TRANSCRIPT

Event
The Red Zone: Charting Paths to Resilience in the Climate-Conflict Nexus
Breakout Panel 3: Frontline Responders in Myanmar: Role of Women in Humanitarian and Climate Action

DATE
Wednesday, May 15, 2024 at 2:30 p.m. ET

FEATURING

Khin Lay
Civil Society and Political Activist, Founding Director, Triangle Women Support Group

May Sabe Phyu
Director, Gender Equality Network, Myanmar

Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe
Union Minister, Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children Affairs, National Unity Government

Thinzar Shunlei Yi
Democracy Activist

CSIS EXPERTS

Hadeil Ali
Director and Fellow, Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com

CSIS CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Good afternoon, everyone. Good afternoon, good afternoon, good afternoon.

I hope you all have been enjoying the conference so far. Thank you, if you're joining us here in person in Washington, D.C., and thank you as well to our online viewers.

My name is Hadeil Ali. I am the director of the Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project here at CSIS. And I’m delighted to be the moderator for the panel on “Frontline Responders in Myanmar: The Role of Women in Humanitarian and Climate Action.”

So let me give you a little bit of a sense of the context in which we’re operating in, and the landscape in Myanmar. Myanmar is facing political turmoil, humanitarian crises, environmental degradation, all presenting a multifaceted challenge for the country. With an estimated 18.6 million individuals, who are predominantly women and girls, that are in desperate need of aid, the humanitarian response has been alarmingly underfunded. Myanmar’s 2023 humanitarian response plan remains only 45 percent funded, leaving nearly 2 million people deprived of essential support. This is all exacerbated by doubling poverty lines since 2021 and displacement of 2.6 million people by the end of last year, 2023.

Despite these dire circumstances, it’s the women in Myanmar who are navigating this dangerous political – the terrain of political dissent and humanitarian aid provision. They are leading the movement. Women in Myanmar are the ones leading the movement, the anti-authoritarian movement, while also in the midst of conflict, humanitarian, and climate challenges.

So, to that end, I am delighted to have an all-star panel today, phenomenal women who are leaders in their own rights, and civil society leaders in Myanmar, as well. Let me introduce to you our panelists joining us both in person and online.

Here joining us in person is, to my left, Khin Lay, who is the founding director of Triangle Women organization in Myanmar. She is a Burmese civil society and political activist. Welcome.

To my right is May Sabe Phyu, who is a director of the Gender Equality Network in Myanmar. She is a women rights and peace advocate, combating to end discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar.

We’re fortunate to have also joining us online, Susanna Hla Hla Soe, who
is a union minister at the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children Affairs at the National Unity Government.

We are also fortunate, later on in the conversation, Thinzar Shunlei Yi, who unfortunately, can’t be here for the conversation in person or online, but was able to share with us a video that we will be watching later, to make sure that her voice is part of our conversation here today.

I want to start off by asking all of our panelists the same question, to add on the context that I gave, of what’s going on in Myanmar. And let’s start here, in person. If you can shed light on what are the main humanitarian and climate challenges that specifically women and girls are facing in Myanmar, and how are those challenges evolving, since 2021?

And can I start with you, Khin?

Khin Lay: Thank you so much. (Speaks in Burmese.)

(Continues in English.) As you know, Myanmar is a developing country and are fighting climate challenges for many years because of political, social, economic, many reasons. So – but after three years of the attempt coup, faces multifaceted, complex emergencies, with mounting humanitarian needs, Myanmar has become the second dangerous country for the civilians.

The junta’s military offensives against resistance have impacted approximately 80 percent of the country’s township. These security concerns have resulted in the displacements of many individuals from their homes. As a result, the internally displaced populations, IDPs, of Myanmar have exceeded 2.5 million people since February 2021.

In addition to the junta forces’ terror campaign across the country, the recent Cyclone Mocha has wreaked havoc in the Rakhine and other primarily, like, in conflict-affected areas such as Chin, Sagaing, Magway, where a strong presence of resistant forces against the military exists. Humanitarian assistance, an asset to these areas, is further compounded by the Myanmar military malicious strategy, called the four cut strategies, which they have used repeatedly in the ethnic areas of – for decades. Innocent civilians have become victims of a merciless denial of the humanitarian aid, further identifying their human suffering. Conflict-ravaged regions remain off limits to United Nations agencies and international actors, blocking their ability to provide the assistance and support to these desperate needs.

Instrumentalization and weaponization of life-saving humanitarian
assistance is one of the junta’s methods to force people into the submission. So humanitarian aid has become the instruments of gaining legitimacy by the junta, as they did during the COVID vaccine delivery too. So, they are allowing the aid to be delivered to the areas where their political and strategic interests are met. The most vulnerable people are not provided with life-saving humanitarian assistance.

Against this backdrop, look at humanitarian actors, including, like human rights organizations and other civil society organizations, despite facing the mounting risks and the adversity, continue to assume that the risks willing to reach to the most vulnerable and affected populations. During the crisis since the last three years, the communities affected have shown remarkable resilience, by constructing their local governance and undertaking other actions to be resilient, such as ensuring, like, food security with the assistance of the local civil society organizations, and ethnic revolutionary organizations.

So, despite facing a controlled banking system and numerous barriers, many local organizations rely on limited resources and individual donations. We, the pro-democracy movement and other, you know, assistance are relying on the local donations. So after three demanding years of relentless local resource limitations, mobilization, resilient people of Myanmar have almost exhausted of their capacity, leaving them to pull from the worlds of the emptiness.

However, some manage to obtain the humanitarian assistance from – through the partnership in the international organization, humanitarian, and development partner organization. But the bureaucratic and – what is it, like red tape and financial control measure adopted by the development and humanitarian organizations continue to pose challenges. So, the situation requires at most flexibility, adaptive and agile programming, and quick response. A trust-based modality of funding is necessary. And donors must be satisfied with one big – what is it called, like cumulative report, explaining how their funds were used and reached to the community. What types of – you know, community requiring today financial audits and transition records due to the serious security risks on local civil society and humanitarian actors.

In relation to the Cyclone Mocha, Rakhine state aftermath of the disasters is characterized by the potential ethnic tension stemming from decades of exclusion, structural violence, and armed conflicts. It is of utmost importance that international humanitarian organizations carry out interventions to address the needs of the Rohingya and Rakhine population equitably, without a separation that exist in conflict fault lines.
Conflict-sensitive way of humanitarian aid delivery is a must in Myanmar. Existing coalition of women rights organizations and network, including local humanitarian network, have established the channels to reach to the most affected population. They have built trust over the years with the communities and have the reliable actors who can effectively carry out necessary actions. The localization of aid must be of the highest priority. So, in the face of such deliberate regime repression and terror, the plight of the vulnerable is magnified.

So, during this Humanitarian Forum, I pledge that the world must not turn blind eye to this grave injustice against the people of Myanmar. We are worthy of international assistance and protection, as we have courageously exhibited of ourselves commitment and resilience in the struggle for freedom and democracy.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Ali: Thank you very much. And thank you for that great call to action at the end. And we will talk a little bit more at the end about what is your message for policymakers.

May, can I ask you the same question? If you can build on what the main humanitarian and climate challenges are, that you see from your perspective.

May Sabe Phyu: Yes, thank you so much. And since the failed coup, Myanmar has been grappling with a multifaceted humanitarian crisis that is abetted by the junta’s nationwide war on the people. And in addition to my colleague’s set, I intend to provide a brief political and economic analysis of the challenges we face.

So, we are experiencing widespread declines across various measurements, with the poverty rate rising. And as you have already mentioned, over 18 million people, which is one-third of Myanmar’s population, now require humanitarian aid. But we are not getting humanitarian needs – I mean, the humanitarian aid that we need.

So, in the three years, our currency has significantly devalued, moving from 1 U.S. dollar to 1,300 Myanmar kyats, to 400 Myanmar kyats today. Three – or 4,000 Myanmar kyats today, which is a threefold increase. And of course, you know, like, its impact on the inflation rate. And you know, the current inflation rate stands at 29 percent for this year’s first quarter.

So, our account balance is negative, largely due to the junta’s
importations of arms and ammunition to kill civilians, over essential medical supplies and vaccines too. I mean, that's consequently, children in many regions lack access to necessary vaccinations since COVID time.

And adding to the mix is Myanmar ranks second out of 187 countries in the 2016 Global Climate Risk Index, indicating its vulnerability to extreme weather events. Myanmar is one of the world’s most disaster-prone countries, exposed to multiple hazards including floods, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides, and droughts. During the coup, we have had Cyclone Mocha in May 2023, and it affected the coastal regions, underscoring Myanmar’s environmental vulnerabilities, and also the structural challenges in providing disaster relief and aid to the Rohingya who live in Rakhine, and other ethnic minorities in conflict zones.

In August 2023, torrential downpours triggered floods and landslides across regions such Bago, Karen state, and Mon state, devastating early harvested rice paddies. It is likely that many here are unaware of these and other disasters Myanmar has faced over the past three years, given the lack of international media coverage our crisis received. The challenges we are facing are systematic and multilayered.

And I would like to continue talking about gender-specific humanitarian challenges. I mean, like, Myanmar is a patriarchal society with strict social, cultural norms that women are coerced to follow. Failure to follow to these norms leads to social stigmatization. Women face invisible labor and a triple pattern managing household chores, caring for the sick and the elderly, and educating children. During times of conflict, these norms are either exacerbated or shift slightly, sometimes allowing for women's participation in decision making and leadership. However, this shift does not reduce their workload in the social sphere.

So, in humanitarian emergencies, women are expected to continue to bear the burden of social reproduction. Public services have been severely affected, with few affordable and functioning hospitals available. Lower economic strata struggle to meet their health needs, and the burden falls heavily on women. The military has been forcibly closing private hospitals employing health care workers who joined the civil disobedience movement, the CDM we call it. And from 2023 to 2024, five to six hospitals has been forced to shut down.

Climate change challenges continually pose threats to women and girls, of course. Gender roles assign them the responsibility of providing food and sustaining lives within the society. When food security arise – food insecurity arises, women and girls face additional stress to ensure their families have enough to eat. The state of food security is very much linked to climate patterns, conflict, and economic factors. So, Myanmar
is facing threats in all three accounts.

So, in the context of recent natural disasters and armed conflict, the resilience and public separateness of the Myanmar people are truly extraordinary. Amidst ongoing crises over the last three years, women in particular have faced increased responsibilities. They have addressed climate-related challenges, like droughts, storms, and floods, while also meeting the critical needs of internally displaced persons, poverty-affected communities, and those affected by both conflict and natural disasters.

It is truly humbling to share the extraordinary dedication and commitment of grassroots civil society organizations and women’s organizations, many of whom are humanitarian actors on ground. They creatively identify and reach the communities and most need, despite limited resources. Their activities are characterized by remarkable intersectional awareness. For example, they targeted the most vulnerable and marginalized families in delivering cross-border aid. We have seen individuals cross land borders on small bikes, each carrying a 20-pound rice bag to sustain affected communities.

Their remarkable endurance under such conditions highlights the strength and perseverance of Myanmar’s communities. But we cannot go on like this indefinitely. We need sustained support, resources, and a systemic change. I will stop here. And looking forward to discuss more based on your questions.

Ms. Ali: Thank you very much. And thank you for highlighting the amount of burden on women. I love the term “triple burden” that you highlighted.

Let’s go over now to Susanna, who’s joining us virtually, for your remarks. Thank you so much for joining us.

Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe: Thank you. Thank you very much. First of all, I would like to thank CSIS for inviting me to this important forum and hear the role of women in humanitarian and climate action. So, this is very, very important and urgent issue, not only our country, and the whole globe and crisis. So, we can see the Myanmar women role after the coup is very important. They are on the front line. And like in the strike group, and medical cover, and logistics support. They are everywhere, leading the role of revolution. And the women power is very much significance during the revolution until now.

Now they are become the refugee camp management leaders, community leader, and development community leaders in their local area. So, after the coup, with the elected parliamentarian, MP, and all the
ethnic leaders, we formed the National Unity Government. So, our ministry, Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children, is one of the Cabinet member of NUG. And I become the very first minister for this ministry, because in our history, in Myanmar history, we never have before to emphasize the issue for the women and children and youth. So, this is a very much remarkable change in our history. And also, we would like to honor the women who are involved in – you know, against the dictatorship, and having the leadership role in the, you know, developing the federal union country.

So, this is very fascinating topic that now we are talking about. So, you may know that Myanmar is the most the weather – climate change heated country in the world. This year, we – a lot of people suffer from heatstroke. So, it’s become 49 degrees. So, it is the – it’s said more the most hottest and the most droughted in the world, and that the people are running for their life. They are running in the field without shelter, without water. And the water case also very big issue for the community. When I visit to refugee camps, and then the community leaders, they only asked for water. They said, without food, we can stand. Without water, they are very much suffer. And then communal violence, because of the competition of getting water in the refugee camps, as well as the local community.

So, this is my recent trip to the community. And this is very high rates in the population. And 6.5 million people, Myanmar people, needed emergency assistance. And 2.6 million, they are internally displaced people. So, I also once stayed in the village, and then I also suffered with the water problem. So, I know how difficult of their life – daily life. And also, as our colleagues mentioned, that economic decline also suffer in our country because of the military destroy the properties of the people, including the women-leading household, the livelihood system – like weaving machine and handmade business in central Burma, central Myanmar, Karen state, and – (inaudible) – state. So, this is a very urgent needed issue that the – we have the oppression of the military as well as suffer from the climate change. So, for the next round, I will talk about how we have the program for them. Thank you very much.

Ms. Ali:

Thank you very much. And thank you for acknowledging that this is a newer conversation to center women and girls as we talk about these different challenges.

Last, but not least, we’ll bring in Thinzar. As I mentioned to you, she’s not able to be with us here live, in-person or online. However, she was able to share with us a recording of some of her remarks to make sure that we have her voice as a – as a youth activist highlighted.
(Speaks in Burmese.) (Continues in English.) This is Thinzar Shunlei from Sisters2Sisters. We are a group of young feminists from different backgrounds, ethnicity, citizenships. And we formed out of the coup attempt in 2021 in Myanmar. We stand in solidarity with our sisters resisting all forms of dictatorship, not just in Myanmar but across the globe, including sister of the Rohingya population, and sister in Ukraine, Palestine, Afghanistan, Sudan. This is such a privilege that we could present what is happening in Myanmar and our recommendation to the humanitarians in this auspicious forum.

As women, we make up more than 50 percent of Myanmar’s population. And in our relatively young nation, with a median age of 27, women from diverse backgrounds and generations have joined in the Spring Revolution against the military junta since 2021. Whether on the military, political, humanitarians, or diplomatic frontlines, we understand the consequences of military dictatorship all too well. Consequently, we resist and challenge the patriarchy system that seeks to oppress us. Tragically, we bear the brunt of the junta brutality, facing sexual, physical, and mental violations. Not just at the hands of the military, but also within a system that fails to protect us.

From detention camps to conflict zones, we endure unspeakable horrors. Our rights trampled upon by those who sworn to defend it. The recent forced conscription law enacted by the junta exacerbate the plight of women and the young population in Myanmar: Through a grassroot-level recruitment system, utilizing a lottery, nearly 14 million eligible individuals are summoned with the junta actively seeking 5,000 recruit, mentally putting young woman in particular and risk. Amidst this turmoil, many of us flee the country, only to fall prey to human trafficker along the borderlines in Thailand, India, and in China, organ traders or online predators.

Woman both online and offline face heightened vulnerability in these desperate circumstances. Meanwhile, as Myanmar grapples with political upheaval, we also contend with the harsh reality of climate change. Despite soaring temperature in Myanmar, the heat of our suffering still persists even in the sweltering summer sun. Why some may perceive Myanmar plight as an internal affair or internal matter, it is in fact a global humanitarian crisis and a stain on the consciousness of humanity. As crises in Ukraine and Palestine garner international attention, it is imperative that no one is forgotten. And Myanmar’s struggle for justice and freedom must not be overlooked.

The U.N. Security Council’s adoption of Resolution 2669, despite its delayed arrival, has failed to protect, has failed to produce tangible progress in holding the junta atrocities. Similarly, the ASEAN, the
Association of Southeast Asian Nations, five-point consensus has yielded no result after two years. We ask international actors to cease any partnership with the junta under the guise of the humanitarian aid, as such collaboration only perpetuate the crisis and undermine the efforts of local humanitarians’ organization – especially the ethnic humanitarian organization that have been operating from so many decades under attack of the military, for many decades.

To address the situation and the crisis in Myanmar, I think it’s also very important. And we, as Sisters2Sisters, we call on them for a new resolution under Chapter Seven of the U.N. Charter. This resolution must mandate the referral of the crisis to the International Criminal Court, or the establishment of the ad hoc tribunal. Additionally, a comprehensive arms embargo and targeted economic sanctions against the military junta are an essential step to curb its reign of terror and bring about lasting change – not just in Myanmar, but also in the region. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Ms. Ali: Wonderful. I think this is a perfect place for us to talk a little bit more in depth about some of the themes that came up in all of your remarks. And I want to talk a little bit more about that tension between the short-term challenges and the longer-term challenges, and what are some of the significant tradeoffs related to climate action and advocacy that women are having to make to be able to respond to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. And, Suzanna, I will start with you to kick off that conversation.

Ms. Soe: Yes. Since forming of our ministry, we have formed the working group and then had the strategy to engage with the community and then to fulfill the needs of the people. So, we have three objectives. We used to call three Ps – protect, provide, and promote. To protect women, children, and youth from the human rights violation. Provide, to support their necessary needs for their livelihoods. And promote, to promote the leadership of women, youth, and children for building the federal democracy country.

So, then we build up the capacity for the local women. So, we already gave the training – provided the training for 2,000 women in the grassroot level. And plus, we have 580 CDM, the staff who are working with us in the grassroot level. So, for example, in the first year, 2021, we supported the pregnant women with the cash transfer program. Like, 50,000 pregnant women provided by our program. Today, we have supported already 150,000 pregnant women with our program. And for the individual women house – women-headed household, we support with food, medicines, and hygiene kits. For last year data, we have more than 60,000 women are supported in 2023.
So, on the other hand, we also have the big, big issue of gender-based violence. According to our research department record, we have 228 women who are committed – or, like, sexual violence, mostly by the military. And like military cases are committed cases is, like, 180, and then the civilian case is like 38, and also the People’s Defense Force committed, like, 15 cases. So, these – some of these cases are women who are looking for water in the jungle. They are committed. They are, like, sexual violence by the – you know, the soldier and also other villagers, and something like that.

So, it is very much worrisome for the women who are taking care of their families during the, you know, conflict. And according to our records, we have women, political prisoner, 3,957 in the prison. And 16 of the women leaders, they are in the death sentence. You know, the military is most notorious and also, they use brutal ways to, you know, end the democracy movement. And so far, the women activists and women leaders killed by the military is 1,303. So, the data is, you know, increased daily, because in every day that the military kill, torture, rape the women in front line, and the women are, you know, the shield to protect the family but they’re faced with the threat and by the military. So, we need a lot of, you know, protection for the women in the front line.

And I would like to highlight some points to take attention for the ASEAN and also international community. So, number one is to increase the humanitarian aid to the affected families because now we shop for, you know, for the humanitarian aid, and we need more pressure and more sanction to stop jet fuel because every day the military use jet fighter to kill their people, their own people. And number three is support the ethnic organization and NUG for cross-border humanitarian aids. Number four, I would like to call upon U.N. and also commissioner to end sexual violence in conflict and to stop GBV violence for the Myanmar women. The last but not the least: Provide the necessary assistance and technical mechanism for the democracy building, assist in building, because we don’t – the people of Myanmar don’t want to live under the military animal. They fight with their most effort to – for the freedom. So, we need the international attention to the people of Myanmar. So, we – your support will be very helpful for our fellow Myanmar people, their struggle for their freedom.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Ali:

Thank you.

OK, let me go to you and ask you what is being done – what can be done
related to the climate challenges that you all pointed out, when at the same time there is a humanitarian crisis? What are you seeing?

Ms. Lay: Yeah, frankly speaking it is very – the country’s situation is very chaotic so there is no stable government because the interim government is, you know, outside of the country because the military junta forced them to be in exile, kind of. So, the policy, the implementations we cannot be excited. But before the coup, the NLD government has planned for national strategy plans for climate change, so – in line with the SDGs. So, they have already have that kind of – the plan, but unfortunately, it cannot be done during that crisis.

But at the same time, the people in the community, grassroots, they are – the minister, Susanna, mentioned that they are looking for the peace, and at the same time they are looking for the food and water and the shelter. So, they are not very much, you know, focused on the climate or the protection, the education, whatever, but they need the peace because without a stability we cannot do anything. That’s why our key message here is that climate problems are very global problems, but at the same time – and in the military dictatorship it is also very important – without having a peaceful situation, we cannot do anything. Without peace, we cannot do anything. So that’s why. But we never forget about climate change or other things – gender equality, other things we are also doing in the process under the NUCC, National Unity Consultative Council. This is the policy platform. We, civil society, NUG, the ethnic leaders, civil society work together to develop the policies when there is a transition about the – you know, constitution-building and, you know, development, the constitution, other policies. So that’s why we are now preparing for these matters, including climate change and other, you know, like, natural environment, things like that.

But frankly speaking, currently we cannot focus specifically on that issue. So, the local people always ask to get the peace, to drive the military junta from their land. So, this is the urgent need. So, you know, to fulfill that demand what we have to do currently is providing the assistance. They are very vulnerable, the girls – especially the girls and elderly people. They are in IDP camps without having, you know, shelters, food, and water, so we have to support them urgently, that emergency assistance. So, we cannot do properly, frankly speaking, what you ask but at the same time we are very aware of it, but currently, because of the situation, we cannot do it.

Ms. Ali: You know it’s a priority but what’s urgent needs to be dealt with first.

Phyu, what would you add to that? Khin was talking about there’s a national strategy but can’t really implement it in that context with the
root causes that need to be addressed first.

Ms. Phyu: Well, you know, like – (laughs) – as we really are. We believe that, you know, when the coup is reversed there will be a significant increase in the space and efforts to respond to the humanitarian consequences of the climate crisis. And given Myanmar's vulnerability to extreme weather patterns and natural disasters, of course these are – concerns have already been considered and included in the local administrative policies of ethnic resistance organizations, governance structure.

So, in one of the ethnic governance structures, their humanitarian policy considers the impacts of natural disaster and humanitarian access. And also, like, the activists, women human rights defenders are also trying to achieve, you know, the impossible things to be possible. So they document humanitarian needs, allowed to potential donors, mobilize resources, and conduct advocacy with remarkable creativity. The grassroot organizations and activists are doing their best to plant trees in dry zones. And also, like, the activists must fully find ways to assess conflict-affected communities and various disguises, constantly maintaining their connections and networks with those in need. So, I mean, what I mean is that despite limited resources, they find innovative solutions to face challenges. I mean, women's groups are well connected, and their existing networks and platforms continue to enable them to operate in a restrictive environment, providing a viable solution. I mean, most of their solutions given to the communities are conflict-sensitive with security concerns as their top priority.

And also, like – I mean, yeah. So, like, before the coup, you know, as my colleague said, Myanmar has – Myanmar was on the right track in addressing environmental degradations and also climate response, you know. However, the current restrictive oppression of contacts has forced people to abandon the progress made during the opening of civic space in our last 10 years. Despite all these difficult times, we are confident that civil society organizations, women human rights defenders, and climate activists are doing what they can. And when the time and space allow, there will be substantial efforts to address these challenges once again. You know, like, since all these challenges and how to respond – the actions for how to respond are already, you know, like, considered, I mean, in their mind.

Ms. Ali: Let me pull that thread here a little bit about the role of grassroots and local civil society groups. If I can ask about, how are they reaching women and girls? And if you can continue that conversation here, how are you seeing those groups reaching the most vulnerable and reaching women and girls who are in need?
Ms. Phyu: Sometimes it is, I mean, difficult for you to understand how we work virtually, right? And we have to be thankful of these technologies and, you know, like, the experiences of connecting our people from around the world by using technologies during COVID time. So right now, I mean, like – even though we are here but we are closely connected with all the women human rights defenders across the country using, you know, like, many virtual platforms. So our phones are always, you know, like – (laughs) – are ready and we have a platform that we can inform to each other. You know, like, we have formed our virtual groups like Signal, by using Signal, WhatsApp, I mean, like Telegram. We have our added – you know, like, a lot of women’s leaders like us in the groups working from different time zones. And even though, if we are sleeping in U.S. time, you know, the other sisters who are working in the Asia, you know, like – I mean, at least one of us could respond, you know, like, the complaints or the urgent needs coming from the ground, because, like, our networks are really broad. Even before the coup we are well connected with the grassroots-level women – not only women organizations but also the civil society partners who are working in different states and region.

So, we have that communication channel to exchange, you know, information and also, you know, like, to deliver the assistance they need. So, it might be a little bit difficult for you to understand – (laughs) – but that’s the way we work. You know, like, I mean, even if they need cash immediately, you know. For example, in Thai Baht, you know, we will be finding who could deliver Thai Baht to their account immediately. I mean, we can find within our networks easily. You know, even this morning one of my sister is asking, OK, I would like to send 15,000 Thai Baht, you know, to one of the women who is – I mean, who is urgently needed for delivering a baby in Thai border, you know? And I could quickly ask, you know, OK, who has Thai Baht to – (laughs) – transfer right away, right? And then, I mean, like, through our network and our – how to say? – connection, everything is quickly done like this. And, I mean, everything is based on trust and also, you know, like, the communication channels we have created and also, like, the effectiveness of coordination among us. So, I mean, like, we are all – the minister, Susanna, I mean, and also the sister-to-sister, Thinzar Shunlei Yi, you know, even though we are representing different hats, but we are well connected, we are informed to each other, and we know how to coordinate and also, like, who to ask, where to get information. So, we are just using all these accessibility resources, you know, by sharing information and using information technologies, you know, effectively.

Ms. Ali: This was really helpful. Thank you so much for sharing how well you’re connected, not just those on the ground but for both of you based here in the U.S., as well, how you’re in constant communication as well.
Khin, if you can, share with us how are some of the local and national civil society operating on the ground to reach women and girls?

Ms. Lay: Yeah. It is quite challenging because we civil societies are targeted by the military junta. We are the, you know, like, the enemy of the, you know, military junta so most of us are in – (inaudible). Most of us fled to the liberated area or the border area. Some are still inside the country, but they are – they stay in low profile, and they disguise themself as – how can I say? – like other business leaders or something like that, so they no longer register in a military junta so they cannot operate publicly on ground, so they go underground, we call it. But we are well connected so these women organization, they always did the, you know, meeting, you know, weekly meeting, Monday meeting, and they share the information as the – (inaudible) – you mention that. So these leaders can reach out to the grassroots who ask their help, you know, so they can reach out through the – across the country.

So, because of, as she mentioned, the technology, even though they’re based in Yangon they cannot, you know, go – move, like, freely to the other conflict-related area. But because of the technology, Zoom and other platform, they can communicate easily, and we can do the online education program and other, you know, like awareness raising programs, so kind of we can do a lot. So, in that way, we can reach out to them. But by providing the assistance – for example, like financial assistance or material assistance – we can use some of the, you know, like, biker or maybe local people who can do these, you know, assistance on their – taking their own risk– so we can do that.

And other thing is that Thinzer Shunlei Yi mentioned cross border. So now most – as May mentioned, the communication/transportation is a little bit difficult inside the country, so what we do is that we rely on the border area, so Thai border, Indian border, other border as well, so we provided the cash transfer to these border areas because of the bank transition is a little bit easier than to the inside country so that we transfer the money and then they buy the materials from them and they cross the border and support to the – even though I’d like – include in medicines and other goods also. So, in that way, we can reach out to them. And also, because, as we mentioned, we trust each other. Trust building is very important, so we build the trust not only this time but also for long term after the opening of our country since 2010, so we build the trust – the community people trust on the civil society, especially the women’s rights organization. They know that women’s work hardly, so that’s why they rely on us.

Susanna, let me go over to you, if you’d like to add on to that conversation about the role of local and national civil society groups in the ways that they’re reaching women and girls.

Ms. Soe: I would like you to see Myanmar as a transitional period. So according to, you know, the research and also the data, the, you know, revolution groups, they occupy 60 to 70 percent of the land of Myanmar, so we can do a lot in the liberated area. And we also have, you know, the ethnic control area and then they already set up there, you know, the administration unit there. And now they’re forming the new government, a new government, their own government, for the liberation. So, like in – (inaudible) – they formed IEC as a government and then under there they’re a new government. They also have the involvement or a department or something like that.

In Karen they also have, you know, the Karen involvement, you know, in forestry department. So, we work together. As the NUG, we walk together with these federal units and we have, you know, the planting day in July. We also have, you know, the international rivers day that we celebrate with the youth and the women along the – you know, the big rivers. And then we have a lot of campaign, a lot of campaign to reach to the, you know, CSO and also community leaders, because most of them, they keep the indigenous right in their own land. So, a lot of things are happening. A lot of things are happen.

And in Karen state the organization called KESAN – Karen Environmental and Social Network – they recently got the international award for keeping the, you know, environment, you know, forestry. They call the mutual – the peace pact that they keep the water sources and also forestry and so and so. So, we have to encourage them, their own community, own management, and also the awareness by themselves.

Yes, of course, we have the fighting. But on the other hand, we also have the good news that the uprising new political actors, they are very aware of their own, you know, environmental keeping and also, they have the plan for their own land. Yeah. Thank you very much.

Ms. Ali: Thank you. Thank you. I’m going to be able to take one or two questions. If you think you have a question, you can start raising your hands.

Khin Lay, I just want to – before I take any audience questions, I want to follow up on something that you said earlier about women leaders
being targeted. And if you can expand a little bit on women who are civic activists, political activists. It’s a very restrictive environment. How are they keeping that work going, as they’re being targeted, as you mentioned?

Ms. Lay: Yeah. Me, myself, May Sabe also, that we are the women’s rights activists. So, me – let me give the examples of myself.

So, on 1st March 2021, after a month of military coup, my apartments was a raided, and my office is also raided. So totally destroyed. And also, from that time on, I have to run and hide in Yangon. And then I fled to the Thai border area, together with my two little kids. So then, the U.S. Embassy evacuated me to U.S. So, this is the first example that we are targeted, because, you know, we are very much affiliate and we’re connected with a woman’s MP, like Minister Susanna, at that time, is a member of parliament. So, we support – I mean, support me. I provided them safe house and other, you know, assistance. Because we are not at the frontline. The women MPs, and they are targeted, so that’s why we are in a, how can I say, supporter.

But at the same time, we did the, how can I say that – firstly, we make the public statement, open letters to denounce the coup. And we openly publicized that we, women’s rights organization, will no longer engage the military junta, because it is against the people’s desire, against the people vote. So that’s why we publicly denounced to the coup. So that’s why we are targeting. And, again, we did the demonstration, protests. But we are strategically protest in front of the international embassy, development partners, agencies. So because we know that we are well-connected with these people, and these embassies, and the agency. That’s why we did that statement. We met in person. Sometimes we sent an open letter. So, on that way we are doing.

We are working together with the other youth activists and student activists, but at the same time we have our own strategies targeted to the international community, who knows what is happening inside the country. That’s why we, women’s rights activists, are targeted, until now, because we never give up. We never, you know, how can I say, surrender to the military junta, stay against the junta. That’s why they stay targeted at the women’s rights activists.

Ms. Ali: Because of their ongoing resilience, right?

Ms. Lay: Yes.

Ms. Ali: Did you want to add, May, anything to that? Please.
Ms. Phyu: Yeah. So, another good example I could give you is, for example, my network. So, like, I mean, I have to run and hide just after a week of – (inaudible) – Khin Lay run and hide, because, like, I joined the Sarong flag campaign on International Women’s Day, 8th of March in 2021. So, we’ve been, you know, blocked and such by the security forces. And, you know, like we barely able to manage to escape, you know, like from the area that security forces block and check to everyone. So, we have gone through really bitter experiences. You know, but, like, I mean, my network – so we have more than 100 of international – both international and local organizations as well as the individuals.

So, we also decided not to extend registrations and any work relationships with the junta, the SAC. So, and we have to close down our office. And, actually, GEN has a very big resource center because, like, gender resources are really scarcity in our country. So, we build up a physical small library called the resource center. Not only our office, you know, we have to close down our gender resource center as well. And all of our, I mean, like office materials – you know, like, I mean, everything we have to donate or give away to our members. And I have to flee.

And also, like, we managed to, how to say, relocate our senior management team to Thailand. And, of course, because of the security and limited resources, we have to also squeeze down number of staff who could continue working in-country, because, like, you know, if we have, like, 20 or 30 staff, it is difficult for us to manage and, you know, like take care of their safety and security in-country, right? So we have to squeeze down our staff. And we talk to our staff. You know, are you willing to continue working with us, because, you know, like, continue working with us, means you have to take your own risks working inside the country, right? And, like, we have a very committed, passionate staff, who are willing to take their own risks working inside the country.

Through them, we are still connected with our members, partners on ground. And it is very difficult for them to travel one place to another, but like the way we are trying to work is, you know, if we cannot go there, we bring those community women’s leaders to come to Thailand or even to U.S. We are – we try to mobilize resources to do, how to say, in-person consultations, inviting the frontline woman’s leaders working in different communities to come. And then, like, we discuss in a – in a safe space, of course, you know. And then, like, we documented all the information they have given to us.

And we use that very firsthand information coming from the ground for advocating here, and at the U.N. as well. So, it’s like, you know, since we are here, we are able to access directly to the United Nations, you know?
Like, when the General Assembly is held, when the Security Council meetings are, I mean, like, having in New York City, right? So, we are using all those firsthand information on the ground to tell the international community here, like we do right now. And also, like, of course, we cannot travel outside of U.S., which is a shame of us because, like, I mean, since we came here with the humanitarian parole or, you know, like, some kind of visa. So our – and then after our humanitarian parole or visa expire, I mean, what do we do?

Our passports are also expired. And, like, the only way we have to – we can stay here is to apply for the political asylum. And the asylum process here is so long. And, you know, like, we are stuck here. We cannot travel outside of the U.S. So, we are using – I mean, like my senior management team members are based in Thailand. And also, like, the other sisters, like us, they relocated to Thailand or within the other ASEAN countries. So to be able to reach the other international communities or to travel to Geneva during the Human Rights Council, of course, this is their responsibility. (Laughs.) So, they are taking responsibility to travel around the world, which we cannot do.

So, what I’m trying to explain as you can see, you know, like, how we are walking and connected at different level. We still have a lot of staff and also our network members who are working on ground in different areas. You know, we have our own ways to collect information from them. And then, you know, like, we have a group of our sisters like us, who are based in Thailand or are, I mean, in Philippines, or in the other countries within the region. So, like, we are using, you know, like, our advantages, accessibility to, you know, like, advocate our issues in different level. And, you know, like, where we are.

And you may not imagine how we continue to work from here. Our working hours starts at 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. every night. We barely sleep, because we work the same time zone with Myanmar. So, like, we are working until up to 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. in our time here. You may imagine that it is impossible, but we are doing this for three – more than three years now. And, you know, like, we are committed to do it.

Ms. Ali:

Thank you very much. I know I promised a potential in-person question. Are there any questions in the audience? OK, my colleague, Eliot, has a – if I can ask you, because of time, to make your question very brief that would be fantastic.

Q:

Sure. I’m Kristen. And I work for a Danish NGO called DCA. We work through local civil society in Myanmar. So very nice to see you.

My question is about the best way that the international community can
support local civil society. So, I know that there’s a lot of good intention on the part of the U.N. and other agencies. But it’s not clear to me that the support is actually the type of support that local civil society in Myanmar needs. So, can you tell us a bit more about how you see that working for you in the best way?

Ms. Ali: That’s a great question. Thank you very much. You could have support, but does that mean that’s the right type of support? I would love to get all of you to answer this question, because it’s a great way to close off our conversation here. So, if you could briefly answer that question. I’ll get to you, Susanna, as well. Can I start with you?

Ms. Lay: Thank you. So yeah, very difficult, especially in that situation. So, the international donor also very confusing, and because of the international crisis as well, because of the financial limitation. So even though – especially let me give the example of the U.S. government, that there is a BURMA Act to support directly – to target it to the movement and the civil society. But unfortunately, this assistance would not go to us, because of, you know, bureaucratic or maybe other constraints, or something like that.

But for us, exactly the support to the civil society is getting shortage and shortage and, you know, very low. We can see that. So that’s why our women’s rights organization, our sisters inside the country, they kept asking for the financial assistance and other assistance to continue their work on ground. Because the prices are higher and triple. But the fundings are very shortage. So, what we want is that the civil society rule is very important to strengthening the civic engagement and the role of the civil society, to continue to support – you know, like, for example, like, the National Endowment for Democracy is my partner, my granter. So, they support for, what is it, like, office space, and, I don’t know how to call it, like, cofounding.

So, most of the donors are just providing for the programming. So, it is not enough and sufficient for the long term. For example, like, inside the country or now the cost is very high. Stay at Thailand or other countries, getting the visa extension – to renew the visa, they have to go out from the Thailand to get to the third country. And then so it is very expensive. So that’s why we need the financial support. And financial support not only for the civil society, the organization, but also to support the local people.

Now I’m doing – I’m not a humanitarian assistant, you know, like organization. My organization, just capacity-building organization. But we have to create and innovate the way we support to the local people. What I’m doing now is that I have a network of Civil Disobedience
Movement people – like teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers. I invited them to join online discussions that I have to weekly visit. So they joined that discussion and panel, and talked about the international affairs or political situations or human rights, blah, blah. I provided them communication bill. So, I call it the communication bit creatively, but I provided them the sufficient amount of money to their bank account.

Without these supports, they cannot survive. CDM people, government employees, they don’t have work. They are, you know, starving. They have family members. On that way, we can support to the these people in the indirectly. So civil society can easily do what they need. So that’s currently what I’m doing now.

Ms. Ali: Thank you. We have one minute left. So, 30 seconds each. I know it’s a – it’s a big question to answer. But, Susanna, can you answer very briefly? What would your message to the international community and policymakers be in terms of how they can support all of your work?

Ms. Soe: Yeah. So, first of all, thank you for the question. And I think the threat is changing, you know? We also have our system as a government, and with the most effective way to support the local CSO is the most effective way to support the community. So now we have, you know, some women organization and some CSO have an MOU with our ministry to support women and children in the grassroot. So, it is very effective. In every village, we have the network and also, we have the township officer there.

And here, our sister, Khin Lay and May Sabe, their organization, they provide a capacity building for our women leaders. So, it is very, very cost effective. And also very, you know, time is very effective. So, recognize us as, you know, a government, because sometimes your organization needs the registration. We can give the registration, and also MOU. And our ministry staff have, you know, the sub-grant for the local CSO. Now, it is very effective. Their report is perfect. And all the – you know, all the financial reports are very thorough. So please believe in the local organization, and partner with us for the effective service to the most needy community. Thank you very much.

Ms. Ali: Thank you. We’ll close things off with you here.

Ms. Phyu: OK. In short, we need flexible and long-term support, because it’s like, you know, we understand that you have a lot of, like, bureaucracies and red tapes. You know, like, we have to follow all the donors’ requirements, due diligence, everything. But you are hearing, you know, how we are responding on ground, right? It is – it is not easy for us to
follow all the requirements of donors, because it is not applicable in the case of Myanmar on ground. A lot of donors, they require organizational registration as well as organizational bank account. But for us, we cannot have official registrations under the military junta. We cannot have organizational bank account because of we don’t have registration.

And also, like, I mean, the current support are very short term – like six months or a year. And you are hearing all the crisis happen in Myanmar. And we need long term, you know? Not only to overcome these crisis situations, but also, we need to rebuild the community and our country. You know, a new – a new union federal democracy – democratic country. So, like, if the donors could not commit for long-term support, it is very difficult for the local organizations to survive.

And a lot of organized – a lot of donors, they only wanted to deliver their aid for programming. And, you know, they are expecting that, you know, like, the local organizations have to bear all the human resource costs and, you know, like office running costs, which is unfair. And also, like sharing risks with us. You know, we are taking our own life working for the community on ground. And, you know, like, if you don’t want to share risk with us, you know, like, how could we work together? So that’s my message.

Ms. Ali:

Thank you very, very much to all of you. Thank you for sharing your personal stories. Thank you for all your work that you’re doing. Thank you for your resilience. I know when we – I felt like when we started off the discussion we talked about a lot of challenges, but you left us with also so much hope because of the resilience of what you’re doing. But at the same time, your dear message of what you need from policymakers, international community. I hope you all are leaving with a lot of good takeaways from the today’s discussion.

I would like to also thank a few of my colleagues. Without them this event wouldn’t be possible, and the partnership with my program here at CSIS. I’d like to thank the director of the humanitarian agenda program, Michelle Strucke. I would like to thank Jude as well for their leadership in making this panel possible, Amani, and my colleague Elliott as well. Thank you so much to all of you. And if I can ask you, please to join me in a round of applause to our wonderful panelists. (Applause.)

(END.)