



# WOMEN IN PEACEMAKING

A MYANMAR REPORT





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**Radha Kumar**



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# OVERVIEW

This Report is the second in a Delhi Policy Group series aimed at assessing the role of South Asian women in peacemaking. Though women's groups in the eight South Asian countries have been active in local and bilateral peace processes, some of them for close to three decades, and many have input government policy, few have been given a leadership role by their governments. This is as true of Myanmar, which is a SAARC observer country, as it is of the SAARC member-states.

However, Myanmar is distinct in that its women leaders and women's groups have been key actors in the peace processes that have brought the country to a new transition, from military rule to democracy and from ethnic conflicts to peace agreements. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar has been in a period of internal conflict since the military coup of 1962, firstly for restoration of democracy and secondly by ethnic groups fighting for community rights, including self-determination. The former, led by Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has been a predominantly non-violent struggle and the latter has been a predominantly armed struggle.

With the official end of military rule in 2011, new avenues opened for both sets of movements. For the pro-democracy movement these

avenues are long and winding ones, comprising as they do the arduous task of institutionalizing democratic governance and behaviour after five decades of military rule. The nation has a constitution that was ratified in 2008; however several women's, minority and pro-democracy groups have contested that it allows the military to retain a significant hold over the country.

**For the ethnic groups, the avenues are much wider:**

They offer a grand opportunity for peacemaking. Myanmar's President (General) U Thein Sein has made peace accords with armed ethnic groups his top priority, and set up an autonomous body to coordinate peace negotiations, the Myanmar Peace Centre. Eighteen ethnic armed groups, meeting separately from the government, signed a 9-point framework agreement in November 2013 on terms and conditions for a nationwide cease-fire with the government. They were hosted by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and included the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), the Kayin National Union (KNU), the Restoration Council of the Shan State Army (RCSS), the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP).

**Three key points that were stressed in the framework were for:**

- (a) A political dialogue to follow the ceasefire within three months.
- (b) Paving the road to dialogue with trust-building measures; and
- (c) Myanmar to have a federal form of government.

All women's, ethnic and pro-democracy groups have wanted a new or amended constitution for some time now. Though consensus on drafting and implementing such a constitution is yet to be reached, there is broad agreement that human rights and a federal structure are two factors that need to be the basis of constitutional change. One complicating factor is that constitutional change is being discussed in both the peace negotiations and the new Parliament; clearly the two forums will have to dovetail at some point, perhaps through the NLD. While there was some uncertainty on the nature and level of peace process cooperation between the pro-democracy and ethnic groups,

the 88ers silver jubilee convention in September 2013 indicated that closer cooperation would come.

This Report is based on interviews conducted in September 2013, two months before the 9-point framework was signed. However, the women leaders and groups that we met were deeply involved in discussions on the coming meeting for a framework, human rights guarantees and the issue of federalism, as the text below indicates. Myanmar is clearly at a ripe moment for peace negotiations, with the government and armed ethnic groups both realizing that they have more to gain than to lose from peacemaking.

One issue that loomed large but was yet to be tackled was the recently flared communal tensions. The 2012 Rakhine State riots between Buddhists and Muslims that have left a simmering hostility across the country have not been addressed as an instance for peacemaking by the government, pro-democracy or ethnic groups. Women's groups had begun discussing the need to undertake minority protections and communal peacemaking when we went to Myanmar; this was an area where they felt experience-sharing with India would help.





# PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WITH ARMED ETHNIC GROUPS

Myanmar is divided into seven states and fourteen divisions representing demographic concentrations of the seven main ethnic groups: Burman (majority), Kachin, Karen (and subset Karenni), Mon, Shan, Chin and Arakan. Demands for federalism are as old as independence, and armed struggles for self-determination started as early as the 1950s. Successive governments managed to contain these conflicts through military means but they have always resurfaced, chiefly due to the failure to move from conflict management to resolution, and as they have resurfaced they have grown in number. “In 1947, there were four main armed ethnic groups. Now there are eighteen,” says Nilar Oo of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

The peace initiatives that were launched in 2011 appear to have made a departure from the solely conflict management approach. They began in the same way, with limited ceasefire agreements, one by one, along

the lines of earlier ceasefires brokered with a number of armed groups by military and intelligence officials. Most of these ceasefires broke down within weeks. Armed groups learned the lesson that carefully negotiated and written ceasefire agreements were preferable, especially if tied to a road-map for political dialogue leading to a comprehensive settlement. They have set up a United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) to forge a common set of points for negotiation. For its part, the government learned the lesson that a conflict resolution approach might lead to a durable settlement that would be preferable to short-term ceasefires and periodic resumption of conflict; and set up a coordinating body called the Myanmar Peace Centre.

Both lessons were learned remarkably fast given that the conflict management approach had dominated for sixty years, which brings home the point that is often made by peacemaking experts: when change comes it comes speedily and surprises all.

The Thein Sein government signalled the seriousness of their intent when they set up the Myanmar Peace Centre by Presidential decree in 2012, and empowered it to negotiate with armed groups. Its relationship to the government was imaginatively constructed: the Peace Centre is autonomous but it works directly under the government's Chief Negotiator, Minister Aung Min. It is staffed by former armed group members, most of them forced across the border to neighbouring countries such as Thailand, who have returned to work in the Centre. "I was in the

**"The original government road map proposed a series of small steps stage by stage, first: state level ceasefires, then political dialogue, third presentation to parliament. The armed groups had problems with each stage, especially stage two, which laid down that armed groups should form political parties and enter parliament. Armed groups want an extra parliamentary process to begin with, the President has asked them for their road-map. A working group of 18 armed groups is producing a framework. Civil society organizations have asked all stakeholders to create an inclusive process, plus consultation with all sections when it comes to a national dialogue on the peace process."**

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**Ja Nan Lahtaw**  
**Shalom Foundation**

jungle with armed groups for many years and now I am making peace,” quips Jo Song, one of the Centre’s negotiators.

The Centre has negotiated ceasefire agreements with fourteen ethnic groups since being set up. It has five departments – ceasefire negotiation, political dialogue, peace building, outreach, and a demining centre. A sixth, on land issues, is in the offing.

Apart from direct negotiations, the Centre provides a platform for armed ethnic groups and government officials to meet and talk. It works closely with the police and ministers in trying to explain peace process strategies. Its members give public lectures on the cost of war and peace and hold monthly meetings in order to mobilize public support for the peace process. Chief Negotiator Aung Min gives high priority to initiatives for public support, says Aung Naing, Associate Program Director.

**“We are called the ‘Male Peace Centre’, but things are changing. People have begun to realize that women’s role should be prioritized, especially in conflict areas. We conduct a certified program twice a year for civil society. Half of them are women.”**

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**Aung Naing**  
Associate Program Director,  
Myanmar Peace Centre

Unfortunately, he confesses, there is only one woman (Daw Rebecca Tin) at the policy making level of the Centre. “Women’s groups suggested that the Centre appoint a gender advisor”, says Ja Nan Lahtaw of the Shalom Foundation, “but nothing has happened.” This recommendation is now backed by donors to the Centre; women’s groups hope that the donors weighing in will help speed up appointment of a gender advisor. International observers, however, point out that the Centre would be happy to develop closer ties to women’s groups: it is the latter that have reservations.

The Shalom Foundation, an NGO from Kachin State that is active in peace mediation, has worked with women in peacemaking for the past year. Its Director, Ja Nan Lahtaw, was herself involved in negotiations that led to the government-Kachin ceasefire of the mid 1990s (her father was the lead negotiator). The Foundation conducts a quarterly Forum on gender rights, ceasefire monitoring, federalism, justice and peace,

environment and development – common problems afflicting all ethnic areas. The issue of internationally displaced persons (IDPs) is dealt with at a local level. The Forum was started in 2012 and brings together civil society organizations from three countries. Its July 2013 meeting was attended by 150 participants representing 70 organizations.

There are a number of women's groups in Myanmar working for development and the rights of women and children. They run microcredit and health programs and campaign for women's land rights. By and large they share the self-determination aspirations of the ethnic groups they belong to: for example, in Karen State the Karen Women's Organization and the Karen Women's Empowerment Group work for the development of Karen women. Many of their members come from families that support self-determination movements, including armed groups, and some are informally quite influential in counselling negotiation. These women's groups are now engaged in the peace process, but their formal involvement is only in a supportive role, to provide logistical help and note taking. "We would like to sit at the negotiating table," says Nant Khin Aye Oo of the Karen Women's Empowerment Group, "but the mindset here does not link gender and peace issues."

The Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON) is a network of 30 organizations set up to support community women's groups across the country. It operates in conflict and post-conflict areas including Karen, Mon and Shan states. The network provides training to women, works on the UN Convention to Eliminate All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and promotes UNSCR 1325. State level networks are also being organized. Together with the Gender Equality Network and the Civil Society Forum for Peace, the network hosted a national women's dialogue in early November 2013, bringing together around 300 women from across the country. The Civil Society Forum for Peace has become a focal point for work on justice and peace.

**"We would like to be a part of the peace process. In 2012, we had started discussions on meaningful participation by women at the negotiating table and how to make UNSCR 1325 real. We want both armed groups and the government to accept our role."**

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**Nant Khin Aye Oo**  
**Karen Women**  
**Empowerment Group**



Susanna Soe of the Women's Organizations Network (WON), who is based in Kachin but is ethnically Karen, has personally experienced the violence of ethnic conflict, as have most of the other women quoted above. WON acts as a forum between the armed groups and the government and is recognized by both. "I got involved in the peace process when the Government made its 1-11 peace call in 2011. Rebel groups asked me whether the offer was serious and they should respond. I did a survey on the issue and sent them the results, and they decided to enter peace talks. Then a group of us set up WON and issued a petition asking for women's participation in peace process. The Government recognised WON and WON is invited as an observer to talks between government and armed groups."

**The Forum made three suggestions:**

1. That the nationwide ceasefire agreement the government proposed should be formally accepted by both the President and the Commander in Chief of the Army;
2. That the framework for peace should be a bottom up one and not tied to the 2015 elections. The peace agenda should be separate from the elections agenda; and
3. That there should be civil society participation in the recently formed Parliamentary Peace Commission. While groups such as WON and the Civil Society Forum for Peace are invited from time to time, their participation has not been formalized.

Some groups within WON are also working on vocational training and implementation of peace agreements while the rest focus on the peace process. Susanna's activities include coordination of the WON member groups, for example through organizing annual conferences between

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**Susanna Soe**  
Women's Organizations Network

them, the first of which was held in 2009.

WON have worked quietly with the Women's League of Burma, an exiled pro-democracy group that supports ethnic self-determination movements, which is based in Chiang Mai in Thailand. The League is now looking for ways to return to Myanmar and work for the peace process. WON have recently been granted permission by the government to jointly hold a women's conference with them.

**“When women get together to talk, they bash men. Also, women like to go into details whereas men tend to be more general.”**

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**Daw Khon Ja,**  
**Kachin Women's Peace Network**

Amongst the armed groups, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is seen as being the best at absorbing women. Daw Non Dro took a leading role to bring KIO to a ceasefire 17 years ago. The Kachin Peace Network and the Kachin Women's Peace Network, both informally associated with the KIO, work closely together. The Kachin Women's Peace Network focuses on advocacy and justice issues, “which is a way to lasting peace”, says Daw Khon Ja from the network. “We are trying to ensure that the gap between justice and peace does not increase. Justice is important during transition.” Perpetrators and victims of the 1988 student uprising (known as the 88ers) often came face to face during meetings organized by the Peace Network.

Daw Yin Yin Nwe, a member of the MPC, undertook negotiations with the Shan State Army (SSA). Daw Jenu, also a member of the MPC is taking a leading role with the Kareni National Program Party (KNPP). Daw Saw Mya Razer Lin, General Secretary of the Rakhine Liberation Party is taking the lead in initiating a peace process with armed groups in Rakhine.

**“The first talks between government and some of the armed groups occurred through the mediation of pastors, but the government was not willing to recognize these talks. It was only after the new government was formed in 2012 that talks were formally accepted.”**

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**Daw Chin Chin**  
**Chin National Party**

However discussion between men and women in the armed groups tends to be limited, as is the role of women in armed struggle. “They perform support duties like nursing. They are involved in the fighting only during the critical times”, says Khon Ja about women in the KIO. A similar trend is found in the Karen National Union; a thinking that men can do more than women in the political field. The majority of KNU comprises men. “They don’t want to be seen riding on the skirts of women,” claims the Karen Women’s Empowerment Group’s Nant Khin. “The problem also lies within women, as they don’t vote for other women”, she adds.

Daw Chin Chin of the Chin Peace and Tranquility Committee, now Chin National Front (CNF), said that the Committee was formed to mediate between government and armed groups in Chin state. The first talks with women from the government took place in March 2007 near Aizwal, at the Indo-Chin border. Daw Chin Chin’s contact with the Chin armed groups began when she was working in conflict areas as a trauma therapist. Since the 2007 round of talks did not go well, talks were reinitiated in January 2012 between the government and Chin National Front (CNF). The state level agreement between the government and the Chin armed group was signed on January 6, 2013 and the union level agreement was signed on May 7. The CNF is one of the founders of the UNFC; however there are problems with the latter now. Like the KIO, which split on the issue, some older members of the group do not like the process of negotiating peace separately with each armed group. Daw Chin Chin still works to bring political parties and armed groups together for meetings. In her opinion, political parties formed after 2012 elections are not working closely on the peace process since “they are Burmese dominated. All the armed groups are ethnic (non-Burman). This gives rise to miscommunication and opposing goals.”

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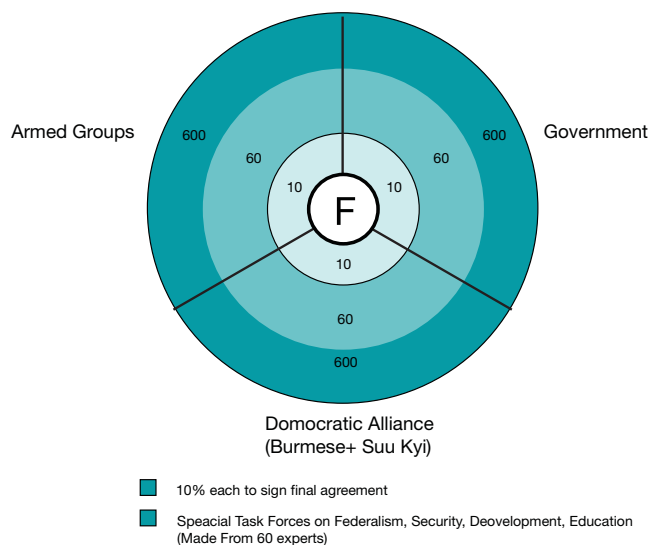


# THE **FEDERALISM** DEBATE AND THE **MINORITIES** ISSUE

Federalism has emerged as the core issue for peace settlements, and a uniting point for ethnic groups fighting for self-determination, both armed and unarmed. The newly formed United Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (UNBF, originally the United Nationalities Brotherhood Forum) is a coalition of fifteen ethnic parties and groups, working on a joint proposal for a new federal structure for Myanmar. “The first priority for ethnic groups is peace, the second is recognition of ethnic aspirations, and lastly democracy”, says Daw Chin Chin of the Chin National Party and Director of the Federation. The UNBF was invited by the UNFC for peace talks. A group of their members and/or supporters based in Chiang Mai have also been working on a federal framework.

The UNBF recently conducted a workshop with international legal experts to advise on legislation to protect the rights of ethnic groups. One proposal that emanated from the workshop was for the formation of a working group composed of Members of Parliament and political

leaders. The UNBF has also devised a broad three-tier framework for peace talks towards a settlement based on federalism, comprising a wide consultative process in the first tier, between government, armed groups and the pro-democracy parties and groups; the appointment of Special Task Forces in the second tier, on federalism, security, development and education; and in the third tier a peace agreement to be signed by ten representatives each of government, armed groups and pro-democracy parties (see diagram below).



The government's Chief negotiator, Minister Aung Min, wants a comprehensive nation-wide ceasefire agreement signed by July 2014. It is still unclear if this will happen. The government claims that it has reached ceasefire agreements with all of the ethnic armed groups, except three. One of the three is the Kachin Independence Organization, which had signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994, under which they were granted the right to maintain their own administrative and military infrastructure in certain areas of Kachin and Shan states. The ceasefire broke down in 2011, when the KIO's armed wing the KIA refused to comply with a directive from the union government to integrate into the governments' Border Guards, upon which the Myanmar army launched a military attack on the KIA (thousands are still displaced from that war). The KIO

ceasefire breakdown and the government's military response gave rise to considerable opposition, which was one factor in the government's 1-11 ceasefire initiative. The KIO remained wary until late 2013. "They do not see any difference between the current and previous agreement, and hence did not sign the new agreement," says Ja Nan Lahtaw.

In parallel to the UNFC, the government too has been working on a framework for political dialogue by studying different peace settlements, but this has not been made available to NGOs. Moreover, while the government and the armed groups have thus far led the peace process, other influential constituencies are now weighing in. According to the UNBF, Parliament, led by the Speaker, has recently staked its claim to authority over the peace process. They passed a resolution stating that all ceasefire negotiations require parliamentary approval. All groups, UNBF members say, long for a nation-wide ceasefire. They believe that Parliament will play a large decision-making role in the post-ceasefire period.

"Despite all this, so far there is no parliamentary commission on protecting the rights of ethnic groups or even on federalism," laments U Zo Zam, Chairman of the Chin National Party. The UNBF, therefore, now plans to found a political party named the Federal Union Party. With the fifteen ethnic parties that are members of the UNBF, the new party will seek two nominees each for the council of the Federal Union Party, and they are already in touch with some 156 MPs. Armed groups and the UNBF met in Yangon in September 2013 as a trust building experiment.

WON is a member of the UNBF, **"The ethnic issue in Rakhine State (Arakan) was a local issue, but now it has grown into a national, regional and even international issue. Both sides are at fault."**

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**Dr. U Myint**  
**President's Advisory Board**

In every state and district, the BAYDA Institute has also started working on political dialogue for federalism. At the 88ers' silver jubilee conference in September 2013, WON and BAYDA put forward joint slogans for federalism and amendment of the 2008 Constitution.

Though there are four religious communities in Myanmar – Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christians – religious and ethnic issues are quite separate. The former has to do with minority rights and/or protections and the latter with demographic majorities and self-rule. Nevertheless the interconnection is a sensitive issue in Rakhine state, where some Muslim groups have asked for a separate autonomous region. Buddhist-Muslim riots flared in June-July 2012, leaving 120,000 internally displaced. Muslims, mainly immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh, make up around 40% of the population of Rakhine. Though the riots were brought under control, a large number still live in camps and Buddhist-Muslim tension continues to simmer, including or especially amongst Buddhist monks.

A Commission of Enquiry into the Rakhine riots was set up by President Thein Sein in July 2012, made up of academics, analysts and NGO representatives (Ja Nan Lahtaw was a member). Its Report, submitted in April and published in July 2013, identified “several root causes of the violence which can be roughly grouped into (a) historic; (b) contentious border issues with Bangladesh and citizenship legislation; (c) continued lack of socialization and integration between the communities; (d) government inadequacies; (e) political parties for their own political agendas; (f) corruption of local officials; (g) lack of education and of economic opportunities in the region and of the people; and (h) external factors such as the rise of extremism on both sides.”<sup>1</sup> The Report also referred to prior demands by Muslim groups for a separate autonomous region in Rakhine as a possible contributory factor.

**“Our main conclusion was that cross-border immigration problems with Bangladesh must stop. The corruption of immigration officers helped create the problem. The Commission recommends firming up the border and halting immigration. We have suggested setting a cut-off date for citizenship of Bangladesh immigrants, and giving citizenship rights to all who migrated before that date.”**

While the Report made recommendations on each of the eight factors it identified as root causes, many of its members – and

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#### **Than Than Nu**

**Democratic Party (Women’s Wing) and member of the Rakhine Commission.**



President Thein Sein (see note in published report) – felt that humanitarian issues of IDPs and cross-border immigration and citizenship issues needed to be addressed as priorities.

Most political parties and civil society groups have been wary of tackling the communal issue. Having just emerged from conflict, and in the throes of forging a new national identity, the people of Myanmar are reluctant to deal with another potentially divisive issue, that of religious tension.

Women's groups may be the first to undertake reconciliation activities in Rakhine. Nilar Oo of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue has been running training workshops for police in conflict management. The EU, she says, is also working on police reforms. Nilar's work includes meeting separately with Rakhines and Rohingyas (name for Bangladeshi immigrants) to see what can be done to build bridges between the two communities. "We have stakeholders and donors in this work," she says, "It entails taking step by step approval, quite a cumbersome but necessary process. We find there are relatively few extremists on either side."

WON and the Rainfall Gender Study Group are starting work on community reconciliation. "We are promoting religious diversity among women representatives and leaders," says the Rainfall Gender Study Group's Pyo Let Han, "and others are working on interfaith peacemaking."

Women's groups are also concerned about a Bill for a new inter-religious law that was introduced in Parliament and is backed by influential monks, which lays down that Buddhist women can not marry non-Buddhist men. The Bill expands on a provision of the 2008 Constitution, which laid down that anyone married to a non-Burmese would be barred from running for the office of President (widely seen as a way of preventing Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming President).

**"Religious divisions are as important to the peace process as armed conflict."**

The Rainfall Gender Study Group issued a statement against the Bill, that it was in violation of gender and human rights, and also went against Buddhist teachings.


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**Susanna Soe**  
**Women's Organizations**  
**Network**

“Buddhism is about freedom and equality, under Buddhist law we can choose our own husbands,” says Pyo Let Han.

The language issue is an additionally explosive element in communal tensions. The Rakhine Commission Report recommends that Bangladeshi immigrants be given classes in Burmese to help them integrate. Ethnic groups also seek official recognition of their own languages. Adds Zo Zam of the Chin National Party: “We need to learn English. Schools should teach three languages – English, Burmese and each state’s language.”

Ja Nan Lahtaw and Susanna Soe underline the need for better research and training on federalism and minority issues, especially on how to tackle issues of diversity. “Communities must be kept in touch with one another,” says Susanna Soe. “There is a gap between the grass roots movements and the elites. NGOs are present within the country however they do not cover the needs of the entire population. The issue of diversity sensitisation is considered as important as gender sensitisation.”

A photograph of two women sitting at a wooden table in what appears to be a library or study. The woman on the left is wearing glasses and a black top with a silver necklace. The woman on the right is also wearing glasses and a black top. They are both looking towards the camera. In the background, there are bookshelves filled with books. A teal rectangular box with white text is overlaid on the image, partially covering the women and the table. The text reads: 'THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE'.

# THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Myanmar's democratization process began with enacting a new Constitution in 2008, under which general elections were held in 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was newly released from arrest, and her party the National League for Democracy (NLD), boycotted the elections. Several NLD members, especially amongst the older generation, split over the boycott decision and contested elections, but the elections were not considered fair and free, with many Western countries dismissing them as fraudulent. In the 2012 by-elections, the NLD was re-registered and won a landslide 43 out of the 46 seats.

While the NLD was occupied with turning itself from a democracy movement into a parliamentary party, the next step that the Thein Sein government took was to negotiate peace with armed ethnic groups. As briefly mentioned in the preceding sections, democratization and peace negotiations took place as largely parallel processes. The challenge now is for the two to dovetail before elections in 2015.

In this context, Aung San Suu Kyi's reference to the need for another Panglong Conference is seen as promising by many. The first two Panglong Conferences led to an agreement in 1947 between independence leader Aung San (Suu Kyi's father) and Kachin and Chin leaders, which accepted their aspirations for self-administration, granting autonomy to frontier regions. The agree-

**“The two trends of peacemaking – democratization and a nation-wide ceasefire agreement – need to be interconnected.”**

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**Daw Nyo Nyo Thin**  
**Yangon Region Hluttaw**  
**Representative**

ment collapsed when Aung San was assassinated. But the concessions offered by the Panglong agreement were limited and have been outstripped by changes over time; moreover, Karen, Mon, Shan, Wa and Arakanese aspirations were not considered.

Aung San Suu Kyi has sought to dispel suspicions of her intentions by meeting with Mon and Karen ethnic leaders who were under fire from the government. She is also involved in discussions for relief to IDPs and demining. She has visited people in refugee camps and spoken with women's groups promising them that she would do something. “She met with the Norwegian Prime Minister to get aid for refugee rehabilitation,” says Daw Chin Chin.

Some groups, such as the Civil Society Forum for Peace, argue that the peace process with ethnic self-determination groups should not be tied to the 2015 elections, but many ethnic groups wish for a settlement to be achieved before the elections. If there is no peace settlement before the elections, there is a danger that election campaigns based on ethnic self-determination will divide the polity.

On the other hand, a rushed peace settlement could be equally risky. With the discussion on federalism just beginning, any agreement with

federalism at its core will take time. The agreement would then have to be debated and approved in Parliament, and a new or amended Constitution would have to be agreed. This is a lot to achieve in eighteen months.

There is a heated debate over whether the 2008 Constitution can be amended or an altogether new Constitution is required. As it stands, it reserves 25% of the seats in Parliament for the military, disbars candidates for the Presidency on grounds of marriage, and gives limited federal powers, which

**“We don’t want the Constitution to be amended on the presidential issue alone, we want a Constitution based on human rights.”**

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**Daw Khon Ja,**  
**Kachin Women’s Peace Network**

too have not been fully implemented. President Thein Sein has called for more powers to be given to regional governments at the state and divisional levels. Technically, regional governments are directly under the President but most of them report to the union government, not the President. Administration is in the hands of municipal and divisional departments whose representatives are appointed, not elected, and there are few oversight bodies. In the absence of oversight, most administrative bodies are seen as corrupt and nepotistic. Many complain that there are two governments on the ground, administration and legislators.

People in Myanmar are divided on the issue of the Constitution. One group wants the 2008 constitution to be amended, the other wants it to be thrown out and replaced with an entirely new constitution. However, everyone agrees on one common point – it should be based on human rights. Those who favour amendment include political parties such as the Democratic Party and National Democratic Force, who support amendment on pragmatic grounds, that it is the only option available given the timeframe of the 2015 elections. The NLD too have conducted several workshops on constitutional amendments and have announced that they will have a list of proposed amendments within three months. The government too has formed a Constitution amendment committee (of which a majority of the members are from the ruling USDP).

Ethnic groups are more divided. The Chin National Party has begun to work on amendments to the 2008 Constitution but the KIO is divided on the issue. One section of the KIO is asking for a new Constitution and saying that they cannot negotiate further on the 2008 Constitution. As the KIO is deep into ceasefire and peace negotiations, the amendment versus new Constitution debate poses a dilemma for the organization.

Another problem, says Nyo Nyo Thin, is that most state level Parliaments are not brave enough to take the lead on important decisions in the peace process. Only three or four state governments, she says, most notably the Kachin state legislators, play an active role in the process. The union government is supposed to play a supporting role in the peace process, she adds. However, the lack of opinion among regional governments and their deference to the union government significantly increases the influence of the union over the states.

The biggest obstacle is that the 2008 Constitution makes it very difficult to amend key provisions, such as the reservation of 25% seats for the military. The removal of reservation in Parliament for the military is an issue that both pro-democracy groups and ethnic groups agree on; they also agree it is easier said than done. The military have ceded many powers, but they are also critical for the success or failure of the current peace initiatives, especially the nation-wide ceasefire under negotiation.

While Constitutional change on the three key points mentioned above is a priority, there are several other democracy and constitutional issues that concern women's groups. For example, a new NGO law is in the pipeline that, according to Human Rights Watch, could give government too much control over civil society organizations. Civil society organizations are also critical of the law, which says that all NGOs regardless of size will have to register with a central committee, which will also monitor their activities. The draft law was prepared by the Pyithu Hluttaw Public Affairs Management Committee and published for public feedback. Failure to comply with the law will lead to punishment, which civil society organizations believe is too severe. There is a danger of small NGOs closing down because they cannot comply with the new rules. On the other hand, if there are no records of NGO funding, it will give rise to corruption. The NLD argues that while NGOs and CSOs have to meet basic accounting and transparency requirements, mandatory record keeping should be sufficient without stringent registration guidelines.

A major concern for all women's groups is poor representation. Women MPs make up only 4.3% of Parliament, says Kin Kyi Matooo of the Democratic Party. Daw Nyo Nyo Thin worries that representation or nomination of women to decision-making posts or panels is token. "The government only invites women in order to appear more inclusive, but any substantive role for women in the process is non-existent," she says. For example, the Rakhine Investigation Commission, constituted to investigate the riots in Rakhine had four women out of 34 members. In Nyapayitaw, the seat of Parliament, there are two women members in the Parliament Select Committee for the Peace Process – Daw Dwe Bu and Daw Mi Myint Myint Than. According to Nyo Nyo Thin, important meetings of the Committee are held over dinner, which the women members find difficult to attend. Women face problems convincing leaders to put them at the negotiating table and they do not want to be seen as over eager either (and refrain from pushing hard for their own rights).

Myanmar does not have a National Women's Commission. The national newspapers did not even announce that Lahpai Send Raw, founder of the Metta Development Foundation, which works on health care, agriculture and peace projects in Kachin State, was awarded the Magsaysay Award in July 2013.

**"I have been pushing for a new election law that guarantees 30% representation for women in parliament."**

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**Daw Nyo Nyo Thin**  
**Yangon Region Hluttaw**  
**Representative**

Women's groups say they want 30% reservation for women in Parliament and would ideally like to see 50% representation. Daw Nyo Nyo Thin has also written to the Speaker and President about the law for reserving seats for women in parliament. Women are very poorly represented even in the regional legislatures. There are only two women regional ministers and no women Chief Ministers. "Since women make up 52% of the population in Myanmar, there is no doubt that they can make a significant difference," says Than Than Nu, Secretary General of the Democratic Party's Women's Wing. The women's wing of the Democratic Party faced considerable intimidation during the 2010 elections, she says. Despite this they won three

seats (one in Mandalay, and two in Yangon) and this has encouraged them to try again during the 2015 elections.

Political parties do not select women candidates to stand for elections and it is very difficult to be an independent candidate. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD did put women on the list of electoral candidates (about a third of their list comprised women) but most politicians think the gender issue is divisive. Some women's groups say that this perception has prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from forming an association of women parliamentarians, as it would be seen as a kind of discrimination.

Women's groups are focused on **“We should study peace accords in Mizoram.”**

developing women's leadership at the regional level. Daw Than Yein, a member of the National Democratic Front, has been to the border areas of Karen and Mon states where women are very articulate but have

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**Daw Chin Chin**  
**Chin National Party**

not been asked to be part of the peace process, “and neither did they have any idea that they could or should participate.” The party gives basic training on negotiation skills and assists women with speaking to their communities and getting involved in the peace process, in the hope that as time goes by more women will actively participate.

Daw Chin Chin of the Chin National Front says that they are interested in learning how to write a constitution. “We should study peace accords in Mizoram,” she said adding that ethnic groups feel the need to stay on home ground when discussing such issues. She echoed the need for empowerment training for women. She mentioned that the CNF plans to publish a weekly women's journal that will cover women's activities and issues. Trafficking and violence against women are big issues as are those concerning youth and education.



# CONCLUSIONS

As the description above indicates, women's groups have been key bridge builders and message carriers between the pro-democracy movement and the government, and between the armed groups and the government. This has not resulted in their acquiring a seat at the decision-making table, but should, both for their own sakes and to ensure a successful peace process outcome.

Among the several suggestions that women's groups have made in this regard, all support the appointment of a gender advisor to the Myanmar Peace Centre, a formal involvement of civil society in planning and oversight bodies for the peace process, and for more women at the decision-making level in political parties and armed groups. Some initiatives towards these ends have been taken: there are training programs for women in Parliament, including on how to approach local authorities, and women's organizations such as the Rainfall Gender Study Group (RGSG) also organize training programs for women on how to participate in peacemaking and how to dialogue with the government.

Secondly, women's groups emphasized the need for more research and policy development on women's participation in peacemaking, without which, they said, it would be difficult to convince the govern-

ment that women are integral actors for peace building. Technical support for the peace process is also essential.

India-Myanmar relations were brought up by most women political leaders and groups. India's Look East policy, said ethnic leaders, had not had a sufficient impact in Myanmar. Bordering Myanmar-

se states such as Chin and Shan do not have access across the border to neighbouring Indian states, despite close ethnic including linguistic ties. While there are occasional exchanges between Myanmar's ethnic leaders and Indian political leaders (for example, the Chief Ministers of Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh), there are no official crossing points or trade facilities on the borders. An Indian proposal to revive the traditional weekly markets ("haats") on the borders is widely welcomed but needs speedy implementation.

Moreover, women's groups in Myanmar would be very interested in India's experience in dealing with communalism, an issue that is still shrouded in silence in Myanmar. As they point out, there is much to be learned regarding what works and what does not in communal crisis situations.

On another plane, women political leaders said that India-Myanmar, and indeed Myanmar-SAARC inter-party meetings that outlined common interests would be very useful, as would co-ordination between political parties committed to democratic principles. Corruption, they said, plagues Myanmar just as much as other South Asian societies. SAARC countries and Myanmar share many of the same problems, which can be worked on together if Myanmar joins SAARC

**"Our first priority is federalism. We have studied how it works in some countries. We intend to visit India but we don't have the opportunity."**

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**U Zo Zam**

**Chairperson of Chin National Party**

**"Exchange programs between women in Myanmar and India can be started. Government of India is now giving scholarships for Myanmar women."**

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**Susanna Soe**

**Women's Organizations Network**

or SAARC develops closer ties to ASEAN, which Myanmar is already a member of.

Finally, women's groups in Myanmar have a special interest in discussing legal reforms with Indian women's groups, who have a long experience in drafting and piloting legislation on gender and women's rights.

## Endnotes

- 1 [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine\\_Commission\\_Report-en-red.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine_Commission_Report-en-red.pdf)

## Appendix

### List of People and Organizations met in Myanmar

1. Daw Thin Thin Aung, Admin Director, Mizzima
2. Daw Chin Chin, Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (Union Of Myanmar) also Member, Chin National Party
3. Ms. Mariann Hagen, Assistant Special Adviser and Head of the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Myanmar, UN
4. Daw Pyo Let Han, Founder, Rainfall Gender Study Group
5. Daw Khon Ja, Kachin Women's Peace Network
6. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Chairperson, National League for Democracy
7. Daw Jan Nan Lahtaw, Director, Shalom Foundation
8. Dr. U Myint, Advisor, President's Advisory Board, Myanmar Development Resource Institute, Centre for Economic & Social Development
9. Daw Aung Naing, Associate Program Director, Myanmar Peace Center
10. Daw Than Than Nu, The Democratic Party (Women's Wing) and Member, Rakhine Commission
11. Dr Than Nyein, The National Democratic Force
12. Daw Nant Khin Aye Oo, Karen Women Empowerment Group
13. Nilar Oo, Deputy Country Representative, Humanitarian Dialogue
14. Daw Pa Pa Pyo, Rainfall Gender Study Group
15. Daw Naw Susana Soe, Peace Negotiation, Women's Organization Network
16. Dr. Jo Song, Land Peace Centre

17. Daw Ko Myo Thant, Editor in-chief of Mizzima
18. Dr. Nyo Nyo Thin, Yangon Region Hluttaw Representative
19. Daw U Tun Yi, The National Unity Party
20. U Zo Zam, Chairperson, The Chin National Party
21. Karen Women Action Group
22. Metta Development Foundation





## **The Delhi Policy Group**

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