

Observe and Act

Opportunities and Challenges for the Implementation of the Women, Peace & Security Agenda in Areas Controlled by Armed and Political Movements

Policy Brief

December 2022

WHAT is the policy brief about?

This Policy Brief aims to enhance our understanding of the role that armed and political movements (APMs) can play as duty bearers and implementers of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, especially when it comes to ensuring the protection and participation of women and girls in peace and security issues. It also provides specific recommendations for how international actors can enhance their understanding of and support for WPS policies and practices in territories controlled by APMs. While this pilot-study only focused on two APMs in Myanmar, we believe its implications are both relevant and beneficial for the wider WPS community and policy actors worldwide.

WHY is the topic relevant?

Although significant progress has been made on the implementation of the WPS agenda by Member States, the agenda's full potential has yet to be realised: it can be further applied and implemented in conflict areas outside of state governance. This is especially pertinent given that an estimated 150 million people live in areas controlled or influenced by armed groups.

For WHOM is it important?

The policy brief is primarily addressed to the international WPS community including policymakers, donors, and international civil society organizations (CSOs). It is also of interest to academics focusing on the WPS agenda in areas under the control or influence of APMs, as well as to local CSOs and members of APMs who are engaging in the implementation of the agenda themselves.

Key recommendations

The international WPS community should

- ▮ Collaborate closely with and support local CSOs, especially women's organisations as they play a key role in the implementation of the WPS agenda.
- ▮ Engage both male and female leadership of the APMs in dialogue on the WPS agenda.
- ▮ Provide technical and logistical support for the capacity-building of APMs on women's protection and participation.
- ▮ Help develop and implement a support system for women within the APMs.
- ▮ Conduct awareness-raising and advocacy activities within the communities.
- ▮ Help create mixed spaces for exchange on the WPS agenda.
- ▮ Provide documentation and encourage reflection.
- ▮ Support participatory action research on WPS with APMs.

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1. Introduction

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted [Resolution 1325](#) – a landmark resolution acknowledging the critical role that women play in peace and security issues. The Resolution’s objective is to mainstream a gender-sensitive approach to peace and conflict within the UN system and its Member States. Throughout the years, it has been complemented by numerous resolutions that have come to constitute the Women, Peace & Security (WPS) Agenda, which calls for the overall protection and promotion of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict environments. Although significant progress has been made on the implementation of the WPS agenda by Member States, the agenda’s full potential has yet to be realised: it can be further applied and implemented in conflict areas outside of state governance. This is especially pertinent given that an estimated 150 million people live in areas controlled or influenced by armed groups, 50% of whom are women and girls (Hebert and Devon 2021: 1026).

This Policy Brief aims to enhance our understanding of the role that armed and political movements (APMs)¹ can play as duty bearers and implementers of the WPS agenda, especially when it comes to ensuring the protection and participation of women and girls in peace and security issues. This report also provides specific recommendations for how international actors can enhance their understanding of and support for WPS policies and practices in territories controlled by APMs. The following findings and recommendations have been primarily derived from a pilot study conducted by Fight for Humanity and Berghof Foundation in July-December 2022, thanks to funding from the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO). Although the study only focused on two APMs in Myanmar,² we believe its implications to be both relevant and beneficial for the wider WPS community and policy actors worldwide.

In addition to a research report (Zin Mar Phyo 2022), the research resulted in the local production of the documentary film *Women on the Margins*.³ The research results were shown during online dissemination events with international policymakers during Geneva Peace Week on 3 November 2022 and during a panel discussion held with the GFFO on 8 December 2022. Dissemination events were also held regionally with leaders from both of the studied APMs (online on 18 November, in-person in Mae Hong Son, Thailand on 21 November 2022) and with a larger public audience in Bangkok on 26 November 2022.

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- 1 We understand armed and political movements as entities that possess a defined organisational structure, are independent from state authority and use violence for political ends. For this report, we do not use the more conventional term ‘non-state armed group’, since some of the actors under consideration operate as quasi/de-facto states and object to being defined solely by their tactical use of force.
 - 2 The terms Ethnic Armed Organisation or Ethnic Resistance Organisation are commonly used in reference to the armed and political movements operating in Myanmar. This Policy Brief refers to APMs, as the focus is global and not solely on Myanmar.
 - 3 Available at <https://youtu.be/k3-ZL4yN80I>.

Fight for Humanity and Berghof Foundation, with the support of the GFFO, will continue research on the role of APMs in the implementation of the WPS agenda in 2023, with a focus on implementation for Myanmar and new research in the context of Yemen. In addition, we will engage with global WPS practitioners from various other conflict-affected or post-war contexts to improve policy impact in this area.

2. Key Lessons from the Research Process

2.1. The Methodology

In 2021, Fight for Humanity and Berghof Foundation initiated an applied research project with students at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. The (unpublished) study suggested that most APMs under review had taken some positive steps to address the WPS agenda, yet only a third of them had taken steps towards concrete policy commitments, including detailed written rules. The research pointed to the need for quality data, especially regarding more complex aspects such as the APMs' understanding of WPS, and the factors and actors that influence them. This indicated the need for a different approach. Thus, we developed a pilot research project to attempt to close this gap by using a participatory methodology for data collection, analysis, and dissemination, in spaces more difficult to access by outsiders, especially not foreign researchers.

Given that APMs control and govern large territories throughout the country – and even more so following the military coup in 2021 – we considered Myanmar to be a particularly well-suited context for conducting in-depth participatory analysis and policy consultations to assess and encourage the APMs' efforts to enhance the rights of women and girls. Moreover, since many women's rights organisations are linked to these movements, they represent suitable entry points for both analysis and advocacy work. The research was conducted in two ethnic territories along the Burmese-Thai border, governed respectively by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Karen National Union (KNU). Over six months, the research team, spread out over Myanmar/Thailand, Berlin, and Geneva, designed the methodology, collected data, and analysed it. Through interviews with APM leaders and associated women's organisations, we investigated the movements' perceptions, regulations, practices, needs, progress, and challenges related to the implementation of the WPS agenda.

The approach involved two members from each movement (with leadership approval) as 'insider experts' who participated in the design, data collection and analysis stages. Their contribution increased local ownership and led to more commitment, willingness, and contribution from the movements. The data collection process was led by a local researcher who travelled with the insider experts to the territories of the KNU and KNPP and conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 women and 19 men from the APMs' leadership, associated Civil Society Organisation (CSO) groups, the community, the women's movement in Myanmar and among external experts.

Our main takeaway from the research process is that the methodology had some interesting advantages: not only the quantity, but also the quality of the data collected was better, given that the local researchers and experts conducting the interviews were deemed more trustworthy by interviewees. In addition, since the insider experts held both theoretical and practical expertise, they enriched the analysis with knowledge and experience from within their specific contexts, making it more accessible and acceptable to the APMs involved. The following sections will discuss in more detail the challenges and opportunities that we found in implementing the participatory action research in this pilot project.

2.2. Challenges

- ☰ **Security:** Both movements find themselves in a critical situation, due to ongoing intensive fighting and attacks by the Burmese military, including airstrikes and shelling. Military attacks can take place anytime and anywhere within the movements' territories. Due to the consistent fighting in and around the areas of both movements, it was challenging for the researchers to travel within the territories deeply inside Myanmar; focus had to remain on the areas bordering with Thailand. Despite the security support provided by the movements, the researchers faced limitations reaching certain areas in order to collect detailed information on policy implementation at the local level. In addition, any 'external' visitor requires extensive time and budget in order to ensure their safe transportation from the border to the territories.
- ☰ **Prioritisation of political issues:** Not only the military situation, but also the political situation constituted a challenge, as the movements often prioritised key political considerations over research on women's rights. Most participants had to travel constantly and maintain very tight schedules due to political meetings and their organisational commitments.
- ☰ **Timeframes:** Participatory processes are time-intensive and require extensive coordination and consultations. Consequently, future projects should allow more time for data gathering, analysis and feedback, including after the dissemination events, to make the process more inclusive and reflective of the perspectives of the participants.
- ☰ **Objectivity:** Since part of the team were also involved in the object of study, objectivity constraints are an inherent aspect of participatory methodologies.⁴ To mitigate this, external interviews were also conducted by an international team member. Furthermore, since some of the research concerned the APMs' understanding and perceptions of key concepts related to the WPS agenda, this did not require any 'objective' data.

2.3. Opportunities

- ☰ **Context-sensitive engagement:** With the support of the insider experts, the overall methodology and data-gathering tools and processes were tweaked to better reflect the perspectives of the movements and the local sensitivities. For example, by tailoring the questionnaires to specific contexts and local languages, participants were more accepting and engaged in asking critical questions.
- ☰ **Trustworthy relationships:** Due to their existing relationships of trust, the insider experts were able to make appointments with interviewees despite their tight schedules; they were often more patient and creative, sometimes splitting one interview over the course of several sessions. Such engagement strategies would not always have been appropriate or possible without local knowledge, personal relationships, and support from the movements.

The participatory methodology hence addressed the need for both more and better-quality data, including data on sensitive issues, such as local perceptions of gender. By having better data on these issues, we can create better strategies for collaboration and support.

⁴ This constraint of participatory research design has been broadly discussed in academia (see Bergold and Thomas 2012). Despite this, the methodology was deliberately chosen to acquire unique and internal data.

To sum up, one of the major benefits of working with insider experts is that it often leads to more ownership on the local level, leading to more commitment, willingness, and contribution from the movements. Consequently, it can help pave the way for a more inclusive peace process with more widely accepted outcomes, and thereby increase the possibility of sustainable and just peace.

It should be noted that although we used this methodology specifically in the context of the WPS agenda and to provide a baseline study on progress and challenges, and to scope for further work in an inclusive way, the same approach could also be used to address different topics, such as minority rights or even in peace processes.

In the next section, we will examine some key trends that emerged from the pilot project that we believe hold validity for other contexts.

3. Key Lessons from the Research Findings

Through the participatory methodology described above, the pilot project aimed to provide empirical data on the WPS agenda of APMs; to review areas of progress and challenges in integrating WPS into their internal discourse, regulations, policies and governance practices; to identify the factors and actors influencing their positioning on the WPS agenda; and to understand these actors' needs and interests in external support to further strengthen their internal efforts to promote women's participation and protection. In this section, we look at key trends that emerged from the research findings in Myanmar, that we believe could hold validity for other contexts as well.

3.1. APMs and the WPS Agenda

One key finding is that the movements studied were willing to engage on matters involving the WPS agenda and demonstrated a willingness to engage further. The two APMs in the pilot project both assigned insider experts and participated in the research dissemination sessions at a high level. The respective leaderships had some knowledge of the topic and recognised the connection between the two WPS pillars of participation and protection. Further on, the movements had taken important steps to promote both women's participation and protection within their territories. The APMs engaged the topic directly and indirectly by encouraging women's organisations to work in their territories.

Based on the two case studies, we found that the APMs considered the issue of women's participation particularly important; this provides a good basis for promoting the idea of inclusive representation even further, beyond 'women's issues'. They also voiced commitments to better protect women and girls in their territories and agreed on the specific needs of women in conflict areas; however, the APMs have yet to address protection issues as concretely as they have issues of participation.

Conclusions:

- ≡ APMs do engage with the WPS agenda, directly and indirectly
- ≡ APMs are interested in participating in research on the WPS agenda and beyond
- ≡ APMs demonstrate a commitment to addressing women's participation and protection



3.2. Progress and Challenges

The two case studies showed that initial awareness raising and empowerment trainings within the APMs contributed to follow-up trainings and the consideration of gender equality in leadership decision-making processes. This internal awareness also contributed to justice system reforms to become more gender-sensitive and gender responsive. The research also showed that efforts were made to improve the APMs' administrative structures to increase their access to women within the territories under their control.

One of the key findings was that when the movements had opened up CSO platforms where women's groups could intervene and engage on issues related to women's rights, it had worked as a channel for advocacy for policy development and implementation. Nevertheless, the research showed that the organisations largely lacked internal capacity to address women's rights themselves. In addition to capacity issues, initial efforts to introduce and enforce norms and regulations to advance women's participation and protection were limited and require further development and implementation. The APMs largely lacked the tools (politics, structures, resources, etc.) to go beyond comprehension and address women's specific vulnerabilities; they instead depend on women's organisations to address women's issues, including GBV and the promotion of women's participation.

By developing quotas for women's participation in the APM constitutions, more practical efforts towards women's participation were made, and more women were brought into leadership roles. However, research highlighted the importance of assessing and improving formal internal policies for any effective implementation of the WPS agenda. While women were shown to invest greater efforts in addressing the needs and the rights of women, they were at times only entrusted to address 'women's issues'. Consequently, the research identified the need to address women's participation on all topics and levels. Furthermore, women's participation continues to be hampered by family 'care burdens', which would need to be addressed by supportive policies.

External actors, such as donors, seemed to put more emphasis on participation rather than protection. One reason for this could be an unwillingness to invest resources into any sector (health, justice, shelters, etc.) associated (or perceived as such) with the APMs. The pilot project confirmed 'you can't have one without the other' – participation without protection will deter women from participating, and the lack of women's participation undermines progress on protection.

Conclusions:

- ≡ APMs need to strengthen their internal capacity to address WPS to complement the external capacity and work of associated women's organisations
- ≡ Formal policies are more effective and need to be developed, including through dedicated action plans on women's participation and protection
- ≡ Awareness-raising and capacity-building activities and training curriculums are required on all levels of administration, including within the justice and security sectors
- ≡ Support systems are required for women to participate meaningfully in decision-making
- ≡ Participation and protection should go hand in hand

3.3. Conducive Factors and Actors

Another key finding from the research is that the APMs maintained a constant dialogue with women's organisations in their territories, which positively impacted their decision-making processes. Women's organisations, CSOs working on women's rights, and gender experts acted as vital advocacy and capacity-building platforms towards promoting gender equality. External actors, in particular international donors such as foreign embassies, and regional actors such as the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), were also shown to be influential. External actors can promote women's rights through funding initiatives, supplying technical resources to facilitate implementation efforts, and applying leverage on powerholders.

The research also found that on political platforms that bring together various APMs, leaders often showed a commitment to more inclusive leadership. In the end, the roles and responsibilities of all leaders – both male and female – within decision-making bodies cannot be over-emphasised. Regarding heavily male-dominated structures, having the presence of open-minded male leaders as potential allies for internal advocacy was found to be crucial. Based on the two case studies, hopes were particularly high for the younger generations of leaders who are more likely to be sensitive to the WPS and the Youth, Peace and Security agendas.

In conclusion, based on the findings, it can be expected that any support or capacity-building efforts provided to internal actors at this time, during the conflict, may pay off in terms of the participation of women in any future process of dialogue, negotiation, and political transition, and pave the way for a more inclusive process, and, in the end, society. Yet, it is important to remember that the process of achieving women's full participation and protection is a gradual one; even if women are merely observers at the start, it is through observing that they can learn how to act on their own.

Conclusions:

- ≡ Conducive factors and actors can both be internal and external, and include progressive leaders, youth movements, women's organisations, and donors
- ≡ Internal capacity needs to be built as the starting point of a long-term investment in both women's rights and inclusive peace processes



4. Recommendations for International CSOs, Donors and Policy Actors

- **Collaborate closely with and support local CSOs.** Local CSOs, especially women's organisations, play a key role in the implementation of the WPS agenda. Continued support for and cooperation with local CSOs on any issue related to gender and the WPS agenda is crucial for effective and sustainable action.
- **Engage both male and female leadership in dialogue.** By holding inclusive dialogues on the status of and next steps for the implementation of measures to improve women's participation and protection, external actors can help empower APM leadership to expand their work at both policy and implementation levels. Such platforms can also help APM leaders internalise WPS norms – ethically and strategically – and appreciate the added value of involving women in decision-making processes.
- **Build the capacity of men as well as women.** Capacity-building support for men can give them the chance to become co-owners of the participation and protection work; capacity-building support for women can allow them to increase their confidence to engage in political discussions. If only women are focused on the responsibility is laid entirely on them which hinders men from taking ownership of the issue.
- **Provide technical and logistical support for capacity-building processes.** By building APMs' capacity to address gender issues and the WPS agenda internally, and supporting the development of comprehensive policy review, development, and implementation mechanisms – also through logistical means – external actors can bring momentum to and support for the sustainability of the work, especially as resources remain scarce.
- **Help develop and implement a support system for women within the APMs.** This may include funding for gender budgets and self-led economic empowerment, supporting projects aimed to guarantee women and girls' access to health services and justice in APM areas, and supporting peer-learning programmes for women to gain experience and knowledge about overcoming inclusion barriers.

- **Conduct awareness-raising and advocacy activities within the communities.** Whether done directly, through school curriculums or through the media and other platforms, educational activities and the promotion of positive stories are fundamental ways to address gender discrimination limiting women’s participation and protection.
- **Help create mixed spaces for exchange.** Such spaces can be between formal and informal actors and structures, as women tend to have a more prominent leading role in informal spaces. It could be beneficial for APM leaders to exchange with various women leaders outside the movements to get their input on how they can improve the rights of women and girls based on their personal experiences.
- **Provide documentation and encourage reflection.** Given the limited capacity and resources available within the APMs for working on the WPS agenda, external CSOs can help provide comparative lessons learnt from other regions/countries and encourage informal spaces for reflection on the implementation of the WPS agenda, even during conflict.
- **Finance longer-term projects addressing the WPS agenda in APM areas.** Short-term projects can be a hindrance for trust-building and sustainable engagement with APMs or within their areas. Funding should also be regulated through more flexible arrangements, allowing beneficiaries – including CSOs and INGOs working with APMs – to conduct their work informally and unconstrained by stringent financial reporting regulations. To the extent possible, such support could be extended to the WPS and gender work of the APMs themselves, including on women and girls’ health and access to justice.
- **Support participatory action research on WPS with APMs.** Research projects funded by external donors on the internal discourses, policies, and governance practices of actors such as APMs should be conducted in collaboration with local and insider experts. These have a greater impact than analyses conducted solely by external scholars, as they foster greater ownership and commitments from the movements.
- **Walk the talk.** When engaging with APMs and promoting discourse on the WPS agenda, communication should be delivered in a consistent manner, come from the highest level of international agencies, and, when possible, include male leaders. This would help underscore that promoting and protecting women and girls’ rights is the joint responsibility of both women and men.

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About Fight for Humanity and Berghof Foundation

Fight for Humanity is an independent non-governmental organisation that works to convince non-state armed actors of the need to respect people's rights in the areas of their control or influence. The organisation works to fill a gap in the prevention of human rights abuses in situations of violence and conflict. Fight for Humanity currently works in Syria and Iraq on projects to protect people's rights in areas controlled by non-state armed actors. It is also working on smaller joint projects with partners in Myanmar (with Berghof Foundation), Cameroon, and Senegal.

The **Berghof Foundation** is an independent, non-governmental organisation supporting people in conflict in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace through conflict transformation. Since 2005, Berghof Foundation has engaged with non-state armed groups around the world and has developed in-depth experience and professional expertise in conducting participatory action research and capacity-building support with their (current and former) members, to encourage transitions from war to peace and democratic politics. It has also developed a gender-specific curriculum targeting female combatants and women associated with armed groups to support inclusive negotiations, political participation, and post-war community leadership.

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