

Women Parliamentarians in Myanmar

PATHWAYS AND BARRIERS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- >> Parties need to have a clear gender equality plan, including support for female candidates, and cognizance of potential barriers such as men's propensity for same-sex group selection to party posts.
- >> Political parties need to give more recognition to previous professional experiences such as work in governmental sector, community organizations etc. from where women leaders tend to have their start in political participation and leadership.
- >> Party related work-history is often used to judge loyalty and exclude women. Parties need to encourage different experiences and diversity in viewpoints in their recruitment drives.
- >> Increase awareness among parents of their important role in shaping children's political socialization, especially girls.
- >> Create peer socialization and leadership opportunities for young women at school and in the communities.

Everyday life as politics and women's political participation in Myanmar



General Aung San defined politics as “Your everyday life”, that “It is how you eat, sleep, work and live”. This definition is deeply internalized by many of the MPs in Myanmar.

“I used to think politics is only involvement in political movements. Only when I get involved, I just realized politics is concerned with everyday life ranging from kitchen (household chores), transportation, to lack of water. It is all political and every citizens of the country are responsible for politics,” said one woman MP.

This broad view of politics has potential for creating opportunities for women's involvement in the political sphere. Clearly increased democratization has opened spaces for women to engage in politics, and those who aim to increase women's political participation should be encouraged to build upon a widely understood and broad view of politics as about ‘everyday life’, legitimizing both the role of women in politics and the relevance of non-government organizations (which can act as pathways to the political system).

However, in reality, women's participation in politics remain low. After the general election in 2015, women representatives in Myanmar parliament was 11%. NLD had 15.1% women MPs, while SNLD had 16.7%, which had the highest ratio of women MPs. Even though this is a much higher representation compared to the government under the military regime, which was only 5%, it still remains one of the lowest in Asia. There is a need to identify why the representation remains low and how we can encourage



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more women in the parliament.

This brief focuses on the women MP at the national level, through interviews conducted during February to March 2020, with ten men and eighteen women MPs from various political parties and two women from CSOs who have been involved in national level policy making processes identifying the reasons for the low ratio of women MPs. This IDRC sponsored project “Understanding barriers and working pathways to women’s political participation in Myanmar” was led by a consortium including the Gender Equality Network (GEN), the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and McGill University. There are largely two barriers that restricts women’s advancement in parliamentary politics – one is by the political parties and the other is by socialization.

Socialization as Barrier and Pathways

Early socialization was found to be particularly important for women MPs. Across interviews, these MPs repeatedly mentioned that their parents

(especially fathers) played a crucial role in influencing their political interest. In particular there was a common pattern that the majority of them had parents who encouraged and believed in their leadership capabilities. They were also likely to be part of households where parents were equally encouraging of sons and daughters and promoting equality between girls and boys.

“I think the reason why I became involved in politics was mainly due to my father... he also said that he wanted me to be a leader.”

Few women MPs report being involved in leading youth political or school group activities (though they have participated in political events). This was in contrast to men MPs who reported taking part in leadership activity and creating networks of political connections from these groups. This lack of peer socialization not only affects women MP’s ability to leverage networks in their role as parliamentarians (vis a vis their male counterparts) but is an ongoing challenge in their ability to socialize and network through informal activities like going out after work for



GEN staff conducting an in depth interview with a woman leader in Kayin State

drinks, etc.

“Sometimes the men gather and drink. As the women don’t drink, we are not in their bro list” says one female MP.

Another notes how hard it is to network:

“Even among networks, there are few networks which support women. Many are for men. Men can group and work together at night. They can go out anytime to release stress.”

Female MPs make it clear that, for most of them, family support and especially support from their spouse was critical in their success. Financial and active support such as sharing of household responsibilities was mentioned frequently as examples of this. One reports her husband saying to her:

“I will take care of house and family affairs. Don’t worry about your mother. I also take responsibility for my daughter.

Noting the key financial role of families, one MP remarked of her friends:

“My friends are bright women but they can’t get support from their families and since they are not bread winners, there may be financial difficulties”.

This, family support, was repeatedly underlined as a critical element by most interviewees and appeared to be a decisive factor compared to men parliamentarians.

Challenges created by political parties

Political Parties are essential for women’s political participation but also conversely serve as an obstacle for women MPs to progress in their political career. As some women MP expressed “party policies” as their first obstacle to participate in politics, i.e. going up the ladder of establishment was more difficult for women MPs.

“We are more or less discriminated against in politics. Both rivals and colleagues within the same party do not want women to be outstanding. Women are attacked in different ways.”

Many women MPs mentioned how they were

discriminated for being a woman. And how men have been controlling crucial positions in parties

“When central executive committee members were chosen, men wanted to take these roles while I was told to do office work.”

MPs identified organizational culture, policies and leadership as obstacles to their advancement in politics. Political parties in Myanmar tend to put large importance on loyalty and experience. Yet the bar for party loyalty seems to be higher for women (men are more free to test those boundaries), and the double standards on how “loyalty” and “experience” are assessed can work as barriers for women’s rise in the political structure, undermining parties’ potential as key pull factors.

This is especially seen in the way women MPs are evaluated for their experience. A majority of the women MPs had professional careers and work experience typically as lawyers, doctors, and teachers, before formally joining/holding party positions (especially between 1988-2012 period). As can be seen in the testimony below, woman MP utilized her skills on financing and public mobilization gained from her NGO experience in her political work.

“When I worked at an NGO, I was responsible for budget. ...When I have to do budget analysis, I know which item has a surplus and which one lacks...I had to do public mobilization when I was in an NGO. So if I have to do voting canvassing or have to meet with the public, I am familiar with these skills. And I am also interested in public mobilization.”

These experiences were also linked to their grassroots’ network/popularity. Women Parlia-

mentarians thus reported routinely drawing upon lessons from their professional work in their activities as MP as well as expertise/motivation for work as MP. However, this expertise is under appreciated within the political system and in internal party dynamics in particular.

“When I filled the form for candidate election, party members criticized me that I used my doctor title... I was downgraded from the role of a respectable doctor to a candidate who had to run errands (folding mat & seat) for the events.”

Women MPs also try to keep more “in line” with party policies to demonstrate their loyalty (because they are expected to be), but unlike men, women find it difficult to get their loyalty recognized.

“During the organizing trip, I did not dare to talk or organize a speech in the very first village as I was afraid to deviate from my party policy”

Conclusion

Many Myanmar leaders have an understanding of politics that can encourage women’s participation in politics. However, the culture of political parties as well as lack of political socialization during school days create obstacles for women to advance in politics. Family support both from parents as well as spouses are essential for women politicians. It is noted that the 2015 election has improved women’s ratio drastically compared to earlier times under military regimes. In this regard the military coup will most likely have a negative effect on women’s participation in politics, reversing a positive trend that had been growing under democratic leadership.