



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 December 2023

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-eighth session

11–22 March 2024

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by ActionAid and Gender Equality Network, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

We would like to acknowledge the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which stands as a beacon of hope and progress in our global pursuit for gender equality and women's empowerment. For over six decades, it has provided a platform for women's voices to be heard, for our experiences to be shared, and for our rights to be defended. CSW's unwavering commitment to promoting gender equality across all sectors, advocating for policy reform, and empowering women and girls worldwide is truly commendable. CSW has been a guiding light, illuminating the path towards a more just and equitable future for all. We express our deepest appreciation for CSW's tireless dedication and look forward to continued collaboration in our shared mission for a gender-equal world.

The Gender Equality Network (GEN), is a member-driven civil society network comprising more than 100 local NGOs/CSOs and international NGOs – in addition to individual members – working for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realization of women's rights in Myanmar. We are committed to creating a world where all people have equal opportunities to reach their full potential, regardless of their gender. We are passionate about accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective and pleased that this important issue is being highlighted at the 68th session of the CSW. We, GEN and ActionAid, collectively representing diverse areas of expertise and holding ECOSOC status, come together to underscore the urgent need for gender-responsive financing to combat poverty, foster equitable institutions, and promote gender equality in Myanmar.

The majority of the world's impoverished are women. It is a stark reality that cannot be ignored. Women, on average, continue to earn a staggering 24 per cent less than men globally. This wage gap is a reminder of the systemic discrimination that women face in workplaces and industries, where their contributions are undervalued and undercompensated. In Myanmar, women bear the brunt of poverty's burden, labouring in low-paid sectors and the informal economy with little to no social protection. Women continuously and courageously shoulder the weight of unpaid care work, an often-overlooked aspect of economic hardship. Yet, it is in the convergence of social, cultural norms, historical marginalization, economic and political instability that we find the gravity of Myanmar's gendered poverty, one which not only disproportionately affects women, but also female-led households, immediate and extended families, and communities at large.

We are overwhelmed with figures; there are about 1.9 million internally displaced persons in Myanmar, whilst 17.6 million people need life-saving humanitarian assistance, a significant majority of whom are women and girls. According to the World Bank's Myanmar Economic Monitor in 2022, approximately 40 per cent of Myanmar's population is living below the national poverty line. But we are more than numbers. The women, girls, and individuals with diverse gender identities are much more than numbers; they are you and me; our present and our future, and we must continue in our efforts to equalize and seek equity through transformative change of the stifling patriarchal systems, compounded with hyper-militarism, that have marginalized women for so long in our country.

Myanmar's economy, which was already contracted owing to the global pandemic, has further plunged as a direct consequence of the failed coup in 2021. Food insecurity, a dire consequence of the 'four cuts' strategy employed by the military, has ravaged communities. Humanitarian aid, regrettably, fails to reach those most in need. In this landscape of physical insecurity and bleak economic prospects,

many have been compelled to divest from Myanmar. Yet, what has emerged in the wake of this crisis is equally troubling; unscrupulous investments, speculative ventures, and unethical practices that exploit the labour of vulnerable women and the environment. Layoffs and rising unemployment rates force women into precarious, high-risk, and exploitative employment, driving an alarming increase in cases of human trafficking to neighbouring countries. The gendered dimensions of Myanmar's escalating poverty are starkly evident; women face the harshest consequences of these crises.

In the intricate tapestry of Myanmar's recent history, the role of institutions tells a story of both progress and peril. Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, Myanmar's economy was experiencing a renaissance. Institutional reform efforts were underway, aligning economic growth with measures aimed at improving public finance allocations to vital social sectors. Some of which bore the noble ambition of advancing women's economic participation and empowerment.

As we all know today, the trajectory of nations can change in an instant. The failed coup of 2021 ushered in a period of profound upheaval, marked by a civil disobedience movement that saw civil servants resign from public institutions in resolute refusal to serve under the military junta. This principled stand against authoritarianism was met with disproportionate use of violence by the military which has given rise to a nationwide armed resistance, plunging the country into a state of intensified conflict that has endured for over 30 months. This 30-month conflict is occurring against the backdrop of Myanmar's 70-year protracted armed conflict. In this turbulent landscape, the institutions that once held the promise of economic prosperity have essentially collapsed and disappeared. The people of Myanmar now face a multitude of crises with no support from the institutions that should safeguard their well-being.

In these trying times, it is the local humanitarian organizations and women's organizations that have stepped in to fill the gap, offering a lifeline to communities in need. Over the course of these arduous 30 months, it has become painfully clear that women's organizations are shouldering the lion's share of the humanitarian assistance burden. These remarkable organizations, regardless of their original areas of focus, have been compelled to engage in humanitarian response efforts. They do so with remarkable creativity, demonstrating unwavering dedication in the face of grave personal danger. The boldness and fearlessness of Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) stand as a beacon of hope, with documented success stories that inspire us all.

In the crucible of conflict that engulfs Myanmar, WROs have emerged as the lifeline for countless families and communities. It is a testament to their resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming adversity. As we gather on this global stage, championing Sustainable Development Goal 5 for Gender Equality, we must carry with us the awareness and appreciation for the invaluable work of these local humanitarian actors. We must ensure that WROs and local humanitarian entities are not only recognized but well-resourced, for their efforts resonate from the cities deep down to the rural ethnic areas. They embody the spirit of solidarity and compassion, serving as exemplars of what can be achieved when we empower women to lead, to act, and to save lives.

In the face of the dire humanitarian crisis gripping Myanmar, it is incumbent upon humanitarian, development, and peace building partners, as well as the donor community to recognize the urgency of the situation and respond tactically and strategically. The past, present, and continuous roles of WROs must be recognised, understood, and valued. We are not merely calling for accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty

and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective now, but for the foreseeable future, we are not calling for the benefits of women and girls only, but for all genders through equality, equity, inclusivity, and accountability. In light of these considerations, we offer the following set of recommendations to the esteemed Member States:

- Foster an environment of equitable partnership, recognizing WROs as essential actors in humanitarian and development efforts.
- Increase financial investments in Gender Equality and Women Empowerment work in Myanmar, with a particular emphasis on channelling funds to WROs that are at the forefront of addressing gender-based vulnerabilities.
- Prioritize context-sensitive, conflict-sensitive, and respectful collaboration with WROs, ensuring that reporting and operational requirements are commensurate with the realities faced by these organizations.
- Uphold the agency of WROs, such as respecting autonomy, recognising expertise, listening actively, avoiding imposition, and trusting in the ability of WROs to guide interventions that resonate with the unique needs of communities.
- Establish mechanisms for continuous dialogue and feedback with WROs to ensure that their perspectives are integrated into policymaking, program design and meaningful partnership.
- Encourage cross-sectoral collaboration among humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding nexus actors to address the multifaceted challenges faced by women in Myanmar, integrating gender perspectives into all, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian initiatives.
- Advocate for a comprehensive gender-responsive approach to economic recovery and post conflict reconstruction in Myanmar, recognizing that gender equality is essential for long-term stability and prosperity.

In closing, we advocate for a transformative approach to financing, one that elevates the work of WROs and empowers them to continue their invaluable efforts in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in Myanmar. Together, we can forge a path towards a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable future for all.
