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Discussion Summary: 25 Years of WPS: Resistance & Resilience among Myanmar Women

Date: 16th July 2025

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This discussion paper was written by the Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, a non-partisan network of organisations and individuals working to advance the WPS Agenda in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region, and globally. The Coalition brings together activists, advocates, academics, and people with lived experience of conflict to promote feminist approaches to peace and security.

In keeping with principles of confidentiality and care, some individual speakers are not named in this summary.

Date: July 16, 2025

Introduction

2025 marks the 25th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which laid the foundation for the Women, Peace and Security agenda. To reflect on progress and gaps over the past 25 years, the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security (WPS Coalition) is hosting a series of dialogues with women leaders from conflict-affected contexts. This dialogue will focus on Myanmar, centring the voices and priorities of women and feminist leaders, both in-country and across the diaspora.

Context

More than three years after the 2021 coup, Myanmar faces ongoing armed conflict, widespread human rights violations, and a deepening humanitarian crisis. Nearly 3.6 million people are displaced, schools and communities remain at risk, and severe funding and access constraints leave millions without life-saving assistance.[1]

Women and girls are disproportionately affected. Reports from the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar highlight the systematic use of sexual and gender-based violence by military forces, the targeting of women activists, and the collapse of essential services, including health and education.[2] Economic insecurity and displacement have also increased risks of trafficking, unsafe migration, and child marriage.

The humanitarian situation has been compounded by natural disasters. In March 2025, a powerful earthquake caused widespread devastation in central Myanmar, destroying homes and infrastructure and forcing tens of thousands into temporary shelters. [3] Many displaced women and girls now live in overcrowded, insecure conditions, heightening their vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

Despite these challenges, Myanmar women's organisations remain at the forefront of community resilience. They continue to provide humanitarian relief, document human rights abuses, and mobilise for accountability and peace. However, they operate under constant threat, with shrinking civic space, surveillance, and targeted reprisals.

Our dialogue in July 2025 provided an opportunity to reflect on these realities and to review the WPS agenda in Myanmar today. It also sought to explore how the WPS community in Australia and internationally can strengthen solidarity, amplify Myanmar women's voices, and advocate for meaningful action to support their rights and leadership.

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[1] UN OCHA, September 2025, https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-49

[2] UN HRC, August 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/myanmar

[3] ReliefWeb, March 2025, https://reliefweb.int/disaster/eq-2025-000043-mmr

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Evolving Realities for Women and Girls Since the 2021 Coup

Speaker: Moon Nay Li, First Secretary, Women's League of Burma (WLB)

Since the military coup of February 2021, Moon Nay Li explained, the situation for women and girls in Burma/Myanmar has deteriorated dramatically, compounding decades of systematic violence, discrimination, and impunity. Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) continues to be used as a deliberate weapon of war by the military junta, echoing long established patterns of abuse documented by women's organisations across ethnic states since the late 1990s.[4]

She noted that the Women's League of Burma (WLB) has consistently documented widespread and systematic CRSV crimes against humanity. Their recent report, Speaking Truth to Power: Ending Military Impunity in Burma/Myanmar (2025), underscores how the military's strategy of sexual violence against women and girls is not incidental but a core tactic of control and repression in ethnic conflict-affected areas. Survivors, often from Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Shan, and other ethnic communities, are subjected to rape, gang rape, torture, and other forms of sexual violence during military offensives. Many have also been displaced, forcibly used as human shields, or forcibly detained.

Moon Nay Li highlighted that women survivors face immense barriers in accessing justice. Myanmar's domestic laws provide little protection for victims, while military courts and state institutions continue to enable impunity. Survivors and their families are left without support, forced to endure long term trauma with little or no psychosocial, medical, or reproductive healthcare services. Reproductive health services in particular remain critically under resourced, with survivors of violence, including girls forced into pregnancy, unable to access safe care; mental health services are almost entirely absent.

She also emphasised that women human rights defenders and activists documenting violations face heightened risks. Many have been arrested, tortured, or even killed for their work.

Despite this dire context, Moon Nay Li noted that women's organisations and grassroots leaders persist in their efforts. Many operate underground due to threats from authorities, yet continue to provide emergency assistance, document violations, and advocate for survivors. The WLB and its member organisations play a central role in these efforts, advancing community-based protection strategies and mobilising women to participate in advocacy, despite the risks.

At the same time, she explained, WLB and its member organisations have been instrumental in advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda at both national and federal levels. Since the early 2000s, WLB has promoted UNSCR 1325 as a vital tool for women in conflict affected areas, developing a WPS framework for Burma/Myanmar and raising awareness among communities and political stakeholders.

However, Moon Nay Li flagged that without monitoring, evaluation, and genuine political will, these frameworks remain under implemented. Ceasefire agreements have repeatedly failed to translate into meaningful peace processes. Women continue to be excluded from decision making, and impunity for CRSV remains entrenched. For WLB, ensuring meaningful participation of women at all levels of peacebuilding, strengthening prevention and protection mechanisms, and holding perpetrators accountable remain essential to achieving inclusive and lasting peace in Burma/Myanmar.

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[4] Women's League of Burma (WLB), March 2025, https://www.womenofburma.org/reports/speaking-truth-power-ending-military-impunity-burmamyanmar

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Impacts on LGBTQIA+ and Gender Diverse Communities

Speaker: Min Khant Tar (A Tar), Kings N Queens

Discussions on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, A Tar explained, too often centre narrowly on cisgender women and girls, unintentionally excluding those who fall outside traditional gender norms. In Myanmar, the ongoing political and humanitarian crises have had layered and often invisible impacts on LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse communities.

Safety is a major concern, A Tar noted. During raids, arrests, and checkpoint stops, LGBTQIA+ people are often specifically targeted. Trans women are misgendered, harassed, and humiliated. Same sex couples fear being outed, not only by authorities but also by neighbours or fellow residents in shelters. For many who already faced stigma and discrimination prior to the coup, the current crisis has magnified these risks.

Displacement has also intensified vulnerabilities. Many LGBTQIA+ people, particularly the youth, have been forced to flee their homes, either due to political violence or rejection by their families. Yet even in emergency shelters supporting LGBTQIA+ people, safety is not guaranteed; such spaces are frequently surveilled or preyed upon. As a result, many individuals avoid seeking support or shelter out of fear of being outed or further harmed. This gap highlights a significant shortcoming in the humanitarian response.

Access to resources presents another critical barrier. In Myanmar, aid distribution, medical services, and legal support are often channelled through community leaders or religious networks. LGBTQIA+ people are regularly excluded, mocked, or dismissed when attempting to access such services. The lack of recognition leaves many without essential care. At the same time, mental health needs within LGBTQIA+ communities are escalating, as people lose support networks, confront displacement, and attempt to survive in a system that has never fully acknowledged their existence.

Despite these challenges, A Tar emphasised that queer and gender diverse people continue to play vital roles in resistance, care, and rebuilding. They are creating safe digital spaces, providing shelter, engaging in healing work, and supporting communities, even when invisible in formal political discussions. Yet they remain excluded from decision-making tables and are too often included only as tokens rather than recognised as strategists, leaders, and agents of change.

As A Tar underscored, “We cannot build peace by excusing the very people who have held the fabric of society together in times of crisis.” For peace to be genuine and transformative, the WPS agenda must evolve to recognise that gender is not binary and to include LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly queer women and gender-diverse people, not as optional participants but as essential actors. Only through inclusivity can the promise of justice, healing, and lasting peace in Myanmar be realised.

Supporting Myanmar Women’s Rights Movements: International Solidarity and Advocacy

Speaker: Anonymous

Our third speaker highlighted that Women’s organisations across Myanmar continue to lead critical efforts to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda, despite severe repression, systemic violence, and extremely limited resources. The military continues to prioritise control of land over the protection of people, using sexual violence as a weapon of war. Perpetrators enjoy complete impunity, both before and after the 2021 coup, with no credible mechanisms in place to recognise or prosecute these crimes.

The speaker noted that women's groups are working to integrate the WPS agenda into political and peace processes at multiple levels, engaging with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), the United Nations, and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC). The NUCC has formally adopted a WPS framework, an important step that the Australian WPS community and international allies can encourage stakeholders to meaningfully implement in the current crisis.

However, national and international stakeholders often prioritise armed conflict over women's protection and participation. Women's groups emphasise the need to expand spaces for women's leadership, strengthen feminist movements, and build collective advocacy and campaigning at the international level. To do so requires resources that many community-based organisations simply do not have.

The speaker highlighted international community must also address the misuse of aid. Following the March 2025 earthquake, significant international funding was channelled to the military, which diverted resources to weapons and military operations. Very little reached civil society or local communities. Direct financial and technical support to women led organisations is urgently needed to ensure aid strengthens communities rather than reinforcing the junta.

The speaker further explained that the military continues to seek legitimacy on international platforms while receiving material and political support from Russia and China. This enables ongoing atrocities, including bombing campaigns, systemic rape, and the killing of civilians, with no accountability. The WPS community and international civil society must resist granting legitimacy to the junta and instead amplify the voices of women survivors, activists, and leaders.

They stressed that women human rights defenders face extraordinary risks: many have been arrested, tortured, or killed for their activism. Urgent asylum pathways, protection measures, and security support are needed to allow them to continue their work safely. At the same time, building stronger connections between international partners and emerging democratic institutions such as the National Unity Government (NUG) and its Ministry of Women's Affairs could help advance gender sensitive policies and the implementation of WPS frameworks.

The speaker emphasised, Myanmar women are not only victims of conflict but also key agents of peace and democracy. Their participation must be recognised and supported as central to building a federal democratic future. Women's groups should not be confined to the role of "victims" but instead acknowledged as political stakeholders and main pillars in peacebuilding processes.

Key Recommendations & Final Remarks

The dialogue underscored that Myanmar women and gender diverse people are at the forefront of resisting military oppression and envisioning a future federal democracy. They are leading humanitarian responses, documenting atrocities, and building frameworks for peace and justice under extraordinary risk.

Speakers warned that without urgent international action, impunity will continue to encourage the military to commit atrocities, including systemic sexual violence and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. The international community must resist legitimising the junta and instead prioritise solidarity with those most affected, particularly women and grassroots civil society.

Participants emphasised that women and LGBTQIA+ people are not only victims of conflict but essential agents of peace. To achieve genuine, transformative peace, the WPS agenda must go beyond symbolism, ensuring meaningful participation and recognition of diverse voices as strategists, leaders, and political stakeholders.

In closing, the session reinforced that international solidarity must be sustained, feminist, and inclusive. Supporting Myanmar women's and gender -diverse movements is not only a matter of justice but central to building a peaceful and democratic future for the country.

From the discussion, several urgent priorities emerged for the Australian WPS community and broader international civil society:

- **Ensure protection, justice, and accountability for women and girls**, particularly survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, through international mechanisms that prevent impunity and strengthen security and protection measures.

- **Provide sustained, direct funding and long-term support to community-based, women-led organisations**, ensuring resources reach those most affected and bypass military or restrictive channels.

- **Support women human rights defenders and activists** with asylum pathways, security protection, and recognition as central actors in peacebuilding and democracy movements.

- **Strengthen advocacy to prevent international recognition of the military junta**, challenge its impunity, and amplify the voices of Myanmar women and LGBTQIA+ leaders in international forums.

- **Advance and expand the Women, Peace and Security agenda** by supporting implementation of the NUCC's WPS framework, building links with the NUG's Ministry of Women's Affairs, and ensuring inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ and gender-diverse communities.

Acknowledgements

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security thanks all individuals and organisations who contributed to this convening and discussion summary. Speakers represent key networks and the lived expertise of Myanmar women, feminist leaders, and LGBTQIA+ activists both inside the country and across the diaspora.

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