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Strengthening the Political Participation of Women for Decision-Making in Union Level Parliaments during Two Latest elections: Lessons learnt from Myanmar

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Acronyms

ASEAN	:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEDAW	:	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
LNGOs	:	Local Non-Governmental Organizations
MGD	:	Millennium Development Goal
MP	:	Member of Parliament
MNCWA	:	Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs
MSWRR	:	Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement
NSPAW	:	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022

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1. Introduction

Limitations on the participation of women in political life underwent dramatic changes with the 2010 general elections, which constituted a historic transition for Myanmar[1].Candidates were elected to a new national bicameral Parliament with an Upper and Lower House. In the 2010 general elections, 498 candidates were elected to the Upper House and Lower House, including only 19 women candidates[2, 3, 4]. In the 2015 general elections, out of 491 candidates, only 67 women candidates were elected to the Union level Parliaments[5].

Thus, political participation among women in Myanmar still remains low [1]. This is because women in Myanmar are still facing many barriers to their participation in politics, as well as cultural differences due to gender roles related to social as well as institutional perspectives[5].The limitation in educational opportunities discourages women from attaining the skills and confidence to put themselves forward for leadership positions[6].The average literacy rates for Union, urban and rural regions in Myanmar is 89.9 percent, the average literacy rate for males is 93.6 percent, but that figure is 86.9 percent for females[7].Moreover, most women are afraid of the term “politics”, especially those who live in ethnic areas, and do not fully understand what “politics” are. The lack of knowledge and awareness of women in political matters may be one of the obstacles facing women in fully participating in politics[8].

1.1 Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the current situation of women’s political participation at Union level Parliaments in Myanmar, to highlight the main challenges women face in accessing political structures, and to identify the strategies for strengthening women’s participation in politics. The specific objectives of this research paper are, therefore, (1) to explore why so few women participate in politics in Myanmar, and (2) to identify strategies to promote gender equality in political life for decision-making in Myanmar.

1.2 Research Questions

The main research questions this paper attempts to answer are as follow:

1. What is the situation of women in Union level Parliaments in Myanmar?
2. What are the challenges facing, and impacts of women’s participation in politics?
3. What are the existing mechanisms assisting women to have a greater presence in political participation in Myanmar?

1.3 Methodology

This research is based on a desk review and the collection of secondary data from online sources, reports, journals, research papers and government data.

2. Political participation of women in Union level Parliaments

Myanmar is one of the countries that is currently undergoing a process of rapid economic and political change with the potential for positive social outcomes which benefit the whole population [6]. After the first largely free and fair historic election in Myanmar took place, an increased number of women candidates were elected to the new Parliament: this now has nearly three times the number of women Member of Parliaments (MPs) of the previous Parliament[1].

2.1 Women's participation in Union level Parliaments in the 2010 general election

The 2010 general election in Myanmar represented a historic transition to civilian government. Candidates were elected to a new Parliament - Assembly of the Union (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) - consisting of an Upper House or House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw) and a Lower House or House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw). Moreover, Parliaments were also formed for the 14 States and Regions[1]. In Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, out of 498 elected MPs, only 19 were women (3.8 percent). In Pyithu Hluttaw, out of 330 MPs, only 15 (4.5 percent) were women, and out of 168 MPs, only four women (2.4 percent) were elected to the Amyotha Hluttaw [2, 3, 4]. Table 1 shows the number of women in Parliament after the 2010 general election.

Table 1: Number of women MPs in the 2010 general election in Myanmar

	Constituencies	Elected MPs	Elected women MPs	% of women MPs
House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw)	330	330	15	4.5%
House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw)	168	168	4	2.4%
Assembly of the Union (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw)	498	498	19	3.8%

Source: Union Election Commission of Myanmar and Amyotha Hluttaw

2.2 Women's participation in Union level Parliaments in the 2015 general elections

The 2015 general elections were held freely and fairly and were widely lauded[5]. It gave a boost to female parliamentary representation as the number of female MPs jumped threefold to reach 67 in both Houses[9]. In the 2015 general elections, 491 candidates were elected to the Union level Parliaments, Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyotha Hluttaw and Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, among them just 67 were women (13.6 percent). In Pyithu Hluttaw, out of 323 candidates, only 44 women (13.6 percent) were elected. In Amyotha Hluttaw, out of 168 candidates, only 23 women (13.7 percent) were elected[10]. Even so, their participation in Parliament is still low in both local and national politics [5]. Table 2 shows the number of women in Parliament after the 2015 general election.

Table 2 Number of women MPs in the 2015 general election in Myanmar

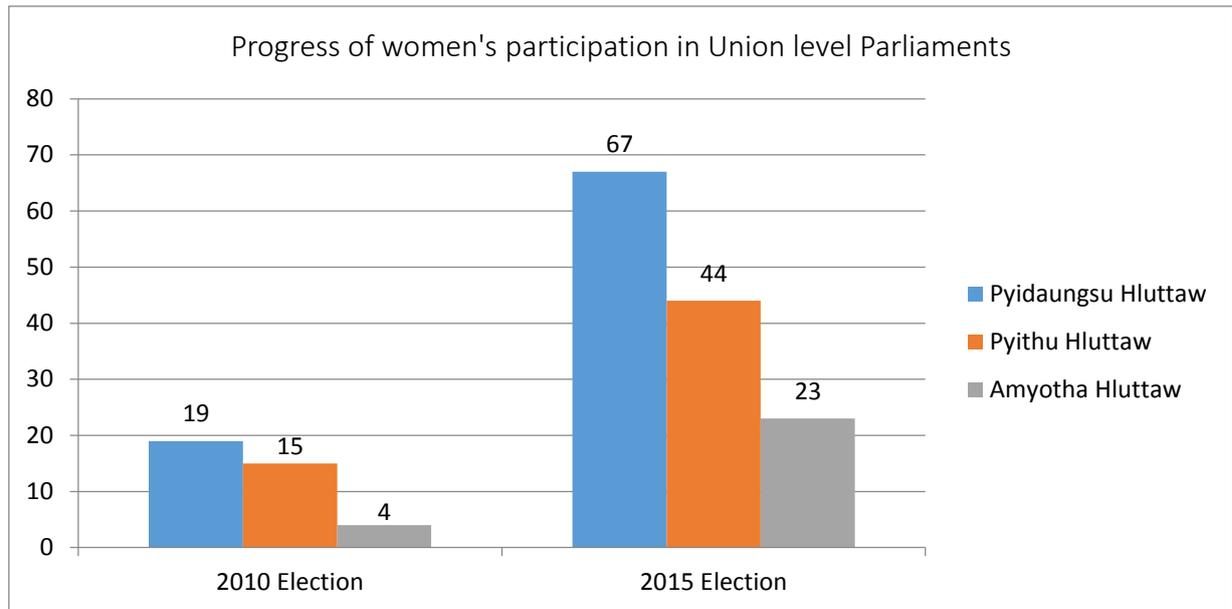
	Constituencies	Elected MPs	Elected women MPs	% of women MPs
House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw)	323	323	44	13.6%
House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw)	168	168	23	13.7%
Assembly of the Union (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw)	491	491	67	13.6%

Source: The Asia Foundation; Gender (In) Equality in the Governance of Myanmar: Past, Present, and Potential Strategies for Change

2.3 Progress and impacts of women's participation in Union level Parliaments

After the first largely free and fair historic election of Myanmar took place, an increased number of women candidates were elected to the new Parliament, the new mandated has nearly three times the number of women MPs compared to the previous one[6]. The current situation represents progress when compared with women's representation in the multiparty democratic elections of 1990 that were held on 27 May 1990, 2010 general election held on 7 November 2010 and 2015 general election held on 8 November 2015. On 27 May 1990, Myanmar held national elections to select a new Parliament and return the country to civilian rule [11]. In that election, 15 women out of a total 492 MPs were elected to the Parliament [5]. In the 2010 election, out of 498 MPs elected, only 19 were women. In the 2015 general elections, female candidates made up 67 of the total number of 491 candidates. Progress from 2010 to 2015 general election is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The progress of women's participation in Union Level Parliaments in Myanmar

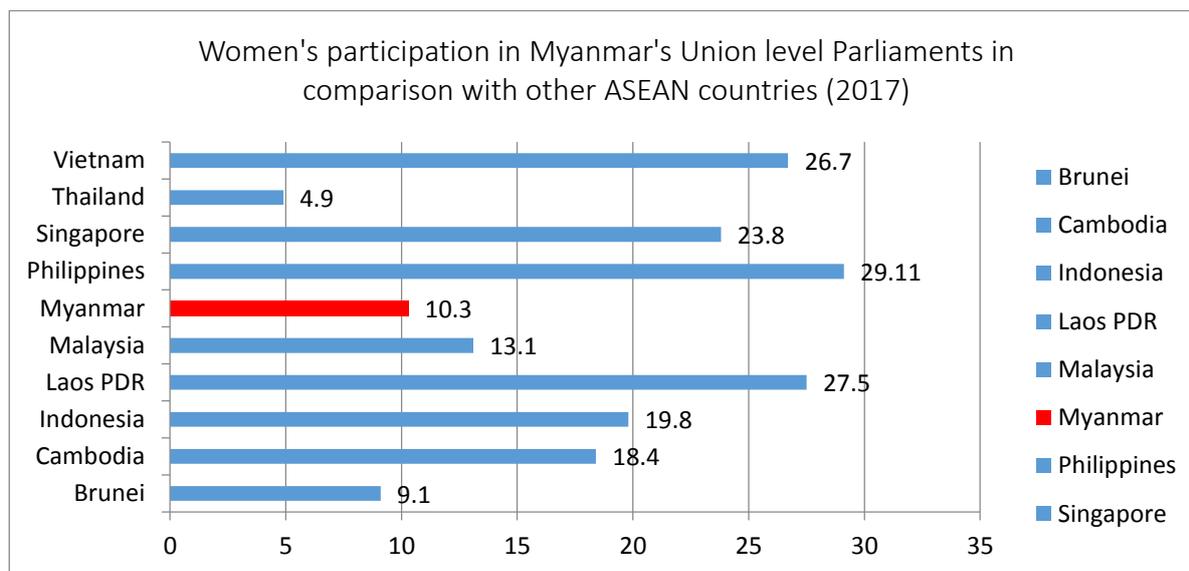


Source: Union Election Commission and the Asia Foundation

Women's participation in the Parliament of the ASEAN countries in 2017

In order to understand the status of women in Myanmar politics, one must view the case in context, particularly with regard to levels of female political representation in Myanmar's neighboring ASEAN member States [5]. Figure 2 shows the participation of women in Myanmar's Union level Parliament in comparison with other ASEAN countries: the Philippines (29.11 percent), Lao PDR (27.5 percent) and Vietnam (26.7 percent) are top in terms of the participation of women in Parliament. Singapore is at 23.8 percent, Indonesia at 19.8 percent, Cambodia at 18.4 percent, and Malaysia at 13.1 percent. Myanmar (at 10.3 percent) is third lowest, above only Brunei with 9.1 percent and Thailand with 4.9 percent.

Figure 2: Women's participation in Myanmar's Union level Parliaments in comparison with other ASEAN countries (2017)



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union- Women in Politics 2017

Impacts of women's participation in politics

Every human has the right to participate in decisions that define her or his life. Among women and men, this right is fundamental to the ideal of equal participation in decision-making [12]. The political participation of women is not only desirable for simple justice and democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account [13]. Men and women have different preferences, and women leaders are more responsive to women's preferences [10]. Obtaining maximum participation of women in politics may provide a balance that more accurately reflects that composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Moreover, without the active participation of women and the abstract of women's viewpoint in different level of governance system, political goals, gender and social equality, development and peace cannot be achieved [13].

Although we do not have strong evidence on the impact of women's participation on the efficiency and effectiveness of governance in Myanmar, one of the interviewed in 2014, answered by several senior staff of LNGOs engaged in community-level development projects reported that higher levels of women participation in decision-making positions resulted in improved project outcomes and it may help to reduce corruption—a significant consideration given the extremely high rates of corruption for all governments [10]. In general, female representation inside and outside of Parliament generates a positive impact on women themselves [14].

3. Challenges for women in participating in politics

The Asia Foundation conducted a survey and reported that “a lack of confidence, lack of education, and lack of experience were raised repeatedly throughout the survey”. In their study, 45 women completed written surveys, while 19 out of a total number of 55 women MPs took part in personal interviews at both national and state/region level about key obstacles to the entry of women into politics [1]. Moreover, in Myanmar women tend to be more closely associated with domestic tasks and adhere to traditional culture, and are not, therefore, considered in terms of public decision-making roles; this can diminish the confidence of women to participate in politics. Women’s lack of confidence is normally seen as a significant barrier to their greater participation in Myanmar politics [15].

3.1 Cultural norms and social perspectives

In Myanmar, men are responsible for decision-making and household income as household heads and women take on the household chores and childcare. This is in accordance with patriarchal cultural norms and values [16]. Concerning the role of women in the home and family, incompliance with traditional values and culture, women who seek office may fail to attract enough support - even if they win— and can be reluctant to run [5]. Furthermore, a serious lack of workers available in the labor market means that the participation of women in public and political life is impeded. One way to improve equal opportunities for men and women to pursue professional careers, balanced with private, domestic tasks and the accommodation of family responsibilities, would be to improve access for both women and men to regular childcare and the establishment of friendly working environments for people with pre-school children [17].

Gender-stereotypes that favor men are one of the reasons behind the lack political engagement among women. Some women maintain that, even if females are qualified or skilled, they are less likely to achieve decision-making positions because of traditional gender stereotypes[8]. After taking survey questions to women MPs, views were clear, with 82 percent of women MPs affirming that the “lack of support from women voters” was the Number One barrier in preventing women from entering politics[1]. Generally, voters are more likely to give their trust to a male MP than to a woman MP when both run for the same position [8].

3.2 Limited educational opportunities for women

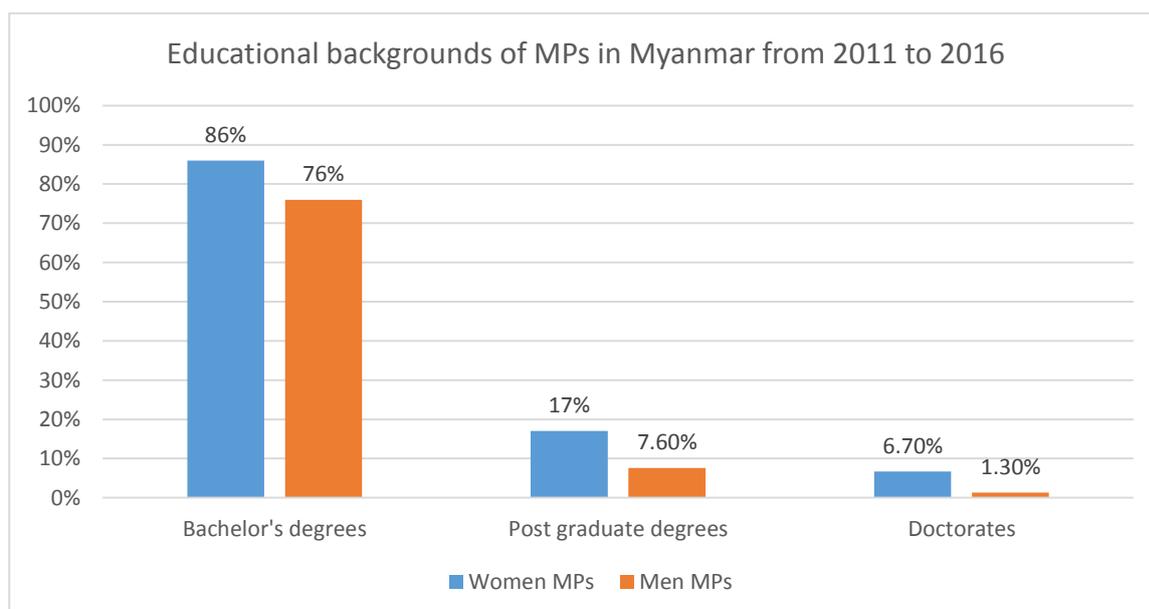
The lack of education among women may affect several aspects of their life, especially in respect of their lack of political participation[8]. The limits to educational opportunities for women prevent them from acquiring the skills and confidence to put themselves forward for leadership

positions[6].Lack of education for women also reduces their opportunities in terms of general employment and earning power.

Education is necessary for women to be able to realize other rights [8]. Most girls who live in rural areas are not well educated because their education ceases at primary level and they do not continue any further. They do not, therefore, have the courage to participate in the governance of their village because they lack self-confidence on account of their low level of education[8]. Consequently, women who have lower self-confidence are afraid to become involved in electoral politics.[18] A problem reported especially by women who have acquired a good level of education is that, although they have the ability to participate fully in politics, they feel the weight of traditional expectations on their shoulders [18].

The women representatives who generally won their positions in the 2011 to 2016 Parliaments had a high level of education. Women in the National Parliament had achieved a higher level of educational attainment than that of their male colleagues[1]. Eighty-six percent of women MPs in the National Parliament had at least the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree in arts, law, or science. About 17 percent had post-graduate degrees, including 6.7 percent who had obtained doctorates. In comparison, 76 percent of men in the National Parliament had the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree, 7.6 percent had post-graduate degrees, and 1.3 percent held doctorates.Table 3 shows the educational background of women and men MPs from 2011 to 2016.[1]

Table 3 Educational backgrounds of MPs in Myanmar from 2011 to 2016



Source: The Asia Foundation-Women's Political Participation in Myanmar: Experiences of Women Parliamentarians 2011-2016.

3.3 Lack of awareness about participating in politics

Another obstacle to women's full participation is lack of knowledge and awareness of political matters. Most women do not fully understand their rights[8]. To enter into politics and to thrive once they are there, a lack of confidence, education and experience are significant obstacles for women [1]. The self-confidence of women MPs is arguably the most important factor in their performance. Around 80 percent of women MPs think that "lack of confidence" is the most important obstacle when asked about the barriers preventing women from entering politics [1]. Lack of confidence in contributing to public decision-making prevents many women from trying to take on leadership roles. This lack of confidence arises to a considerable extent from traditional cultural norms that associate women with the household sphere, and men with the public sphere. These norms also mean that women who are in governance can face resentment from men and have difficulty getting their voices heard [13].

In 2014, the Asia Foundation in Myanmar conducted a survey with more than 3,000 respondents, both men and women, across 14 States and Regions in Myanmar, to observe what barriers might be hampering women in participating in politics. The survey shows that, despite increasing democratization and political awareness across the country, there remains a number of crucial barriers to women's participation in politics. Women respondents expressed how much (or little) they were interested in politics compared with men. Responses showed that 59 percent of women almost never discussed politics with friends, while the figure was 41 percent for men. In addition, only 2 percent of women expressed a high level of interest in politics, and 53 percent said they were not interested in politics at all, compared with 8 percent and 39 percent of men, respectively [5].

4. Legislation, government policy and strategy to increase the participation of women in politics

4.1 Legislation to achieve higher positions for women

Myanmar is committed to several international policy initiatives that aim to end gender discrimination and promote women's participation in public life [19]. Myanmar has, for example, cooperated with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 [20]. In conjunction with this, Myanmar is committed to guaranteeing a series of measures to help end all discrimination against women, including the abolition of all discriminatory laws and the adoption of alternatives that prohibit discrimination against women and ensure the elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or businesses under CEDAW [19].

The 2008 Constitution certainly states that “the Union shall not discriminate [against] any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth,” [21]. Sections 347 and 348 of the 2008 Constitution guarantee the legal equality of all citizens, and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. Section 249 ensures equal opportunities in public employment, occupation and section 350 provides for equal pay for equal work [13]. On the other hand, section 352 of the Constitution codifies differently by stating: “nothing...shall prevent the appointment of men to the positions that are suitable for men only”[21]. Even if there are such norms in the constitution, there is still indication that some positions are suitable only for men and this surely discourages women participation [13].

4.2 Government policy for gender equality and gender mainstreaming

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR) established the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs (MNCWA) to enhance the advancement of women in 1996, after the participating in the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing) in 1995 [16]. According to the policies of the new government, MNCWA was re-established in 2012 [16]. More recently, in October 2013, the Myanmar government approved a National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013–2022 (NSPAW) [6]. MNCWA will guide the management committee for the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) [16], which covers 12 priority areas, and states that laws and policies should be reviewed, developed, and applied so as to promote the rights of women and girls [22]. The main point has been to ensure the equal participation of women in decision-making and leadership at all levels of society, i.e. to:

1. Implement awareness-raising activities to promote policy change related to women’s representation and participation in decision-making and in national level positions in Parliaments, Parliamentary Committees, Ministries, and Departments, and political parties at all levels[23];
2. Raise awareness and gain the acceptance of the general public on the benefits of women’s participation in leadership and decision-making[23];
3. Raise awareness to address harmful customary laws and gender discriminatory practices that are identified as barriers to women’s participation in leadership and decision-making[23];
4. Raise the awareness of the media about increasing the visibility and prevalence of women decision-makers in Government and the private sector in the media[23].

Moreover, because of the institutional blockages to women being able to effectively participate in public politics, a key strategy has been discussed and identified in the implementation of a quota

system across all areas of governance. Political quotas can be related to two major categories, (1) a reservation of seats system, whereby a certain number of seats are reserved solely for women, (2) a reservation of candidates system, whereby each political party must have a minimum percentage or number of women [19]. Gender quotas work most effectively when part of a broader policy and cultural change, and can be bolstered by complementary, mutually-reinforcing mechanisms such as constitutional guarantees of equality, equality in recruitment procedures and capacity development. A focus should be on women's pathways into political life and the institutions that nurture women's political participation and in which women are able to articulate interest, and organize around gender-based injustices [21]. Quotas, which have had a large causal effect in strengthening the number of women in government, have now been introduced in many countries around the world [19].

4.3 Government strategy for gender equality

The Myanmar National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW) also sets out key outcomes with regard to enhancing women's participation in public life and decision-making[21]. In accordance with the implementation of NSPAW (2013-2022), practical initiatives concentrate on the provision of information for women about public affairs and mentoring programs for female Parliamentarians to improve leadership and decision-making skills. Moreover, the implementation of activities to improve women's engagement with electoral processes and the application of quota systems to ensure women's participation in decision-making in legislative, judicial and executive bodies, has also been widespread. Furthermore, the implementation of community-based initiatives, including youth-focused activities, to address harmful customs, laws and gender discriminatory practices that can act as obstacles to women's participation in leadership and decision-making, as well as capacity building for future women leaders on leadership and negotiation skills, have also been extensive[23].

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the situation of women MPs in Myanmar, as well as the obstacles facing women who wish to access political structures, along with the strategies for strengthening women's participation in politics. After the two recent elections, there were 19 women MPs out of 498 in 2010, while the number of women in 2015 increased to 67 women MPs out of 491. However, a comparison with the Parliaments of other ASEAN members shows that the number of women MPs in Myanmar is still low. Women in Myanmar face significant challenges if they wish to enter politics. Generally, men are responsible for decision-making and women take care of household chores

and children in accordance with cultural norms and values. Even women who are standing for election as MPs face a lack of support from women voters who are prejudiced against them. Moreover, the limiting terms of the educational opportunities for women often prevent them from acquiring the skills and confidence to put themselves forward for leadership positions. Furthermore, women also lack the appropriate knowledge and awareness to participate in political matters.

In order to secure their full rights and empower all women in Myanmar, in 2013 the ministry of Social Welfare Relief and Resettlement was initiated by the implementation of NSPAW(2013-2022).To support awareness-raising, policies are required in relevant sectors focusing on women's representation and participation in decision-making and in national-level positions, and to address traditional, customary regulations and discriminatory practices identified above as a barrier to women's political participation. Moreover, the implementation of practical initiatives focusing on the provision of information for women about public affairs, and the oversight of programs for female Parliamentarians to develop leadership and decision-making skills, is also important. So, too, is the recruitment of a proportion of women to engage with electoral procedures.

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Annex 1. Definitions

1. **Women’s participation in political life** (or women’s political participation) refers to women’s ability to participate equally with men, at all levels, and in all aspects of political life and decision-making. Women’s participation and access to formal political power structures vary across countries.(The UN Women Training Centre’s Glossary)
Women’s participation in political life means participation of Myanmar women in Union level Parliaments.
2. **Two last elections** means the 2010 general election and the 2015 general election of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.
3. **The Union level Parliaments** means the three houses of Myanmar Parliaments: the Assembly of the Union (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw); the House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw); and the House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw).
4. **Gender** refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men, and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. (European Institute for Gender Equality)
5. **Strengthen** means to make (someone or something) stronger, more forceful, more effective, etc. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strengthen>)
Strengthen means to have more women participating in Parliaments in Myanmar.
6. **Quotas** in politics may be defined as an affirmative measure which establishes a fixed percentage for the nomination or representation of a specific group. They are generally used to increase the participation of this group in decision-making positions and most often take the form of a “critical minimum”, such as 20, 30 or 40 percent.