organizations remain outspoken critics and work towards structural change — these efforts are disproportionately underfunded. The lack of support for cross-border programming magnifies inequalities in communities that are already marginalized and makes it harder for much needed critical feminist voices from border-based organizations to be heard. Organizations that choose not to register in order to maintain their core activities and integrity, as is their right under the Associations Registration Law (2014), also need support — and donors should adapt and accommodate potential knock-on financial and banking implications.

6. Support Gender Budgeting

Policies and practices to allocate resources that address the barriers to women's participation in organizations and programming are necessary components of any gender-just organization. Gender budgeting includes the provision of resources for child-care, as well as flexibility in office hours and a child-friendly workplace. It means providing money to make travel safer for women — allowing them to travel for work in pairs, for example. It means strategic decisions and priorities to ensure that no woman in the organization or involved in their activities is left behind or excluded. Gender budgeting is vital to advancing women's active participation and leadership in civil society and donors should offer technical and financial support as needed.

7. Promote Women's Participation and Leadership

For women staff, in particular, having women leaders contributes to their own sense of confidence and positive performance in the workplace. Women leaders are credited with making an effort to increase women's presence within the organization. The presence of and respect for women staff in an organization is highly likely to generate greater women's participation in the community. Serious commitment to gender equality includes formal and regular monitoring of women's active participation, including affirmative action, like women-only capacity building in areas where women may not have had access.

8. Promote Gender Analysis

The assumption that women's organizations are or should be responsible for providing the gendered analysis on all issues is common; in fact, all CSOs should be responsible for this, with gender expertise built into their staffing and reporting. Requiring a gender analysis in grantee reporting, including roles of women in the programs and projects as well as participation of and impacts on women of the programming, can facilitate organizational reflection. Donors can take responsibility to challenge groups on their (lack of gender) analysis when it is perpetuating or reinforcing injustice.

Donors can consider working with partner organizations on a checklist or a set of qualitative indicators that they can use to assess their progress or efforts on gender mainstreaming and/or feminist practice beyond quantitative measures to ensure gender balance.

9. Support Feminist Organizations

While crucial, feminist programming is not only about promoting women's participation and leadership. Feminist programming involves a contextual assessment of power dynamics, identifying those who are most oppressed and the systems of oppression, and promotes strategic methods to transform this system. This means working towards gender justice (i.e. promoting women's rights, addressing toxic masculinities, promoting the rights of LGBTQI) and addressing the root causes of oppression in Burma's context.

10. Create Opportunities to Learn

Organizations committed to feminist practice create cultures of internal reflection and analysis on power dynamics and uses of power within the organization, between staff and even in people's lives outside of work. Progressive women's organizations are struggling to define what they want to do and how they want to do it without depending on foreign words and concepts. Donors can support exchanges facilitate participation in programs or create opportunities for partners to learn from non-Western feminists, while also offering support for self-reflection and institutional learning. Resources should be developed in Burmese and Indigenous languages for building skills in feminist practice — and not simply the direct translation of Western resources. Encouragement and support should be provided when requested, for internal discussions on structural change, as well as technical and financial assistance for feminist analysis, curriculum development, leadership and the intersections of feminism and other human rights issues.

Creating learning spaces across movements within countries and across regions contributes to solidarity, movement building and intersectional approaches. Issue areas that would strengthen current analysis and programming include: gender and land rights from a human rights approach; SGBV strategies and challenges that incorporate gender and structural analyses; strategies for engaging ethnic armed organizations on gender justice and other progressive policy reform; intersections of feminism and Indigenous peoples' rights; LGBTQI identities and rights in ethnic areas; and wellbeing for CSOs and activists.

11. Support Sustainable Activism

Valuing the wellbeing of staff is a feminist issue that requires organizational attention to issues of burnout, stress, conflict, and staff turnover — and there are costs associated with this.

Donors can encourage and fund psychosocial support, other healing practices and basic wellbeing benefits as identified by the organizations and their staff. Donors can facilitate discussions, especially with leadership, on the need and strategies for staff wellbeing. Restricted or supplemental funding specifically for wellbeing initiatives would help to counter the presumption that donors are unwilling to fund staff wellbeing and reduce the pressure on organizations to prioritize budgeting for programming. A coordinated joint fund for all partners, with earmarked funding specifically for gender budgeting and wellbeing initiatives, would demonstrate donor commitment.

12. Do Not Neglect Service Provision

Service provision to address gaping holes in government provision for basic needs is a strategic intervention used by many women's organizations. Service provision in the form of safe houses, counselling services, drop-in centers or health centers, for example, provides women's groups a critical relationship with communities, creates a platform for public education on women's rights issues and an evidence-base for advocacy. Women's rights organizations feel scrutinized by human rights donors, who critique service provision as not a human rights issue, and will not fund the staff costs required for service provision. Donors need to recognize the practical and critical importance of funding service provision when it is within a strategic, intersectional framework of women's equality and access to resources.

13. Choose Partners Carefully

The increasing donor attention to SGBV has the potential of encouraging inappropriate, ill-equipped organizations to implement SGBV programming. Without proper gender, power and structural analyses, domestic and sexual violence programming can reinforce victim blaming, perpetuate stereotypes and provide inadequate responses and services. Partners also need to have the trust of their local community. Donors providing funding for these services need to thoroughly vet potential partners on their analysis and gender justice commitment and their capacity to provide adequate support to women experiencing violence.

14. Support LGBTQI activism

A slow but notable change in Burma's movements in the past two decades has been the increasing visibility and acceptance of the LGBTQI community. While stigma, discrimination, violence and stereotyping are still pervasive, the acknowledgement that there are LGBTQI people in Burma, and the ways in which LGBTQI people and organizations are claiming public space, has improved. To date, most LGBTQI-focused programming has been health related, such as HIV prevention education, instead of initiatives supporting acceptance and equality of sexual and gender diversity. This is a common pattern seen globally and can be seen as a "safe" entry point for organizing. However, typically this work has centered around men. Those who identify as women have been left behind. LGBTQI organizations are almost exclusively urban-based (in Yangon or Mandalay), and this adds to the intersectional invisibility of Indigenous peoples' gender and sexual diversity.

Donors can encourage explicitly inclusive programming and recruitment of staff. Donors can also challenge partners to explore challenges for the LGBTQI community and engagement in ally or solidarity work. Donors can explore possibilities for supporting LGBTQI activists and initiatives, particularly in ethnic areas, to promote gender and sexual diversity and rights in all communities.

15. Support Feminism with Men

During our research, we came across only one report examining Burma's culture of masculinity and its impact on gender injustices, but this analysis is key.[22] Strategies for engaging men that came out of the audits included taking men on exposure trips to places where women had more leadership positions within organizations, getting endorsement from male leaders to undertake women-specific programming, and media work that brought women's perspectives to mainstream media. Donors should initiate discussions with male leadership on masculinities and change strategies; challenge sexist and patronizing attitudes; insist on women's active participation in donor meetings; and support and highlight projects that are working to resist toxic masculinities.

16. Recognize Your Role in Movement Building

From our experience working with women's and community organizations, when organizations speak out against the government, there are few allies in the donor field. Donors are powerful and their silence has an impact. Social change is also dependent on movement-building. Hence, donors need to highlight feminist movements, the exploitation they speak out against and the changes they want to see. Throughout the peace process, ethnic women's organizations have been seen as troublemakers (or worse, "anti-progress") if they did not join in applauding the process. Donors need to develop national, regional and global coalitions to build the case for increasing support and amplifying the voices of those who speak truth to power.

22 international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Myanmar_MasculinitiesGenderSocialConflict_EN_2018_0.pdf

VI. Conclusion

We have been inspired and humbled by Burma's grassroots movements throughout our working lives, and in particular Indigenous peoples' and women's organizations working in rural and conflict-affected areas and Burma's borderlines. We have consistently been disappointed by how overlooked these groups are by more mainstream organizations in Burma and by international donors. We wrote this report to share what we have learned about supporting social justice movements and the substantive change they create. As feminist activists, we hope this report can contribute to more donors committing to gender justice and equality in Burma. Being a feminist donor requires first and foremost an honest internal reflection on the feminist practice, policy and intersectional analyses at work within one's own organizational culture and programming. Fostering and strengthening that critical reflection can in turn be used to support partners who are building the grassroots movements for change that Burma so desperately needs.

The Fund for Global Human Rights is a public foundation that helps courageous activists create lasting change. We provide financial and strategic support to grassroots leaders and groups offering cutting-edge solutions to some of the world's greatest challenges. With the Fund's partnership, human rights activists and organizations effectively address abuses of power and systemic inequality in more than 20 countries. The Fund for Global Human Rights partners with the people of Myanmar to promote respect for human rights and seek justice for past and ongoing abuses as the country navigates an uncertain transition to democracy and peace. The Fund supports 10 organizations in Myanmar. These community-based groups work to protect land and natural resource rights of rural and indigenous people, build women's social equality and political participation, document ongoing human rights abuses, and promote respect and understanding across ethnic and religious groups.

Inter Pares is a feminist organization located in Canada, dedicated to promoting international social justice. Inter Pares – which means among equals – believes in solidarity, not charity, as an approach to international cooperation. For over 45 years, we have worked closely with courageous activists and inspiring organizations throughout the world to build peace, advance justice and globalize equality.

Our programs largely focus on six global issues: food sovereignty, women's equality, peace and democracy, economic justice, health, and migration. We work with long-term counterparts – local and national activist organizations – in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Canada. We have worked with local organizations in Burma and refugee-receiving neighbors since the early 1990s. Our program, supported by the Government of Canada, assists approximately 40 local coalitions and groups working on health services, human rights, environment, free media and refugee relief. A key focus of this work is coalition building for inter-ethnic understanding.

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