



CASE STUDY 4

PEACE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN MYANMAR

Country: Myanmar

Focus: Peacebuilding

Donor(s): DFAT

Organisation(s): Centre for Peace and
Conflict Studies

Budget: c. USD 100,000 p.a.

Timeframe: 2014-



FEBRUARY 2018

KEY POINTS

- A gender lens adds to our understanding of the broader political landscape, as well as the specific gendered challenges faced by female leaders.
- Knowledge of local context is crucial to identify critical actors and build strategic relationships drawing on existing networks.
- It is important to address the possible tension between working with women from diverse backgrounds and those who are best positioned to affect change.

OVERVIEW

This case study concerns a DFAT-funded cohort of female peace leaders in Myanmar which forms part of a broader range of programs working with peace leaders throughout the region. Since 2014, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies has identified and trained a select group of women to contribute to Myanmar's peacebuilding efforts. In addition to empowering individual women and ensuring gender-inclusive peacebuilding, the program also aims to contribute more broadly to a sustainable settlement as well as economic growth in the country: "Peace and stability are necessary conditions for inclusive growth in Myanmar. Economic stability and development will be far more difficult without peace, and economic progress is dependent on continued political reform."¹

GENDER AWARE WAYS OF WORKING

Although the program aims to train and support individual women, it also uses gender analysis as a lens through which to understand Myanmar's political landscape: "We focus on a whole systems approach to conflict, and gender is one of the lenses we can use to understand our position and our theory of change. This enriches our enquiry and therefore using a gender lens as part of program design is just as important as ensuring that there are female beneficiaries."² Employing a gender lens allows the program to recognise that "the persistent and significant gap in women's decision making power and formal participation in peace processes reflects a fundamental structural power imbalance at play, despite widespread academic and practitioner consensus that empowering women is essential for durable peace".³

POLITICALLY INFORMED

Being politically informed is a way of working that recognises that development outcomes are determined by the dynamics of power and politics. It is not about formal governance reforms, such as elections or civil service reforms. It involves analysing stakeholder interests and incentives to understand what is politically feasible.

In addition to contributing to how a political landscape is understood, the use of a gender lens has also allowed the program to identify and respond to the specific gendered challenges faced by women in positions of power: "We also know that peacebuilding is not a short-term sprint, it is a long, emotional and intense marathon and many of the leaders at the forefront of advocacy, negotiations and organising run the risk of burning out. [...] For those holding senior management positions, the pressure to perform, deliver and remain emotionally and professionally balanced is extreme."⁴ For women in leadership positions, this is exacerbated because they so often hold multiple roles in both the public and private sphere. Therefore: "A key aspect of the program is to ensure that the women who wear other hats are not overwhelmed. For example, a few of the people couldn't come to the final training because they couldn't get adequate childcare. One way we address this is by continuing to support women after they have gone through the program and are back in their normal roles."

As well as empowering female peace leaders to contribute to a sustainable settlement, the program aims to have an indirect impact upon gendered roles and norms: "We are providing particular skills or space for reflection for leaders who happen to be women. We are not going in explicitly trying to name and change the norms but in practice we hope and believe that

GENDER AWARE

Being gender aware is a way of working that analyses how women and men, girls and boys, experience an issue differently and/or unequally, and the power relations that sustain these inequalities. A robust analysis also looks at how gender intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, religion, ethnicity, class and disability, and non-binary gender identities or diverse sexual preferences.

support individuals in those places we are doing that. Most of the women we are doing our work with are sought after as representatives of women in the peace process. They are therefore already prominent, articulate, adept advocates for gender equality anyway."⁵

POLITICALLY INFORMED WAYS OF WORKING

The key facets of the program's politically informed approach include using local knowledge to identify change agents, drawing on existing networks to ensure diversity among participants, a focus on relationships and reflective, iterative programming, and the careful framing of gender issues.

Strong local knowledge gained through local partners is crucial to "identify the sort of people who might be up and coming leaders, and then build up those people's leadership skills".⁶ This is partly because the program works with a very select group of individuals already in peace leadership positions. "[The CPCS] has identified these women based on their position, passion, commitment to conflict transformation and their proven ability to move things forward. All of the leaders possess high levels of legitimacy and trust with key individuals and institutions involved in a specific conflict setting, and possess a unique ability to directly and/or

indirectly influence conflict parties and behaviour by way of direct mediation, advocacy, and/or building consensus with negotiating parties."⁷

By employing local knowledge and capitalising on broad existing networks, the program is also able to ensure maximum diversity among participants: "They are building on existing networks to make sure that they are getting people from different states and areas, to make sure that they are not just focused on Yangon."⁸ Thus, participants include "ethnic political party members, members of CSO's, academics. There are a wide range of people active in the peace process, so it's essential that leaders from all of these areas are identified."⁹

The diversity of participants then serves to create new bridges: "Over the months, the groups develop great respect for one another, not only as friends but also as fellow female leaders in Asian peace processes. This translates to a relational peer network that will serve as a resource for many years to come."¹⁰ This is achieved through activities ranging from "one-on-one coaching to joint problem-solving workshops"¹¹ which "intentionally creates opportunities to deepen relationships (as professionals, as well as friends) between the group. We believe this is central to creative and resilient leadership."¹²

Creating space for reflection and renewal also serves to foster relationship-building as well as individual personal development: "The personal thread focuses on making space to pause, reflect and restore. We do this through exclusive and in-depth one-on-one leadership coaching focusing on what drives and blocks the individual. We believe that these topics are at the heart of resilient leadership. The focus on personal resiliency is a critical dimension of leadership often missing in current Women Peace & Security trainings." Practically, time devoted to reflection creates "space to identify what changes are needed (in both their organisation and their conflict contexts), as well as tools to take action. This strengthens the strategic approach of the women

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“Tackling issues head on doesn’t always work. Particularly if you are a woman and you are trying to change the status quo.”

leading in a peace processes, organisation or mediation. Leaders are [then] able to clearly articulate the strategic direction, rationale as well as identify the key driving dynamic of their conflict context”.¹³

This space also allows for an iterative and tailored approach: “The training is designed to be flexible to the expressed needs of the group. Thus, while there is a clear frame and process, we are committed to ensuring that the time and investment of all is relevant and valuable for their leadership development.”¹⁴ For example, although the program works with established leaders, it also provides technical skills where relevant: “Leaders gain analytical skills that are grounded in systemic conflict transformation thinking in order to better understand and design strategic interventions into conflict. The program also dedicates time to establishing the important skill sets of lobbying, advocacy and the art of communication in peace work. This means that leaders leave more confidently able to clearly communicate and strategically leverage their position in lobbying and networking situations.”¹⁵

Finally, the program has employed the principles of a politically informed way of working by strategically framing gender issues. For example: “In one of our first cohorts we had the leader of a large ethnic women’s organisation who since gone on to be one of the chairs of a Myanmar-wide group which has been putting pressure on the peace process to be more inclusive. She was very prominent but we realised and that she had been pegged as a women’s rights/gender voice. That meant that part of we helped with was ways to communicate strategically: toning down the gender hat and considering other strategies to be relevant politically, with success.”¹⁶

CONVERGENCE OR TENSION?

This case highlights several key ways in which a gender lens and the principles of a politically informed way of working are complementary. For example, a gender lens enriches a broader understanding of the political landscape, contributing to more sustainable settlements, while politically informed approaches can help strengthen relationships between critical actors promoting gender equality, as well as identify ways to strategically frame the issues on which they work.

However, the case also exemplifies a possible tension between ensuring that female beneficiaries are both diverse and positioned to affect the greatest change: “There is a lot of debate about how you get the right women engaged, not just at a high level but within their communities, and not just the people at the top tier, but also at other levels of society or within the younger generation. This sometimes means looking at what the structure of women’s engagement was a few years ago, and then empowering these women in future roles. It’s about engaging women at different levels of society. For example, by looking at people who are already engaged at the mid-level and then building them up.”¹⁷ The program has aimed to address this by ensuring that “within every cohort, to begin with, there is already a diverse layer of representation going on. Even though women are leaders or prominent in their field, they are coming from varied backgrounds. Some are elected officials, some are from NGOs, some work bringing religious leaders together”.¹⁸

EFFECTIVENESS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

There are several important challenges faced by this program. Firstly, its success depends on ensuring that outputs are sustainable: “We need to make women stay engaged after they go through the program, so we have to think about how we are making

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“Every single person that we are working with, we know their position in the political landscape.”

sure that these women go on to have an impact.”¹⁹ Secondly, there are varying levels of support for women’s engagement within the peace process: “It’s important not just to preach to the converted, but to make sure that we are getting that message right through to the people at the top. That means making a concerted effort to ensure people understand why these women are important. We are not saying that they are going to be able to change the world by themselves, but we hope that they can make a difference.”²⁰ Finally, the military retains significant oversight over the country’s civilian government, and therefore “those political realities are always part of what you are working within. You have to be aware of personal, micro and macro pace of change and people’s ability to manage that, and stay sustained, enthusiastic and willing to play a part.”²¹

METHODS

A rapid review of select program documentation, combined with confidential interviews with at least two key informants per case. Informants include project staff, independent reviewers, donors and other stakeholders. Identifying and listening to local and/or female informants has been prioritised. Interviews for this case took place on 21.04.2017 and 1.05.2017.

SELECTED RESOURCES

www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org

1. <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/aid-investment-plan-aip-myanmar-2015-20.aspx>
2. Key informant interview, 03.05.207
3. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/transforming-women-to-transform-conflict/>
4. Ibid
5. Key informant interview, 03.05.207
6. Key informant interview, 21.04.2017
7. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/the-multiplier-effect/>
8. Key informant interview, 21.04.2017
9. Key informant interview, 21.04.2017
10. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/strengthening-strategic-peacebuilding/>
11. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/approach-methodology/>
12. Ibid
13. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/strengthening-strategic-peacebuilding/>
14. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/approach-methodology/>
15. <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/cultivating-systems-and-self-awareness/>
16. Key informant interview, 03.05.207
17. Key informant interview, 21.04.2017
18. Key informant interview, 03.05.207
19. Key informant interview, 21.04.2017
20. Key informant interview, 21.04.2017
21. Key informant interview, 03.05.207

This case study was written by **Orlanda Siow** of UCL as part of the Gender and Politics in Practice (GAPP) research project. It is one of 14 short case studies focusing on development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware. See *From Silos to Synergy* for a synthesis of the lessons that emerge. Explore all GAPP publications at dlprog.org/gapp.

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Developmental Leadership Program
International Development Department
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham, B15 2TT
United Kingdom

dlprog.org/gapp

Cover photos:

World Bank, A young woman walks home along the road from Naypyitaw AusAID: Markus Kostner



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