

Mandating men

Understanding masculinities and engaging men for gender equality and peacebuilding in Myanmar

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Introduction

The Union of Myanmar is a complex country context marked by ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. It has been shaped by decades of an authoritarian, isolationist regime and numerous interconnected conflicts, ranging from national-level ethnic political and armed conflicts and a pro-democracy struggle, to broader social-level land conflicts. It has also seen conflicts at the household level, such as domestic violence. In Myanmar, as in other countries, these numerous forms of violence affect men, women, boys, girls and those with diverse gender identities in different ways.

A peace process has been underway since 2010, achieving a (partial) National Ceasefire Agreement in 2015 and with political dialogue negotiations ongoing to work towards a peace agreement. Only 10 of the 21 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have signed the NCA to date and the complex process has been faltering at an impasse, leading the two largest EAOs to suspend their participation in late 2018.

Why is it important to consider masculinities when we think about gender?

There is increasing awareness that gender is important in understanding conflict and working towards peace and social cohesion. A growing number of development programmes are dedicated to addressing this. In practice, such programmes have largely focused on women's participation in political and peacebuilding processes. This focus on increasing women's meaningful participation in arenas and activities formerly dominated by men is an essential aspect of peacebuilding. However, there is another 'side' to the gender inequality dilemma, which is less well understood – one that deals with the experiences of men and boys.

Masculinity norms can be mobilised to manipulate the taking of violent actions.

Social expectations around masculinity are often overlooked (or oversimplified). Masculinities, that is, the social expectations of men to act or behave in certain ways because they are men, can be drivers of conflict or violence. However, limiting work on this to 'men-engage'-type approaches focusing mainly on mobilising men to prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) can mean overlooking how social

expectations of masculinities can also lead to increased vulnerability for men and boys, especially related to violence. To date, this has often not been recognised or addressed by peacebuilding programming. Importantly, examining masculinities should not detract from seeking to understand and respond to women's needs – they are complementary and a comprehensive approach to gender should take both into account.

Understanding masculinities is important, because these masculinity norms – these social expectations – can be mobilised to manipulate the taking of violent actions.

For instance, society may invoke the expectations on men to be protectors of their community from perceived external threats, including land confiscations for development projects. This pressure can turn into frustration and violent action where this means confronting more powerful actors such as large corporations, armed actors or government agencies.

Conflict analyses and interventions that overlook this gender dimension are incomplete, and risk missing important entry points for peace. Such projects can also risk misunderstanding the full impacts of their interventions. Peacebuilding efforts are more likely to be effective if they are informed by a comprehensive analysis of conflict dynamics, which considers the dual impact of gender norms on conflict and of conflict on social gender norms. Social expectations on men can shape conflict dynamics, such as by their joining armed groups and perpetuating violence, but

the occurrence of conflict and violence can also influence expectations on men. For example, when communities have been displaced from their farmlands by conflict, men may be expected to migrate for work in order to be able to provide for their family.

KEY TERMS:

Masculinities: The socially created expectations on men to act and behave in certain ways because of their gender. These expectations vary depending on various other factors such as age, socio-economic background, religion, ethnicity and location.

Intersectionality: The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ability and social class, which overlap to create interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Originally coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Gender identity: A person's internal sense and experience of their own gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth or with the traditional categories of man/male and woman/female.

LGBTQ: An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer people that is widely used in the Western world and which has been adopted by a variety of international institutions. Other formulations include LGBT+, LGBT* and LGBTI (the 'I' stands for 'intersex').

Sexual orientation: An individual's emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to a given sex or gender.

SOGI: Sexual orientation and gender identity, or SOGI, is an acronym used by a variety of organisations and researchers to refer to issues of gender and sexuality. It does not indicate a particular group, as all humans have a sexual orientation and multiple gender identities.

Background

International Alert, Phan Tee Eain and Thingaha Gender Organization collaborated on a research project in Yangon, in southern Shan state and in Tanintharyi region with financial support from the Paung Sie Facility. The research sought to analyse social norms, their construction and their implications, at the household and community levels, from a comprehensive gender analysis perspective. A comprehensive gender analysis considers the different impacts of conflict on women, men and those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) in Myanmar society. The research considers the masculinities issue across the spectrum of conflict, from household-level and social conflict issues to the ethno-political armed violence and Panglong 21 Union Peace Process.

Stereotypical expectations link masculinity to two key expectations:

- Protector: to protect the family or the community from harm, from those perceived as enemies. The community to be protected could be understood as one clan, an ethnic group or as referring to the Union of Myanmar.
- Provider: to provide for the family and meet their needs, such as shelter and food. To be the breadwinner.

These two key expectations, alongside expectations of getting married, starting a family and continuing the ethnic group, are particularly difficult to meet in contexts of conflict like Myanmar's long-running armed conflicts, or in situations of displacement. The research identified examples of how expectations of masculinity can drive behaviour that exacerbates or leads to an increase in violent conflict, and pose different types of vulnerabilities for men living in these conflict contexts. Social expectations of strength and being the protector and provider can lead to these vulnerabilities being overlooked and missed in programme design or monitoring and evaluations.

Key findings

VULNERABILITIES RELATED TO MASCULINITIES EXPECTATIONS:

■ **Challenges meeting the masculinities expectations:**

The research identified multiple challenges that a significant portion of men face in trying to live up to the social expectations of providing for the family and donating to religious and social causes. After more than 60 years of armed conflict in parts of the country, long decades of isolation and a fragile economic situation, meeting the basic expectations can be challenging for the majority of men in Myanmar, particularly those at the 'bottom of the pyramid', the poorest section of society. Rigid and unrealistic masculinities expectations can cause frustrations that find expression in violence against themselves, such as drug abuse or risk-seeking behaviour, or against the family in domestic violence.

■ **Discrimination against non-binary and non-heterosexual men:**

In a context of strong heteronormative expectations, non-binary men who do not comply with strict social gender norms face challenges including social and verbal discrimination, discrimination in the labour and rental market, and increased risks of harassment or extortion from security forces. Current laws are restrictive and do not provide legal protection from discrimination. Socio-cultural depictions belittling people of diverse SOGI in films, media and traditional theatre and puppet shows perpetuate discrimination and harassment.

■ **Lack of transitional justice for former political prisoners:**

The historical repression of the pro-democracy movement entailed large-scale political imprisonment of protestors in dire conditions with lasting physical and socio-economic impacts, which have barely been addressed in the political discourse but continue to have traumatic consequences for those affected. Male political prisoners were,

Gender – a men's issue?

and often remain, unable to meet gender expectations of providing for their family, often as consequences of their attempts to protect their families and communities by promoting democracy. There is limited public understanding about the differences between political imprisonment and criminals, which perpetuates discrimination in society and in the labour market. This matters for survivors and considering current trends of decreasing press freedoms and the criminalisation of socio-political protest, which pose risks of increasing future political imprisonment.

WAR AND PEACE:

- **Armed violence and conscription into armed groups:** Dominant expectations of masculinities drive male conscription into armed groups with varying levels of voluntariness. Targeted training and indoctrination into military mindsets coupled with the experience, witnessing and perpetration of violence and harsh conditions at the frontlines, lead to high levels of unaddressed traumas and attitudes that last long after leaving active service. Veterans of both state and non-state armed groups, especially from lower ranks, face particular challenges related to economic issues, social status and enduring influence of military indoctrination shaping social interactions.
- **Vulnerabilities related to forced labour or forced 'portering':** Men and boys were and are more likely (although not exclusively) to be targeted for forced labour or forced into guiding or carrying equipment for armed actors. This often occurred in exploitative conditions and involved threats or experience of violence with detrimental long-term impacts on the physical and psycho-social health of survivors. There has been no form of recognition of the harm caused or any compensatory, restorative measures, yet the trauma of these experiences remains.
- **Gender and masculinities in the peace process:** Women and men both face

different challenges to participating in the peace process. A comprehensive gender analysis of the key dialogue topics is missing to date, but is essential to ensure that the different needs and priorities are recognised so they can be addressed. A gender analysis of the process and proceeding can also help illuminate hierarchies between men and provide entry points for encouraging men to proactively engage with gender, peace and security (GPS) issues.

SOCIAL CONFLICT ISSUES:

- **SGBV:** Social expectations of masculinities by both men and women play a key role in driving the perpetration of SGBV (including domestic violence and intimate partner violence), condoning violence, invisibilising perpetrators and shifting the blame to the victims of such violence for dressing or behaving against traditional gender expectations. In order to address this problem and better support survivors, community and civil society leaders need to better understand the root causes of SGBV – i.e. gender inequalities, an unfounded sense of male entitlement to women’s bodies and lack of understanding of the vital concepts of consent.
 - Men and boys can also become targets of domestic and sexual violence but this is doubly stigmatised. Service providers should also recognise and address this by providing service and support.
- **Land conflict:** Local dispute resolution over land issues has been traditionally dominated by elite male leaders, benefiting those at the upper levels of society through a patronage system, to the exclusion of women and men of lesser age or status. The expectation on men to defend family lands (and associated livelihoods) in the face of superior powers, such as the military, government or corporations, can exacerbate gender pressures that can lead to frustrations, migration, marital breakdown or increases in domestic violence. Loss of lands and livelihoods can push families into poverty and is contributing to high levels of migration and drug abuse.

- **Substance and drug abuse:** In all research locations, respondents voiced grave concerns about high rates of drug abuse and its harmful social impacts as a key issue. Gendered expectations on men to provide for the family in difficult economic situations can drive substance abuse and increase associated levels of violence; approaches to address substance abuse will be more effective if informed by a gender analysis. Peer pressure and internalised expectations of meeting the provider norms can combine to drive feelings of frustration, which in turn link to the consumption of drugs. Civil society organisations expressed perceptions of drug addiction fuelling SGBV and domestic and criminal violence, and called for more effective law enforcement.
- **Migration:** The modalities of how people migrate, whether due to conflict or for economic reasons, are influenced by gender expectations, but also shape gender dynamics. A mix of active conflict, natural disasters, land grabbing, and lack of economic and education opportunities drive high internal and external migration in Myanmar. Forced displacement can leave families in poverty, creating major difficulties for men to meet gender expectations of protecting their family or providing for them. These frustrations can contribute to mental health issues, such as depression and suicidal tendencies. They can also spur violence against others, including domestic violence. Economic migration levels were also high in the research areas, with some gender differences in migration depending on locations: in southern Shan, women tend to migrate to urban centres and men tend to migrate further away for higher salaries, while, in Tanintharyi, these trends are changing, with daughters increasingly migrating and taking on the role of supporting the family through working abroad.

The findings indicate that the dual expectations on men to protect and provide for their family, linked with efforts to maintain or increase their status, can drive engagement in armed violence

or, conversely, in peace efforts. The gap between the social expectations on men and their lived experiences can negatively affect men's psycho-social wellbeing and drive harmful behaviours such as drug abuse and perpetration of SGBV, particularly for forcibly displaced men or economic migrants in precarious conditions. The harmful psycho-social consequences of frontline combat and economic challenges are issues to be considered when designing demobilisation and reintegration programmes, to support former combatants to find non-violent livelihoods. A comprehensive gender analysis should form the basis of such a programme design.

The focus of many women's organisations has been on women's representation, advocating for 30% participation, and highlighting the issue of sexual violence in conflict. There has been less of a focus on integrating gender across all sectors. This should not always take the form of standalone, women-focused activities: the peace process would be considerably strengthened by applying a strong gender analysis across the sectors, from the social sector to the economic, natural resource management and security sectors. A stronger analysis of the different gendered experiences in these sectors increases the likelihood of addressing the varied needs and priorities of the diverse stakeholder groups. It also increases the likelihood of reaching a sustainable and inclusive peace agreement. This is not a job for women only: men should be actively involved in this analysis and in promoting gender equality of the process. A similar argument applies to the benefits of ensuring women's participation in land conflict resolution.

For the peace process, the implementation of any eventual agreement will also need to be monitored in terms of social inclusion and gendered impacts. The current focus on women's participation runs the risk of encountering backlash or resistance against programming that is perceived to be neglecting men and their concerns. By considering all genders, it can illustrate more clearly why gender matters to men as well as women in the

conflict and post-conflict phases – and why both should play an active role in creating a more peaceful and gender-equitable Myanmar.

Key recommendations to government, EAOs and civil society actors supporting peace and security processes in Myanmar

Gender ≠ Women

1. **Promote gender equality and diversity as being central to peace and peacebuilding.**
2. Recognise that **gender does not mean only women – it's a men's issue too.** Gender means understanding the socially created differences between women, men and diverse SOGI. This requires considering the relationship of power between the genders and needs to be approached from an intersectional angle that takes into account how other identity factors – such as age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic class, location, education and disability – interact with gender.
3. Ensure that **gender mainstreaming involves more than just 'adding women'** – it should be based on comprehensive gender analysis at the beginning, for implementation planning and monitoring of gendered impacts. Gender mainstreaming is not a 'zero sum game': men do have to make space for women and give up some of the (currently inequitably distributed) privilege, but in turn their invisibilised needs and vulnerabilities must also be taken into account.
4. Recognise men's gendered identities and **how expectations drive their behaviour** choices, whether violent behaviour in conflict, SGBV or peacebuilding behaviour. This will be crucial in any potential future disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes.
5. **Recognise and address male vulnerabilities**, such as those of men with disabilities, non-binary men, former political prisoners and forced labour, drug addicts, displaced and internal migrants as well as veterans.

- Note: In light of current masculinities norms, use the term 'vulnerabilities' carefully, as the idea of being labelled as vulnerable may prompt defensive reactions and disengagement.
6. Support men's potential to advocate for peace and gender equality – **mandating men to take concrete actions for gender equality**, such as speaking out for women's participation, creating space for women's voices, reflecting on gender dimensions and modelling more positive forms of masculinity that promote tolerance, empathy, inclusion and peace. Promote the voices of men in speaking out against violence and for tolerance, gender equality and social cohesion.
 - Provide practical suggestions to men about what they can personally do – such as proactively asking women for their concerns, respecting the concerns they voice, refusing to participate in all-male panels or meetings, and ensuring childcare support to women participants and good prior notice of meetings so arrangements can be made.
 - Note: However, there needs to be accountability to women's voices and equal value accorded to women's perspectives – this should not be a new form of perpetuating male bias and domination.
 7. **Prevent backlash against women and women's empowerment by engaging men strategically** and communicating the reasons and aims of women-focused work clearly.
 8. **Support a gender-sensitive psycho-social support and transitional justice or reconciliation process**, which includes a clear gender focus in consultations and a sensitive approach to issues of sexual violence in conflict but also recognises and addresses abuses against male victims including forced portering, labour, recruitment and forms of sexual torture in detention.
 9. **Promote improved understanding of the root causes of SGBV** such as entrenched gender inequalities, an unfounded sense of male entitlement to women's bodies and lack of understanding of the vital concepts of consent. Change broader social norms to shift the blame from victims to perpetrators, and create social attitudes that do not excuse or facilitate such crimes.
 10. **Support the capacities and opportunities for women and youth to engage in decision-making and settling of conflicts**, including addressing land conflicts, building on women's socialisation into more constructive and peaceful approaches to conflicts. Promote non-violent conflict-resolution skills for men and boys that value fairness, justice, empathy and participation rather than status or power-based decision-making.
 11. **Base drug crises responses on a gender analysis**; they will be more effective if they focus on the underlying gender norms and expectations on adolescent and older men. Collaborate with civil society, government, faith, business and political/community leaders to jointly put an end to the drug epidemic.
 12. **Design and implement awareness-raising campaigns about gender equality and core issues of consent** for adolescent men in general, and particularly in internally displaced persons camps and among migrants, including respectful and sensitive treatment of potential survivors of SGBV.
 13. **Provide awareness raising and support on safe migration for both women and men**, including on the pressures of gender expectations and how to engage with them positively.
 14. **Monitor local responses to migration into the area and the impact on social cohesion**, to avoid perceptions of violence linked to migrants and potentially violent local responses to any reported incidents of SGBV committed by migrants. Local dialogues about migration and associated changes should be managed carefully and transparently to create a space where people can share concerns in constructive, non-violent ways, build empathy and tolerance, and learn facts to counteract malicious rumours and prejudices.

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