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PUTTING WOMEN UP: PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN MYANMAR POLITICS

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The coup that overturned Myanmar's elected government in early 2021 clearly upended the roadmap to democracy the country had been following, however haltingly, for over a decade. As of this writing, Myanmar's political future is uncertain; the military (called the Tatmadaw) has shown no sign of relenting in its assault on the prior elected government and the broad resistance the coup triggered. One might question the utility of exploring the status quo ante in light of the desperate situation now. We contend that understanding how, and how well, aspects of democracy worked during Myanmar's ill-fated experiment is, in fact, essential. Not only might we still hope for restoration of civilian, elected government, under the National Unity Government (NUG) currently contesting the military junta or otherwise, but the underlying sociopolitical patterns evident in the recent past, reflecting societal attitudes and priorities, remain germane. Especially salient in this vein are attitudes towards women's leadership: while

neither women nor men can currently seek or hold elected office, institutional features alone were hardly the only arbiters of women's political standing when they could do so.

This book investigates the extent to which men and women have faced different opportunities and challenges in securing election, especially as members of parliament (MPs), but also at subnational tiers, in Myanmar, and why. For instance, have the relevant hurdles been more at the local or national level, in society or in political parties, and structured largely by gender or more by class or other attributes? Understanding these patterns is essential to knowing the extent to which a return to civilian government will likely empower women, or what attitudinal changes, beyond structural ones, would be necessary. Moreover, this investigation allows us to consider Myanmar in comparative context, to see how sociopolitical attitudes and constraints here align with those elsewhere in the region, coup aside.

To answer these questions, we set out to examine women's political representation and opportunities to participate in party politics in Myanmar. Our findings are based on a three-year (2017–20) project funded by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) on "Engendering Political Recruitment and Participation at the Party, Local and National Level in Myanmar". The project brought together an international academic team of five members, led by Netina Tan of McMaster University, working in collaboration with Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF), a local non-governmental organization in Myanmar, to examine political parties' and community members' attitudes towards and practices regarding women's political leadership. The qualitative and quantitative data the team gathered allow us to assess men's and women's relative opportunities to participate in both local and national politics in Myanmar, through different political parties. Here we draw together those findings.

We launched the project with a focus on capacity-building, with research-training workshops for the EMReF team members, as well as collective brainstorming as we developed our research methods and approach. We then embarked on two years of extensive primary data collection across Myanmar, as detailed below. Researchers from EMReF conducted the field research, with support from locally based and external team members. We were unable to complete one planned-for component due to the pandemic then ramping up: a visit to Indonesia

and Malaysia for comparative research. We then worked together to analyse the data and write up our findings, even as a coup (discussed further below) upended politics—and life broadly—in Myanmar. Enough of our research team, however scattered, stayed with the project for us to complete this volume, as the culmination of our multi-year, collaborative effort.

Much of the existing literature on Myanmar (and on other transitional democracies and/or postcolonial, developing states) typically adopts a historical or culturalist perspective to detail the barriers to women's political access. Our book takes a different approach: it is the first effort of which we are aware to study systematically the key political parties, their candidate selection methods, and how party organization and leadership affect women's political participation at the local and national levels. Our collaborative approach to the work, as well as our original primary data, are rare in Myanmar studies and Southeast Asian comparative work, especially in English (though we know of little that comes close in local languages, either). We provide unparalleled glimpses into the "secret gardens" of candidate selection and internal politics of even less-known parties in Myanmar. Our findings expand upon insights regarding gender inequality in Myanmar politics despite the February 2021 coup.

Yet the coup does loom large, of course, and reinforces how deeply militarization and violence intertwine with politics in Myanmar. Shortly after we completed our field research in Myanmar, Myanmar's military overthrew the National League of Democracy government that had been re-elected the previous year, claiming irregularities, and installed a highly coercive military regime. That coup government remains in place; the country remains in turmoil. The junta has planned provisionally for elections in 2023, but most observers expect these polls not to be meaningful, if they happen at all. We opted to continue with our analysis not only in hopes that the country might soon return to electoral rule, making conclusions about women's access to elected office directly germane again, but also given the extent to which these findings reflect more than just contingent institutional arrangements. Rather, our findings reveal how past institutional structures and rules interact with long-standing socio-cultural practices and attitudes within families and local communities. Those features predated the now-upended democratic regime and will surely outlast the current authoritarian one.

UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MYANMAR POLITICS

Since liberalization began in Myanmar in 2010, Myanmar has held three nationwide general elections for its national and subnational parliaments. (We sketch these institutions and electoral rules below.) While only 37 parties competed in 2010, in November 2015, many parties that boycotted in 2010 competed and others formed, following changes in the relevant laws, bringing the total contesting to 93, then about 100 in 2020 (Kudo 2011; Oh 2020). In both 2015, the election immediately preceding our research, and 2020, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a clear majority of both elected and total seats in the national parliament and in most (12 of 14) subnational state/regional parliaments (International Crisis Group 2015, pp. 15–16; Asia Foundation 2020). The party's female leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, is constitutionally barred from becoming president, given a provision aimed specifically at her, disqualifying anyone with foreign immediate family from that office. However, she is widely regarded as the de facto leader of the civilian government. (While detained under trumped-up charges since the coup, she remains the acknowledged leader of the NUG.) The formal position of State Counsellor was created for her, instead.

Notwithstanding the prominence of a charismatic and popular female head of government, other senior elected positions remain extremely male-dominated. Upon her election in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi, known as Daw Suu, was (and still in the NUG, remains) the only woman in the national-level cabinet, and the vice presidents, speakers, and deputy speakers in the Pyithu Hluttaw and Amyotha Hluttaw, the lower and upper houses of parliament, were all men. Two of the 14 state/region chief ministers were female—they were the first women to hold those positions—as was one state/region hluttaw speaker of the house (also the first woman to hold this position) (Minoletti 2016).

These patterns hold across elected offices. While the proportion of female members of parliament elected in 2015—13.7 percent—was higher than at any time in Myanmar's past, then increased to 16 per cent in 2020, it remained extremely low by international standards. By comparison, the rate globally (as of January 2022) is 26.2 per cent; across Asia, it is 21.1 per cent (IPU Parline 2022). Women's representation in the 14 subnational parliaments was also low, averaging 12.7 per cent of elected MPs in 2015 and even less, 9.7 per cent, when one includes

military appointees in that total; women's share of elected state and regional seats increased only to 18 per cent in 2020 (Asia Foundation 2020). States and regions diverged widely in their proportion of female MPs, but that share remained well below parity even in the parliaments with the highest levels of female representation: women were just 26 per cent of elected MPs in Mon State and 30 per cent in Yangon Region in 2020. Three state parliaments included no female MPs at all in 2015 (Minoletti 2016). (We delve more deeply into these data below.)

Political parties vary considerably, too, in the proportion of their MPs who were female. Nevertheless, among the parties that won five or more seats across Myanmar's national and subnational hluttaws in 2015, the highest proportion of female MPs was 16.7 per cent, in both the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (seven women out of 42 MPs) and the Zomi League for Democracy (one woman out of six MPs). The NLD's rate was slightly lower, at 15.1 per cent. Women were particularly poorly represented in parties such as the Arakan National Party (4.4 per cent of MPs), the Union Solidarity and Development Party (2.6 per cent), and the Pa'O National Organisation (0 per cent) (Minoletti 2017).

This imbalance extends throughout administrative tiers. Only 88 of Myanmar's 16,785 ward/village tract administrators are women (i.e., around 0.5 per cent). We lack research thus far into the extent to which experience of local leadership in Myanmar can lead to political participation at state/regional and national levels; elsewhere, such a progression through levels of government is common, as lower-level office, whether elected or appointed, trains politicians for higher-level positions. Since 2012, the position of ward/village tract administrator has been an elected one in Myanmar. However, these elections are indirect. Each household has a single vote, cast by the head of household, for a "ten-household head", then these ten-household heads elect the ward/village tract administrator.

Most heads of Myanmar households are men, which creates a highly gender-unequal electorate. This imbalance perhaps contributes to the very low number of female ward/village tract administrators. Other key issues related to local-level participation that previous research identifies include the fact that since 2012, there has been no officially recognized position of "village head" and that there are no requirements for ward/village tract administrators to hold public

meetings or distribute information (Minoletti 2016). However, the lack of detailed research into local-level political participation, especially from a gender perspective, limits the scope of academic insight into local political processes, as well as how these scale up to the state/regional and national levels. Further study is needed, presumably once the current impasse is resolved, to understand key issues and dynamics. In the meantime, our research—detailed in the chapters to come—represents a step in that direction.

SITUATING MYANMAR IN TERMS OF GENDER AND PARTY POLITICS

The problem of the paucity of women in elected office is not unique to Myanmar. In 1995, the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, China spurred a global push for gender equality and highlighted women's persistent political underrepresentation as a democratic problem as well as a hurdle for economic and human development. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action noted that women were underrepresented despite making up half of the electorate, and notwithstanding political liberalization in many countries (UN Women 1995, p. 79). In 1995, women comprised about 10 per cent of the world's parliamentarians. Today, even after the adoption of gender quotas for elections in more than 130 countries, women still comprise only 26 per cent (IPU Parline 2022).

Women's low level of representation in Myanmar's parliaments is a concern for many reasons. First, representation in governance bodies has symbolic importance, and more gender-equal representation can help foster a greater sense of institutional legitimacy among female citizens—an especially salient consideration when these institutions are still new, as was the case in Myanmar (Mansbridge 1999). Men and women tend to have different preferences and priorities for policy-making and budgetary allocations, and female representatives tend to be more responsive than male representatives to women's preferences (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Lawless 2015; Tinker 2004).[1] More inclusive and gender-equal participation in governance bodies can thus result in more efficient and effective policy-making—again, a concern in a context of transitional government and resource-scarcity (Agarwal 2009; Beaman et al. 2009; Janssens 2010).

Lastly, changing the gender composition of representation can affect styles of governance. For example, research on the United States has found that female mayors are more likely to acknowledge and address fiscal problems their cities face, and female chairpersons of government committees tend to do more to facilitate discussion among other members (Lawless 2015). While we may see cross-cultural differences in governing styles, which institutional variations may accentuate, it is reasonable to expect similar divergence between male and female styles in Myanmar and elsewhere, as well.

The rise in women's representation worldwide has been largely a consequence of advocacy from the UN system, women's movements, democracy activists, and donors. A surge in research on how women come to power and their substantive impact when in office, focused especially on political parties as mediating institutions, has underpinned this push. Party strategists commonly attribute women's political under-representation to women themselves. When asked about the lack of female candidates, they often lament that no women are willing to step forward, or that there are too few qualified women. This explanation, sometimes labelled as "supply-side", blames women's under-representation on a perceived lack of supply of eligible or qualified women (Bjarnegård 2013; Norris and Lovenduski 1993). Other observers suggested that more emphasis should be placed on "demand-side" explanations, focusing instead on the kind of candidates parties are looking for and the formal and informal criteria they use when selecting candidates to compete in elections (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2019; Hennings and Urbatsch 2016).

Increasingly, analysts have realized that supply and demand factors interact: when parties want to recruit women, they also motivate and shape women's ambition, leading more women to step forward (Verge 2015). Programmes that focus solely on raising the skills of potential female candidates, rather than reforming parties in a more gender-equal way, hence miss their mark (Geha 2019). Our starting point is, thus, the assumption that we need to view political parties as male-dominated institutions as well as considering women's sociological position, to understand the ways in which women as a category enter party politics, secure nomination as candidates, and compete in elections.

With few exceptions, academic research has found political parties to play pivotal roles in ensuring or hindering political gender equality

(Kunovich and Paxton 2005). Political parties are the gatekeepers to women's political representation; the manner in which they select candidates for elections is key to understanding the lack of diversity in the ensuing legislature or other elected offices (Lovenduski 2005; Caul 1999; Dahlerup 2007; Gallagher and Marsh 1988). Previous research to explain women's low parliamentary representation in Myanmar, however, has tended to focus less on parties as institutions, leaning more towards supply-side explanations. These studies have found the following factors to be especially important:

- Cultural biases that lead most citizens to prefer male political leaders and women to have less confidence and ambition to try to become parliamentarians.
- Cultural norms that make it harder for women to travel to remote areas and/or overnight (e.g. to campaign), or to avoid harassment. (Although male and female parliamentary candidates both frequently face forms of harassment, harassment of public figures is often gendered, making this more commonly a problem for women than men.)
- The difficulty of balancing family and household responsibilities that women are typically expected to perform with participating in public life.
- That men dominate key leadership positions within parties at both national and local levels (GEN 2013, 2015; Asia Foundation 2014).

The few years preceding the coup saw an increasing amount of research on gender in politics in Myanmar (Zin Mar Aung 2015; Maber and Tregoning 2016; Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. 2017; Minoletti 2014). We thus have reasonably good information on certain factors salient to explaining gender differences in political participation and can rule out for Myanmar some explanations that apply elsewhere. For example, while often assumed an explanatory factor, education does not seem to be so in Myanmar. Among those aged over 25, men are more likely than women to be literate and are slightly more likely than women to have completed high school (15.1 per cent of the male population vs. 13.7 per cent of the female population). However, women are slightly more likely than men to have completed tertiary education (9.3 per cent vs. 8.8 per cent), and are noticeably more likely than males to have

completed an undergraduate degree (7.6 per cent vs. 6.1 per cent), a master's degree (0.3 per cent vs. 0.2 per cent), or a PhD (0.1 per cent vs. 0.0 per cent) (Government of Myanmar, Department of Population 2017). Thus, gender differences in educational attainment explain little or none of the difference we observe in parliamentary representation.

Nor does labour-force participation seem to matter in the same way it does in some other countries. Although women have a lower labour-force participation rate than men in Myanmar, the gender gap is lower (and in some cases reversed) for many of the occupations from which parliamentarians are most commonly drawn (Minoletti 2017, pp. 26–29). Specifically, the 2015 Labour Force Survey found 80.2 per cent of the male population aged 15 and above to be active in the labour force; the equivalent figure for women was only 51.6 per cent (MOLES, CSO, and ILO 2017). This gender gap in labour-force participation is significant and above that found in many other ASEAN countries. Nevertheless, women are both relatively and absolutely more prevalent than men in occupations classified as "professional": for instance, teachers, lawyers, veterinarians, and medical staff (ILO 2017). Hence, analyst Paul Minoletti (2017, p. 29) concludes: "Overall [in Myanmar], it does not seem that gender differences in occupation are a major factor driving the gender differences we see in women's and men's likelihood to seek or win elected office".

Some explanations relevant in other contexts are germane to Myanmar, but with a twist. For instance, here, as elsewhere, the cost of campaigns may be a particular impediment for women. Political campaigning is expensive. Many parliamentary candidates have to use their own funds to cover some or all of their costs. This requirement may pose a bigger barrier for women than men. However, research by the Gender Equality Network (GEN) found that in Myanmar, party matters more than gender. That is, a party's financial capacity to support their candidates affects their abilities to campaign effectively, regardless of personal resources (Minoletti 2017, p. 40).

Yet an especially debilitating feature of the system, when it comes to gender equity, is the enduring role of the armed forces in government, even prior to the coup. The military ruled Myanmar from 1962 to 2010. Even with the advent of an elected government, the military-drafted 2008 constitution still reserves at least 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for military appointees and ensures that the

military appoints several key government ministers (i.e., Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs). The militarization of Myanmar politics and reservation of legislative seats for the military has a significant impact in depressing the number of women in the Pyithu Hluttaws (Harriden 2012, pp. 175–79; Zin Mar Aung 2015). The military appoints very few women to parliament, so the reservation of seats has meant fewer seats for women. Further, the constitution can only be changed with the military's approval.[2] Moreover, the Tatmadaw's long and intimate involvement in Myanmar's politics has had a broader impact on political participation by reinforcing traditional concepts of male authority and superiority as part of a militarization of public space (Hedström, Olivius, and Kay Soe 2021; Hedström and Olivius 2022). As we explore in later chapters, violence in different forms, starting at the level of the family, has pervasive effects on attitudes about women and gender roles; the looming public, and highly masculine, face of Myanmar's military surely amplifies those effects.

Importantly, cultural norms are not static, nor are citizens' voting preferences, when citizens have the opportunity to express them. Although a majority of Myanmar citizens share a preference for male leaders, in the 2015 elections, vote choice was largely based on party allegiance rather than on candidates' characteristics (Minoletti 2017, p. 42). This pattern means whom the parties nominate matters. Consequently, whom the parties recruit and how, and the extent to which this process disadvantages women relative to men, is critical. It is especially these questions, at the intersection of supply- and demand-side explanations for women's political underrepresentation, that our study seeks to address (Minoletti 2017, pp. 36–37).

Recruitment and promotion dynamics within parties are important factors in explaining women's low level of participation (Niven 1998; Lawless and Fox 2010; Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Crowder-Meyer 2013). This salience is evident as women are noticeably absent in key party-level decision-making committees and councils. However, we lack detailed insight into how these dynamics operate in Myanmar—for instance, of selection criteria and processes that local bodies, including political parties, use to choose legislative candidates (Barnea and Rahat 2007; Gallagher and Marsh 1988).

To explain the low descriptive representation and participation of women in political parties and in elected offices at all tiers, from

village leadership to the national parliament, we organize this book broadly around four key themes:

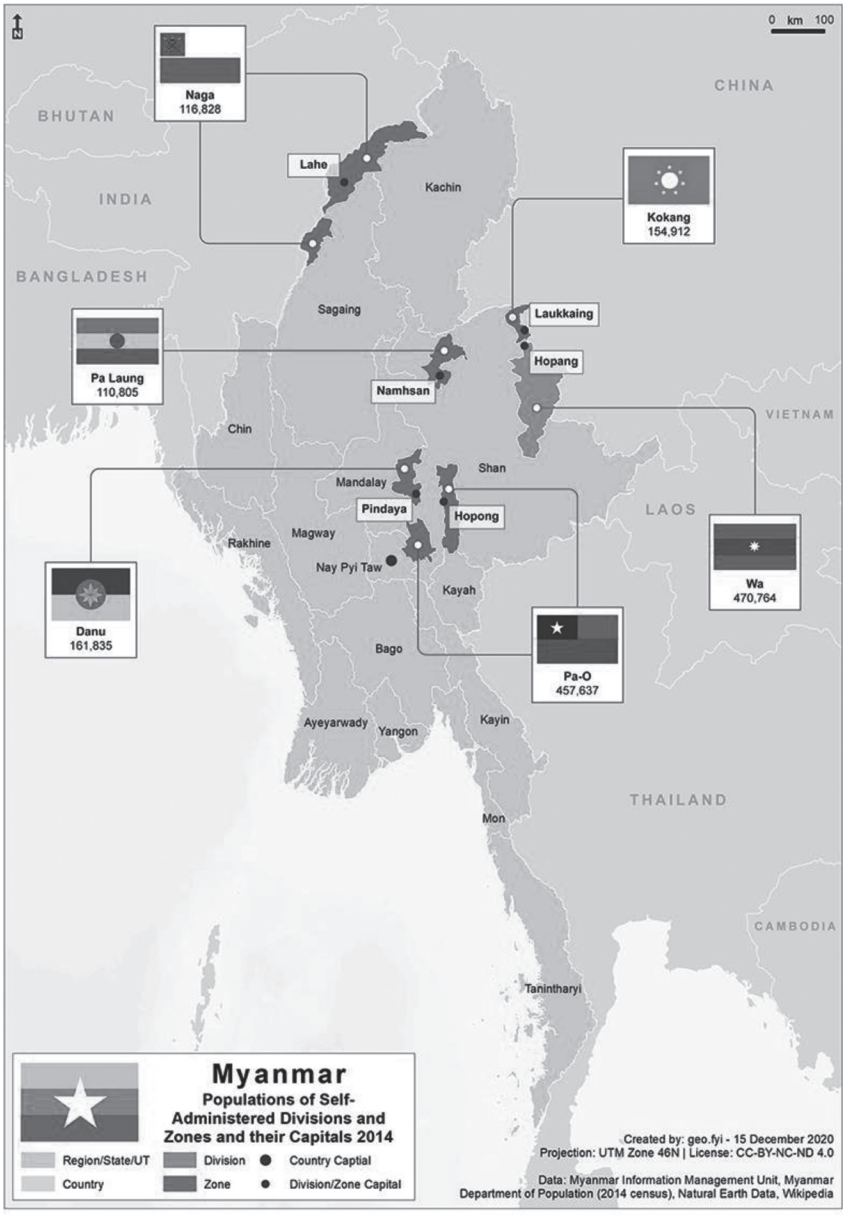
i. Intra-party dynamics and parties' candidate selection methods (Chapters Two and Three);
ii. Public attitudes towards women's political participation (Chapter Four);
iii. How exposure to gendered violence in the private sphere shapes attitudes towards women's participation in the public sphere (Chapter Five); and
iv. Local governance institutions and processes (Chapter Six).

Intra-party politics has largely been a black box for gender researchers in Myanmar.[3] Existing research tells us little about whether what inhibits women's political advancement is primarily a supply or demand problem, or whether institutional, cultural, or resource factors affect women's more than men's political participation (Minoletti 2017, p. 6; Norris 2012). Nor does it offer substantial insight into the extent to which political parties are bureaucratized or what formal or informal selection criteria guide candidate selection. Similarly, extant scholarship regarding socio-cultural norms and gendered attitudes towards political participation is limited, both in terms of *which* factors matter most for political socialization, and, especially, the effect of these leanings at the grassroots level, where popular attitudes may be less mediated by party or other mechanisms, and where political careers so often begin. The chapters to come shed light on these important questions—not just for knowledge's sake, but also to better prepare the ground for Myanmar's hoped-for return before long to elected, civilian-led governance.

ELECTORAL AND PARTY SYSTEMS IN PRE-COUP MYANMAR

Myanmar's 2008 constitution substantially restructured the preceding military-authoritarian system. One feature that remained constant: ethnicity as a core defining feature of, and fault-line in, the polity. Since 2008, ethnic identities have been institutionally represented in four different forms: ethnic states, self-administered areas, ethnic affairs ministers, and constituencies won by ethnic parties. Geographically, the

FIGURE 1.1
Administrative Geography of Myanmar



Source: *Geo.Fyi* (2020).

country is separated into seven regions located in the central area and dominated by the Bamar ethnic-majority population, and seven states within the borderlands, each dominated by ethnic-minority groups. The 2008 constitution also created six self-administered zones and districts (SAZ/SAD) for smaller ethnic groups that comprise minorities within a state or region but are in the majority within a specific township (Jolliffe 2015, p. 32). There are now self-administered zones or districts for the Wa, Kokang, Naga, Pa-O, Palaung, and Danu (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014, p. 14). Figure 1.1 maps out this landscape.

Myanmar's bicameral union (national-level) parliament, collectively referred to as the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, includes the Pyithu Hluttaw and the Amyotha Hluttaw; see Figure 1.2. The Pyithu Hluttaw has 330 elected MPs and 110 MPs appointed by the military.[4] The Amyotha Hluttaw has 168 elected MPs and 56 military-appointed MPs. Myanmar's state and regional parliaments, also called hluttaw, vary dramatically in size, but all also reserve at least 25 per cent of seats for military appointees. In addition to "regular" elected MPs, many states' or regions' hluttaws have elected ethnic affairs representatives, who represent specific ethnic groups residing there.[5]

All of Myanmar's elected MPs are elected via a "first-past-the-post" or majoritarian system. For the Pyithu Hluttaw, each of Myanmar's 330 townships is a single constituency. For the Amyotha Hluttaw, each state or region has 12 constituencies. Since most have more than 12 townships, some townships are grouped together to form single constituencies. However, in other states or regions, the opposite is true, meaning some townships are divided between two constituencies. For state/region hluttaw elections, each township is split into two constituencies.

GENDER BREAKDOWN IN MYANMAR PARLIAMENTS

It is beyond our scope here to detail electoral patterns or parliamentary composition in full across Myanmar's three post-transition, pre-coup elections (2010, 2015, and 2020). Moreover, given the partial nature of the 2010 election—the leading opposition party, the NLD, boycotted—we focus on the presumably more representative 2015 and (to a lesser extent) 2020 elections. Within that ambit, we home in on questions of gender.

Heading into the 2015 elections, women comprised only 6 per cent of MPs in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw—and that was an increase from a mere 2.7 per cent elected in 2010 (Egreteau 2014; Minoletti 2017). (Intervening by-elections boosted the count.) In 2015, women's share of elected seats increased to a still less-than-impressive 13.7 per cent at the national level. They fared slightly worse at the subnational level: across all state and regional parliaments, women secured 12.7 per cent of seats, though that was a sharp improvement from the 3.8 per cent they held previously, as Table 1.1 indicates.

TABLE 1.1
Total Number of Elected Female MPs in the Different Levels of Government, 2010–20

	Elected MPs No. of Women/Elected MPs (%)			Military-appointed MPs No. of Women/Military MPs (%)			Women as % of All MPs		
	2010–15	2015–20	2020	2010–15	2015–20	2020	2010–15	2015–20	2020
Union Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw)	28/438 (6%)	67/424 (13.7%)	79/397 (16.6%)	2/164 (1.2%)	2/164 (1.2%)	NA	4.8%	10.5%	NA
Upper House (Amyotha Hluttaw)	4/155 (2.5%)	23/145 (13.7%)	26/135 (15.5%)	0/56 (0%)	0/56 (0%)	NA	1.8%	10.3%	NA
Lower House (Pyithu Hluttaw)	24/28 (7.8%)	44/279 (13.6%)	53/262 (16.8%)	2/108 (1.9%)	2/108 (1.9%)	NA	6.2%	10.6%	NA
State/ Regional Parliaments	25/634 (3.8%)	84/575 (12.7%)	116/641 (18%)	1/221 (0.5%)	2/219 (0.9%)	NA	2.9%	9.7%	NA

Source: Phan Tee Eain and The Gender Equality Network (2014); Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. (2017); EMReF (2020).

Women's representation varied considerably among states and regions. In top-performing Mon state, women held nearly 20 per cent of seats in 2015, whereas Chin, Kayah and Rakhine states had yet to

elect any women as of the time of our research (Minoletti 2017, p. 12). As we note earlier, that gap persisted in 2020, even as Mon state's share of female MPs edged even higher. The reservation of seats for military appointees notably reduced the proportion of women in office: women secured only 1.2 per cent of military-appointed seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw in 2015, and a paltry 0.9 per cent at the state/regional level (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.2 tallies the proportion of female and male candidates and MPs across all parliaments in the 2015 elections for each of the parties in our study. It is striking that fewer than 20 per cent of candidates in all the parties were women, and only one party had more than 20 per cent female MPs—the Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP), which only had four MPs in total. The average proportion of female candidates across all parties and independents in the 2015 election was around 13 per cent.[6] Five of our parties exceeded that average, as the table indicates, and four were below average. Women's participation as both candidates and MPs is strikingly low in the Arakan National Party (ANP), Pa-O National Organisation (PNO), and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

TABLE 1.2
Parties, Candidates, and MPs

Party	Total Candidates	Female Candidates	Women as % of Candidates	Total MPs	Female MPs	Women as % of MPs
MNP	54	10	19%	3	0	0%
SNLD	151	27	18%	42	7	17%
LNDP	28	5	18%	5	1	20%
KSDP	55	8	15%	4	1	25%
NLD	1152	167	14%	886	134	15%
TNP	27	3	11%	12	1	8%
USDP	1151	69	6%	117	3	3%
ANP	79	4	5%	45	2	4%
PNO	24	1	4%	10	0	0%

Source: Extracted from Union Election Commission (UEC) and EMReF (2015).

While this study focuses on gender equality in legislative office, it is worth highlighting also other aspects of political representation. While we do not have exact data on the ethnic composition of MPs or on the total Myanmar population, the proportion of MPs who were Bamar and non-Bamar appeared to correspond roughly to the proportion of the population that is thought to be from these groups (i.e., Bamar comprise around 60–65 per cent). Furthermore, the three probably largest ethnic minority groups accounted for the largest shares of non-Bamar MPs: Shan (6.5 per cent of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw MPs), Rakhine (5.7 per cent), and Kayin (4.7 per cent). In terms of religious groups, the Christian minority were overrepresented among MPs, whereas Muslims were not represented at all, despite being over 4 per cent of Myanmar's population. The share of MPs who were Buddhist roughly corresponded to their share of the general population—close to 90 per cent (Minoletti 2017, pp. 14–15).

Clearly, numerical representation in parliamentary bodies need not entail substantive representation. For example, although ethnic Bamar were not overrepresented among MPs, many ethnic-minority leaders feel that a small Bamar elite that pays insufficient attention to ethnic-minority interests has controlled decision-making within the dominant and highly top-down NLD (TNI 2015, p. 12). Moreover, even prior to the coup, the Tatmadaw continued to wield significant influence over policy-making and implementation in Myanmar and was widely seen to focus on Buddhist and Bamar interests (Stokke 2019b; Fink 2015; South 2018). Clearly, while women's underrepresentation is an important dimension to address, it was not the only area in which Myanmar's pre-coup leadership and democratic praxis fell short of normative ideals.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Our study draws on two years of extensive primary data collection through a mixed research method. We collected multiple forms of qualitative and quantitative data, including from elite interviews, surveys, focus-group discussions (FGDs), and secondary literature. Samples of our interview protocols and survey and focus-group discussion questions are in the appendices to this book. All told, we conducted 2,889 surveys in four regions to capture variation among voters across the country, 99 focus-group discussions, and 98 semi-

structured interviews at the ward and village level across Myanmar in 2018 and 2019. To supplement our focus on ordinary citizens, we also conducted 72 in-depth qualitative interviews with members of nine political parties.

We review each of these methods here; the chapters that follow each draw on one or more of these sets of data.

Interviews with Selected Parties. Since 2010, proliferating parties have risen to advance democracy or (re)claim rights for their respective communities. Broadly, three types of parties have emerged: nationwide multi-ethnic parties such as NLD, ethnic-based parties, and smaller Bamar-dominated parties (Stokke 2019a; TNI 2015). For our research purposes, we chose to focus on nine parties of varied sizes, organizational structures, ages, and ideological platforms:

- Arakan National Party (ANP)
- Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP)
- Lisu National Development Party (LNDP)
- Mon National Party (MNP)
- National League for Democracy (NLD)
- Pa-O National Organization (PNO)
- Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)
- Ta'Ang National Party (TNP)
- Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)

Among these parties are the six that won the most seats across all Myanmar's parliaments in 2015 (NLD, USDP, ANP, SNLD, TNP, PNO), as well as the most electorally successful ethnic Kachin, Lisu, and Mon parties (KSDP, LNDP, and MNP).[7] We profile each of the nine parties in Appendix One. The parties in our study include those that:

i are relatively highly institutionalized and have clear rules that they follow most or all of the time (MNP, NLD);
ii. have a low level of institutionalization and frequently perform processes in an ad-hoc manner (KSDP, LNDP, TNP); and
iii. fall between these poles (ANP, PNO, SNLD, USDP).

The parties we selected have significantly different histories, political organizations, ideologies, and internal party cultures. For the purposes of this book, we have divided them into three main categories:

i. parties that are "old" by Myanmar standards, having competed in the 1990 elections, then been suppressed by the military government in the 1990s and 2000s (MNP, NLD, SNLD);
ii. newer ethnic-based parties founded since 2010 (KSDP, LNDP, TNP); and
iii. parties with strong connections with the military establishment (PNO, USDP).

The ANP does not fit easily in this schema, as it was formed from the merger of the Arakan League for Democracy (category i) and the Rakhine National Development Party (category ii).

Our findings draw from data collected in 72 interviews our EMReF research team conducted between November 2018 and March 2019 with members of the nine political parties listed above. The EMReF researchers conducted all the interviews in Myanmar language, then translated them into English. One researcher from EMReF and three international researchers then used the English-language data for statistical analysis. Our interviewees included two categories: candidates and gatekeepers. Candidates include respondents who ran for office in 2015, whether or not they won.[8] Gatekeepers are those who did not compete in the 2015 election, but hold positions of authority at the central level (e.g. party chairman, general secretary, central executive committee member, central committee member) or township level (e.g. township chairman or secretary). Also, a few gatekeepers held positions at the state/region or district level of their party. Overall, we interviewed a total of six candidates and four gatekeepers from four larger and electorally successful parties (NLD, USDP, ANP, and SNLD) and four candidates and two gatekeepers from the five smaller parties (TNP, PNO, LNDP, KSDP, MNP).

Broadly, these interviews covered interviewees' personal and political backgrounds; intra-party rules, promotion, and recruitment of candidates for the 2015 elections; and their experiences as politicians. (See Appendix Four for the list of interview questions, translated from Myanmar language into English.) The EMReF research team followed up with telephone calls to senior officials from the central party apparatus if they had questions or missed issues in the original interviews. The data from these party interviews inform both Chapters Two and Three, in which we probe, respectively, candidate selection methods and elite attitudes towards women in politics at the party

and state levels, and whether certain types of parties perform better than others in terms of advancing women.

Survey. To assess the perceptions and attitudes of the community towards male and female political leadership, we also conducted a survey in 20 villages with both male and female appointed village or ward leaders. We selected another 40 villages to capture diverse geographical locations—ethnic villages from hilly regions (Shan, Kachin, and Mon state), the dry zone (Magwe Region), and the coastal region (Ayeyarwady Region)—to explore how different cultures, traditions, and livelihoods shape popular attitudes.

For the survey at the community level, we used a randomized sampling method to select townships and villages, but purposive sampling to select states and regions. The questionnaire for the survey required careful preparation, piloting, translation, and back-translation before its launch. Some questions drew upon existing publicly available international survey instruments (e.g., World Values Survey, International Social Survey Program, AsiaBarometer) for ways to capture attitudes towards women in government, perceptions of corruption, and other key social and political characteristics. Other questions were more specific to the Myanmar context and our specific focus. We then developed a coding scheme to enable statistical analysis. See Appendix Two for our survey questions.

Our team conducted quantitative, multi-level regression analysis with these data to understand attitudes and perceptions towards male and female political decision-makers. We analyse the survey's key findings regarding attitudes towards women's political leadership at the local-community level in Chapter Four, and the social roots of those attitudes especially in Chapter Five.

Focus-group Discussions and Community-leader Interviews. Lastly, we probed further into the question of women's ability to participate at the local level by conducting 99 focus-group discussions (FGDs) and 98 semi-structured interviews in wards and villages in Ayeyarwady Region, Mandalay Region, Mon State, and southern Shan State, from September through November 2019. (See Figure 1.1 for the location of these states and regions.) In each state and region, we visited three townships, and in each township, one ward and one village. The three townships in Ayeyarwady Region were Kyaunggone, Ngaputaw, and Nyaungdone; the three in Mandalay Region were Ta-Da-U, Thabeikkyin, and Singu; the three in Mon State were Bilin, Kyaikmaraw, and Kyaikto;

and the three in southern Shan State were Hsi Hseng, Nyaungshwe, and Taunggyi.

We chose the states and regions for our study to reflect a variety of geographical, economic, and cultural features. We took into account where we were able to get access to conduct this qualitative research and the accompanying survey. Due to ongoing conflict, and the difficulty this posed for obtaining access to conduct research safely across multiple randomly selected townships, we did not consider including Kachin State, Rakhine State, or northern Shan State. Once we had chosen our states and regions, we randomly selected townships, ward/village tracts, and villages in each on which to focus. We elaborate on our selection of townships, wards, village tracts, and villages in Chapter Four, which draws upon these data alongside the broader-based survey.

Our team conducted a total of 99 FGDs, with four FGDs in each ward and village—one each with "old" women, "old" men, "young" women, and "young" men. Our final sample consisted of twenty-three Ward/Village Tracts Administrators (W/VTAs), thirty-seven 100 Household Heads (100 HHs), fourteen 10 Household Heads (10 HHs), nine elders and fifteen other community leaders. "Young" refers to age 18–34, and "old" means age 35 and above.[9] 75 per cent of our FGDs had between five and seven participants—our target number. Nine per cent had fewer than five participants, and 16 per cent had more than seven.[10] The FGD discussion topics covered how decisions are made at local levels, what local leaders do for their communities, what opportunities residents have to participate in decision making, and residents' views on female leaders and on desired qualities in leaders more broadly. While our research design originally aimed for gender parity among interviewees, the extent of male dominance among these positions made that difficult to achieve. Only 28 per cent of respondents were women, spread unevenly across categories.

In each ward/village in our study, in addition to the FGDs, our team also conducted semi-structured interviews with four community leaders—98 in all.[11] No accurate data are available on the ethnic composition of Myanmar's population, but it is commonly suggested that Bamar are around 60–65 per cent of the population, meaning the composition of our interviewees and FGDs is broadly representative of the national population in terms of ethnicity. 58 per cent of our FGDs

included Bamar participants only; 27 per cent included participants who were all members of a single non-Bamar ethnic group (Mon, Pa-O, Shan, etc.); and the rest included participants of more than one ethnicity.

All the FGDs and interviews followed guides that we wrote first in English and then translated into Myanmar language. The FGDs were organized as group interviews guided by a facilitator and a pre-prepared FGD guide. The FGD and interview guides are available in Appendices Three and Four. The questions in the FGD guide encouraged discussion as a group and focused on collecting information about de facto decision-making as well as on identifying opportunities and hurdles for participation in local politics. Chapter Six in particular draws upon these findings in exploring local-level political participation and distribution of authority.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The chapters to come present and assess our research findings in detail. Here, we offer a bird's-eye overview of what we have learned and where that insight leaves us. Given the circumstances in which Myanmar now finds itself, we offer, too, key takeaways on the trajectory and prospects of this project. The research posed special challenges, both in the process and, of course, in the aftermath.

Our research finds a mixture of institutional, cultural, and individual-level factors that together shape women's chances of pursuing and securing elected office. Institutionally, we find that party type does matter: the more personalized and less institutionalized parties are, the less prone they are to nominate candidates *not* from within gatekeepers' personal networks. Such network-related constraints especially hinder women. Ideology matters, too, precisely in the way one might expect, as those parties inclined towards progressivism are more likely to advance women. That said, ethnic parties are no more likely than catch-all national ones to nominate women to stand for the national parliament—the quest for descriptive representation on one axis need not translate to pursuit of the same goal across axes. Regardless, our findings thus far suggest the need for more work to study the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion on women's political pursuit at both the local and national levels.

Compounding these factors are cultural and normative attributes—and while a hoped-for eventual return to elections and civilian leadership may bring a change of parties, perhaps with different internal processes, these cultural factors are likely to persist. Most importantly, men and women experience political agency differently: everything from childhood experiences to marital status play out differently in terms of their effects on the likelihood of candidacy for women and for men. For example, in Chapter 5, Bjarnegård discusses the extent to which one's early childhood experiences with domestic violence can have long-lasting, gendered impacts on attitudes towards politics.

Social norms do (still) favour men as political leaders, in line with a general pattern of overall conservativism. Those attitudes have rarely extended to overtly violent campaign (or counter-campaigning) strategies, at least in recent elections—unless we read the coup as a spectacularly aggressive form of electoral violence—but gendered patterns of verbal harassment, especially online, have marred polls. More broadly, voters in Myanmar tend to associate even local-level political leadership with qualities understood as male, and to consider women as less suited for such empowerment. The experience of having had a female head of government has not shifted the needle on those perceptions, nor—especially in light of the gendering also of violence—is there reason to expect the current interregnum to incline voters towards putting their trust in female politicians.

The process of the research itself warrants discussion. At the time of our survey and field research, Myanmar remained in its comparatively democratic phase. Another election was in the offing—and took place as planned in 2020—and while the polity was some way off from liberal democracy, citizens enjoyed a civilian-led government, a degree of civil liberties, and avenues for political participation. Even under these circumstances, survey and field research posed real challenges. Most notably, some areas remained sites of active, armed ethnic conflict, or "black areas" with limited access. Given our aspirations for both nationwide and sub-nationally representative research, these constraints posed methodological and logistical hurdles. Moreover, legacies of mistrust compounded more basic hassles of gaining ethics approval from relevant government agencies and poor infrastructure at times confounded our team as we moved through the country for interviews and to implement our face-to-face survey.

Of course, our multiyear initiative ended on a decidedly low note. First, we could not complete the final phase of the research: members of our team from EMReF were set to travel to Indonesia and Malaysia in April 2020 to learn more about the experience of a Southeast Asian state with (Indonesia) and without (Malaysia) quotas for female candidates; the pandemic postponed those plans, then the coup cancelled them altogether. Second, we delved into our final analysis and drafting of the chapters assembled here collaborating remotely, adapting to COVID-19 social distancing and travel protocols. But third, and more devastatingly, the coup scattered several of our Myanmar team members and made it impossible for those who remained in Yangon to focus on academic pursuits as their world unraveled. We eventually regrouped, still working remotely, in Myanmar, Canada, the US, and Europe, to make sense of the research findings drawn from what now appears to be a lost era, and on smaller questions than the all-consuming ones Myanmar now confronts, but reflecting a society that *is* still there. The analyses that follow aim not only to detail a past history, but also, more importantly, to reveal and consider underlying fault-lines, frictions, and potentials of enduring relevance.

THE CHAPTERS TO COME

Presently, very few publications on Myanmar politics feature collaborative research findings from both academic and practitioners' perspectives. Our book, and the research project behind it, bring together an exceptional group of Myanmar experts (Aye Lei Tun, Hlat Myat Mon, Khin Myo Wai, La Ring Pausa, Su Su Hlaing, Jangai Jap, and Paul Minoletti) and international academics with expertise in political science (Netina Tan, Meredith Weiss, Michelle Dion, and Elin Bjarngård), economics (Guillem Riambau, Paul Minoletti), gender studies (Netina Tan and Elin Bjarngård), and quantitative survey analysis (Guillem Riambau, Michelle Dion, and Khin Myo Wai).

Chapters Two and Three reveal the "secret garden" of politics: the formal and informal rules governing candidate selection in nine political parties in Myanmar and internal politics in mass-based and ethnic parties. In Chapter Two, Netina Tan and Aye Lei Tun highlight how intra-party politics—the role of selectorate bodies such as central executive committees (CEC) and the selection criteria they use—affected

the demand for female candidates in the last two general elections. They find that more organized, institutionalized, and ideologically progressive parties that conduct candidate searches from the local level up are more favourable towards and open to female candidates. In contrast, personalistic and community network-based parties are more arbitrary and likely to turn to personal networks to source for candidates, and to disregard rules and selection criteria. What this contrast implies is that policy recommendations to improve the supply of female candidates ought first to pay attention to party organization, platform, selection rules, and criteria.

We then turn in Chapter Three to the specific orientation of parties, in asking whether ethnic parties facilitate women's representation. Jangai Jap and Cassandra Preece use available qualitative and quantitative data to better understand whether ethnic parties matter for women's political representation at the national level. They investigate candidate selection procedures in ethnic parties and parties' positions on recruiting and supporting female politicians in policy and in practice. Leveraging 2015 election data, this chapter compares ethnic parties with the NLD and the USDP, in terms of their track records in nominating women and their likelihood of winning. They hypothesize that the extent to which ethnic parties put female candidates up for election may be correlated with the degree of party institutionalization. They find, however, that ethnic parties are not more likely than catch-all national parties to recruit or support female politicians.

Looking beyond parties, our survey data allow us to explore societal attitudes—and to confirm that traditional conservative attitudes remain dominant in Myanmar. In Chapter Four, Anor Mu, Paul Minoletti, Guillem Riambau, and Michelle Dion use our survey data to examine mass attitudes towards women and political leadership, including towards women's participation in formal politics. These data allow them to examine which factors affect women and men differently as they contemplate or pursue political careers. The results show that past life experiences, including specifically experience of physical abuse as children, have markedly different effects on women and men in the long run. Formal education, marital status, and perceptions of safety also have divergent effects.

In Chapter Five, Elin Bjarnegård widens the frame, to consider the larger goals of democratic elections in Myanmar, as a presumed

important step towards the peaceful resolution of conflict—even as elections themselves carry risk of violence and violations of electoral and personal integrity, especially in a conflict-affected political environment such as Myanmar's. Observers widely lauded the elections of 2015 for being relatively free and fair. But closely following the next polls was the coup d'état, raising questions of how thick the veneer of political peace (at least for central Myanmar) had been during the decade-long period of political liberalization. This chapter investigates the extent to which political candidates or local-level decision-makers in Myanmar's 2015 general elections experienced violence and intimidation as part of campaigns. Recent research suggests that political violence can be gendered in different ways, including in motive, form, and impact.

The second aim of this chapter is to investigate if the extent of violent experiences differs between politically active men and women in Myanmar, and if they face different forms of, or consequences from, violence. The analysis draws on our interviews with gatekeepers and candidates as well as focus group discussions, demonstrating that Myanmar politicians had normalized attacks and abuse as part of politics, even before the 2021 coup. Although most interviewees reported improvements compared to previous political experiences, a majority of our candidate interviewees reported some form of intimidation during their 2015 election campaigns. Verbal or online harassment reported included ethnic or religious aspects. While it is difficult to discern any differences by gender in the *extent* of harassment and verbal abuse, we see discernable differences in the *forms* of harassment that men and women face. Women were more often the victims of personal accusations, often online, including degrading talk directed against family members as well as rumors about their person.

Lastly, in Chapter Six, Cassandra Preece, La Ring Pausa, and Paul Minoletti analyse data on women's and men's political participation and representation at the local level, and perceived gender inequalities in the processes involved. Formal legal, policy-making, and budgetary powers in Myanmar are highly centralized. However, decision-making at ward, village tract, and village levels is central to citizens' lives, especially related to local development, basic administration, security, dispute resolution, and social and religious activities. While women attend local meetings in large numbers, they are less likely than men to participate actively in group settings. Men dominate and speak more

in meetings, and leadership positions are highly male-dominated—to the extent that women constitute less than one per cent of ward/village tract administrators in Myanmar. Other key local leadership positions, including 100-household heads and local elders, are likewise extremely male-dominated. Behind this pattern is the reality that women face the downsides to political participation disproportionately more than men, especially in terms of sacrificing time to attend meetings, and do not enjoy the upsides of influencing decision-making and feeling empowered. The pull of masculine leadership stereotypes ensures male dominance of leadership positions and decision-making at the ward and village-tract levels. Feminine stereotypes and expectations that women perform their domestic tasks or stay indoors after dark, in contrast, limit women's participation in local governance.

Taken together, these chapters sketch a landscape not entirely hostile to women's leadership, but still presenting important structural and cultural constraints. Even if elections resume quickly, the playing field in Myanmar will almost certainly remain less than level, unless and until both processes and popular attitudes change.

NOTES

1. Although the quantum of evidence for Myanmar is still limited, research suggests that there, too, men and women have different preferences, and female leaders tend to be more responsive to women's preferences (Minoletti 2014, 2015).
2. Hartery (2019) suggests that the Tatmadaw's constitutional veto is not so secure as assumed. However, this veto is very much de facto in place, and probably applies de jure, as well.
3. Several studies have touched on this issue (e.g. DIPD 2016; Minoletti 2016; Phan Tee Eain 2016). However, none of these studies were able to explore the intraparty level in much detail or depth.
4. In 2015, elections were only held in 323 constituencies; they were cancelled in the other seven due to security concerns. However, two of these constituencies were able to elect MPs in 2017 by-elections.
5. For more on how Ethnic Affairs Representatives are elected, see TNI (2015), p. 7.
6. Note that there is a slight discrepancy between these two sources for how many of the 6,072 candidates were women—Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation counts 805 (13.3 per cent), whereas the International

Foundation for Electoral Systems gives the number as 800 (13.2 per cent) (EMReF 2015; IFES 2015).

7. UEC database on successful candidates in the 2015 election (hereafter, "UEC database").
8. SNLD had chosen one of our candidate interviewees to run in 2015 in Kyethi Township, but the Union Election Commission (UEC) cancelled elections due to local security concerns. He successfully contested there in the 2017 by-elections. All other candidate interviewees ran in 2015.
9. We also conducted additional FGDs which were (i) with young women in a ward in Singu Township, Mandalay Region; (ii) with older men in a village in Kyaikto Township, Mon State; and (iii) with young men from a ward in Kyaikto Township, Mon State. The extras were a result of our having too many participants.
10. In most of the wards and villages in our study, the ward and village tract administrator (W/VTA), 100-household head (HH), and/or community elders helped us to find FGD participants. However, there were also some instances in which the field researchers walked through the ward/village to find potential participants on the street or in their homes. The FGDs were conducted in W/VTA's offices or homes, monasteries, and community halls.
11. One W/VTA; one village administrator (VA) or 100-HH; one 10-HH or elder; and one other community leader. In practice, we were not always able to interview exactly one from each category in each ward/village. Our final sample consisted of 23 W/VTAs, 37 100-HH, 14 10-HH, 9 elders, and 15 other community leaders. That last category includes not only leaders of community groups (such as women's groups, local development organizations, loan groups, and religious and social groups) but also two members of the local election/voting commission and one village clerk. Of the 98 interviewees, 63 per cent are ethnic Bamar, 34 per cent are non-Bamar, and 3 per cent are mixed Bamar and non-Bamar.

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