Building Peace in the Shadow of War: Women-to-Women Diplomacy as Alternative Peacebuilding Practice in Myanmar

Magda Lorena Cárdenas and Elisabeth Olivius

Department of Political Science and Graduate School for Gender Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; Department of Political Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Conventional assumptions locating peacebuilding temporally after violence have largely prevented exploration of how peacebuilding is practiced amidst conditions of ongoing violence. This article addresses this gap by analysing how Myanmar women’s activists have devised strategies in pursuit of peace, amidst ongoing armed conflict, from the 1990s and onwards. The findings demonstrate that women’s inter-ethnic cooperation contributed to transform conflict divides long before the initiation of formal national peace negotiations in 2011. Further, theorizing these peacebuilding practices, the article provides new insights into the dynamics of women’s peace activism of relevance beyond the case of Myanmar.

KEYWORDS

Women’s activism; gender equality; inter-ethnic dialogue; Women’s League of Burma; Peacebuilding

Introduction

In Myanmar, armed conflict has persisted for 70 years. As such, it is not typically a case considered in research on peacebuilding. While a formal peace process has now been ongoing since 2011, alternative practices of peacebuilding beyond official negotiations have a much longer history, but remain understudied and poorly understood. Arguably, conventional assumptions locating peacebuilding temporally after the end of war have prevented exploration of peacebuilding in cases like Myanmar. This clearly limits our understanding of how peace is conceptualized and pursued by people affected by armed conflict, and how post-war peacebuilding is part of, and shaped by, a longer temporal trajectory of peacebuilding.

We address this gap by analysing peacebuilding as a process of social transformation (Lederach 1997; Mac Ginty 2014) that can be observed both before and beyond official peace processes or conventional peacebuilding measures. In this process of social transformation, women play a significant, but often unrecognized, role through grassroots initiatives seeking to facilitate dialogue and transform conflict narratives (Banerjee 2008; Gizelis 2011; Donahoe 2017). We contribute to advancing literature on women and peacebuilding by introducing the concept women-to-women diplomacy to identify
and analyse women’s peacebuilding practices built on shared experiences, the promotion of women’s agency, and a commitment to gender equality as a key aspect of peace (Cárdenas 2019a). We develop this concept drawing on numerous empirical examples documented in previous research, arguing that the components of women-to-women diplomacy as we conceptualize it here capture recurring features of women’s peacebuilding practices across cases (Cockburn 2007; Farnsworth 2011). With the aim of facilitating a more systematic analysis of women’s peacebuilding practices, we suggest women-to-women diplomacy as an analytical framework, and demonstrate its utility through an analysis of the case of Myanmar.

Having fled ethnic persecution and political repression, women exiles from ethnic minority insurgencies and pro-democracy movements began forming women’s organizations in Myanmar’s neighbouring countries in the early 1990s. The limited space afforded to women within ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) as well as the democracy movement prompted the mobilization of gender as a new basis for political identification and action, and a multi-ethnic movement of women from Myanmar gradually emerged as a significant player in the Burmese diaspora. A key milestone in this process was the founding of Women’s League of Burma (WLB), an umbrella organization uniting organizations of women from various ethnic minorities as well as the majority Burman population, in 1999 (Hedström 2016; Cárdenas 2019a). Since then, WLB has played a key role in fostering new relationships across ethnic divides, challenging dominant conflict narratives through skilful international advocacy, and strategically building a diverse women’s movement for peace.

Building on interviews and documentary data, we analyse how WLB has devised strategies in pursuit of peace in Myanmar amidst ongoing armed conflict. We argue that women-to-women diplomacy has been successful in terms of forging peaceful relationships and mobilizing activism and international attention for social transformation towards peace, equality and justice. While these practices have not been able to end armed conflict or bring about a lasting peace settlement between conflict parties, decades of alternative peacebuilding practices have nonetheless laid the groundwork for changes that are now debated in the official peace process. Moreover, the transformations brought about by the onset of an official process of peacebuilding are itself presenting new challenges to the effectiveness and sustainability of women-to-women diplomacy. This suggests a frictional relationship between conventional and alternative approaches to peacebuilding, where these may undermine as well as reinforce each other. Thus, we argue that understanding women’s long-standing peacebuilding work is essential to a nuanced analysis of the current transition in Myanmar, its flaws and challenges, and the types of peace it can be expected to bring about.

The analysis thereby contributes to broaden the analytical scope of peacebuilding research, as it sheds new light on how peacebuilding is practiced in conditions of ongoing armed conflict (Öjendal et al. 2021). Exploring women-to-women diplomacy as an alternative peacebuilding practice provides new insights into women’s peacebuilding work as an example of ‘perpetual peacebuilding’ – the ongoing pursuit of peace in multiple spaces, across changing contexts and times (Millar 2021; Paffenholtz 2021). In addition, as the WLB was based in exile in Thailand until 2017, our analysis adds to existing, largely gender-blind, research on how diaspora groups engage in homeland conflicts and peace processes (Smith and Stares 2007; Koinova 2017) by highlighting women’s activism and demonstrating the gendered nature and effects of diaspora politics.
This article is structured as follows. Next, we introduce the concept of women-to-women diplomacy as a way of capturing and theorizing specific peacebuilding practices employed by women in the case of Myanmar and elsewhere. We then situate women’s activism and participation in the context of armed conflict, forced migration and peacebuilding in Myanmar. Thereafter, in the analysis, we outline three peacebuilding practices employed by the Women’s League of Burma, and demonstrate how they have contributed to the transformation of predominant conflict narratives and the creation of a platform for inter-ethnic cooperation. Further, we discuss the challenges of women-to-women diplomacy as peacebuilding practice in the context of the ongoing transition and official peace process. In conclusion, we consider the potential of women-to-women diplomacy as an analytical tool for identifying and understanding women’s peacebuilding work in contexts of ongoing violence and unresolved conflict beyond the case of Myanmar.

**Women-to-women diplomacy as alternative peacebuilding practice**

An extensive body of research on women’s peace activism in conflict-affected contexts has demonstrated that women’s bottom-up peacebuilding practices often bridge conflict divides through alliances and dialogue between women across ‘enemy lines’. The seminal work of Cynthia Cockburn (2007, 2014) analyses the experience of women’s organizations and networks in a range of contexts, for example, Bosnia–Herzegovina and Israel-Palestine, and demonstrates how women’s peace activism create spaces for peaceful transformation of relationships and conflict narratives. Numerous studies of women’s peacebuilding practices in cases such as Rwanda, Turkey, and Northern Ireland point to similar dynamics (Gizelis 2011; Donahoe 2017; Berry 2018, Kamenou 2020; Dinçer 2020). Notably, this literature shows that women’s bottom-up peacebuilding is practiced not only in the aftermath of war, but also in the midst of it, as well as in contexts of frozen conflict (Cárdenas 2019a). Thus, these practices contribute to transform everyday relationships and resolve conflict in the absence of any progress in terms of conventional, masculinized understandings of peacemaking and peacebuilding.

So why do women engage in forms of peace activism that reach across conflict divides, often in the midst of ongoing violence? Feminist scholars have challenged essentialist explanations which posit women as ‘natural peacemakers’, instead pointing to how their social positioning in gendered relations of power shapes women’s experiences of armed conflict and their interests with regards to peace (Enloe 2000; Sjoberg 2014). Cockburn (2007, 2015) argues that when women collaborate across ethnic and religious divides, they do so based on an understanding that they share experiences of conflict and violence which are determined by gendered dynamics and power relations. Through dialogue, women recognize shared interests and barriers for their enjoyment of rights, as well as the prevalence of restrictive gender roles beyond the ethnic or religious group to which they belong (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016; Kim 2019; Joshi and Olsson 2021). Similarly, women’s peace activism in Turkey, Israel and Georgia (Aharoni 2018; Cárdenas 2019a; Dinçer 2020), illustrates how the realization of not only common experiences of the conflict, but wider patterns of gender discrimination becomes a basis for women’s mobilization across conflict lines. Further, women’s peace initiatives resulting from such mobilization rely on a common understanding of gender equality as an intrinsic aspect of peace.
Thus, a reading of this body of research points to important recurring features of women’s peace activism across divides. It is often motivated by the recognition of gender-specific experiences and forms of suffering in armed conflict. This provides a basis for identification between women who might otherwise be differently positioned in the conflict, which then becomes a basis for mobilization of peacebuilding practices where women’s agency and capacity as agents of peace are foregrounded. Finally, these practices are underpinned by what we argue is a distinctly feminist assertion: that gender equality is an intrinsic aspect of any sustainable and legitimate peace.

Building on these observations, we theorize women’s peacebuilding characterized by these three features as women-to-women diplomacy. Thus, the concept of women-to-women diplomacy describes women’s peace activism which involves dialogue and collaboration across conflict divides based on the recognition of shared experiences as women (the basis for peacebuilding); promotes women’s agency (the means of peacebuilding); and is driven by a common goal of gender equality as a key aspect of peace (the goal of peacebuilding). Inspired by people-to-people diplomacy (Davies and Kaufman 2002), we conceptualize women-to-women diplomacy as an alternative peacebuilding practice which can challenge conflict narratives and create platforms for dialogue and cooperation across conflict divides. This is achieved through encounters between individuals and groups of women who share experiences of a conflict, but may be positioned differently in relation to it, and also share the goal of achieving equal rights. To this end, it engages civil society in a similar manner than people-to-people diplomacy does, and relies on a view of bottom-up peacebuilding as a process of social transformation (Lederach 1997).

However, in contrast to people-to-people diplomacy, the purpose is not only to bring actors together across divides. We argue that what makes women-to-women diplomacy specific, beyond being simply a form of bottom-up peacebuilding exercised by women, is that it is premised on a feminist analysis of conflict, as well as a feminist vision of peace. As such, women-to-women diplomacy aligns with feminist arguments which expand the conceptualization of peace, acknowledge a wider scope of peace agents, and reveal continuities of gendered violence from wartime to peacetime (Confortini 2006; Sjoberg 2014).

Women-to-women diplomacy is grounded in the feminist assertion that the relationship between war and peace should be understood not as a dichotomy but a continuum, where forms of gendered violence, domination and inequality seen in war often continue to shape people’s lives in peace (Cockburn 2014; Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016; Wibben 2021). Having experienced this directly, women activists hold that gender justice cannot be separated from sustainable peace. Moreover, conceptualizing war and peace as points on the same continuum rather than dichotomous opposites is a fruitful starting point for making sense of how peacebuilding is practiced amidst ongoing violence (Öjendal et al. 2021). Thus, theoretically as well as empirically, an analysis of women-to-women diplomacy can advance our understanding of the relationship between peacebuilding and violence beyond binary understandings of war and peace. The three features of women-to-women diplomacy, outlined above, can be used to distinguish women-to-women diplomacy from other forms of peacebuilding or peace activism, and as an analytic framework for delving deeper into how, and with what effects, women-to-women diplomacy is practiced in different conflict contexts.
Women in conflict and peacebuilding in Myanmar

Myanmar has been the scene of civil war ever since its independence in 1948, with numerous ethnic minorities in the country’s hilly border areas demanding a federal model as outlined in the Panglong Agreement of 1947. As the main structure of power after the coup in 1962, the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) militarized the political institutions and social dynamics of Myanmar, and subjected its population to human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement (South 2008; Simpson and Farell 2020).

The ethno-nationalist insurgencies intensified after the military coup in 1962, led by what came to be known as Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). Women participated in these movements, both in the political organization and the military activities. However, their work was limited to social welfare issues and providing services to their armies (WLB 2011). Thus, supporting work to men’s leadership was an entry point for women’s participation in resistance politics, although male leadership among the EAOs restricted women’s participation and did not fully recognize them as effective political actors in the organization. This pattern also characterized the (primarily ethnic Burman) student-led democracy uprising in August 1988 (Ikeya 2011; Hedström 2016).

In response to war and counterinsurgency campaigns targeting civilians, and as a result of the crackdown on the 1988 uprising, large numbers of ethnic minority populations as well as democracy activists fled from Myanmar, particularly to Thailand (South 2008). Despite some resistance from male leaders who considered women’s separate organization to be a diversion from ‘the larger political goals’ of the struggle (WLB 2011), the transnational, diasporic political space proved conducive to women’s mobilization and to their engagement with peace. Spurred on by male dominance in the exiled opposition, as well as inspiration from international feminist networks and the 1995 Beijing conference, several new women’s organizations were founded during the 1990s, and some older women’s organizations, originally established as supportive ‘women’s wings’ of armed movements, were reinvigorated and took on more independent roles and agendas (Olivius and Hedström 2019).

The majority of these organizations based their membership on ethnic identification, and were closely embedded in the ethno-nationalist politics of ethnic armed insurgencies (WLB 2011; Hedström 2016). Thus, women’s loyalties to a collective identity as women have coexisted with loyalty and belonging to their ethnic communities from the inception of the movement, complicating common assumptions that feminism is at odds with nationalism or militarism (Cockburn 2007). Indeed, as Hedström (2016) notes, nationalism and militarism were key in mobilizing women from Myanmar towards political action. The structure of armed ethno-nationalist movements provided a key political opportunity for the emergence of the women’s movement. Further, ideas about ethnic identity and ethnic self-determination were, and remain, key frames of interpretation and representation for diasporic women’s organizations and activists (Olivius and Hedström 2019).

In 1999, 12 Burmese women’s organizations based in exile – most of them in Thailand – united to form a multi-ethnic umbrella organization, Women’s League of Burma (WLB). By doing so, they hoped to constitute a stronger voice for the advancement of Burmese women and to demand influence in the exiled oppositions as well as raise international awareness of the plight of women in Myanmar’s conflict areas. Since then, WLB has
established itself as a prominent actor in terms of leadership in the exiled opposition as well as skilful international advocacy (Olivius 2019a). Key areas of WLBs programmes have been international networking and advocacy, the political empowerment of women, reconciliation and peacebuilding, and combating violence against women (WLB 2011; WLB 2021a). Complementing the work of WLB, the member organizations’ own programmes have been more geared towards the grassroots level, focusing on material assistance as well as training and capacity building among women in their ethnic communities (Cárdenas 2019b).

While the majority of women’s organizations emerged from within ethno-nationalist nation-making projects, the formation of a cross-ethnic women’s movement nonetheless represented a challenge to ethnicity as the primary basis for political identification and mobilization. However, arriving at a united, multi-ethnic alliance was not an easy task: in a report describing the first ten years of the alliance, WLB describes the precarious process of creating trust across ethnic boundaries and a common political identity as women (WLB 2011). However, in the work of WLB the struggle for gender equality was from its inception intertwined with a broader struggle for social change in Myanmar, where ethnic self-determination within a democratic federal union has always been emphasized as the essential basis of a just peace, and a precondition for the realization of ethnic women’s rights (Olivius and Hedström 2019).

In the beginning of the 1990s, the military government of Myanmar began to pursue a radically new strategy, seeking to negotiate separate ceasefire agreement with ethnic insurgency groups in order to pacify some of its opponents. Between 1989 and 1995, ceasefire agreements were brokered with some 25 different armed groups in which they were allowed to retain their arms and the control of their territories, provided that they did not fight the Tatmadaw (South 2008) while the resolution of political issues was postponed. As ceasefire deals were struck between top military leaders, the negotiations were not generally inclusive of women, or broader segments of the civilian population. Further, they failed to address political grievances at the heart of the conflict, and a national solution to the civil war in Myanmar remained elusive.

However, after the political reforms initiated by the Thein Sein government in 2011, negotiations were opened with active EAOs, which led to a new series of bilateral ceasefires, and eventually to the conclusion of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015. The NCA was initially signed by only eight EAOs, and two more have signed since, which means a majority of EAOs are still non-signatories. Despite its failure to include all relevant stakeholders, the NCA has since provided the main framework for peace negotiations, which has higher ambitions for addressing core political issues in comparison to previous peace attempts (Thawnghmung 2017; Simpson and Farely 2020). Further, despite women’s activism and lobbying for inclusion in the process, the number of women among official delegates in the NCA talks and subsequent Union Peace Conferences has been low, and civil society organizations have not formally been included in the process.

Thus, while the NCA claims to be based on a principle of inclusivity this has not materialized in terms of women’s participation. According to AGIPP (2015), while the EAO Law-keelar summit of June 2015 agreed to negotiate for a quota of at least 30% women, this was rejected and eventually substituted by an ambiguous compromise in the NCA: ‘We shall include a reasonable number of women representatives in the political dialogue.
process’ (Chapter 5, Clause 23). Consequently, the representation of women in the bodies established to implement the NCA is very low. For instance, in 2016, there were two women out of 52 members in the Union Peacemaking Working Committee (UPWC) and none among the 11 members of the Union Peacemaking Central Committee (UPCC) (Muehlenbeck and Palmiano Federer 2016).

The lack of official inclusion in the NCA has motivated women activists to intensify their work through non-official arenas and strategies towards peacebuilding (WLB 2016; Pepper 2018). Moreover, as opportunities to work inside Myanmar have increased since 2011, many women’s organizations are increasingly moving their operational work into Myanmar. In March 2017, the WLB decided to relocate its main office from Chiang Mai to Yangon based on strategic considerations regarding how to be most effective under the current political circumstances, but also spurred by donors’ decreasing willingness to fund exile-based organizations as opposed to organizations based in Myanmar (Olivius 2019b). Moreover, while the border areas in Thailand still constitute an important node for the Burmese women’s movement, the number of women’s organizations and networks based inside the country, particularly in Yangon, is rapidly expanding as a response to the changing political situation (Faxon, Furlong, and Sabe Phyu 2015).

This geographical shift is fundamentally redrawing the political landscape of the Burmese women’s movement, which is becoming less and less exile-based. These developments also present new opportunities as well as challenges for women’s peacebuilding work, as the diversity of the women’s movement in terms of experiences of armed conflict is increasing. In contrast to women’s organizations founded in exile, which are strongly linked to broader ethnic minority struggles, emerging Yangon-based networks are dominated by ethnic Burman women. Their activism is targeting the state rather than the international community, and does not generally frame women’s rights issues as related to armed conflict or ethnic relations.

Meanwhile, women’s peacebuilding is still practiced amidst a context of ongoing violence and war. Armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Northern Myanmar has resurfaced since 2011, displacing hundreds of thousands of people. In Rakhine State in Western Myanmar, persecution of the Rohingya population has escalated to the point of alleged genocide, and an estimated 700,000 has fled to Bangladesh in 2017 alone (Kachin Women’s Association Thailand 2016; Sadan 2016; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017). In ceasefire areas armed clashes and abuses of civilians still occur, poverty is widespread, and fragile and insecure conditions have prevented large-scale return of displaced persons (Karen Peace Support Network 2018). In addition, the military coup on February 1st 2021 clearly highlights the uncertain and reversible nature of developments towards peace and democracy in Myanmar (BBC 2021). Despite significant changes in recent years, a context of ongoing violence and political volatility thus continues to shape women’s peacebuilding practices in Myanmar.

Methods and material

The analysis presented here is based on interviews as well as documentary sources. Interviews were conducted separately by both authors with several categories of respondents during 2016, 2017 and 2018. Firstly and most essentially, interviews were conducted with
activists from Women’s League of Burma and its member organizations, mainly in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, and in Yangon. The activists interviewed for this study generally hold leadership positions within their organizations, not least demonstrated by the election of some of them as organizational representatives within the WLB. The interviews focused on the role of women’s organizations in peacebuilding; the political goals of the organizations; their relationships to other actors; and their views on the current peace process and the future of their homeland. These interviews are essential for tracing the alternative peacebuilding practices used by Burmese women in pursuit of peace, prior to the initiation of an official peace process after 2011, and amidst ongoing violence during the partial and unfinished transition.

Secondly, to grasp recent transformations where many diasporic women’s organizations are in the process of returning to Myanmar, and a number of organizations and networks in Yangon and elsewhere in Myanmar are rapidly expanding, interviews were also conducted with activists from women’s organizations based in Yangon. This spatial shift where women’s activism is gradually moving from the border areas surrounding Myanmar to Yangon is central to an analysis of how women-to-women diplomacy is currently employed as peacebuilding practice in Myanmar. These interviews are used to scrutinize relationships between ‘exile’ and ‘inside’ women’s organization (which roughly corresponds to minority-dominated and majority-dominated organizations), and the process of building a unified national women’s movement for peace. Thirdly, to broaden the material, interviews were also conducted with a range of other organizations such as ethnic human rights organizations, Burmese exile media, and national and international donors.

Initial interviewees were identified through contacts with women’s organizations and other organizations, and thereafter through a snowballing sampling technique. This was facilitated by contacts gained through previous research by the second author, and by new relationships established through the first author’s volunteer work with one WLB member organization in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2018. All interviewees were informed of the focus and aims of the research; the voluntary basis of their participation; their right to withdraw at any time; and their opportunity to access the results of the research if they would like to. On average, the length of the interviews was between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English; many of our respondents are used to English as a working language. Nevertheless, the meanings that could be conveyed and the nuance of the conversation may at times have been constrained by the use of English. Further, empirical material was also collected by the first author through participant observation during a two–month volunteer work, which entailed supporting research, project drafting and evaluation as well as conducting a training on peace negotiations.

In addition, the analysis draws on a review of documents produced by diasporic women’s organizations from 2002 to 2016 such as reports, statements, and press releases. Together with interviews, this documentary material enables the analysis to examine how Burmese women’s organizations in exile have worked to influence conflict and peacebuilding in Myanmar over a period of 15 years. Drawing on these sources, the following analysis demonstrates how women-to-women diplomacy has been employed as alternative peacebuilding practice in diaspora during ongoing conflict, and during the years of transition where the location as well as the identities and strategies of the women’s movement has been reappraised and reshaped.
**Women’s League of Burma and women-to-women diplomacy**

Founded to amplify the voices and influence of women in the pursuit of peace and social and political change in Myanmar, WLB itself pertinently illustrates the characteristics of women-to-women diplomacy as peacebuilding practice. The key goals and values enshrined in its constitution recognize commonalities between women’s experiences and interests across ethnic divides, and emphasizes women’s agency as key to a just and durable peace. Further, in a context of ethnic polarization and persecution, WLB was founded on a commitment to mutual respect and non-discrimination, and an ambition to practice peaceful co-existence, democracy, and equality (WLB 2021a). As such, the alliance has aspired to embody the forms of political order and peaceful relationships that it envisions for a future Myanmar. Thus, the agenda and organizational form of WLB were always intimately shaped by the context of ongoing war, ethnic persecution and political repression. Its vision for gendered justice and equality is articulated in direct relation to the pursuit of peace and a political resolution to the conflict, which sets it apart from women’s movements in peaceful contexts. However, in the process of building a multi-ethnic alliance, WLB has also faced the challenges of harmonizing political agendas of the women’s organizations within the movement as well as accommodating differences in terms of culture, education and rural-urban dynamics.

In this section, we analyse how these aspirations have been translated into concrete peacebuilding practices in the past decades. Three specific practices are examined: women’s leadership training; shadow reporting to the CEDAW Committee; and women’s peace forums. These do not provide an exhaustive account of the peacebuilding work of WLB, but serves to illustrate how women-to-women diplomacy has been practiced and the achievements and limitations of this form of peacebuilding.

**Women’s leadership training: Forging new sisterhoods**

Since the emergence of new ethnic women’s organizations and the evolution of existing women’s wings into more independent organizations in Myanmar’s borderlands in the late 1990s, many of them have placed a strong emphasis on building women’s leadership capacity, particularly targeting young women and often taking the form of internships at the organization (Olivius and Hedström 2020). For example, the Karen Young Women Leadership School, established in 2001 by the Karen Women’s Organization, has trained about 30 women each year. Leadership training programmes have constituted the first step for many women to become activists, a pattern that is reflected in the interviews with them. For instance, a woman who has held top leadership positions in her ethnic organization as well as in WLB explains how an internship was crucial in her development as leader and political activist and provided her with awareness of democracy, human rights and women’s rights principles:

> In 2003 I could join with my organization, and I could attend the basic English and computer training. So I was recruited for 9 months, and it was my first time that I was in touch with English skills, computers, and there I learned what is democracy and what is human rights and what is women’s human rights, everything.

Following the example of existing leadership training programmes in its member organizations, WLB established its own six-month internship programme ‘Emerging
Leaders Political Empowerment School’ in 2001. While programmes in member organizations targeted women from a specific ethnic group, WLB recruited participants from different member organizations, forming a multi-ethnic group.4

Further, these interns worked in an environment at the WLB secretariat already defined by close co-operation between elected representatives from different member organizations. According to WLB, the school has given ‘women from WLB member organizations the knowledge and skills to be powerful agents of social change and leadership in Burma’ (WLB 2021b). In addition, as expressed by a senior activist, working together in WLB has trained women activists to embody and exemplify the political principles that they are advocating for, creating a microcosm of a future Myanmar through relationships between women:

We are hoping to have a federal democratic union. WLB is already a federal system. We have our own constitution. Each organization have their own constitution, their membership, their funding. And together we have WLB. See? We have been practicing. So it is a real accomplishment.5

A large proportion of currently most prominent women leaders in women’s organizations, human rights organizations and other organizations founded in exile, has graduated from one or several leadership-training programmes of this type. Likewise, these trainings have provided women the tools to get a wider understanding on international frameworks on human rights and to apply this knowledge in its advocacy work and in the elaboration of reports to UN bodies (as shown in the following section).

The prominence of internship training programmes where women from different ethnic groups live and work together has also contributed to shape the multi-ethnic women’s movement that now exists, as new sisterhoods forged in training have provided a basis for trust and co-operation. Further, as interns have become movement leaders, they have brought with them a political identity based on their position as women, not only on ethnic identification. This is a recurrent argument of the interviewees, and pointedly expressed by a long-time activist involved in a key training programme:

In the trainings that we provided we were not just talking about content and theory. We were trying to get the women to be able to work across ethnic boundaries […] And the differences are not insurmountable. Your ethnic identity should not be the only defining part of your identity. Some then went on to middle level leadership, some to high level leadership, but they trusted each other to communicate and to ask help from each other. It is a big sign of trust that you feel confident and comfortable enough to ask someone from another ethnic group to help you. So the thing was that the bond that they built from being interns was an enduring bond, and in fact we saw that, it became much more easy for different women’s groups to work together, especially on the peace process.6

Women’s testimonies reflect how these new sisterhoods have enabled the WLB, and the women’s movement more broadly, to transcend ethnicity, challenge entrenched conflict narratives, and embody an alternative political order, rather than just being an umbrella for separate ethnic women’s organizations. This has also allowed the WLB to not only foster women’s role as activists but to take on a role as mediator, contributing to peaceful conflict resolution between different EAOs. On several occasions, WLB has acted as a go-between seeking to unify different EAOs, in recent years both signatories and non-signatories of the NCA, arguing that collective action will make them better able to effectively engage in peace negotiations with the government.7
Thus, relationships formed between women activists trained in a multi-ethnic women’s movement, with WLB as its key organizational hub, have proved to be strong enough to withstand divisions between the ethnic armed movements these women identify with. Likewise, the trainings illustrate how the components of women-to-women diplomacy are intertwined in the sense that the platform of sisterhood is based not only on shared experiences of the conflict, but in the common commitment to women’s agency and a gender-just peace.

**CEDAW shadow reporting: Contesting conflict narratives through international advocacy**

Women’s organizations in the Burmese diaspora are highly connected to transnational feminist movements and advocacy networks. As noted by scholars on feminist transnationalism (Zwingel 2012; Reilly 2007), women’s organizations make use of transnational spaces, relations and norms, reconstructing, negotiating and localizing transnational feminist ideas and goals to make them useful in their own struggle for change. After its founding, WLB quickly learned to use the language and tools of international framework such as Security Council Resolution 1325. Likewise, it has developed strategies and skills to participate in UN forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Human Rights Council, and the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in order to draw attention to the situation in Myanmar generally and Burmese women, in particular.

Despite having signed CEDAW in 1997, the Myanmar government has made little or no effort to adhere to it, while simultaneously perpetuating a rhetoric of Burmese women’s ‘inherent equality’ (Ikeya 2005; Than 2014). At the same time, human rights abuses, including sexual violence, against women in conflict areas have been rampant (see, for example, SHRF and SWAN 2002; WLB 2016) while publicly protesting against these abuses in Myanmar has been difficult and dangerous. In this context, international advocacy and networking, like the preparation of CEDAW shadow reports, has provided a key strategy for exposing how war and ethnic persecution affect the lives of women, and calling for solutions to the conflict that would also safeguard women’s rights. Thus, CEDAW reports constitute an informal tool of accountability by which WLB want to raise awareness on women’s rights as human rights and to demand a place for them on the political agenda. Moreover, preparing the reports under the WLB umbrella, women from different ethnic identifications and conflict backgrounds have shared their experiences and identified common patterns of discrimination and inequality. As such, the process for CEDAW shadow reporting has provided one arena for women-to-women diplomacy during ongoing-armed conflict.

In 2000, WLB put together a working group tasked with writing a shadow report for the CEDAW session (WLB 2011) which depicted discrimination and abuse of women in Myanmar, particularly in ethnic minority dominated areas of armed conflict. In the following examination by the CEDAW Committee in 2008, WLB had evolved considerably and launched an extensive report, building on community consultations across large areas of Myanmar. Being part of the reporting process, one activist relates, was a learning experience in terms of both familiarity with international norms and institutions, and the establishment of new relationships and networks:
It was a good experience, we had to find different information, understand what CEDAW is and what the process of the CEDAW is. And how it is important for women’s issues. And at that time we also had a good network with other CBO groups and they also participated in the report, they contributed cases so it was very comprehensive.

After submitting the report, a WLB team participated in the CEDAW session in Geneva and was able to challenge the regime’s representation of the situation of Burmese women and to demand the fulfilment of their international legal commitments. In a reflection report on the CEDAW process, a WLB member describes how their lobbying work in Geneva made her feel that she was making a difference. ‘When the Committee asked the questions based on the information which we provided, I felt very proud of what we had done for the women of Burma’ (WLB 2009, 18). Thus, through the CEDAW process as well as international advocacy more broadly, women activists could exert pressure on the military regime at a time when oppositional political activity inside Myanmar was a life-threatening endeavour.

The shadow reporting process was equally significant as an inclusive, bottom-up process of relationship building. Bringing a wide range of organizations together in consultations and data collection across Myanmar, it expanded the inter-ethnic platform for co-operation within the WLB. Through community-level workshops, detailed information was collected at the same time as awareness about women’s right generally and CEDAW specifically was increased. This process is explicitly linked to visions for change in Myanmar by the WLB as one of its members recalls,

We hope that the experience from this process has set the tone for our work in a future democratic nation. This process of empowering communities on the ground, and taking actions together to change policy is one we want to carry on, and to pass on. (WLB 2009, 22)

This statement reflects the conscious aspiration of the WLB to embody mutual respect, democracy and equality within the movement, and thereby build peace despite the absence of an end to armed conflict. However, substantial political changes have shaped the WLB’s coordination in this task. The most recent CEDAW review of Myanmar, in 2016, took place in a context of transition to semi-democratic governance and an ongoing peace process that opened up for a rapid expansion of women’s activism in Myanmar, making the Burmese women’s movement inside and outside its borders significantly more diverse. Moreover, international advocacy was no longer the only viable arena for the pursuit of peace and political change, and many Yangon-based women’s organizations were turning towards working with the state, rather than condemning it in international advocacy, as a means to exert pressure for change.

Despite the common recognition of the political potential of the shadow report and its multiple forms of cooperation, several differences emerge in the content of the speech and demands made by exile and inside organizations. When the process began in 2014, WLB and a number of organizations and networks in Myanmar intended to write a joint report, and much of the consultation and data collection was done jointly in a climate of increasing exile-inside cooperation. Compared to previous processes, involved exile activists felt that this was a positive but difficult development. ‘Last year it was also very good that different women’s organizations in Burma and here [in Thailand] combine different issues. But it is also still a challenge for us to work in Burma with these different groups.’
However, as the process unfolded, tensions arose around which issues to focus on, and how critique of the government and military should be expressed. While some organizations in Myanmar viewed the WLB as too ‘political’, voicing their critique too aggressively, exile activists were concerned that some inside organizations’ relationships with the government prevented them from speaking out on issues such as military sexual violence in conflict areas. For this reason, working with organizations inside the country was by some exile activists seen as ‘watering down’ key WLB messages, diverting the alliance from its core mission to stand up for the rights of women in conflict areas. According to one activist, the WLB report

... got it a bit watered down because they were working inside with some of the groups there, and even though their messages were probably stronger than some of the other ones, there was no mention of federalism, right? I think it was a wasted opportunity.10

In this view, cooperation with organizations inside Myanmar tamed the political position and critique of the WLB. This view is linked to broader conflicts and debates around whether and when to return to Myanmar, and around which strategies that may be most effective in the current political context. Many exile activists feel that those who have returned, like organizations founded inside Myanmar, have toned down their critique of the government in response to surveillance and insecurity: ‘self-censorship change people here a lot. Many organizations increase their self-censorship because of the close monitoring of the authorities’.11 Despite this, other activists argue that uniting with women inside the country, finally being able to build a national women’s movement, is in itself the most important goal. In doing so, one activist explains, ‘the CEDAW report was our platform’.12

In the end, WLB choose to write their own report, as did several other organizations, given the differences in focus and approach and limited number of pages allowed. However, the organizations still formed a joint team and presented together in Geneva. Thus, as several activists point out, although the organizations could not agree on one report, the process of reporting nevertheless was a significant forum for cooperation, bringing exile and inside organizations a step closer towards a unified movement. As exemplified by an activist in Yangon, different styles and strategies are recognized as complementary and equally valid:

WLB, their politics are very strong […] I think they are very active and very bright […] We criticize the government but very softly. They criticize the government but very strongly. But we can all cooperate though the CEDAW review process. I think soft and strong words can combine.13

In sum, CEDAW illustrates the practice of women-to-women diplomacy by providing a space for dialogue for women with very different positions in relation to the armed conflict, where a shared commitment to women’s agency and a gender-just peace could evolve. Thereby CEDAW reporting also laid the groundwork for a joint agenda for women’s rights as a key topic in the national peace process. However, CEDAW reporting also reflects the multiple divides existing within the women’s movement, and the challenges of reaching across not only ethnic divides but also exile-inside, rural-urban cleavages in the context of a transitional political landscape. Below, the potential of women-to-women diplomacy to build relationships between organizations founded in
exile and newer organizations based in Yangon, a key current challenge in the context of ongoing transition and accelerating diaspora returns, is further explored.

**Women’s peace forums: Building a national women’s movement for peace**

As demonstrated in the previous sections, WLB has constituted a forum for women-to-women diplomacy and for building a strong, multi-ethnic alliance of women but also promote unity and peaceful conflict resolution between EAOs as well as other diaspora organizations. Thus, the diasporic political space has allowed WLB to engage with peace-building strategies despite ongoing violence and political repression in Myanmar. However, the period of transition after 2011 has presented WLB and its member organizations with new challenges.

Thus, the opening for diaspora return, and for bridging the divide between ‘exile’ and ‘inside’ organizations, has required WLB to employ practices of women-to-women diplomacy across far more significant differences than before. Notably, the new Yangon-based women’s activists have a strong representation of urban, educated Burman women, who lack the personal experiences of armed conflict, persecution and displacement that had been foundational for activists and organizations operating from exile, and are not deeply attuned to the needs and political aspirations of minority populations. Differences in ethnic identification and experiences of conflict fundamentally shape different feminist agendas, and complicate the formation of a unified women’s movement. As one prominent WLB activist explained, in relation to organizations in Yangon,

> Our political position is not the same. Because we are not only working on women’s participation in the peace process, but we are also working on founding a federal democratic country, for the ethnic rights and self-determination, and ethnic equal opportunity. If we just talk about women’s issues, it is okay [to work together]. But if we are talking about criticizing the government, or the Tatmadaw, then they are scared of WLB. They said that ‘they are doing politics, we don’t want to deal with them.’

In this context, a Women’s Peace Forum jointly organized in Yangon by WLB and Women Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON) in September 2013, which gathered 300 women activists, became a milestone in establishing trust and common political ground between the two strands of women’s organizations. For many exile activists who had grown up in refugee camps and border towns, this was their first time returning to Myanmar. This event was preceded by informal meetings, which were essential for overcoming suspicions and building relationships. As one activist relates, at first she did not feel that she could speak openly as she was not sure whether she could trust the ‘inside’ activists but this changed as they continued to meet,

> The second time we knew more about each other and also could see that our feeling is the same because every woman from urban or rural areas has been discriminated. Our feeling is the same, so then the second and the third time our relationship is better, much better.

Another participant described her experiences of the encounter as very emotional and remembered strong feelings of connection and sisterhood, as well as grief over having been separated for so long. For her, working together and creating one, unified women’s movement has been a central aspiration: ‘this is the movement that we wanted – we used to be the border based movement, now we want to build a national movement’.
A leading WLB activist at the time relates that security arrangements around the 2013 event were massive, but despite security concerns, she felt happy and excited. Another participant at the forum remembers her feelings of this being a watershed moment, gathering women activists from across ethnic, generational and political divides as if the armed conflict could no longer divide them. At the same time, these activists remember the tensions this encounter entailed:

The voices of young women [from exile] were very strong. But I could also see a lot of the older, Burman women, who had stayed in-country, who had seen these women as enemies. Some of them were pro-regime, some of them were anti-regime, but still very conservative on women’s rights. The concepts that the border-based women were talking about was very sophisticated feminist, human rights, international law, and some of these other older women were kind of left behind. This was still very new for them.

Nevertheless, despite departing from vastly different social positions as well as feminist frameworks, the women at the forum managed to draft common recommendations for the advancement of Myanmar women, thereby publicly stating a common agenda for an emerging, unified women’s movement (WLB and WON 2013). While the recommendations avoided some of the most sensitive issues, like sexual violence perpetrated by the Tatmadaw, it included a strong focus on women and peacebuilding and endorsed the vision for a federal democratic state enabling ethnic autonomy.

After 2013, Women’s Peace Forums has become a recurring event, and a key platform for building relationships between different segments of the women’s movement. Later events have also constituted key arenas for developing joint strategies and draft proposals for the Union Peace Conferences that commenced in 2016. This is significant not least because these forums have included women’s organizations and activists with widely divergent relationships to the state: those actively engaged in state policymaking processes, those involved in formal peace negotiations, for example through EAO negotiating teams, and those from areas of ongoing conflict that have been excluded from, or opted out of, the official peace process. So while the adoption of joint strategies and agendas has not been without tensions and disagreements, differences previously seen as insurmountable have been gradually bridged. As a result, a diverse but inclusive national women’s movement for peace is emerging, which can no longer be dismissed as representing only the interests of particular conflict parties. Thus, faced with a new political context which has tested its applicability and effectiveness, women-to-women diplomacy has proved a feasible strategy for building peaceful relationships and challenging dominant conflict lines and narratives amidst ongoing violence.

Conclusion

After 20 years of activism and advocacy, WLB has consolidated a position as a key peacebuilding agent in relation to EAOs and other exile organizations, and is increasingly recognized as such within Myanmar as well. The practices explored in this article illustrate how women’s peacebuilding, and its effects, can be captured and described using the framework of women-to-women diplomacy. Women’s leadership training, CEDAW reporting, and women’s peace forums have created space for dialogue and recognition of common experiences and interests between women across conflict divides; promoted
women’s agency as a means to more effectively build peace; and fostered a shared commitment to gender justice as an intrinsic aspect of a legitimate and sustainable peace. This has been possible to a large part because of the shared commitment to gender equality amongst WLB members and partners. This case therefore supports the idea that women-to-women diplomacy constitutes a distinct type of peacebuilding by women, which is set apart by its normative grounding in a feminist analysis. This is what has allowed women from diverse backgrounds and positions in relation to key conflict issues to form a shared political agenda and project, despite tensions and disagreements.

Analysing the experiences of WLB through the lens of women-to-women diplomacy, this article has contributed to elaborate an analytical framework that can be used to better understand the nature and potential of the peacebuilding practices of women’s organizations beyond the case of Myanmar. As this analysis illustrates, drawing on a conception of peacebuilding as social transformation, this framework captures how women actively build peace not only after the end of violence, but also in conditions of ongoing war, flawed political transition, and in situations of forced displacement and exile. The analysis thereby contributes to broaden the analytical scope of peacebuilding research, and shed new light on how peacebuilding is practiced in conditions of ongoing-armed conflict. Moreover, this particular case, where exile provided the political space for women to organize and mobilize, also adds to existing, largely gender-blind, research on how diaspora groups engage in homeland conflicts and peace processes by highlighting diaspora politics as a space for women’s peacebuilding.

Our analysis also highlights how practices of women-to-women diplomacy have been adapted and modified in relation to changing conflict dynamics over time. The practices of women-to-women diplomacy developed by the WLB have been effective in terms of forging new alliances across difference, challenging dominant conflict narratives and building peaceful relationships from exile during the era of military dictatorship. Currently, a quickly changing political landscape demand that women’s organizations and activists adapt to new realities. However, the example of the women’s peace forums indicates that these alternative peacebuilding practices are indeed able to travel from the diasporic political space to make a difference on the national political scene in Myanmar.

Notes
1. In 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) decreed that Burma would be referred as Myanmar. However, the names encapsulate two narratives and national identity trajectories (Dittmer 2010). For consistency, we use the name Myanmar throughout without taking side in this debate. However, Burma is used when quoting respondents who used this name.
2. The program runs for 13 months, women participant are recruited from refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border as well as from villages in Karen State in Myanmar. After graduation, most students go on to work in community-based organizations in the refugee camps or in Myanmar, frequently taking up leadership positions (KWO 2011).
3. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 18 January 2017.
4. In addition to WLB’s training programme, several other internship programmes aiming to build the political capacity of the Burmese exiled opposition have existed, often run by or supported by international NGOs or donors. While these have not been directly under the WLB, there has been close co-operation. Key programmes such as the ALTSEAN internship
programme in Bangkok and the Foreign Affairs Training in Chiang Mai have been hugely influential.

5. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 18 November 2017.
6. Interview with representative from NGO, Bangkok, 27 February 2017.
7. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 15 November 2018.
8. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 17 January 2017.
9. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 17 January 2017.
10. Interview with representative from NGO, Chiang Mai, 13 November 2017.
11. Interview with international organization officer, Yangon, 16 November 2018.
12. Interview with representative of women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 18 November 2017.
13. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Yangon, 27 January 2017.
14. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 17 January 2017.
15. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 1 December 2016.
16. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 18 November 2017.
17. Interview with representative from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 9 December 2016.
18. Interview with representative from NGO, Bangkok, 27 February 2017.

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Notes on contributors

Magda Lorena Cárdenas is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at Umeå University, Sweden. Her research focuses on women’s role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in different conflict settings, including Georgia, Myanmar and Colombia. She has recently published in Civil Wars and Canadian Foreign Policy Journal.

Elisabeth Olivius is an associate professor in political science at Umeå University, Sweden. Her research explores peacebuilding, post-war development, women’s activism, and migration and diaspora politics with a focus on Myanmar, and she coordinates the Varieties of Peace research network.

ORCID

Magda Lorena Cárdenas http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7133-314X
Elisabeth Olivius http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2400-9144

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