

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Un)desirable women: The production of the ideal Women, Peace and Security agenda participant in Myanmar

Rebecca Haines¹ , Elisabeth Olivius², Khin Khin Mra³, and Jenny Hedström⁴

¹Department of Sociology, McGill University, Montréal, QC, Canada; ²Department of Political Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; ³Department of Politics, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK and ⁴Department of War Studies, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden

Corresponding author: Rebecca Haines; Email: rebecca.haines@mcgill.ca

(Received 25 September 2025; revised 21 April 2026; accepted 26 April 2026)

Abstract

International actors working to implement the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda emphasize the importance of partnership with local women's organizations and activists. Building on data from Myanmar, this study examines how and when women in conflict contexts are understood as ideal participants in – and vehicles for – the WPS agenda. Drawing on interviews with international donors, gender experts, and Myanmar women activists, the analysis demonstrates how both desirable and undesirable participant subject positions are produced through the discourses and funding choices of WPS donors. In particular, we identify and discuss three *undesirable* subject positions prominent in donor-driven discourses: the oppositional woman, the fearful woman, and the apolitical woman. We also find that how (un)desirability is framed depends on changing factors that include shifts in local political context and in the foreign policy goals of international donors – shifts that may be particularly dramatic and abrupt in conflict-affected contexts. Critically examining the production of these three undesirable subject positions, we discuss what kinds of local women can be recognized as desirable participants in the implementation of the WPS agenda and draw attention to persistent power relations that shape political space and inclusion in peacebuilding.

Keywords: feminism; international aid; Myanmar; participation; peacebuilding; Women, Peace and Security (WPS); women's activism

Introduction

In international peacebuilding paradigms, the participation of civil society actors is understood as key to successfully transforming conflict and building peace.¹ Women's organizations in conflict-affected contexts are often singled out as essential civil society peacebuilding partners, not least within the prominent policy architecture known as the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.² For women's organizations in conflict settings, these international policies and norms

¹Thania Paffenholz, 'Civil society and peacebuilding', in Thania Paffenholz (ed), *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment* (Lynne Rienner, 2010), pp. 43–64; David Chandler, 'Race, culture and civil society: Peacebuilding discourse and the understanding of difference', *Security Dialogue*, 41:4 (2010), pp. 369–90; and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Constructing civil society: Gender, power and legitimacy in United Nations peacebuilding discourse', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2015), pp. 887–910.

²United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security was unanimously adopted in 2000. It has been followed by an additional nine resolutions, which, alongside numerous policies, action plans, and projects, now make up the international Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The British International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

constitute critical resources for mobilization and advocacy, and provide them with access to transnational networks, funding, and legitimacy.³

At the same time, support from international peacebuilding actors comes with specific policy priorities and procedural requirements, which women's organizations are required to address. Even as the agency and ownership of local actors is emphasized, international peacebuilding, including the WPS agenda, has been frequently criticized for reproducing unequal power relations, where local perspectives, priorities, and agendas remain subordinated.⁴ Despite its original intent as 'a civil society project that takes seriously the expertise and experience of women and women's organizations in the pursuit of peace and security',⁵ the integration of WPS issues into dominant liberal models of peacebuilding has been critiqued for having dulled the agenda's critical edge and sidelined conflict-affected women's voices and priorities.⁶ In effect, while women's organizations are hailed as key agents of peace, in practice they are often enlisted as subordinated 'logisticians' or 'laborers' for international actors,⁷ and required to fit narrow expectations about the nature and role of 'local women'.⁸

Building on data from Myanmar, this study examines how and when women in conflict contexts are understood as rightful or ideal bearers of the WPS agenda and optimal recipients of its associated resources. Drawing on interviews and participant observation with international donors, gender experts, and Myanmar women activists and policymakers, this article explores how local women and women's organizations are perceived and represented by international actors involved in supporting WPS objectives. Specifically, we ask: what sorts of women are imagined to be the desired partners in achieving the WPS agenda's central aims? Through an analysis of how international peacebuilders working on WPS issues speak about local women's organizations and activists, their roles, approaches, and behaviours, we trace how ideas of participant desirability are produced and circulated.

Our study draws on data gathered between 2018 and 2020, in the years leading up to the 2021 military coup that abruptly ended a decade of semi-democratic political transition. During this period, a wide range of international agencies were present in Myanmar, many of whom were supporting local partners and peacebuilding projects broadly falling under the umbrella of the WPS agenda. These partnerships and processes were, as elsewhere, 'frictional encounters'⁹ – encounters that involved tension between competing priorities and perspectives among actors in asymmetrical relations of power. While some positive evolutions in partnership practices were emerging, the organization and practices of international aid still left Myanmar women's

³Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security* (Oxford University Press, 2019); and Radhika Coomaraswamy, 'Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325' (UN Women, 2015).

⁴Chandler, 'Race, culture and civil society', pp. 369–90; Swati Parashar, 'The WPS agenda: A postcolonial critique', in Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 829–39; and Elisabeth Olivius, Jenny Hedström, and Zin Mar Phyo, 'Feminist peace or state co-optation? The Women, Peace and Security agenda in Myanmar', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5:1 (2022), pp. 25–43.

⁵Shepherd, 'Constructing civil society', p. 325.

⁶Heidi Hudson, 'A double-edged sword of peace? Reflections on the tension between representation and protection in gendering liberal peacebuilding', *International Peacekeeping*, 19:4 (2012), pp. 443–60; and Carol Cohn and Claire Duncanson, 'Women, Peace and Security in a changing climate', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22:5 (2020), pp. 742–62.

⁷Shepherd, 'Constructing civil society'.

⁸Minna Lyytikäinen and Punam Yadav, 'Capitalising on UNSCR 1325: The construction of best practices for the Women, Peace and Security agenda', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 16:2 (2022), pp. 123–41; Yasmin Chilmeran, 'Constructing the local woman peacebuilder in the Women, Peace and Security agenda: Iraqi women's participation in local peacebuilding programmes', *International Political Science Review*, 45:5 (2024), pp. 609–24; and Coline Esther Cardeño, Elisabeth Olivius, and Malin Åkebo, '"Jihad is planted in our hearts": International aid, rebel institutions and women's participation in the Bangsamoro', *Civil Wars*, 27:1 (2025), pp. 42–69.

⁹Nicole George, 'Light, heat and shadows: Women's reflections on peacebuilding in post-conflict Bougainville', *Peacebuilding*, 4:2 (2016), pp. 166–79; and Annika Björkdahl and Kristine Höglund, 'Precarious peacebuilding: Friction in global-local encounters', *Peacebuilding*, 1:3 (2013), pp. 289–99.

organizations struggling to manage short-term grants and narrowly restricted funding, while imposing a heavy burden of funding applications and reporting.¹⁰ The power dynamics reinscribed in these material aspects of international–local relationships have been examined by others.¹¹ Complementing these accounts, in this article, we explore the discursive dimensions of these unequal relationships, looking at how spaces for influence and participation are shaped by the expectations and dominant narratives embraced by international actors supporting WPS work.

In our analysis, we identify three prominent ‘undesirable women’ tropes – three common perceptions of Myanmar women’s organizations and women’s rights activists that emerged from our interviews and observations during the period in question. Each of these ‘undesirable women’ reflects a broad critique articulated by different international donor representatives, casting some Myanmar WPS actors as problematic and less-than-ideal recipients of WPS resources. Based on our analysis, we have categorized these undesirable subject positions as (a) the oppositional woman – viewed as too confrontational, critical, and insufficiently collaborative; (b) the fearful woman, who does not speak up in expected ways; and (c) the apolitical woman, who is too focused on community level service delivery to possess properly ‘political’ ambitions or to employ sufficiently ‘strategic’ ways of working.

While the 2021 military coup changed the context in Myanmar dramatically, we argue that our findings continue to have relevance for WPS work, both in post-coup Myanmar and in other contexts. Our analysis highlights how the production of subject positions in WPS donor discourses circumscribes the approaches used by women’s rights actors and establishes hierarchies among women’s groups, limiting who is heard, funded, and ultimately understood as a credible bearer of the WPS agenda.¹² We also highlight the tension between how symbolic ‘local women’ are fetishized as key agents of peace in international WPS discourse, while – at the same time – actual women are being discursively disciplined and excluded. Finally, we point to the instability of these discursively produced hierarchies, as international funding trends, preferences, and policy imperatives shift the characteristics of WPS actors that are viewed most favourably. These shifts may be particularly abrupt in conflict-affected contexts, where dynamics are more volatile and can change dramatically within short periods.

We begin by situating our analysis in relation to previous work on the discursive production of subject positions as a key dimension of power in international aid and peacebuilding. We then provide a brief overview of the context of Myanmar during the period our data is drawn from, as well as a description of the data we analyze. Thereafter, we present our analysis, illustrating the production of the three undesirable subject positions briefly outlined above. In conclusion, we reflect on what these findings tell us about what the desirable WPS participant might look like, and about power relations in the implementation of the WPS agenda.

¹⁰Rebecca Haines and Cate Buchanan, ‘The localisation discourse in post-2021 Myanmar: Implications for conflict sensitivity’, *Development in Practice*, 33:5 (2023), pp. 648–55; and Elisabeth Olivius, Malin Åkebo, and Jenny Hedström, ‘Navigating friction: Women’s peacebuilding in hybrid regimes’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 32:1 (2026), pp. 237–61.

¹¹Alba Boer Cueva, Keshab Giri, Caitlin Hamilton, and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Funding precarity and women’s peace work in Colombia, Nepal, and Northern Ireland’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:3 (2022); Caitlin Hamilton, Anuradha Mundkur, and Laura J. Shepherd, *Civil Society, Care Labour, and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Making 1325 Work* (Routledge, 2021); and Angelika Arutyunova and Cindy Clark, ‘Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots: The Status of Financing for Women’s Rights Organizations and Gender Equality’ (Association for Women’s Rights in Development), available at: <https://www.awid.org/publications/watering-leaves-starving-roots>, accessed 7 October 2013.

¹²Sheri L. Gibbings, ‘No angry women at the United Nations: Political dreams and the cultural politics of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325’, in Nicola Pratt and Sophie Richter-Devroe (eds), *Gender, Governance and International Security* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 34–50; and Martín de Almagro, ‘Producing participants: Gender, race, class, and Women, Peace and Security’, *Global Society*, 32:4 (2018), pp. 395–414.

Producing participant subject positions in Women, Peace and Security work

Our analytical point of departure is the contention that the production of subject positions is a key aspect of governing.¹³ In our analysis, we seek to understand how women activists in Myanmar are 'objectified as certain kinds of subjects through the ways they are targeted by political power'.¹⁴ Thus, the governing practices and dominant discourses of WPS donors and international experts and peacebuilders shape relations of power in different ways, making different subject positions available to individuals and groups. These discursive processes shape how people can speak, act, and be heard, positioning some as problematic or unintelligible subjects, and others as legitimate and desirable.¹⁵ The discursive production of subject positions does not simply determine people's agency, but it does create openings to act in some ways while making other options more difficult, less intelligible, or less acceptable.¹⁶

Postcolonial feminist scholars have long argued that the production of subject positions is key to establishing and upholding hierarchies.¹⁷ For example, Mohanty analyzes how the construction of an idealized, subordinated, and oppressed 'third world woman' works to facilitate a representation of Western women as liberated and free.¹⁸ This illustrates how binaries between selves and others uphold hierarchies through the production of subject positions.¹⁹

Previous scholarship on the WPS agenda has highlighted how women's agency, along with broader narratives about gender, are made legible by following established scripts,²⁰ and how participant subject positions are constructed in gendered, racialized, and classed ways.²¹ In WPS policy and practice, the 'local woman' is variously constructed as an essentialized peacebuilder by virtue of assumed, stereotypical feminine traits; as apolitical and non-sectarian; non-elite, thus representing the 'authentically' local; and as a potential intermediary who can build bridges, both between different local communities, and as a point of contact between international actors and 'the local'.²² These framings shape who is recognized, consulted, and funded in WPS work.²³ For example, expectations that women represent a homogenized identity as women, and stand above or outside of politics and the divisions associated with armed conflict, may render some women's agency, experiences, and priorities less visible, or even cast them as illegitimate.²⁴ While some women and their organizations may be able to strategically position themselves as the right kind of peacebuilding

¹³ Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (Sage Publications, 2010).

¹⁴ Graham Burchell, 'Peculiar interests: Civil society and governing "The system of natural liberty"', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 119.

¹⁵ Carol L. Bacchi, *Analyzing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (Pearson Education, 2009), p. 40.

¹⁶ Dean, *Governmentality*.

¹⁷ Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *Feminist Review*, 30:1 (1988), pp. 61–88; Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (Routledge, 1998); Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press, 1999); and Lila Abu Lughod, 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its other', *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (2002), pp. 783–90.

¹⁸ Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes'.

¹⁹ Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes'; and Elisabeth Olivius, 'Constructing humanitarian selves and refugee others: Gender equality and the global governance of refugees', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 270–90.

²⁰ Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations'.

²¹ de Almagro, 'Producing participants'.

²² Chilmeran, 'Constructing the local woman peacebuilder', pp. 612–13; and Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations'.

²³ Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations'; and de Almagro, 'Producing participants'.

²⁴ George, 'Light, heat and shadows'; Jenny Lorentzen, 'Frictional interactions on Women, Peace and Security in Mali', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 59:4 (2021), pp. 463–83; Dipti Tamang, 'Rethinking "participation" in Women, Peace and Security discourses: Engaging with "non-participant" women's movements in the Eastern borderlands of India', in Laura J. Shepherd (ed), *The Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Place, Space, and Knowledge Production* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 36–54; and Cardeño et al., 'Jihad is planted in our hearts'.

partner, others are excluded, for example, due to their links to armed groups or self-determination movements.²⁵

These ideals and legibility criteria can also be contradictory. For example, women may be viewed favourably when they fit expectations of proximity to ‘the local’ or are able to signal ‘grassroots’ credentials, but may simultaneously be rewarded for their fluency in international languages, vocabularies, and frameworks.²⁶ In other words, women activists must be understood as local enough, but not too local to be unintelligible or unrelatable to a transnational WPS policy community. This can result in a precarious and nearly impossible balancing act. For example, in our experience, Myanmar women’s rights activists have often been encouraged by donors to engage in the global WPS agenda, including the calendar of international events associated with it. However, they are also in danger of eventually being perceived to have become too international – perhaps by travelling abroad too frequently or beginning to sound too polished and cosmopolitan. At that point, an activist might find herself subject to criticism for losing her ‘authenticity’ or no longer being sufficiently representative of the ‘grassroots’. As we point out in our analysis below, donor preferences can and do change, even over short periods of time. This introduces additional contradictory pressures – to ensure one is currently a desirable participant, while also attempting to future-proof one’s desirability for such a time when trends among donor preferences may shift.

The above literature illustrates how implicit norms related to women’s participation can have material effects, shaping women’s opportunities to benefit from international support for the WPS agenda. Our approach here contributes to this discussion by retroactively tracing what a desirable WPS participant looked like during a particular period in Myanmar’s recent history. We do this primarily through identifying the most prominent discourses related to *undesirability* among participant subject positions. That is, we start from narratives and statements in which international donors and peacebuilding actors working on the WPS agenda criticize or express frustration with women activists and women’s organizations. We argue that one way of making visible the discursive production of *desirable* participant subject positions is to look at how subjectivities and expressions of agency that do not conform to donor expectations and preferences are represented and critiqued. Via this process, undesirable participants are problematized, marginalized, or rejected. Consequently, this process tells us something about how dominant governing frameworks and discourses make and re-make the space in which certain women may participate, while also revealing the limitations of that space.

Context, material, and methods

In the latter years of Myanmar’s so-called transitional decade (2011–2021), wide-ranging political, economic, and administrative reforms led to a partial opening of civil and political space, some relaxing of press censorship, a proliferation of new diplomatic relations, and dramatically increased foreign investment and development assistance. The return of many activists and women’s organizations from being based abroad, alongside increased opportunities for public contestation, activism, and advocacy, led to the expansion of a diverse and vibrant women’s movement within the country. Partly driven by their politicization in response to decades of targeted state violence, ethnic minority women’s groups comprised a significant portion of this movement. A nationwide peace process, along with new investment opportunities in conflict-affected ethnic minority areas, attracted a substantial international presence, including a burgeoning peacebuilding industry that included WPS activities.²⁷

²⁵ Rebecca Haines, ‘Women’s principled tactical pluralism: Understanding the cases of sisters2sisters and the spouses of people’s soldiers’, *Journal of Burma Studies*, 29:2 (2025), pp. 319–68.

²⁶ Lyytikäinen and Yadav, ‘Capitalising on UNSCR 1325’; and Tamang, ‘Rethinking “participation”’.

²⁷ Cate Buchanan and Khin Khin Mra, ‘Women, Peace, and Security Funding Dynamics in Myanmar, 2010–2020’ (The Asia Foundation, 2024).

At the same time, the significant presence of the military in the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government, ongoing armed conflict in many of the country's ethnic minority border areas, and continued attempts by the government to restrict space for both civil society and international organizations, underscored the limits of reform and reconciliation efforts. This led observers to label pre-coup Myanmar as a hybrid regime: not fully democratic, not fully authoritarian.²⁸

Nevertheless, international peacebuilders increasingly turned towards the Myanmar state as a peacebuilding and development partner. Indeed, the policy architecture for implementing WPS activities, like many other formal peacebuilding initiatives in the country, was placed under the direct oversight of the government.²⁹ For example, in 2013, Myanmar launched the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) as a framework for implementing WPS activities under government oversight. While ostensibly modelled on the Beijing Platform for Action, it attracted critique for, among other issues, not sufficiently consulting with ethnic minority women's groups and not having a dedicated budget or implementation plan. Due to political sensitivities on the part of the Myanmar military, the NSPAW also failed to explicitly refer to the gendered impacts of armed conflict. Instead, it included a less politically charged section on 'women in emergencies' – a phrase that came to be used euphemistically to refer to many issues, including conflict-related sexual violence, to avoid highlighting the military's culpability in these crimes.³⁰

During this time, the quasi-democratic government maintained a restrictive Association Registration Law (2014), which pressured civil society groups to formally register their organizations. A large number of civil society groups, including many women's organizations from ethnic minority areas, did not want to register, as doing so subjected them to increased government scrutiny, affecting their ability to advocate on politically sensitive issues. Despite this widespread concern among Myanmar civil society actors, many international donors, including some with substantial WPS portfolios, prioritized working solely with formally registered civil society organizations (CSOs). In practice, this often resulted in restricting their grantees to urban-based CSOs with less politically sensitive agendas, while excluding many ethnic minority women's groups, who were among those least willing to register.

As the above discussion demonstrates, Myanmar state actors remained able to marginalize critical voices in work associated with the WPS agenda during this 'transitional' period. And as the above examples also show, international support for women's rights sometimes contributed to the co-optation of the WPS agenda into a wider framework of illiberal and repressive state policies. This context, in combination with dominant, global WPS practices, norms, and frameworks, combined with wider gendered social norms, shaped donor expectations on the peacebuilding roles of Myanmar women, including discursive constructions of desirable and undesirable WPS participants.

This article originated from initial informal conversations that took place among the authors, in which we reflected on common experiences we each had as staff members, consultants, researchers, and volunteers involved in a variety of gender equality-related work on Myanmar during the pre-coup period. The analysis presented here is based on a set of 41 interviews (with 36 individuals, several of whom were interviewed multiple times), conducted during the period of 2018–2020. These interviews were conducted by the four authors, and some by an additional colleague, Zin Mar Phy. The broad purpose of these interviews was to explore the effectiveness of, and challenges related to, international support to the WPS agenda.

The first category of interviewees is staff of international organizations, including UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and donor agencies. Many of these

²⁸ Kristian Stokke, Kio Kwe Moo Kham, Nang K. L. Nge, and Silje Hvilsum Kvanvik, 'Illiberal peacebuilding in a hybrid regime. Authoritarian strategies for conflict containment in Myanmar', *Political Geography*, 93:102 (2022), p. 551.

²⁹ Olivius et al., 'Feminist peace or state co-optation?'

³⁰ Women's League of Burma, *The Prospects of Advancement for Women? WLB's Analysis of National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women* (Women's League of Burma, 2019).

respondents were gender advisors or in management roles overseeing WPS funding, although WPS-related issues were not always the sole focus of their roles. In this category, we interviewed 20 individuals in 23 separate interviews. The second category of respondents is comprised of Myanmar women activists, including those from women's rights organizations working both at the national and more local levels, along with women working as gender technical experts, consultants, politicians, or representing broader civil society or resistance organizations. Indeed, many women defy easy categorization, as they may work for a women's rights organization but also be involved in broader rights-based struggles, represent an ethnic armed group, or be at least sometimes a policymaker. In this category, we interviewed 16 individuals in 18 separate interviews.

We analyzed this interview data to identify predominant discourses articulated and circulated by international donors who were funding civil society work within the WPS agenda in Myanmar during this time. Throughout the article, our data is complemented by each of our experiential knowledge gained through work with various organizations in Myanmar and long-term relationships with a range of Myanmar women activists and women's organizations. Our analysis began with an inductive approach to reviewing our data, guided by our working observations, and was then adjusted based on more detailed analysis. During this process, our initial categories of undesirability were somewhat reframed to better fit the nuances of our interview data. We finalized our analysis and reflected on its implications for ongoing WPS work in Myanmar during discussions among the authors in late 2025 and early 2026.

In addition to the formal peer review process, three additional Myanmar gender equality experts and other analysts working on Myanmar reviewed this article before its publication. The article has been shaped by their feedback. Soliciting additional reviewers among those closely involved in this context is one effort to ensure this research engages with a community of activists and practitioners who do not always have the opportunity to shape academic knowledge.

Importantly, while the article is largely a critique of problems that arise within the discourses produced and circulated by international WPS actors, in all of our work, a notable current of counter-narratives was also always present. We spoke with many people working on WPS and wider peacebuilding, as donors, technical support providers, civil society activists, and frontline workers – both Myanmar and international – who readily recognized the notable advocacy successes, organizing skills, collaboration track record, and overall longevity of Myanmar's women's movement. Some of these individuals are quoted in this article, and all of them helped shape the analysis we share here.

The production of the (un)desirable participant

Below, we draw on our interview and observational data to illustrate the production of three predominant undesirable subject positions: the oppositional woman, the fearful woman, and the apolitical woman. These three subject positions represent critiques of Myanmar women's organizations and activists articulated throughout the period of focus. However, we also discuss how donor preferences appeared to be shifting towards the end of that time and later, in response to the 2021 military coup, illustrating how these undesirability discourses can change rapidly, creating an unstable landscape of desirability criteria for women's rights activists and organizations.

The oppositional woman

The main undesirable subject position articulated by international WPS actors during the pre-coup period is that of the overly oppositional woman (or women's group). This type of activist or group was considered confrontational, making a practice of publicly calling out the violations and failures of various political actors, and often choosing not to engage with those they considered illegitimate. Given that prior to 2021, violent conflict with the Myanmar military was far more prevalent in ethnic minority areas, this type of anti-government opposition was often articulated by ethnic minority women's groups. Such organizations have a long history of international advocacy,

focusing on issues such as state-sponsored sexual violence in areas of armed conflict.³¹ This advocacy frequently included the use of direct language, condemnation of powerful perpetrators, and drawing international attention to abuse, using a disruptive and unapologetic style.³²

During this period, international donors funding WPS initiatives were also working in support of what they viewed to be an ongoing transition towards democratic governance in Myanmar. Notably, during the several years immediately leading up to the 2021 coup, an internationally backed peace process had run into considerable roadblocks, and international donors were attempting to salvage this effort. Within this, the dominant orientation of many bilateral and otherwise institutional international donors was to support peacebuilding and democratization through building the capacity of state institutions.³³

In this context, women and women's groups who engaged in vocal critique of the NLD-led government were seen by some international actors as troublesome and uncooperative, working at cross-purposes to the foreign policy goals of international donor governments. These types of women's rights actors became a thorny reminder of the uncomfortable reality of this 'transitional' period, including the significant role of the military in government and its ongoing human rights abuses. A donor representative in 2020 expressed concern about some women's group grantees, describing them as 'very activist types – they fight, use "name and shame" strategies, push as hard as they can, and argue a lot.'³⁴ In a similar vein, speaking about a report on the NSPAW written by a prominent women's alliance primarily representing ethnic minority groups, a UN representative dismissed the report's usefulness by saying:

It was a very negative report.... For the government to take them seriously, they either have to be registered [with the government], or at least come up with some positive recommendations. So if you're just negative and give no solutions, that's all not very good.³⁵

The advocacy style and the perceived anti-government position of these women's rights actors were often described as a failure to embrace the 'right' type of participation. As one donor representative put it:

These women's rights organizations don't have the right relationships. The whole peace process is predicated on having the right relationships, and they don't have them. And building trust is the key way to go about doing it, establishing quiet, discreet, relationships.³⁶

As these quotes suggest, donors tended to prefer women's rights groups that chose to collaborate with the internationally backed peace process rather than embarrass the government. Further, women's organizations seen as affiliated with ethnic minority armed groups or with broader ethnic minority struggles against the NLD-led government were often perceived to be undesirable partners.³⁷ While collaboration with the government was not perceived by donors to be a political position, opposing the government often caused women activists or organizations to be seen as sectarian and too political, transgressing ideals of local women peacebuilders.³⁸

At times, donor representatives recognized the tensions embedded in this position. In 2020, an international donor described a Myanmar women's rights group as being:

³¹ Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius, 'The politics of sexual violence in the Kachin conflict in Myanmar', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 23:3 (2021), pp. 374–95.

³² Interview with international gender expert, 10 August 2020.

³³ Stefan Bächtold, 'The rise of an anti-politics machinery: Peace, civil society and the focus on results in Myanmar', *Third World Quarterly*, 36:10 (2015), pp. 1968–83; and Olivius et al., 'Feminist peace or state co-optation?'

³⁴ Interview with donor representative, 10 July 2020.

³⁵ Interview with donor representative, 28 August 2020.

³⁶ Interview with donor representative, 23 July 2020.

³⁷ Interview with two gender experts at international NGO, 18 August 2020.

³⁸ Chilmeran, 'Constructing the local woman peacebuilder'.

... still unregistered and still seen as rebellious women ... that push the envelope. This can hinder their ability to be part of any joint process. They're seen as taking too many risks and being a liability. This makes it hard to gain political capital. I commend them for their principles, but they come at a political cost.³⁹

This same donor representative went on to admit that this women's organization had made controversial decisions in the past that she had later come to respect. As an example, she recalled a time when civil society actors had been barred by the government from discussing security issues during peace process dialogue events. The women's organization in question was among those who rejected these restrictive rules of engagement and removed themselves from the process. While at the time they were deemed by some to be insufficiently committed to peace, their decision was later vindicated when this highly restricted channel for civil society engagement predictably deteriorated into dysfunction.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, despite retroactive recognition that this women's organization had previously been right to refuse to engage in dialogue under conditions they deemed unacceptable, this donor continued to view them as insufficiently open to engagement with the government in the present.⁴¹

In addition to being viewed as too confrontational, critical, and political, we found that the 'oppositional woman' was also at times chastized by international WPS actors for being insufficiently collaborative and consensus-seeking among women's groups. This manifested in frequently expressed perceptions of the Myanmar women's movement as fractured, and of women activists being unable to coordinate and agree on goals and strategies. Ironically, the landscape of Myanmar's women's movement includes some of the country's longest-running, most diverse, and most stable civil society networks,⁴² and the notable capacity of Myanmar women's organizations to bridge conflict divides and build alliances has been the subject of previous research.⁴³

Arguably, this critique is based on unrealistic expectations that women should speak with one voice and have shared interests.⁴⁴ In a context characterized by a significant lack of horizontal trust (i.e., person-to-person trust that impacts everyday relationships), women's groups face the same relationship-building challenges as the rest of civil society, among others. During the period we examine in this article, civil society, armed groups, political parties, and the government all demonstrated tense or fragmented internal and external relationships, unsynchronized messaging, and difficulties in coordination towards shared goals. However, expectations of unity and collaborative relationships often appeared to be particularly high for women's groups.

Donor perceptions that women's groups were uncommonly uncollaborative also reflect a donor desire for greater *legibility*,^{45,46} of their grantees and partners.⁴⁷ As one WPS donor representative observed in 2020, the plethora of actions taken by such a broad and diverse women's movement

³⁹ Interview with donor representative, 23 July 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jenny Hedström, 'Solidarity in exile? The influence of gender politics in the pro-democracy struggle in Myanmar', in *Journeys from Exclusion to Inclusion: Marginalized Women's Successes in Overcoming Political Exclusion* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2013), pp. 213–65.

⁴³ Magda Lorena Cardenas and Elisabeth Olivius, 'Building peace in the shadow of war: Women-to-women diplomacy as alternative peacebuilding practice in Myanmar', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15:3 (2021), pp. 347–66; and Mollie Pepper, 'Feminist peace building at the grassroots', in Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius (eds), *Waves of Upheaval in Myanmar: Gendered Transformations and Political Transitions* (NIAS Press, 2022), pp. 97–117.

⁴⁴ Lorentzen, 'Frictional interactions'; and Chilmeran, 'Constructing the local woman peacebuilder'.

⁴⁵ In its simplest terms, *legibility* refers to the facility with which something can be deciphered or understood. Building on this definition, social scientists use this term to explore how complexity is often made comprehensible through standardization and simplification, enabling greater control or monitoring. This theoretical application was popularized by James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

⁴⁷ Interview with donor representative, 1 July 2020.

‘... causes a jumble that outsiders feel is challenging to decipher and engage with. It is like bubbles coming up everywhere, but it’s not clear how to read this because nothing comes together into a fountain.’⁴⁸ In our experience, especially newer foreign donor representatives often found Myanmar’s complex women’s movement landscape bewildering and desired a simpler field, in which women’s groups largely agreed with each other, joined forces in fewer, streamlined initiatives, and delivered more consolidated messages. Relatedly, donors typically only had clear sight of their own set of WPS grantees, and wanted to see these particular groups (hand-selected by themselves as the donor) collaborating with each other. Donors tended to be less aware of the many ways that women’s groups might be collaborating in more organic, self-selected ways.⁴⁹ This builds on the notion of legibility, since it often appeared that the primary desire was for each donor to perceive their own portfolio as consolidated and coherent.

Moreover, WPS donors often did not appear aware that their own funding practices, narratives, and stylistic preferences had at times increased tensions among women’s organizations. Indeed, in our experience during this period, some donors fuelled tensions in the women’s movement by elevating the profile of a small group of favourite activists and groups (often referred to colloquially as ‘donor darlings’), at the expense of more diffuse and incremental movement-building work. As one long-time international gender specialist noted,

It’s not clear that the competitive nature of the donor environment is conflict sensitive, in a context where civil society is rife with historical tensions and mistrust. Donors don’t acknowledge the ways that their money and how they distribute it overlays onto existing tensions. Then they turn around and judge the women’s movement when everyone doesn’t magically get along.⁵⁰

As time passed and international personnel turned over, the critique of the women’s movement as fractious became an oft-repeated truism that donor representatives passed along to each other. We heard this critique articulated by international staff new to their posts, who had already developed this perception after a very short time with their portfolio. In this sense, this view did not necessarily reflect direct experience on the part of those who repeated it, but had rather become a token of received wisdom. Of course, this critique was likely also underpinned by the unexamined sexism involved in highlighting women’s conflicts with each other while overlooking, normalizing, or attributing greater substance to conflicts among men.

The construction of the oppositional woman as an undesirable participant in the WPS agenda aligns well with Chilmeran’s⁵¹ typology of the stylized roles that are prescribed for local women peacebuilders, where they are expected to be non-sectarian and apolitical. Similarly, research on the implementation of the WPS agenda in Mali⁵² and the Solomon Islands⁵³ has highlighted how WPS practices at times demonstrate a preference for a depoliticized position for women, in which they are expected to represent a homogenized identity as women, and to be able to bridge differences and conflict divides. The oppositional woman, therefore, is undesirable because she is too political, confrontational, and not sufficiently consensus-seeking. This critique is, in the case of Myanmar, most often levelled against ethnic minority women, illustrating how women’s identification with broader political struggles, ethnic collective identities, and anti-government agendas may be perceived as disruptive, partly because it breaks with the idealized image of women as singular representatives of the shared interest of women.

⁴⁸ Interview with donor representative, 10 July 2020.

⁴⁹ Interview with international gender expert, 29 July 2020.

⁵⁰ Interview with international gender expert, 6 August 2020.

⁵¹ Chilmeran, ‘Constructing the local woman peacebuilder’.

⁵² Lorentzen, ‘Frictional interactions’.

⁵³ George, ‘Light, heat and shadows’.

The fearful woman

Somewhat paradoxically, a second undesirable subject position that emerged from our observations and interview data is that of the overly accommodating, reticent, or fearful woman (or women's group). This critique was at times levelled against those who opted for an insider's approach during the pre-coup period, attempting to shape policy-making processes as active participants in them, and to influence state officials privately via collegial relationships. These women articulated ways in which they consciously adapted their messages and tactics in hopes of improving women's lives from within the state apparatus.⁵⁴ This was often understood as a more collaborative or agreeable style, focused on technical assistance, relationship-building, and a willingness to engage with a wider range of actors.

As the critique against the oppositional woman makes clear, the insider approach was preferred by many international WPS donors. During the period of transition towards semi-democratic governance, international donors actively encouraged or strongly incentivized CSOs to move from border areas or neighbouring countries and set themselves up inside central Myanmar.⁵⁵ Indeed, building the capacity of state institutions from inside the country was the dominant approach of international aid, and this also shaped WPS practice.⁵⁶ In fact, the 'collaborative civil society woman', willing to work with state institutions and new policy processes to help them function well, was most commonly the paradigm of desirability embraced by major international actors during this time.

Some women involved in organizations that took this approach did find that it was at least sometimes productive. As one women's rights activist taking an insider approach in key policy spaces told us:

It's better to show that we are capable and we have technical knowledge.... We were treated like we should not be there [in policy spaces] at the beginning, but slowly, as we practiced our presence in different spaces, we tried to give really concrete advice, and we looked for opportunities to offer to prepare something very useful for peace process stakeholders, our status has improved. We need to do concrete things that are helpful. We are slowly acknowledged this way. This builds up respect over time.⁵⁷

Here we see how some women's rights actors working with the government and peace process stakeholders felt there were genuine opportunities for substantive influence to be gained via collaboration and technical assistance.

However, as a consequence of strong donor preferences during this transitional period, choosing a more technocratic approach also came with distinct material advantages. Several long-time gender experts reflected in 2020 that when donor funding to Myanmar began to increase around 2011–2012, women's groups that were viewed as more confrontational lost funding to those willing to do more technical assistance and insider engagement.⁵⁸ This is in line with similar processes that have occurred elsewhere, in which donor preferences structure financial resources such that more 'radical' civil society groups – or those focused on social movement mobilization and overt state accountability – have less access to resources than groups using other tactics.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Olivius, 'Time to go home? The conflictual politics of diaspora return in the Burmese women's movement', *Asian Ethnicity*, 20:2 (2019), pp. 148–67.

⁵⁵ Interview with international gender expert, 10 August 2020.

⁵⁶ Ashley South, 'Hybrid governance' and the politics of legitimacy in the Myanmar peace process', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48:1 (2018), pp. 50–66; and Olivius et al., 'Feminist peace or state co-optation?'

⁵⁷ Interview with women's rights activist, 28 July 2020.

⁵⁸ Interviews with donor representative, 28 July 2020, and with international gender expert, 10 August 2020.

⁵⁹ Mary-Collier Wilks, 'Activist, entrepreneur, or caretaker? Negotiating varieties of women in development', *Gender & Society*, 33:2 (2019), pp. 224–50.

Unsurprisingly, women's groups who opted for this more collaborative approach were also often better educated, with more polished presentational styles, and higher English language skills.⁶⁰ Those who did not fit this profile reported feeling discriminated against by international donors.⁶¹ Skewed donor attention and resources going towards already relatively more privileged women reinforced patterns of exclusion that had marginalized ethnic minority women from rural, historically conflict-affected areas of the country.⁶² In this way, WPS donors often reproduced existing inequalities by providing preferential financial backing to women's groups seen to be engaging in a manner that supported the donor's own foreign policy goals in Myanmar at that time.

Despite this default tilt towards encouraging WPS actors to work with the state, international actors did not always seem to understand the implications of this approach. During this time, civic space inside Myanmar did not expand to the degree that had been anticipated early in the transition.⁶³ Women's groups and activists that had moved inside of centrally governed Myanmar and were working with the government became subject to greater scrutiny and risk.⁶⁴ Especially from around 2017 onwards, exacerbated by the Rohingya genocide and efforts by some journalists and civil society actors to document the violence and advocate for Rohingya rights, the semi-democratic government showed an increasing appetite for surveilling and controlling civil society and punishing speech.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, in several interviews with the authors during this period, donor representatives complained that women's organizations they were funding to undertake WPS activities had become too cautious.⁶⁶ In one instance in 2020, a UN officer shared her frustration about a meeting in which government officials (including those from the military) and women's CSOs gathered to feed into a report on Myanmar's progress on the NSPAW. As discussed earlier, one issue area in the NSPAW entitled 'women in emergencies' was commonly understood to loosely encompass peace and security issues in conflict-affected parts of the country. Arriving at this discussion item, the UN official told us she had expected the women's organizations to share specific information about the conditions faced by women in conflict-affected areas, including conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated by the military. However, she was disappointed, recalling:

We asked all the CSOs to come and also all the government departments, and ... we did group work. And you know, around 'women in emergencies', nobody talked about conflict.... And then I even said, you know, you're supposed to represent the whole of the country ... so I urge you to talk about the issues of women that are not present here, the communities in the conflict areas.⁶⁷

Despite her urging, no women at the table spoke about conflict-related sexual violence or other atrocities in conflict-affected areas during this meeting, although these crimes were widespread. Similarly, in an interview with an international gender expert during this same period, she noted,

The technical assistance work can go too far ... [some women's organizations] were so non-confrontational in a meeting ... I witnessed that I was astounded. [Some women's organizations] are going so far toward alliance and accommodation, emphasizing that they have the right skills and connections, that they will lose their broad-based social movement.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Interview with international gender expert, 10 August 2020.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Olivius et al., 'Feminist peace or state co-optation?'

⁶³ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2019: Myanmar' (Freedom House, 2019), available at: {www.freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-world/2019}, accessed 16 January 2026.

⁶⁴ Cardenas and Olivius, 'Building peace in the shadow of war'.

⁶⁵ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2019'.

⁶⁶ Interviews with donor representatives, 27 July 2020, and interview with head of international NGO, 29 July 2020.

⁶⁷ Interview with donor representative, 28 August 2020.

⁶⁸ Interview with head of international NGO, 29 July 2020.

In general, concerns about women's organizations becoming depoliticized and unwilling to talk about gender-related injustice are valid. However, the surprise and frustrated expectations described by these individuals appear misaligned with the power relations operating in these meetings and more broadly within government–civil society relations in Myanmar during this time. In meetings where military, civilian government, and civil society representatives were all present together, issues related to armed conflict – including conflict-related sexual violence – were routinely silenced, denied, or avoided.⁶⁹ As discussed, depoliticized euphemisms had to be used even to obliquely reference the gendered impacts of conflict, so as to avoid pointing the finger at the military's sexual violence crimes. In this context, the fact that continued military dominance in government, along with re-intensified forms of repression, might have significant dampening effects on civil society voice, should not have come as a surprise. However, these examples demonstrate how donors often failed to understand the implications of the civil society–government collaborations they were continuing to encourage and financially incentivize. In another interview with a WPS donor in 2020, he expressed frustration with his organization's women's rights grantees, accusing them of not being 'brave', becoming 'unambitious', and asserting they '... have a reluctance to push for things – they don't always try hard. Women's organizations don't push hard enough out of fear ... [they] might feel they are offending others if they do, and then the government can resist and ignore them.'⁷⁰ Similarly, around the same time, a UN official criticized 'silent' women's organizations, arguing that through their presence in fora for policy consultation, 'they end up endorsing things they should have spoken [up] about.'⁷¹ Notably, this same UN official was also highly critical of women's organizations perceived to be too oppositional and confrontational, illustrating the tensions embedded in international constructions of (un)desirability.⁷² These tensions often made it almost impossible for Myanmar women's organizations to manage the balancing act of becoming and remaining the right type of WPS participant. We return to this point later for further discussion.

These types of comments from donors appear unaware of the ways in which international support shaped the behaviours and approaches of women's rights activists in the direction of accommodation and non-confrontation. During this period, women's organizations were encouraged to work with the government and participate in policymaking spaces, learning to adapt their communication styles, tactics, and focus in order to do so. However, through the above examples, we see that donors often did not understand how the very same approaches might impact the willingness to use these spaces to speak out on sensitive topics, or the risks that doing so entailed.

Firstly, being too outspoken in government fora could cause women's rights actors to lose key relationships that were integral to the success of their insider approach. In an interview in 2020, one women's rights organization representative told us they were often cautious about what they said in large group meetings with government stakeholders, explaining '... because we do not want people to feel embarrassed about not keeping their word, we do not "catch them" in the act of not being accountable. It is partly because we do not want to be distanced from them or damage our relationships.'⁷³ Another prominent women's rights activist told us around this time that she was aware that organizations she worked with were being criticized by donors and other women's groups, who felt they were being too diplomatic.⁷⁴ She responded to this criticism by stating,

It's not because we are afraid and don't want to take the risk. We think it will work better if we are more subtle, because these issues are so hypersensitive. People with military backgrounds

⁶⁹ Olivius et al., 'Feminist peace or state co-optation?'

⁷⁰ Interview with donor representatives, 28 July 2020 and 29 July 2020.

⁷¹ Interview with donor representative, 28 August 2020.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Interview with women's rights activist, 28 July 2020.

⁷⁴ Interview with women's rights activist, 7 August 2020.

react easily to certain words or behaviours, and once you've crossed that line, they will never listen to you or your entire organization.⁷⁵

Women's rights activists we spoke with highlighted the specific gendered nature of these dynamics. As one woman activist told us,

... many women only get into the role of leader because they are strong. They fight and resist, and that's how they survive. But men suspect that they are being dominated and then cannot tolerate this approach or behaviour. It creates alienation and resistance.... We also need to avoid triggering this kind of confrontation.⁷⁶

This suggests that choosing to not speak out on a particular issue in a group setting may be a reflection of a strategic silence on the part of some women's organizations, given the gendered structural conditions they are operating within.⁷⁷ As such, silence does not necessarily imply weakness or a lack of agency, as it was often understood by international donors.

Moreover, being too outspoken in the presence of government actors did not only entail risks to the relationships and reputation of women's organizations and activists. In our experience, during this time, donors often appeared unaware of the very real security risks involved in challenging the government or speaking about sensitive topics, when operating in a space where there was no protection from surveillance, harassment, and potential arrest. This insecurity was particularly felt by women with prior personal experiences of war, trauma, and violence at the hands of state agents. An activist from an organization with a history of advocacy that was previously conducted from outside the country explained how donors had affected their ability to be outspoken:

There was a funding cut to the exile movement and we were forced to move inside Burma without any security. So there can be no surprise that there has been a dampening of our efforts. We need support, but ... the donors are actually not able to shield us. Many in the donor community, they said the country is changing ... why not move back? They underestimated the risks that remained and put CSOs in a difficult place.⁷⁸

This interviewee went on to explain that, having moved inside centrally controlled Myanmar, they now had to make more complex risk assessments related to what they said publicly, considering the safety of all staff and members in different parts of the country.⁷⁹ Other women's organizations described making similarly complex risk calculations around the same time.⁸⁰

The above discussion demonstrates the difficulties in finding an acceptable balance between what international actors perceived as the 'oppositional woman' and the 'fearful woman'. While a more critical arm's length approach as a vocal outsider of the internationally backed government was often frowned upon as unproductive, some WPS donors expected insider women to raise highly sensitive topics in face-to-face settings, despite the higher risk of this type of confrontation. When they declined to do so, some international donors viewed them as failing to adequately stand up for vulnerable women or being unwilling to 'speak truth to power'.⁸¹ While both fostering strong relationships among power-holders and confronting their unaccountable and abusive behaviour can be important for achieving gender justice aims, these approaches may at times be

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Interview with women's rights activist, 28 July 2020.

⁷⁷ Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered silences in post-conflict societies: A typology', *Peacebuilding*, 8:1 (2020), pp. 1–15; and Linnéa Blomqvist, Elisabeth Olivius, and Jenny Hedström, 'Care and silence in women's everyday peacebuilding in Myanmar', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21:3 (2021), pp. 223–44.

⁷⁸ Interview with women's rights activist, 22 August 2020.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Interviews with women's rights activists, 28 July 2020 and 7 August 2020.

⁸¹ Bayard Rustin, *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence* (American Friends Service Committee, 1955).

mutually exclusive, creating the need for constant cost/benefit calculations on the part of gender equality actors. Too often, international WPS donors did not appear to recognize or fully appreciate this trade-off.

Additionally, WPS donors who criticized women's groups for their lack of boldness were at the same time often hesitant to back them up or push for gender equality priorities themselves. Partly, they were struggling to keep the peace process on track and to secure influence and relevance within it. As one international gender specialist with experience working with various WPS donors put it, 'It seems like some donors act like WPS is just not worth the expenditure of their limited political capital'.⁸²

Critically, while international WPS donors often categorized specific women activists or women's groups as either more confrontational or more accommodating, in our experience, actual women's rights actors often defied this easy categorization.⁸³ Some individuals or groups known for their technical assistance and collaborative approaches with government during this period also had long histories of engagement in more disruptive activism and confrontational postures towards power-holders. Similarly, some groups or individuals known for their direct and challenging styles have also engaged in years of careful informal relationship-building and back-channel influencing.⁸⁴

Further, having different activists and organizations using different tactics at the same time was sometimes described by activists as a strategy of complementarity. For example, one interviewee in 2020 told us that her insider organization had a practice of referring information to a group more engaged in outsider advocacy.⁸⁵ The organization working more closely with the government had access to insider spaces and was more privy to problems there, but the advocacy organization was in a better position to call out these issues. Similarly, in another interview around the same time, a gender specialist noted the need for simultaneous insider and outsider work on gender equality: 'You need to build up the pressure, but then those people may not know how to change the system once they get the attention. So, then you need the technical assistance capacity to make use of that moment'.⁸⁶ One women's rights activist summed up her view by saying, 'We need to grab the strengths of both approaches and weave them together'.⁸⁷ This insight into the mutual benefit of divergent tactics comes from a more systems-level lens that was often inaccessible to WPS donors, many of whom had a limited view of the complex field of Myanmar's women's movement.

The apolitical woman

The third undesirable subject position reflected in, and produced by, discourses employed by international WPS donors was of the apolitical woman (or women's group). This subject position centred on a critique of women who were perceived to be overly focused on community-level needs and service delivery priorities, and were less interested in more formally political spaces and policymaking processes. Within specific donor agencies in which feminism was more embraced, women's groups focused on service delivery might also be labelled as insufficiently feminist. For example, describing a network of local women's committees, in 2020, a UN official dismissed them as being 'more into maternal and child care – you know, very 1970s social welfare kind of work'.⁸⁸ Based on this assessment, these women's committees were not seen as the right kind of participants in the WPS agenda.

In contrast, local women's understandings of peace sometimes revolved around mundane, everyday indicators of security, such as being able to walk home alone at night without fear, or being

⁸² Interview with international gender expert, 6 August 2020.

⁸³ Interview with international gender expert, 10 August 2020.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Interview with women's rights activist, 7 August 2020.

⁸⁶ Interview with international gender expert, 29 July 2020.

⁸⁷ Interview with women's rights activist, 28 August 2020.

⁸⁸ Interview with donor representative, 28 August 2020.

able to rear pigs and chickens in one's backyard without the livestock being taken by soldiers.⁸⁹ This demonstrates significant gaps between different perceptions of the content of an adequately political and feminist peace agenda.⁹⁰ In Myanmar during this period, international WPS activities and support to women's participation in peacebuilding had a strong emphasis on the formal peace process, despite its increasingly dysfunctional nature. Consequently, some of this programming operated in parallel to, rather than reinforcing, women's long-standing peacebuilding work at the grassroots level.⁹¹ Commenting on this gap, a Myanmar gender advisor argued that local women in conflict-affected areas:

... want to see this peace in their daily life and security.... Their peace is kind of different from how the Myanmar peace process is unfolding, and the Myanmar peace process is beyond just the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).... Yes, you can have so many NCA meetings in Nay Pyi Taw or Chiang Mai. If I'm still living in fear, it's no peace for us.⁹²

Arguably, the gap between international engagement and local women's conceptions of peace was at least partly generated by a lack of attention to the lived experiences of many Myanmar women. Since Myanmar is a conflict-affected country that also experiences severe natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies – along with long-term inadequate state capacity and outright state neglect in some areas – the work of many local women's organizations has been to step into service delivery gaps to improve women's lives at the community level. Importantly, this orientation has also been a response to intense political repression in different periods. During times when overt political activism has been most risky, women's political agency has often taken quieter, more informal, and deliberately non-visible forms, and has often been more focused on service delivery and livelihoods. However, this is not simply apolitical work. In fact, in doing this type of work, women may be seen making decisions and controlling resources, including in ways that men come to rely on. Labelling this as mere charity work, irrelevant to broader processes of social change and peacebuilding, reveals ignorance about the gendered politics embedded in this work and its value for the creation of everyday peace and security.⁹³

This discussion recalls debates in feminist literature about 'practical' vs. 'strategic' gender interests. Maxine Molyneux argued that practical gender interests are not part of a struggle for liberation per se, but are rather efforts to improve one's life under existing power dynamics.⁹⁴ Strategic gender interests, instead, aim to change the 'rules of the game'. For Molyneux, strategic interests can only be pursued once practical needs have been accounted for, at least to a reasonable degree.⁹⁵

While these concepts have been useful in considering the variations of gender interests people may have, Molyneux's formulation has been criticized for creating a hierarchy between these two types of interests – one that perhaps even echoes a wider patriarchal devaluing of caregiving labour. Further, her formulation has been critiqued as implying a linear progression from practical women's interests to strategic ones (i.e., more advanced, sophisticated, or ambitious ones). Critics have also pointed out that the practical vs. strategic binary often maps problematically onto the divide between middle and non-middle-class women's movements and organizations,⁹⁶ appearing to valorize middle-class interests above those of non-middle-class actors. Additionally, the

⁸⁹ Interview with women's rights activist, 12 May 2020.

⁹⁰ Olivius et al., 'Feminist peace or state co-optation?'

⁹¹ Pepper, 'Feminist peace building'.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Pepper, 'Feminist peace building'; and Blomqvist et al., 'Care and silence in women's everyday peacebuilding'.

⁹⁴ Maxine Molyneux, 'Mobilization without emancipation? Women's interests, state and revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies*, 11:2 (1985), pp. 227–53.

⁹⁵ Molyneux, 'Mobilization without emancipation?'

⁹⁶ Maruja Barrig, 'The difficult equilibrium between bread and roses: Women's organizations and the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Peru', in Jane S. Jaquette (ed), *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 114–48; and Sonia E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

temporal ordering of these two categories ignores the ways in which gender equality movements often formulate aspects of both types of interests at the same time,⁹⁷ and may move back and forth between a focus on practical and strategic interests, depending on the political context or degree of need.

The critique of the ‘apolitical woman’ can also be understood against the backdrop of Chilmeran’s⁹⁸ discussion of how local women peacebuilders are idealized as intermediaries that facilitate international actors’ access to local communities. In this constructed subject position, the apolitical woman fails to act as this point of contact, as she does not speak the language of international peacebuilding. As Lyytikäinen and Yadav have argued,⁹⁹ women who are understood as ideal WPS actors must possess the status gained from perceived proximity to the ‘local’ and the ‘authenticity capital’ this brings. However, they must also be able to package locally specific knowledge into the language and formats of international frameworks. This latter requirement excludes women who lack certain language skills, networks, and a cosmopolitan fluency with international structures, policies, and norms. Thus, the ideal ‘local’ participant is an educated, urban woman integrated within WPS policy-oriented communities, not a grassroots activist or frontline worker.

A related critique of the ‘apolitical woman’ that we observed is the critique that some women, while appropriately committed to issues or processes that were considered properly ‘political’, were seen as insufficiently politically minded to approach those issues *strategically*. As one WPS donor commented in 2020, ‘sometimes it’s challenging to try to have [women’s group grantees] become more politically informed, to learn to contribute at the right time, and to take up opportunities. We don’t want to make them donor-driven, but they’re also not strategic in their approaches.’¹⁰⁰ The perception that smaller or more local women’s groups were frustratingly unstrategic or lacked political savvy was a frequent critique articulated by WPS donors.

To the extent that these observations of a lack of strategic vision among women’s groups were a genuine problem, one long-term international gender specialist linked this at least partly to the perverse effects of funding models and the public relations interests of donors. As she explained:

No one gives [women’s organizations] adequate core funding ... because everyone wants to fund the ad hoc events or the trips or the public-facing work. In essence, donors want too much political mileage out of what women’s organizations do. This leads to women’s organizations becoming unstrategic, because they’re running after small pots of money and constantly prepping for workshops, speaking engagements, and donor meetings.¹⁰¹

The same gender advisor pointed out that this situation arises because women’s organizations are in such desperate need of resources that they have no choice but to try to access whatever funding is available:

Women’s organizations are highly vulnerable to these so-called partnerships, which actually just turn them into logisticians for INGOs or UN agencies, because they are so underfunded.... So it makes complete sense to them to organize meetings for INGOs, and the UN, and donors – things that give them almost no return. [In those arrangements], there [may be] no co-funding and there are also no tangible things like equipment or ... whatever it might be that’s useful for them.¹⁰²

⁹⁷Raka Ray and Anna C. Korteweg, ‘Women’s movements in the third world: Identity, mobilization, and autonomy’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25:1 (1999), pp. 47–71.

⁹⁸Chilmeran, ‘Constructing the local woman peacebuilder’.

⁹⁹Lyytikäinen and Yadav, ‘Capitalising on UNSCR 1325’.

¹⁰⁰Interview with donor representative, 10 July 2020.

¹⁰¹Interview with international gender expert, 6 August 2020.

¹⁰²Interview with international gender expert, 31 August 2020.

Notably, with often short funding commitment cycles and changing political landscapes in their home countries, we found that WPS donors themselves regularly struggled to implement a long-term strategic vision in support of the WPS agenda. Despite this, WPS donor representatives often complained about the lack of strategic vision from women's organizations, while not appearing to understand the linkages between these behaviours and their own funding modalities, shifting priorities, and short-term thinking.

Thus, the critique of women's organizations and activists as insufficiently political or strategic reflects both a lack of understanding of how international funding models shape the work of women's organizations, and a lack of alignment with the needs, priorities, and experiences of many women living and seeking to build peace in Myanmar's conflict-affected areas. As Gibbings argues, the ideal woman participant in the WPS agenda must be seen as connected to the local but at the same time allied with the global 'transcendental goals of the UN' and other international peacebuilding actors.¹⁰³ Being too connected to the particular, or too focused on the mundane issues of everyday life, such as community-level service delivery, is often seen as undesirable. While the 'oppositional woman' subject position discussed above is perhaps too relentlessly political, the 'apolitical woman' is seen as irrelevant to WPS politics, or inadequate in her approach to it.

Unstable and shifting discourses

While the three undesirable subject positions discussed above were prominent among WPS donors during the period we focus on, we were also able to observe intimations of change in these discourses towards the end of this period. Because of dramatic changes in the context thereafter, including the deepening of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup that occurred in February 2021, we are unable to determine whether discourse changes that surfaced in 2020 would have carried through into substantive material changes in funding and partnership preferences, had the political landscape not been so dramatically disrupted. Nevertheless, we can begin to see how perceptions of desirability related to WPS participants depend on shifting contextual factors, including local political developments in the aid recipient country and the foreign policy goals of WPS donors.

Specifically, towards the end of the 2018–2020 period, we observed WPS donor representatives beginning to articulate frustrations connected to their own funding directions. For example, a long-term international donor representative told us she felt there had been an over-focus on building the technical abilities of a small group of women's rights actors to engage in peace negotiations, at the expense of investing in a broad-based grassroots mobilization of popular support for the peace process.¹⁰⁴ Also in 2020, a prominent Myanmar policymaker told us she was similarly concerned that donor-funded WPS interventions through Myanmar women's groups had overlooked the value of galvanizing popular support and leveraging public pressure for advancing the WPS agenda and the peace process.¹⁰⁵ This shift in opinion occurred in the context of a highly bureaucratic but largely stalled internationally backed peace process, which was causing some to call for a re-consideration of funding priorities, peacebuilding approaches, and the structure of the peace process as a whole.¹⁰⁶

In fact, towards the end of the period we focus on, we began to hear that women's groups that had been considered by some to be too confrontational to work with were now re-gaining favour.¹⁰⁷ Their strengths in using direct, everyday language, and attracting attention through advocacy, appeared relevant again. While this adjustment may have been a predictable response to the obstacles encountered in the peace process, it also came with a deepening critique of the women's

¹⁰³ Laura J. Shepherd, 'Making war safe for women? National Action Plans and the militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda', *International Political Science Review*, 37:3 (2016), pp. 324–35.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with international gender expert, 29 July 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Myanmar woman policymaker, 13 August 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Interviews with donor representatives, 28 July 2020 and 29 July 2020, and with a women's rights activist, 28 July 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with donor representatives, 5 August 2020.

groups that had invested in a more insider, technocratic approach. Where once this approach had been labelled ‘politically savvy’, these groups were increasingly described as ineffective, overly cautious, and lacking ambition. Here we see that donors’ often narrow perceptions of ‘what works’ to pursue the WPS agenda in this context shaped the approaches and behaviours of women’s organizations and activists, at times leading them to over-invest in strategies that proved less than successful. Critically, this put them in an even more precarious position when these strategies fell out of favour or were proven less effective than had been hoped.

In perhaps a positive sign of adaptation under extreme conditions, the authors did witness a shift in donor perceptions of (un)desirability among WPS partners in the aftermath of the 2021 coup. While this is outside of the primary period of focus in this article, it is useful to briefly outline our observations here. Soon after the coup, many Myanmar women’s organizations pivoted to emergency response work, as state violence against citizens skyrocketed and communities were rapidly displaced due to intensified conflict. This dramatic uptick in basic humanitarian needs pushed donors to acknowledge the importance of women’s organizations in meeting the growing need for emergency service delivery.¹⁰⁸ Further, the post-coup crackdown on civil society perpetrated by the Myanmar military underscored to donors why some of their partners might choose to invest in less overtly politically sensitive work for their own security during a period of intensified repression.

In separate interviews in 2022, some WPS donors acknowledged that supporting women’s groups to engage in timely emergency response could also help bolster their social position in ways that increased broader acceptance of their gender equality work.¹⁰⁹ Further, some donors saw emergency response as a means of women’s rights groups building credibility that could help them gain influence in alternative local governance structures that rose in prominence after the coup.¹¹⁰ In our experience, building and retaining legitimacy in the eyes of communities may be particularly difficult for women’s rights actors, who are often more likely to be faced with negative public narratives or to be sidelined from decision-making. We view this post-coup shift in the thinking of some WPS donors in Myanmar to be a positive example of how WPS donors can recognize and support women’s organizations’ shifting priorities and strategies in a rapidly changing context. Nevertheless, it again demonstrates how (un)desirability discourses produced and circulated by international WPS donors can change rapidly, creating an unstable landscape of desirability criteria for women’s organizations. Further, despite this positive example, in our experience, the discourses we have documented in this article remain prominent among some international donors supporting the WPS agenda in Myanmar today.

Conclusion

While the participation of ‘local’ women is often emphasized as critical to the implementation of the WPS agenda and to the construction of a gender-just peace, the agency and political space for women activists and women’s organizations is shaped by narrow and often contradictory expectations and discursive scripts. Complementing previous accounts focusing on resources and decision-making power,¹¹¹ our analysis has demonstrated how the discursive construction of local WPS participant subject positions constrains the agency of local actors, even as their participation in the implementation of the WPS agenda is encouraged. Our analytical focus on discourses of (un)desirability expressed by international WPS donors in Myanmar sheds light on just how difficult it is for women activists to be perceived as the right kind of WPS participant.

¹⁰⁸ Interviews with donor representatives, 5 May 2022 and 27 June 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with donor representative, 27 June 2022.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Boer Cueva et al., ‘Funding precarity and women’s peace work’; Hamilton et al., *Civil Society, Care Labour*; and Arutyunova and Clark, ‘Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots’.

Our analysis highlights the discursive construction and circulation of the undesirable subject positions of the ‘oppositional woman’, the ‘fearful woman’, and the ‘apolitical woman’, as amalgamations of critiques expressed by some international WPS donors during Myanmar’s period of semi-democratic transition prior to the 2021 military coup. While women who were outspoken critics of the government or of dominant approaches to peacebuilding were often seen as troublesome and unhelpfully confrontational, those opting for a more collaborative insider strategy were eventually chastized for perceptions that they were too reticent and accommodating. And while both an outspoken and overtly political position and a more technocratic approach were each represented as undesirable in different ways, so too were women’s groups largely focused on local service delivery, who were often deemed irrelevant to the WPS agenda.

Furthermore, our analysis shows how (un)desirability discourses are unstable and change over time, thus moving the goalpost of desirability and requiring local women to navigate a shifting terrain. This indicates that desirability in terms of WPS agenda participation is often aligned with wider donor foreign policy preferences and other shifts in international donor values and aims. To be sure, donors are not a homogeneous group, and some have demonstrated a more enduring commitment to WPS than others. However, even donor organizations that have maintained a relatively consistent commitment to the WPS agenda over a considerable amount of time may still significantly alter the *types* of gender equality actors they prefer to support, based on shifting political aims, allies, strategies, and tastes.

We argue that these shifts are likely to be particularly acute in conflict-affected contexts, where domestic politics can dramatically change quickly, also upending the foreign policy positions of other countries within short timeframes. Multiple rapid shifts in donor preferences can leave gender equality actors and women’s movements experiencing a kind of metaphorical whiplash. In this environment, they may be hard-pressed to assert their own priorities, strategies, tactical preferences, and assessments of ‘what works’ in their contexts, while also retaining the resources to sustain gender equality work.

While our analysis reflects contextual dynamics and changes specific to Myanmar and to our period of study, we contend that our key findings resonate beyond this case, highlighting persistent tensions and limitations in international aid and peacebuilding. The impossibility of being the right type of actor reproduces asymmetrical power relations where local actors are always subjects to be taught, guided, shaped, and moulded by international actors, who are positioned as the legitimate knowers of the WPS agenda and of peacebuilding more broadly. While symbolic ‘local women’ are fetishized and rhetorically held up as important actors, actual local women are often disciplined and marginalized in WPS politics.

While space does not permit us to include a thorough reflection on implications for policy and practice, our analysis suggests that WPS donors and international peacebuilding practitioners would do well to maintain scepticism of dominant narratives about women activists and women’s rights organizations, bearing in mind common tropes that often stand in for contextual complexities, and the ways in which international actors are often complicit in constructing and circulating these narratives. Further, it is important to approach decisions made by women’s organizations – to engage, resist, or remain silent – with curiosity and the starting assumption that these choices reflect analysis and reason. More broadly, a more power-aware approach to supporting the WPS agenda remains needed.

Acknowledgements. This article has significantly benefited from insights and feedback from a number of people. We would first like to thank the Myanmar activists, women’s rights actors, and gender equality experts who agreed to be interviewed and whose experiences helped shape our arguments. We have also benefited enormously from a wider range of conversations with WPS funders, gender equality experts, and practitioners related to Myanmar over the years, and this article reflects experiences discussed in different forms with a community of people. We would also like to thank those who provided feedback on drafts of this article, including three anonymous reviewers recruited by the *Review of International Studies* and three additional critical friends with close experience with Myanmar women-led civil society and the WPS funding landscape. Of course, responsibility for the final choices made in this article remains entirely with the authors.

Funding statement. This work has also been made possible by support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant Number: 767-2023-2155), the Swedish Research Council (Grant Number: 2019-04227), and the International Development Research Centre (Ottawa, Canada).

Rebecca Haines is a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department of McGill University, Canada and a visiting scholar at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Her work focuses on the gender dynamics of resistance movements and the role of women's organizations in peacebuilding and political change.

Elisabeth Olivius is an associate professor in Peace and Conflict Studies and Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Political Science, Umeå University, Sweden. Her current research explores the role of women's organizations in peacebuilding and resistance and the politics of women's rights in authoritarian and hybrid conflict-affected regimes.

Khin Khin Mra is a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester researching gender, governance, and institutional change in Myanmar's shifting political landscape. Her work examines feminist activism and the politics of gender reform under hybrid and authoritarian regimes.

Jenny Hedström is an associate professor in War Studies and Director of Studies at the Swedish Defence University, Sweden. Her current research explores the role of women's voluntary defence organizations in total defence, and the politics and effects of women's wings on war and postwar transitions.