



Female Myanmar Army soldiers march during the seventy-third Armed Forces Day parade 27 March 2018 in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar.
(Photo by U Aung/Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

Integration of Women and Gender Perspective into the Myanmar Armed Forces to Improve Civil-Military Relations in Myanmar

Lt. Col. Miemie Winn Byrd, EdD, U.S. Army Reserve, Retired

For the first time in more than half a century, ninety-two female military cadets (nonmedical) graduated from Myanmar's Army Officer Training School in Yangon, Myanmar, in August

2014.¹ Since then, over four hundred female officers and seven hundred noncommissioned officers and enlisted soldiers have been placed in service within the Myanmar armed forces, officially known as the

Tatmadaw, accounting for 0.2 percent of total estimated personnel strength.²

Following Myanmar's independence from the British in 1948, women were largely excluded from military service (though they were recruited to the military during the 1950s to serve primarily in the medical field). Despite this, Myanmar women have held an influential and important role in their indigenous society. There is a well-known line from a William Ross Wallace poem that states, "for the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world," meaning that women have great influence and authority.³ Accordingly, Myanmar women have contributed significantly to the political, economic, social, and cultural development of the nation throughout its history. They traditionally have held prominent positions in the business, education, literary, and fine arts sectors. Eminent historical figures include Ludu Daw Amar, a well-respected writer, journalist, and activist; Nawin Daw Thein Tin, who organized a boycott against foreign products at the Nationalist Women's Conference; and Burmese writer, historian, and teacher Mya Sein, the sole female delegate selected to attend the 1931 Burma Round Table Conference in London.⁴ Other revered and celebrated examples of women in Myanmar society include "anyaint pwe" Burmese dancer Liberty (Laybarti) Ma Mya Yin; Burmese music instructor Saw Mya Aye Kyi; founder of

the weekly newspaper *Independent Weekly* Ma San Youn (whose pen name "Independent" Daw San was better known); Burmese novelist Dagon Khin Khin Lay; famous twentieth-century Burmese writer Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay; and, of course, State Counsellor of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi.⁵

Despite the glorious history of women's significant contributions to Myanmar society, modern-day Myanmar women

face many barriers to fully participating in the political and security sectors, even though they make up more than half of the fifty-two million population in Myanmar. (According to the 2014 population and housing census, the female population outnumbered the male population by 4 percent [52 percent versus 48 percent].) And yet, female representation and participation in the nationwide peace negotiation process accounts for only 17 percent, significantly lagging behind the targeted 30 percent.⁶ Moreover, as previously stated, women account for only 0.2 percent of the total personnel of the Myanmar armed forces.

The speed and spread of Myanmar's peace, prosperity, and progress depends on the elimination of violent conflicts in its border areas. However, bringing peace to these regions has been extremely slow (almost to a stalemate with some of the ethnic armed groups). As the peace process creeps forward at a snail's pace, the increased participation of Myanmar women should be seriously considered to quicken the stride. According to data from the Center for Foreign Relations, women and civil-society's participation in the peace negotiations increases the chance of success by 36 percent, and obtained peace is more enduring.⁷ In order for Myanmar women to participate effectively in the peace process, they must be given opportunities to upgrade their capability and capacity. Opportunity to serve in the armed forces is one of the ways to elevate their capability, capacity, and experience to participate in the security sector.

The purpose of military organizations is not to improve women's equality but to win the nation's wars and prevail against enemies. Thus, Myanmar must be cognizant of this purpose when advocating for the integration of women and gender perspectives into the military. They must clearly be able to demonstrate the benefits of increased effectiveness in achieving an organization's primary purpose through the integration of women and gender perspectives. The integration of women into the military is beyond *equality*; rather, it is to improve the *quality* of the force.

During a combined military exercise in February 2018, Myanmar Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services Min Aung Hlaing explicitly stated that the Tatmadaw is in the process of building a "standard military."⁸ In this effort, the Myanmar armed forces are taking major steps toward modernization of the military for increased capability and combat power. Combat power generally derives from "physical factors (the means,

Lt. Col. Miemie Winn Byrd, EdD, U.S. Army Reserve, retired, serves on the board of governors of the Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies at Claremont McKenna College as an adjunct fellow in Honolulu. She received a BA in economics and accounting from Claremont McKenna College, an MBA from University of Hawaii, and an EdD in education leadership from the University of Southern California. She served twenty-eight years in the U.S. Army Reserve as a civil affairs officer and was mobilized from 2003 to 2007.

meaning the size and materiel of the organization), conceptual factors (doctrine or the way the means are employed), and morale factors (the will of the soldiers).⁹ In this equation, many armed forces naturally tend to overemphasize hardware and equipment, and not enough on conceptual and morale factors. Integrating women and gender perspectives into the military can create opportunities to revise conceptual and morale factors and adapt organizational culture and structures to maximize effectiveness.¹⁰ Additionally, by opening the armed forces to women, the qualified pool of candidates will increase and in return may solve the problem of recruitment shortfalls to maintain all-volunteer armed forces.

Integrating gender perspectives and women into the Myanmar military can bring additional capabilities and capacity that can improve the effectiveness of operations in the increasingly complex operational landscape. Drawing on the experience from the United States, female soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the U.S. Armed Forces have provided specific competencies and perspectives that improve the conduct of operations. An excellent example is the American female code breakers of World War II, who gave a definite advantage to the Allied forces and contributed to the victory.¹¹ In U.S. combat units, women have been able to increase the information gathering and analysis capabilities of units, as well as implement a gender perspective in the area of operations. For example, the female engagement teams in Iraq and Afghanistan were able to gain valuable information and intelligence because they could engage with local women and children within the area of operations, a valuable asset that Robert Egnell discusses in his paper “Women in Battle: Gender Perspectives and Fighting,”

Gaining access to local women not only allows a unit to develop a better understanding of local conditions and culture, it can also improve the unit’s relationship with the



Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (left), commander-in-chief of the defense services, attends a graduation ceremony August 2014 for the nearly one hundred female cadets graduating from the Defense Services Academy in Myanmar. The cadets were the first female officers to go through the program since 1961. (Photo courtesy of Myanmar Ministry of Information)

community, its perceived legitimacy, and force protection of troops.¹²

The United Nations, likewise, acknowledges that female officers and soldiers are essential for certain tasks in peace and stabilization operations. The United Nations experience has shown that the female peacekeepers are more effective at addressing the specific needs of female combatants during demobilization and reintegration. They are also more effective at interviewing survivors of gender-based violence and interacting with local women in communities where the women may not be comfortable with speaking to male peacekeepers.¹³

Given the significant role Myanmar women have played historically in the anticolonial and independence movements, they can again serve as an accelerant for building twenty-first-century professional armed forces to actualize the vision of the commander-in-chief of defense services. In other militaries, the integration of women has transformed the culture of combat units, the fabric of unit cohesion, and the way combat and violence are employed. Many organizational behavior studies

have found that diverse and inclusive teams consistently outperform homogeneous teams, especially in dealing with complex problems, because such teams “encourage greater scrutiny of each member’s actions, keeping their joint cognitive resources sharp and vigilant.”¹⁴

Myanmar military could be one of the catalysts to strengthen the country’s civil-military relations since male dominance in the military was cited as one of the key contributing factors that created friction between the military and other civilian organizations, especial-

“ This culturally embedded belief can create a daunting obstacle for female commissioned and noncommissioned officers to achieve significant leadership positions within the male-dominated armed forces. ”

In order to reap the full benefits of integrating women and gender perspectives into military organizations, the implementation must include specific policies and mechanisms for women to achieve leadership and decision-maker positions within the organization. Traditionally, male-dominated organizations have certain masculine organizational cultures and structures that can serve as barriers to successful attainment of leadership and decision-maker positions for women. Pervasive and subtle second-generation bias that is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices can disadvantage women from rising to the top.¹⁵

The Myanmar culture, which is inseparable from localized Buddhist religious belief, associates men with higher status than women. This association influences the way the Myanmar people in general perceive the status of men and women outside of religion. This culturally embedded belief can create a daunting obstacle for female commissioned and noncommissioned officers to achieve significant leadership positions within the male-dominated armed forces. Additionally, a lack of thoughtful accommodation for child bearing and child rearing could also create a significant drop-off point for women. Such drop-offs will further diminish already small numbers of female service members selected for higher command positions. Research has shown that a critical mass of 30 percent is needed in order to see the full benefits of female integration and gender perspective within the organization and at leadership levels.¹⁶ However, the drop-offs and second-generation bias can impede the attainment of 30 percent.

The diversity created by integrating women into military organizations can improve an organization’s performance. Increased female participation in the

ly during humanitarian crises and armed conflicts.¹⁷ Female military liaison officers could serve as a bridge between the military and civilian organizations. Including female service members on public affairs and civil affairs teams can also improve the Myanmar armed forces’ image and its relationship within the areas of operations and surrounding communities, which can significantly contribute toward building trust at the foundational level. In a democratic system of governance, public trust is an essential component. Military organizations that are able to garner trust from the public generally enjoy legitimacy and, in turn, are able to develop a positive and cooperative civil-military relationship—an indispensable ingredient for effective national security.

The recent integration of women into the Tatmadaw is a very positive start, but more is needed to realize the full benefits. Currently, women are serving in administrative, logistics, and information communication technology roles and are restricted from operational positions. Most of them are posted in the garrison headquarters as support staff. Such limited roles do not prepare the female officers to be competitive for advancement into higher ranks and decision-maker levels. As noted in the United States, female soldiers are able to sharpen the effectiveness of stability operations, counterinsurgency operations, counterterrorism operations, and postconflict reconstruction operations. Many of the twenty-first century armed forces have successfully integrated women into their organizations. Myanmar could apply some of the lessons learned from others’ experiences to integrate women effectively and reap the full benefits of their inclusion.

Gender-friendly policies at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels are required to ensure the success of the integration. At the strategic level, the Myanmar military should set interim targets for recruitment as the roadmap to reach the “magic” number, 30 percent of the total force. At the operational level, it should develop policies that will expand the role of female officers and soldiers into more military specialties to include combat positions. Policies for maternity leave and child care should be thoughtfully reviewed and upgraded. Tactical level policies should include required gender-sensitive training programs for leaders and commanders to prevent gender-based discriminations, to ensure respect for diversity, and to promote unit cohesion and morale. These policies will help prevent discrimination based on second-generation bias and will ensure the professional advancement of female soldiers. Again, many of these policies could be drawn (with some adjustments to fit

the Myanmar context) from other militaries that have successfully integrated women.

Although organizational, cultural, and mindset changes are never easy and quick in any context, such changes are now extremely necessary to keep up with rapidly evolving national, regional, and global security environments. Security organizations that practice adaptability and flexibility are most likely to succeed in achieving their mission. The inclusion of women in the Myanmar armed forces can contribute toward building a twenty-first century “standard military” by leveraging impressive talent offered by more than 50 percent of the nation’s citizenry. The additional skill sets and unique perspectives presented by the female military service members may be the precise element that is needed to win the peace and achieve comprehensive security for a newly democratic Myanmar in an increasingly complex security landscape. ■

Notes

1. “For First Time in 50 Years, Burma’s Military Welcomes Women Officers,” *The Irraddy*, 29 August 2014, accessed 25 April 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/first-time-50-years-burmas-military-welcomes-women-officers.html>.
2. Anonymous source, “Myanmar Military Strength,” Global Fire Power, accessed 25 April 2019, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=myanmar. A total personnel strength was estimated at 406,000 by Global Fire Power.
3. William Ross Wallace, “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle Is the Hand That Rules the World,” in *Beautiful Gems of Thought and Sentiment*, ed. Henry Davenport Northrop (Boston: The Collins-Patten, 1890).
4. “1931–1932: Miss May Oung (Daw Mya Sein) Attending the 1931-2 Burma Round Table Conference in London,” *Lost Footsteps*, accessed 25 April 2019, <https://lostfootsteps.org/en/history/miss-may-oung-daw-mya-sein-attending-the-1931-2-burma-round-table-conference-in-london>.
5. Kin Thida Oung, *A Twentieth Century Burmese Matriarch* (self-pub., 2007), 63; Chie Ikeya, “The Life and Writings of a Patriotic Feminist: Independent Daw San of Burma,” in *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, ed. Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013), 25 and 32.
6. “Women’s Roles in Peace Processes: Explore the Data and Read In-Depth Profiles of Major Peace Processes from 1990 to Present,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed 25 April 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/explore-the-data>.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Shawn Crispin, “Myanmar’s Military Just Wants to be Normal,” *Asia Times*, 15 February 2018, para. 16, accessed 25 April 2019, <https://cms.ati.ms/2018/02/myanmars-military-just-wants-normal/>.
9. Robert Egnell, “Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness: Implementing UNSCR 1325 and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security,” *PRISM* 6, no. 1 (March 2016): 76, accessed 9 October 2019, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Gender-Perspectives-and-Military-Effectiveness.pdf>.
10. Robert Egnell, “Women in Battle: Gender Perspectives and Fighting,” *Parameters* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 34, accessed 9 October 2019, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Summer_2013/4_Egnell_Article.pdf.
11. Liza Mundy, *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017).
12. Egnell, “Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness.”
13. *Ibid.*
14. David Rock and Heidi Grant, “Why Diverse Teams are Smarter,” *Harvard Business Review* (website), 4 November 2016, para. 7, accessed 16 April 2019, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>.
15. Herminia Ibarra, Robin J. Ely, and Deborah M. Kolb, “Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers,” reprint, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2013, accessed 17 April 2019, <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers>.
16. “Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter: Quick Take,” *Catalyst.org*, 1 August 2018, accessed 28 May 2019, <https://www.catalyst.org/research/why-diversity-and-inclusion-matter/>.
17. Donna Winslow, “Strange Bedfellows in Humanitarian Crisis: NGOs and the Military,” in *Twisting Arms and Flexing Muscles: Humanitarian Interventions and Peacebuilding in Perspective*, ed. Natalie Mychajlyszyn and Timothy M. Shaw (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 116.