



Policy Brief

Drivers of Change: Reflecting on the significance of external support on Women, Peace and Security to Armed and Political Movements in Myanmar

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Executive Summary

This policy brief explores the impact of a participatory action research project in Myanmar, analysing and supporting the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in areas controlled or influenced by Armed and Political Movements (APMs). It collects and analyses stories of discourse, policy and process changes, perceived by a diverse group of stakeholders as being linked to the project's approach of involving the leadership and engaging in a participatory manner.

The overall project aims to support the full implementation of the WPS Agenda by generating knowledge on the policies and practices of APMs in strengthening the participation and protection of women and girls, as well as on the factors that can influence these processes. In (South-Eastern) Myanmar, it engaged with two movements, the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), through participatory research and subsequent dialogue in support of the movements' efforts to implement the WPS Agenda.

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Key Takeaways

With its findings and recommendations, this brief aims to provide valuable insights for international organisations, donors and other actors seeking to engage on this topic; it does so by highlighting the important need to:

1. Consider which movements are willing to engage on WPS and strengthen existing dynamics

Recognise and engage with movements willing to address WPS issues, whilst respecting existing dynamics, political contexts and commitments. Conduct thorough baseline studies to align external support with local dynamics without imposing an agenda.

2. Involve the leadership in the process without side-lining women's organisations

Acknowledge APM leaders as governance actors while ensuring the inclusion of women's organisations. Recognise and build on the expertise of women's organisations for sustainable change, ensuring inclusive consultations, with the goal of reaching equal gender representation in decision-making positions.

3. Encourage men's engagement but also recognise women's leadership

Promote male engagement in WPS issues for wider acceptance, but ensure it does not undermine women's leadership. Recognise and value women's expertise and experiences in decision-making processes.

4. Build on trust and existing entry points

Foster trust through participatory engagement and utilise existing entry points by collaborating with insider experts, given their networks, familiarity with the context and involvement in socio-political dynamics and discussions. Create a safe space for various stakeholders, specifically but not limited to civil society, to raise concerns and suggestions, accompanied by investment in support structures.

5. Plan for long-term engagement rather than quick fixes

Recognise that structural changes take time, requiring long-term engagement rather than quick fixes. Commit to support the process until the practical implementation of measures within APMs and within the territories they are governing.

[1] Insider experts are women members or close affiliates of the movements, who have been identified and supported by the movements' leadership to work in a consultative capacity for the realisation of the project.



Introduction

“They [international actors] don't really treat ethnic armed organisations as a valid or legitimate government of their own people. So I think they need [...] to start working with them just like they work with others to improve the government structure or institution,” claimed the leader of a women’s organisation during a participatory research project on the role of Armed and Political Movements in implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Myanmar.[2] The WPS Agenda was formally initiated by the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), followed by the subsequent sister resolutions, and builds on Resolution 1325’s four pillars of prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery, in order to address the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls. At a national level, Myanmar’s previous government passed the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) in 2013 to promote the WPS Agenda in the country, but failed to meet the minimum standards of a National Action Plan, for instance by not allocating a specific budget and misleadingly reframing the word “conflict” to “emergencies”. [3]

The Observe and Act project aimed to generate and disseminate knowledge on how Armed and Political Movements (APMs), [4] specifically the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), [5] are already advancing and could further improve women’s protection and participation in territories under their control. Both movements belong to the oldest ethnic resistance organisations in Myanmar and share a history of armed struggle for political self-determination against the central government. With the military coup d’état in February 2021, this armed resistance re-intensified, affecting the communities under the movements’ territorial control and influence. [6]

According to this research, neither KNU nor KNPP has specific policies on women’s rights and gender equality but they do indeed engage with the WPS Agenda despite facing various challenges in doing so. Both movements placed greater emphasis on women’s participation than on protection and mainly rely on the expertise of their affiliated women’s organisations. Overall, patriarchal practices and stereotypical gender roles are still rooted in the communities and the leadership of the movements, which raises significant challenges for women’s political participation, especially on the decision-making levels. [7] Following up on the recommendations developed during this research conducted in 2022, dialogue sessions in support of each movement’s internal efforts to strengthen gender policies and women’s leadership were developed and implemented over the course of 2023.

[2] Mar Phyo, Z. (2022). Observe and Act: The Role of Armed and Political Movements in the Implementation of the Woman, Peace and Security Agenda in Myanmar. Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity.

[3] Women’s League of Burma (2019). The Prospects of Advancement for Women? WLB’s Analysis of National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women.

[4] We understand Armed and Political Movements as entities that possess a defined organisational structure, are independent from state authority and use violence for political ends. For this policy brief, we do not use the more conventional term “non-state armed group”, since some of the actors under consideration operate as quasi/de facto states and object to being defined solely by their tactical use of force.

[5] The project’s decision to work with these movements was based on various considerations, including involvement in active conflict, existence of political and armed wings, provision of public services, access via the Thai-Myanmar border, previous contacts, and openness to engage on WPS.

[6] Loong, S. (2022). Southeast Myanmar: A Shared Struggle for Federal Democracy. The International Institute for Strategic Studies. Online article. Retrieved from <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/southeast>.

[7] Mar Phyo, Z. (2022). Observe and Act: The Role of Armed and Political Movements in the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Myanmar. Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity.



In post-2021 coup Myanmar, the role of APMs as governance service providers, and hence as duty bearers for women's rights, is slowly receiving increased (international) recognition. However, the need to look beyond the central government to support meaningful implementation of the WPS Agenda has a long legacy in Myanmar [8] and will remain pertinent in any type of potential future scenario. In consequence, this policy brief reflects on the specific approach applied during the Observe and Act project with the aim of providing home-grown recommendations in support of the implementation of the WPS Agenda in areas controlled by APMs, in Myanmar and beyond. In a volatile context, multiple factors have influenced the dynamics of participation and protection of women and girls on the ground, and increased international attention to WPS issues in Myanmar. Therefore, the brief does not claim to establish causality between the project's implementation and the observed changes, but it describes what participants in a research process who had been involved in the project at different stages and different levels describe as their individual perception of change resulting from the engagement.

The Observe and Act project has developed a specific approach to research and dialogue facilitation, characterised by four main elements:

1. APM Leadership Engagement

Whilst civil society organisations (CSOs), especially women's organisations, were consulted closely in the process, the main entry point for this project has been the leadership of the APMs. As a first step, the leaderships of the KNU and KNPP were approached and asked for permission and support in conducting the project. Since then, they have been continuously involved in the activities, for instance by identifying insider experts, participating in interviews, facilitating the dissemination of findings or participating in the dialogue sessions. The APMs are thus recognised as duty bearers and the responsibility to implement the WPS Agenda is not offloaded to women's organisations, which are an indispensable ally in this effort, but not a substitute for the movements' own governance provision.

2. Participatory Methodology

Participation has become one of the international community's favourite buzzwords, but can be interpreted in numerous ways and always comes with limitations that need to be kept in mind. For this project, the participatory approach meant that insiders from the movements, so-called insider experts, were involved in all phases of the project, from methodology development to implementing the activities, monitoring the outcomes and planning future programming. The activities such as conducting research or designing and facilitating dialogues were conducted solely by local actors without the presence of external project staff, in order to enable an environment of trust and create a process led by the insider experts. At the same time, given the fluidity of insider and outsider roles, as well as agenda-setting for foreign-funded projects being mainly in the hands of international donors,[9] participatory engagement is to be seen as a gradual process rather than as a fixed once-and-for-all set element.

[8] Olivius, E., Hedström, J., & Mar Phyoo, Z. (2022). Feminist Peace or State Co-optation? The Women, Peace and Security agenda in Myanmar. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5(1), 25-43.

[9] Bilgen, A., Nasir, A., & Schöneberg, J. (2021). Why Positionalities Matter: Reflections on power, hierarchy, and knowledges in "development" research. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 42(4), 519-536



3. Strengthening existing efforts

Both international NGOs involved in the project – Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity – strove to avoid external agenda-setting by strengthening existing efforts from within the movements. As international actors, the partner organisations do not claim to know how the participation and protection of women and girls can be best strengthened in the areas concerned, nor to have legitimacy to criticise the movements. Via insider research and constant exchange with a broad variety of stakeholders, the project aimed to identify existing efforts and build on them. Local CSOs and women from within and outside of the organisations have been fighting for women’s rights for far longer than the timespan of this or other engagement. Listening and building on their demands creates the possibility for international engagement to be seen as a tool (within the existing limitations) to achieve joint goals rather than imposing outsiders’ own processes or ideas.

4. Inclusivity

Whilst the APM leadership has been the main contact point for the project, it is crucial to involve all the various stakeholders meaningfully in the process. Involvement here means consulting women’s organisations, CSOs and other stakeholders (human rights organisations, diaspora groups, international actors, etc.) on the planned engagement and incorporating their recommendations in the methodology, as well as conducting the project activities with representatives from different membership levels and different areas. In the programming for the participatory action research, for instance, women’s organisations did not feel sufficiently consulted, an issue emphasised during the dissemination of the findings. Consequently, the programming for the subsequent dialogue sessions was adapted to ensure more consultation by working with a focal point for each of the women’s organisations. Such adaptation requires flexibility on the part of all project partners but creates a broad acceptance of, and commitment to, the process.

This paper uses a simplified model of the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique^[10] as a frame of reference for learning from the engagement in Myanmar over the past 1.5 years and developing specific recommendations for the application of participatory methodologies with APMs on the topic of WPS. Seven qualitative interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, ranging from local partners and insider experts to APM leaders from both KNU and KNPP, and members of CSOs. The collected data was verified and analysed during a workshop with the project team and an external expert on WPS.

This policy brief reviews different perspectives shared by interviewees and analyses their personal accounts of the perceived (most significant) changes observed during the project, thereby critically evaluating the benefits and challenges of the participatory methodology applied. It contributes to the research previously conducted within the Observe and Act^[11] project by adding to the understanding of existing dynamics in strengthening the participation and protection of women and girls in areas controlled by the two APMs, as well as by taking a step back and putting the approach described above in context with the developments since the baseline study.

[9] Bilgen, A., Nasir, A., & Schöneberg, J. (2021). Why Positionalities Matter: Reflections on power, hierarchy, and knowledges in “development” research. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 42(4), 519-536.

[10] “The most significant change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation.” See: Davies, R., & Dart, J. (2005). The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) Technique. A Guide to its Use.

[11] The participatory action research resulted in [a research report](#) (also available in [Burmese](#)), a [policy brief](#) (also available in [Burmese](#)) and a short video documentary [Women on the Margins](#) (also available as a [short version](#)).



2. Change Stories from the KNU and KNPP

The findings emphasise significant changes within both the KNU and the KNPP in the implementation of the WPS Agenda during the project period 2022-2023. The first noticeable change has been the inclusion of accountability on gender equality issues in the discourse of the APM leaderships. Furthermore, various policy commitments and significant efforts in practical implementation were observed in both movements. Lastly, the majority of interviewees also highlighted changes in the process of addressing gender equality within and beyond the APMs.

Discourse and Attitude Change at Leadership Level

"Gender is not just a female issue. It is the issue that concerns both men and women." This statement comes from the opening speech by Nye Reh, the KNPP Minister of Home Affairs, during a dialogue session in support of the development of an internal Gender Policy for the KNPP in 2023, demonstrating a significant shift in the leadership's discourse. As one interviewee highlighted, the Ministry of Home Affairs has generally been regarded as one of the departments which were rather weak on gender issues. She referred to this surprising discourse change over the course of the project by stating: "I have to say that it has changed from unspoken position to outspoken situation on the gender issue within the leadership level." Similarly, P'doh Saw Thaw Thi Bweh, General Secretary 1 of the KNU, emphasised the existence of patriarchy within Karen society and the importance of men's engagement on WPS issues during his interview for this paper. He stated: "Regarding gender issues, the patriarchy is deeply rooted in all organisations or communities. This is an undeniable fact. So we need to be well aware that awareness-raising related to Women and Security matters should target not only women but also men." While this research provides limited information on all relevant factors leading to these discursive shifts among both movement leaderships, the majority of the interviewees highlighted these as a significant change during the course of the project. This change is considered significant, because previously, the responsibility for gender and WPS topics was often expected to be assumed by women and women's organisations.

In addition, the WPS policy dialogue sessions conducted by the KNU raised highly sensitive issues on gender that had previously not been discussed openly within the group, such as domestic violence and the rights of LGBTQ+ people. According to one respondent, "Gender is an unspoken issue in society. People know there is an issue but they do not bring it up in public discussion. People think women's issues are not related to men, and only women should work on women's issues. There are different perspectives [referring to domestic violence and LGBTQ+ rights] which are unspoken. But when the dialogue [sessions] started, they started to talk about these issues." However, other interviewees have also pointed out that such discourse changes are mostly seen in formal settings, while practical behaviour in informal settings has largely remained unchanged.



Policy Commitment and Practical Implementation

Several interviewees acknowledged notable changes in terms of policy commitments and practical implementation of the WPS Agenda within both movements. The first noticeable change – notwithstanding certain limitations – occurred in the electoral regulations for the KNPP congress. In the KNPP, electoral candidates are required to have been full party members for at least five years, and the process to become a full party member takes another six months.[12] However, the party leaders recently offered, exclusively for members of the Karenni Women’s Organisation (KNWO), more flexibility with regard to this criterion in order to create opportunities for more women delegations. One interviewee stated: *“During the [regular coordination] meeting with KNWO, KNPP leaders discussed the possibility that if KNWO members are willing to join the election, they don’t need to fulfil the designated membership term to participate in the party election.”*

Furthermore, the KNPP requested the KNWO to help in developing a gender policy and a policy on Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) for the movement. “KNPP never thought of leading these things [policy developments] before,” one of the interviewees said, highlighting the new willingness of the leadership to assume responsibility on gender issues itself, instead of assigning them directly to the women’s organisations.[13]

The second significant change observed by the interviewees concerns the structural organisation of both movements. The KNU set up a core group with one focal person from its associated Karen Women Organisation (KWO) in order to organise internal inclusive dialogue sessions on WPS as part of the Observe and Act project. The KNU also started a discussion at the leadership level on establishing a specific women’s department within the organisation and having a focal person on women and gender issues. In addition, the KNU agreed on a specific Action Plan for strengthening women’s participation at the leadership levels during the project’s dialogue sessions. It is comprised of specific activities within a clearly defined timeframe and also outlines the specific methodology and thematic focus of the content. However, the lack of designated resources for its implementation needs to be acknowledged as a limitation. Similarly, the KNPP also underwent certain structural changes over the course of the project. One interviewee highlighted that the KNPP’s legal system failed to address GBV cases on the ground. To address this shortcoming, the KNPP recently demonstrated its willingness to improve the justice system’s accessibility for women in some townships, facilitating their direct access to remedies and courts. *“They [KNPP] are also making some efforts to appoint necessary staff for those places [in the township-level justice system]. These are the beginnings of change, I can say,”* one interviewee highlighted.

Beyond the influence of the project, interviewees from both movements also mentioned other significant factors contributing to these positive policy commitments and practices. They include: long-term efforts by the movements and policy decisions pre-dating the project, the impact of the current political context, and internal pressure to focus on WPS issues. In fact, the Observe and Act process came in a timely manner to help fill existing

[12] Karenni National Progressive Party (2021). Basic Principles and Constitution, reviewed and ratified at 14th Party Congress, 27-30 December 2021.

[13] Mar Phyoe, Z. (2022). Observe and Act: The Role of Armed and Political Movements in the Implementation of the Woman, Peace and Security Agenda in Myanmar. Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity, p. 25.



existing gaps in the practical implementation of previous policy commitments. An interviewee from the KNU said, "Women's participation was initially taken responsibly by the KWO and the KYO [Karen Youth Organisation], but it could not be fully supported in the political pathway which KNU wanted to pursue. So the KNU started to take it into account as an important issue. Then, coincidentally, the joint project came along and there have been activities after all."

Process Changes

In both movements, the findings revealed significant evolution in processes around WPS issues. The KNPP leaders – in part – increased their attention to WPS issues through their active involvement in the project. Some interviewees attributed this change to the current political and conflict dynamics. As they see it, the re-intensification of the conflict since 2021, but also consistent advocacy from civil society and the international trend to promote WPS in Myanmar, required the leaderships to pay more attention. Other interviewees, however, identified this as an impact of the Observed and Act research. An interviewee associated with the KNPP commented: "KNWO has been doing WPS for a long time. However, there were no clear instructions by KNPP to count it as an important issue in the past. After the research had been done, some KNPP leaders revealed that there is a need to address WPS issues."

The findings further denote an evolution in the process of working on gender issues, from attributing the sole responsibility for gender work to women's organisations towards greater collaboration between the APMs and women's organisations. For instance, the KNPP leadership committed itself to lead – with the support of the KNWO – the process of developing a gender policy. The KNU leadership assigned its Foreign Affairs Department the task of promoting women's participation at leadership level within the organisation. One interviewee described this process of change initiated during the project's dialogue sessions as the "creation of a movement". Rather than assigning responsibilities to single entities, a sense of shared responsibility was created. One interviewee from KNU stated: "If only two to three people discuss WPS issues, then only those few people will know about it. But KNU is not working on this issue alone; it does so with inclusive participation in the process broadly." For instance, besides the KNU developing a very detailed four-year action plan, other stakeholders who participated in the dialogues also developed their own internal action plans, mutually reinforcing the KNU's effort. The KYO, for instance, developed an advocacy plan on gender awareness, and the KWO devised a new capacity-building scheme for KWO women leaders who participate in the KNU's township and district structures as a result of taking part in the dialogue sessions.

The three levels of change described in this section, namely, discourse and attitude changes, policy commitments and practical implementation, and process changes, are overlapping and interconnected. They are influenced in a systemic way by a variety of factors. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that all participants perceived certain changes towards improved implementation of the WPS Agenda since 2022 as associated with the Observe and Act project and its approach.



3. Linkage back to the approach: Factors influencing the observed change

The collected stories revealed two main factors linked to the project methodology that contributed to the emergence of these significant changes. The first is the active involvement of the movements' leaderships in the project implementation process. The second is the participatory approach, which mainly relies on working with insider experts to strengthen the existing internal capacities. However, rather than attributing discursive, policy/organisational and practical changes to the Observe and Act project alone, all participants stressed the importance of existing political will, the movements' demands and political factors in achieving the described significant changes.

Involvement of the Leadership

The majority of interviewees from both movements highlighted the involvement of leadership levels in the research and dialogue process as an important driver of change. Leaders not only granted their approval to the project, but were also able to build a trusted partnership in implementing the activities throughout the whole engagement. Here, it is crucial to be clear about the roles of the different stakeholders, specifically with regard to the relationship between the APM leadership and the two international NGOs implementing the project. The APM leadership was recognised as the legitimate governance actor in the area, thereby institutionalising modes of social coordination [14], and making it the duty bearer responsible for addressing the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls by implementing the WPS Agenda. The INGOs' role was to offer support – to the extent possible and requested – for specific efforts in line with its own and/or the donor's strategy. This created a partnership which in turn contributed to the observed changes.

The implementation of a WPS project under the (shared) responsibility of the APM leadership contributes to shaping the ways in which leaders address the issue publicly. According to some interviewees, the discursive change on gender and WPS issues at the leadership level – despite the aforementioned limitations – encouraged meaningful participation by APM members in the activities. Furthermore, the continuous involvement of the leadership in the process, from identifying the insider researchers and thus having a voice in the composition of the project team, to contributing as interviewees and participants in the dialogue sessions, also encouraged a substantive debate around WPS in top-level circles, which in turn supported positive policy developments. At the process level as well, the central role of APM leaders in convening project activities, for instance by issuing formal invitations with official letterheads, was identified by the interviewees as a significant contribution to more meaningful participation in these spaces, especially among male participants. As one KNPP interviewee pointed out: *“Before, if we invited men to join the discussion on gender issues, they rarely came along. They were not interested in these issues. Even if they participated, they left the session early. But now [since it was convened by the leadership], they have come and joined the session until the end.”* Similarly, interviewees from KNU acknowledged the importance of leaders' involvement in the process: *“Even when the Foreign Affairs Department takes responsibility for the process, we are not still sure if all key persons will respond to our invitation, but it was due to the leaders' involvement. Frankly, doing this [dialogue sessions] also needs political weight.”*

[14] See Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2021). Areas of Limited Statehood and Governance: Concepts and Measurements. In Börzel, T. A., & Risse T. (eds.). *Effective Governance Under Anarchy: Institutions, Legitimacy, and Social Trust in Areas of Limited Statehood*. Cambridge University Press, 29–57.



However, the leadership's involvement should not come at the expense of consulting other stakeholders. Women's organisations and civil society, in particular, have been advocating for and strengthening women's rights and gender equality for a long time. While recognising APM leaderships as legitimate governance actors, it is therefore essential to ensure that CSOs are continuously informed and given the opportunity to influence the processes. The involvement of the leadership, which is still male-dominated, cannot replace the voices of civil society.

Participatory Approach

All interviewees from both movements pointed to the use of participatory methods, especially through continued partnership with insider experts, as another important factor contributing to the observed changes. The insider experts were identified by the APM leadership based on jointly defined criteria, and then invited to join the project team as consultants. They were thus affiliated to their respective movements and were part of the Observe and Act project at the same time. Rooted in the concept of insider research, meaning the study of *"one's own social group"*, [15] the collaboration with insiders was further developed during the practical phases of the Observe and Act project. After the initial research phase, the insiders were involved in dissemination activities, follow-up programming, methodology development and implementation of dialogue sessions, continuously consulting with both the APM leadership and the rest of the project team.

Key project activities such as the field research and the policy-focused internal dialogue sessions on WPS – jointly led by the APM leaderships and the insider experts – were conducted without any involvement of externals. This, according to the majority of interviewees, resulted in the methodology being more reflective of the needs of the local movements and, consequently, in an increased feeling of trust towards and ownership over the process. One interviewee pointed out: *"Dialogues were based on trusting each other. The insider [expert] was an internal person. So it is easy to build trust during the dialogue sessions to have more productive discussions."* Over time, it also became evident how this trust increased gradually, both among the stakeholders and in the participatory element of the overall project, by growing as a project team and developing follow-up plans jointly. Participatory engagement hence needs time and effort to evolve; it does not come out of the blue.

Some interviewees also highlighted opportunities for improving the work with insiders. It was recommended to create more space for systematic empowerment and training with the insider experts, e.g. by providing technical support or building dialogue facilitation skills, in order to build more effective processes. At the same time, more detailed preparation for the specific activities might run the risk of the insiders being perceived as promoting an outside agenda. Gender is still a sensitive issue within the movements, especially at the leadership levels, as it entails questioning the patriarchal structures and stereotypical gender roles which are deeply rooted in society. Therefore, despite the aforementioned areas of progress, one interviewee raised a concern about the role of insiders: *"So far, it is still okay since we haven't reached deep into the behavioural changes yet; we have only looked at the institutional level. When it comes to challenging the values and norms, there might be more resistance as they might not see [us] as insiders but rather as the people who bring in an outsider agenda."*

[15] Recognising that the insider/outsider dichotomy is strongly contested and fluid from a feminist standpoint. See Naples, N.A. (2003). *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research*. First edition. Routledge, p. 46.



This shows how the fluidity of positionalities [16] plays out in this project and reveals another limitation to participatory engagement. When building a partnership between international NGOs and APMs, certain power dynamics are inherently existent when international partners and/or their donors are financing or at least contributing to the realisation of certain activities. Therefore, agenda-setting cannot be fully led by the movements, but there is the potential to gradually make it more collaborative over the course of longer-term engagement. From an international actor's perspective, it is necessary to constantly reflect on this and to explore pathways for improvement.

Overall, this shows how the specific approach of the Observe and Act project, involving the leadership and working in a participatory manner, contributed to the observed changes described previously. These changes are to be seen as small steps towards enhancing the mutually reinforcing participation and protection of women and girls in the currently re-intensified armed conflict in Myanmar, but as the saying goes, little strokes fell great oaks. Through the combined efforts of the various parties and actors involved, these changes have the potential to affect the key people on an individual level and eventually lead to the socio-political goal [17] of creating a more resilient and equal society as a basis for sustainable peacebuilding.

4. Recommendations

Drawing from the observed changes and their linkage to the Observe and Act project, we conclude this policy brief by offering five key recommendations, to be considered in future programming and reflected upon by actors who are seeking to support the implementation of the WPS Agenda in areas controlled or influenced by APMs.

The brief recommends that (international) organisations, funding providers and other actors:

1. Consider which movements are willing to engage on WPS and strengthen existing dynamics. Gender and WPS are still sensitive issues in most armed and political movements. The political willingness of such movements, and specifically their leaderships, to engage on WPS is key to enable change processes and to mitigate the sensitivities within the movements. Different movements have different political contexts, cultures, resources and commitments to the WPS Agenda. If the process is not aligned with the existing dynamics, this will have a negative impact and damage the sense of local ownership. Thorough baseline studies can identify these dynamics and ways for externals to provide support without imposing their own agenda.

2. Involve the leadership in the process without sidelining women's organisations. APM leaders are to be recognised as governance actors and duty bearers for women's rights in the areas under their control or influence. Their involvement in the process is important, both in terms of eliciting new practices and in creating a long-term partnership with international actors, who in turn contribute to the necessary change processes. At the same time, women's organisations and other civil society groups often have a long record of advocating for gender rights and WPS. Recognising and building on their expertise is

[16] Bilgen, A., Nasir, A., & Schöneberg, J. (2021). Why Positionalities Matter: Reflections on power, hierarchy, and knowledges in "development" research. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 42(4), 519-536.

[17] See CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2016). Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics: A resource manual. Retrieved from <http://www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Reflecting-on-Peace-Practice-RPP-Basics-A-Resource-Manual.pdf>.



also crucial for the sustainability of the change processes. Therefore, it is important to ensure inclusive consultations among different stakeholders, especially women's organisations, before and during the engagement.

3. Encourage male engagement but also recognise women's leadership. Male championship is important in leading women and gender issues towards effective wider acceptance, especially among male leaderships, and encouraging them as duty bearers. However, recognising women's expertise and experiences and the risk of re-asserting a "gentler" patriarchy, this should not undermine women's participation at the decision-making level of the process as well.

4. Build on trust and existing entry points. Participatory engagement is based on trust between the stakeholders as a basis for achieving specific policy changes, and consequently takes time to gradually become more effective. Collaborating with insider experts through existing entry points saves time and facilitates the process. Nonetheless, creating a safe space among trusted participants (without the involvement of externals) for all stakeholders to raise concerns and suggestions is crucial to do no harm, and should ideally be accompanied by investment in support structures and empowerment programmes, in order to demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainable change.

5. Plan with long-term engagement rather than quick fixes. Structural changes, especially in relation to overcoming socially constructed practices and norms within the movements, take time and do not happen overnight. Short-term or ad hoc engagement leads only to perceived changes which are unsustainable in a politically volatile context. Therefore, the engagement should not stop at the policy development stage but should accompany the process until gender equality measures are implemented, both internally within the APMs and in the territories they govern.



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