



GENDER & POLITICS

WOMEN AND MEN
CANDIDATES
IN THE 2015 ELECTION

August 2017

BRIEFING PAPER

“

There is a clear need for Myanmar to raise the gender equality of political participation, so as to improve the quality of democracy, and to meet its domestic and international policy commitments.”

The Lack of Women in Myanmar's Parliaments, and Why This Matters

Achieving gender equality in political participation is widely recognised as an important development objective in itself, and can also be a powerful means to achieve other development objectives. This importance is reflected in one of the targets of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: 'Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life.' One of the key objectives of Myanmar's National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, 2013-22 (NSPAW) is to, '...improve systems, structures and practices to ensure women's equal participation in decision-making and leadership at all levels of society.' NSPAW is designed to help Myanmar meet its international policy commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Platform for Action.

Table 1: Percentage of MPs that are Women in Myanmar's National-level Parliaments, with International Comparisons¹

Rwanda	55.7%
Bolivia	51.8%
Philippines	27.1%
China	24.2%
Bangladesh	20.3%
Indonesia	19.8%
Malaysia	13.1%
India	12.2%
Myanmar	10.5%
Thailand	4.8%
Global Average	23.3%
Asian Average	19.4%

Following the November 2015 elections, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi became the de facto leader of Myanmar, the first time a woman has held this position. However, representation in Myanmar's parliaments remains highly gender unequal. Women make up only 1 in 10 of Myanmar's MPs - as Table 1 shows, this is more unequal than most of Myanmar's neighbours, is less than half as gender equal as the global average, and only slightly more than half as gender equal as the Asian average. Myanmar is ranked 159 out of 191 countries on the proportion of national-level parliamentarians that are women, i.e. it is in the bottom 20% of countries globally.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the only woman cabinet member at Union (national) level, and the Vice-Presidents, Speakers, and Deputy Speakers are all men. On average, gender inequality of representation in State/Region parliaments is similar to that at Union level, with women making up 9.7% of State/Region MPs. However, there is considerable variation between States/Regions, with 3 State parliaments having no women MPs (Chin, Kayah, and Rakhine), whereas the highest (Mon State) has almost 20% women MPs. Two of Myanmar's 14 State/Region

¹ N.b. data in Table 1 for individual countries (including Myanmar) are correct as of 1st February 2016. Data for the global average and Asian average are correct as of 25th April 2017.

Chief Ministers are women (in Kayin State and Tanintharyi Region), and only one State/Region parliament has a woman Speaker of the House (Mon State).

The high level of gender inequality in Myanmar's parliaments is likely to have a number of negative consequences, including:

- Inequitable policy-making and budget allocations, that are biased towards the preferences of males.
- Less effective decision-making by the government.
- Higher levels of corruption.
- The agency and well-being of women and girls being limited.

Why Are There So Few Women in Myanmar's Parliaments?

A number of cultural norms affect men's and women's political participation in Myanmar, including a widespread preference for male leadership among (female and male) citizens, and women being associated with domestic and supporting roles. Cultural norms strongly shape several of the most important factors for explaining why there are so few women MPs in Myanmar, e.g:

- Expectations within most families that women perform 'their' domestic tasks regardless of what other responsibilities they have. These rigid expectations result in most women having insufficient time to pursue a political career. Most of the women candidates from Myanmar's 2015 elections that were interviewed for this study reported having flexible and supportive families, and it is very difficult have a political career without this family support.
- Political parties' recruitment of electoral candidates typically favours men. In some cases, potential women candidates face outright discrimination from male party members. More often women, lose out in subtler ways, for example the vast majority of key positions at all levels of most political parties are filled by men, and they are likely to encourage their friends and contacts (which also tend to be men) to become candidates.
- Females having less confidence and ambition than males to try and become politicians. This is influenced by a number of cultural norms, including those that associate political leadership with men, and encourage males to be confident and assertive while females are encouraged to be subservient.

Another highly important factor that limits women's parliamentary representation is the reservation of a minimum 25% of seats in all parliaments for military appointees: only 2 of the military's 166 appointees to the national parliament (1.2%), and 2 of the military's 225 appointees to State/Region parliaments (0.9%), are women.

Women in Myanmar typically have lower income and less access to finance than men, which affects their opportunity to become electoral candidates and MPs. However, this does not seem to be as important for explaining women's low level of participation, as the factors discussed above. Similarly, constraints on women's travel (which can be strong particularly in remote areas) have some negative effect on women's opportunity to become MPs, but do not seem to be one of the most important factors.

Women are considerably less likely than men in Myanmar to work outside of the home - women's labour force participation rate is 51.6%, whereas men's is 80.2%. This reduces the pool of potential women MPs, because the vast majority of women (and men) that become MPs were previously employed outside of the home. However, it is important to note that women are employed in large numbers in many of the occupations that MPs are most commonly drawn from. Indeed, in some of these occupations more women than men are employed (e.g. veterinarians, teachers, lawyers, various kinds of medical staff).

Women in Myanmar are slightly more likely than men to hold an undergraduate degree or above, and to have completed high school. Thus, women's low level of political participation cannot be explained by gender differences in formal educational attainment.

The common association of leadership with 'maleness' means that women frequently have to do much more than men to convince others that they are qualified to be leaders. Women that do become MPs in Myanmar tend to be exceptional in a variety of ways, for example: women MPs are more highly educated than men MPs; women that become MPs are much more likely to have families that support them being politically involved than the average Myanmar family; they are more confident and politically ambitious than the average Myanmar woman; and they are more likely to be willing to transgress traditional social norms regarding what behaviour is 'appropriate' for females.

Another way in which many female politicians in Myanmar are exceptional is that they are disproportionately likely to have male relatives (particularly fathers) that were previously well-known politicians: almost one-third of the women candidates interviewed in our study had a father that had been involved in politics. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a famous example of this phenomenon.

What Can Be Done to Make Political Participation More Gender Equal?

There is a clear need for Myanmar to raise the gender equality of political participation, so as to improve the quality of democracy, and to meet its domestic and international policy commitments. Key recommendations for how to achieve this, include:

For Political Parties:

- Work with LNGOs, INGOs and/or relevant experts that can provide assistance to devise and implement internal party policies and strategies aimed at raising women's participation.
- Consider introducing internal party targets that stipulate a minimum level of female participation as electoral candidates, and committee members at township and national levels.

For the Government of Myanmar:

- Introduce mandatory gender quotas for elections to Pyidaungsu and State/Region hluttaws. These can be designed as temporary special measures (TSMs), e.g. for two or three parliamentary terms. TSMs are included in the recommendations from the recent CEDAW committee review of Myanmar. TSMs are also a great way to work towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 10.

- Ensure that NSPAW is effectively implemented at all levels, in coordination with Myanmar civil society, political parties and other stakeholders. This has been recommended by the CEDAW committee, and will help Myanmar to achieve (SDGs) 5 and 10.
- Adopt and implement the draft Prevention of Violence Against Women Law, including the provisions targeting online harassment.

For the Government of Myanmar, and LNGOs, INGOs and UN agencies:

- As the CEDAW committee has called for Myanmar to do, work to change cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality and suppress female leadership. Potential strategies include:

Deliver programs targeted at women and girls that encourage them to aim for political careers, and support female politicians.

Deliver programs targeted towards men and boys that encourage them to be more accepting of females pursuing professional and political careers, and that encourage males to be more willing to perform domestic labour.

Revise educational curricula so that they do not reinforce gender norms that associate males with the public sphere and leadership, and females with domesticity.

- Promote awareness of, and provide training and follow-up support to, women and men MPs to give them the ability to propose and debate legislation in a gender-sensitive manner.

For LNGOs, INGOs and UN agencies:

- Encourage, and provide financial support to, political parties to carry out activities to raise female members' confidence and political skills.
- Provide funding and other support for cross-party initiatives that bring together women MPs and candidates.
- Women and men MPs and candidates can benefit from a variety of trainings that can improve their skills as politicians. For some trainings it will be appropriate for trainings to be targeted at women only or be delivered to single-sex groups. However, many trainings (especially those covering technical policy issues) can be given to mixed-sex groups. When delivering trainings to mixed-sex groups, it is important to take steps to ensure that women and men can participate equally.
- Provide leadership training to potential women candidates.
- When working on political and governance activities be aware of how prevailing gender inequalities may affect female participation, for example if a village meeting is called how many females will attend, and will they actively participate? If there are likely to be significant inequalities, adopt strategies specifically designed to counteract this.

*For further recommendations, please see the full report,
'Gender and Politics in Myanmar: Women and Men Candidates in the 2015 Elections.'*



Gender and Politics in Myanmar: Women and Men Candidates in the 2015 Election August 2017



The Gender Equality Network
Yangon, Myanmar
© All rights reserved
Printed in Myanmar.

This briefing paper is based on the recent Gender Equality Network (GEN) report, 'Gender and Politics in Myanmar: Women and Men Candidates in the 2015 Election', which is available to download from the GEN website [<http://www.genmyanmar.org/what-we-do/publications/>]. The research included a literature review and in-depth interviews with 50 candidates in Myanmar's 2015 election.

Restricted for Project Purpose Only

Supported by:

