

Resilience Under Repression

Women Leaders Sustaining Civic Space in Myanmar

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1. Introduction

Women-led and women-serving civil society organizations (CSOs) play a vital role in sustaining communities, advancing gender equality, and responding to humanitarian and social needs across Myanmar, particularly in conflict areas. In Myanmar, women leaders have long been central to civic engagement, often working at the frontlines of policy and humanitarian work. Since the military coup in February 2021, however, the operating environment for civil society has deteriorated sharply, exposing women leaders to intensified pressures that fundamentally reshape how they lead and operate.

The contraction of civic space has profoundly altered civil society operations across the country. Restrictive laws, heightened surveillance, and direct interference by authorities now characterize the post-coup context. CSOs increasingly operate under unclear legal and administrative frameworks, limiting public participation and constraining rights and advocacy work. In response, many CSOs have reduced activities or shifted toward less politically sensitive programming in order to survive. For women-led CSOs, these constraints intersect with persistent gender norms and discrimination, amplifying both organizational vulnerability and personal risk.

Broader conflict dynamics have also significantly impacted women-led CSOs. Although security measures do not always explicitly target women, they often disproportionately increase both risks and burdens borne by women leaders.

Women leaders experience these pressures not only as operational challenges but also as direct threats to their well-being. Leadership roles increase exposure to surveillance, harassment, and reputational risk, particularly in heavily securitized environments. Women leaders must continuously assess risks related to public engagement while simultaneously managing responsibilities to their employees, families, and communities. Gender-based discrimination further compounds these challenges, as women leaders of-



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ten face skepticism regarding their authority, alongside disproportionate caregiving burdens.

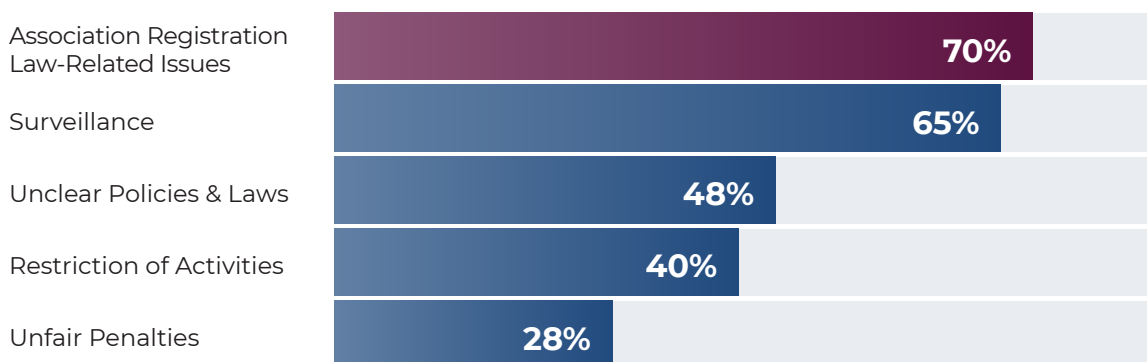
This assessment, drawn from extensive surveys conducted by local experts of 60 women-led CSOs, examines the lived realities of women leaders across diverse organizational types and sectors in Myanmar’s civic space. Using quantitative and qualitative data, it focuses on three interconnected areas: the legal, operational, and security challenges affecting women-led CSOs; the safety risks experienced by women leaders; and coping strategies used to address these constraints. The assessment recognizes that community-based organizations (CBOs), local and national NGOs, and informal networks experience risks differently, and that organizational focus (e.g. human rights versus public health) shapes both exposure to threats and patterns of adaptation.

By centering women’s voices and experiences, this assessment aims to inform gender-responsive recommendations to support women’s leadership in Myanmar’s challenging civic space environment.

2. Main Challenges and Threats

Women-led CSOs in Myanmar operate within an increasingly restrictive civic space, shaped by interlinked legal, operational, security, and gender-based threats. These challenges reinforce one another, creating cumulative pressure on CSOs and women leaders.

Legal and Policy Challenges



According to a broad range of surveyed women-led CSOs in Myanmar, legal and policy barriers are the dominant challenge. **The Association Registration Law (ARL)** accounts for **70%** of all reported policy challenges, making legal status under the ARL the single most significant constraint. For many women-led CSOs—particularly commu-

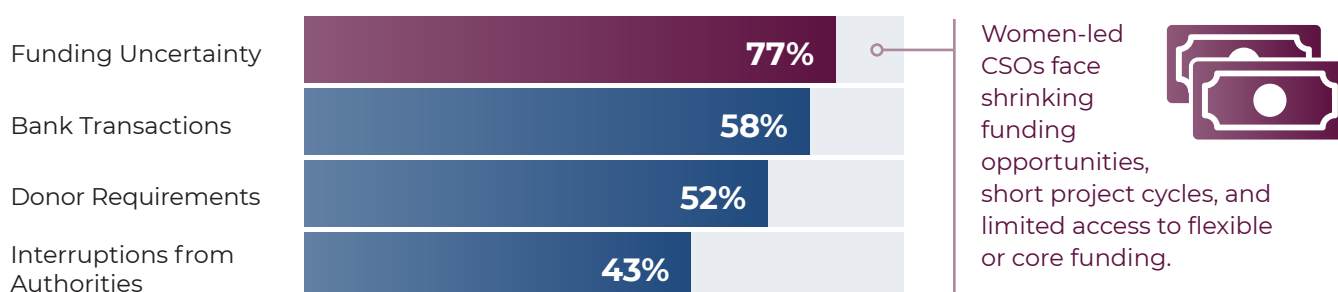
nity-based and informal groups—registration requirements are perceived not as protective mechanisms but as sources of vulnerability that expose them to surveillance, penalties, or forced closure. Registration also does not guarantee safety; registered organizations often experience increased scrutiny, reinforcing perceptions that legal frameworks function primarily as tools of control.

Surveillance is the second most frequently reported challenge, representing **65%** of mentions. Persistent monitoring shapes organizational behavior, discouraging open communication and driving widespread self-censorship. Women leaders describe operating in an environment where their activities are closely watched, limiting collaboration and advocacy. Surveillance often extends beyond organizational activities to personal conduct, resulting in higher stress and narrowed leadership space.

Legal ambiguity further compounds these pressures. **Unclear provisions in policies and laws**, accounting for **48%** of mentions, create uncertainty and fear of arbitrary enforcement. CSOs lack predictable rules, making it difficult to assess compliance or plan activities safely. This uncertainty translates into operational disruption, as leaders must rely on caution and informal risk assessment rather than transparent procedures.

Restrictions on activities comprise **40%** of reported challenges, illustrating how administrative controls translate into practical limitations. Trainings and community engagement are frequently restricted, disrupted, or conducted discreetly. These restrictions disproportionately affect women-led community-based organizations whose work depends on local visibility and participation. Concerns about **unfair penalties**, mentioned by **28%** of respondents, reinforce perceptions of discretionary enforcement and discourage long-term investment in organizational development.

Operational Challenges



The assessment data also highlights a set of interrelated **operational challenges** that significantly constrain women-led CSOs in Myanmar. These challenges reflect financial insecurity, administrative burdens, and ongoing interference, all of which are intensified by the broader conflict and restrictive operating environment.

Funding uncertainty emerges as the most significant operational constraint, accounting for **77%** of all reported operational challenges. Women-led CSOs face declin-

ing funding opportunities, short project cycles, and limited access to flexible or core funding. This financial instability undermines organizational continuity, affecting staff retention and institutional development. Many women leaders report operating on minimal resources while facing increasing community needs, forcing difficult decisions about prioritizing only essential services.

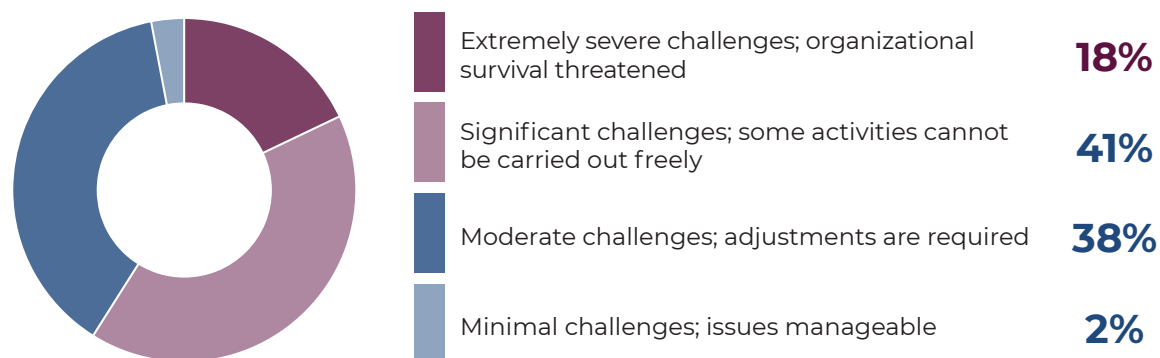
Banking and transaction barriers represent the second most frequently reported challenge, at **58%**. Restrictions on cash withdrawals, delays in fund transfers, and limited access to banking services disrupt routine operations, including staff payments and supply procurement. These constraints are particularly severe for CSOs working in humanitarian assistance, where timely access to funds is critical. As a result, some CSOs rely on informal financial mechanisms, increasing surveillance and other risks.

Donor requirements account for **52%** of reported operational challenges, reflecting the heavy administrative burden placed on CSOs operating under conflict conditions. Women leaders describe difficulties meeting reporting obligations while navigating surveillance, mobility restrictions, and staff shortages. Rigid donor frameworks often fail to account for unpredictability on the ground, diverting leadership time away from staff support and community engagement. Smaller CSOs and CBOs are particularly affected due to limited capacity.

Interruptions from authorities, comprising **43%** of mentions, further constrain operations. These include unannounced visits, document checks, demands for information, and forced suspension or modification of activities. Even when not resulting in formal sanctions, such interference creates uncertainty, discouraging open engagement and reinforcing self-censorship. These challenges are especially acute for CSOs working across multiple regions, or in politically sensitive sectors.

In sum, operational challenges are driven by a combination of financial fragility, administrative pressure, and persistent interference by authorities. These constraints limit the effectiveness and sustainability of women-led CSOs and place disproportionate pressure on women leaders to balance survival with service delivery in an increasingly restrictive environment.

Impact of Legal and Operational Threats



Among all challenges, gender-based pressures cut across organizational types and sectors. Women leaders face heightened scrutiny, challenges to their legitimacy, and burdensome caregiving responsibilities. Gendered expectations magnify the impact of the aforementioned constraints, requiring women leaders to invest disproportionate effort in risk management simply to sustain basic organizational functions.

Women-led CSOs, including formally registered organizations, face a different configuration of risks. Registration does not provide protection; rather, it often increases scrutiny. Sectoral focus further shapes exposure to risk. CSOs working in **human rights, gender equality, women's empowerment, labor rights, and governance** face the highest barriers, including monitoring (65%) and activity restrictions (40%). In contrast, CSOs in **humanitarian assistance, health, disability inclusion, and social services** experience fewer overt restrictions. These CSOs nevertheless continue to face severe operational challenges. Funding scarcity and banking difficulties significantly undermine service delivery. Many women leaders in these sectors deliberately maintain low profiles, indicating that reduced interference among humanitarian CSOs often reflects strategic self-limitation, rather than more enabling conditions. The military conscription law, referenced by **approximately one-third (32%)** of respondents, exacerbates challenges by limiting staff mobility and shifting additional burdens onto women leaders.

A clear majority (59%) of respondents report **significant to extremely severe impacts** resulting from legal and operational threats, meaning that restrictions limit operations or threaten organizational survival. This underscores the fact that challenges are not sporadic, but **systemic and persistent**. A further 18% rate the situation as extremely challenging, signaling **existential risk** for a substantial subset of organizations.

While challenges vary by context, they collectively place sustained and unequal pressure on women leaders who continue to operate at the frontlines of community resilience, with limited protection and support.

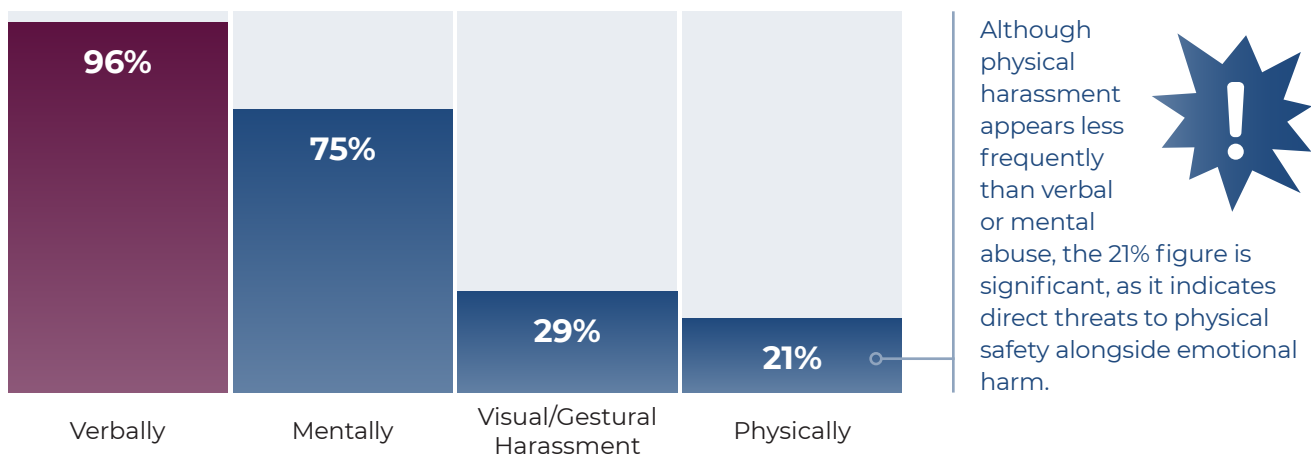
3. Safety and Well-Being of Women Leaders

The assessment data reveals a highly challenging environment for the safety of women leaders operating in Myanmar’s civic space. Since the 2021 coup, surveillance and gender-based discrimination have intensified, making leadership roles not only more demanding but also more dangerous. Women leaders face overlapping risks that affect their physical safety and emotional well-being, as well as their capacity to sustain organizational work.

Safety concerns for women leaders have increased significantly, particularly in relation to mobility and interactions with authorities. Many women leaders describe fear during travel, heightened scrutiny at checkpoints, and vulnerability when conducting field visits. In conflict-affected areas, some avoid travel entirely or limit movement to reduce exposure to violence. These constraints directly affect organizational effectiveness by restricting monitoring and community engagement. Women leaders also carry the emotional burden of being responsible for the safety of staff, volunteers, and community members, which adds continual stress to their leadership roles.

Gender-based harassment and discrimination remain prominent threats. 41% of women leaders have experienced offensive or discriminatory treatment related to their work, indicating persistent gender bias. The respondents report sexist remarks, belittling attitudes, intimidation during interactions with authorities, and public questioning of their leadership capacity. Such experiences reinforce unequal power dynamics and contribute to fear, self-censorship, and emotional strain.

Harassment or Offensive Treatment Experienced



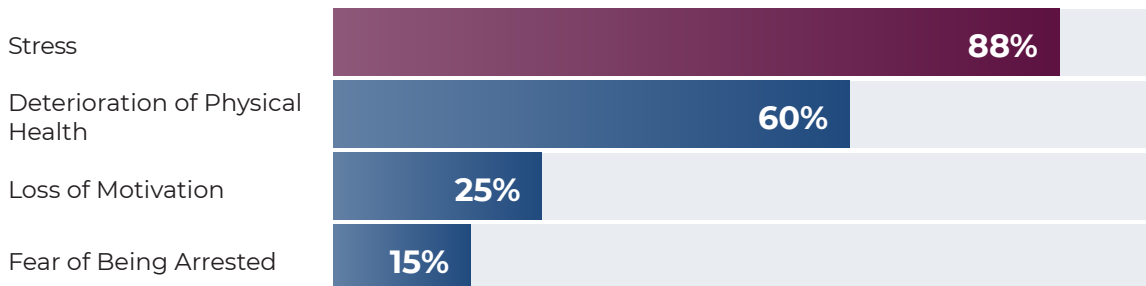
Harassment involving **multiple forms simultaneously** is widespread. **36%** of respondents report experiencing **three or more types of harassment at once**, including physical, verbal, mental, and visual/gestural harassment. This suggests that harassment is often systemic and sustained rather than incidental, leading to cumulative harm.

21% of respondents report **physical harassment**, indicating direct threats to physical safety alongside emotional harm. **Visual and gestural harassment**—non-verbal, often sexual, misconduct that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment—occur frequently alongside verbal abuse, reinforcing patterns of intimidation and humiliation in both public and professional spaces.

Significant shifts in gender roles have also occurred since the coup, with **63%** of respondents reporting changes. Conflict, forced conscription, and economic instability have reduced men’s participation in public and organizational life, resulting in women assuming expanded roles. While these shifts have increased women’s visibility and participation, they have also intensified workload without corresponding increases in remuneration, authority, or recognition.

Economic stress further undermines women leaders’ well-being. Many women manage organizational responsibilities alongside household survival, in the context of shrinking pay and rising costs. Some take on multiple jobs or rely on informal support networks to sustain both organizations and families. These pressures increase fatigue, particularly when combined with caregiving duties and security-related stress.

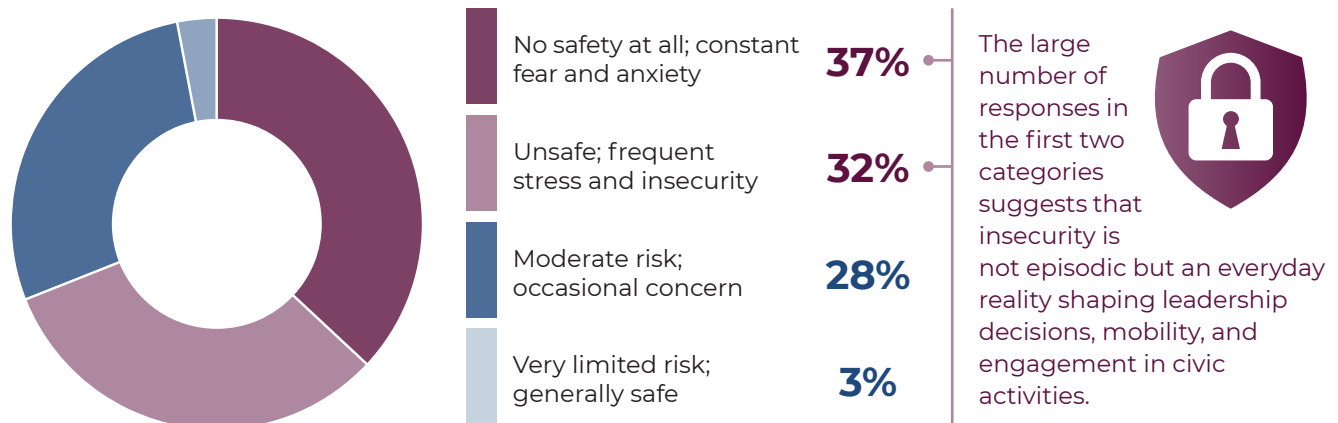
Impacts on Well-Being



The assessment indicates a **severe deterioration in perceived safety and security among women leaders**. A clear majority (**69%**) report feeling unsafe or completely unsafe, describing frequent or constant fear, stress, and anxiety related to their work. This suggests that insecurity is not episodic but an everyday reality shaping leadership decisions and engagement in civic activities.

A further **28%** report a **moderate level of risk**, indicating that even those not experiencing constant fear remain concerned about safety. Only **3%** perceive their environment as largely safe, underscoring the near-universal sense of insecurity among respondents.

Level of Safety and Security



In summary, the safety and well-being of women leaders in Myanmar's civic space is under sustained threat. Gender discrimination, restricted mobility, and shifting gender roles create a demanding leadership environment that places women at high risk of burnout and harm. Without targeted protection, such as psychosocial support and gender-responsive interventions, the sustainability of women's leadership and the organizations they lead remains precarious.

4. Coping and Adaptation Strategies

Women leaders in Myanmar rely heavily on **adaptive coping strategies** to navigate escalating constraints. These strategies are largely survival-oriented and reflect the absence of institutional protection.

One of the most common strategies involves **reducing visibility and adapting modes of operation**. Assessment data indicates that **35%** of respondents report adjusting how activities are conducted to avoid attention from authorities. This includes scaling down programs, limiting public meetings, shortening activity duration, or conducting engagements discreetly. Women leaders frequently reframe advocacy and rights-based activities under humanitarian or social service language. While these adaptations allow continued operation, they can also reduce program reach and weaken collective advocacy.

Risk avoidance and security management account for **29%** of adaptation strategies, and include conducting advance risk assessments, avoiding high-risk activities and unsafe situations, and using more secure communication channels. These strategies

reflect constant threat perception and the normalization of security planning in daily organizational work.

Many respondents note the importance of **programmatic adaptation**, including shifting project focus, modifying implementation methods, or reframing activities to appear less sensitive.

A significant proportion emphasizes **psychological resilience**, describing patience and mental endurance as essential coping mechanisms, particularly in the absence of psychosocial support.

Compliance and negotiation strategies include selectively engaging with authorities, adjusting documentation practices, and navigating registration requirements pragmatically to sustain operations.

Finally, the respondents report **relocation strategies**, including moving activities or offices to safer areas.

Coping and Adaptation Strategies



Overall, the assessment data reveals that women leaders demonstrate strong adaptability and resilience, enabling CSOs to survive under extreme pressure. However, coping and adaptation strategies depend heavily on personal sacrifice. Without targeted, gender-responsive support—particularly in protection, psychosocial care, and flexible funding—the sustainability of women’s leadership and organizational resilience remains at serious risk.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

Women leaders in Myanmar operate under interconnected pressures. Since the 2021 coup, legal and financial constraints, operational disruption, and surveillance have become normalized, significantly narrowing civic space. These challenges are compounded by gender-based discrimination and social expectations that place disproportionate burdens on women leaders.

Constraints are rarely experienced in isolation. Restrictive registration requirements and unclear policies intersect with persistent surveillance and the risk of arbitrary penalties, fostering fear and self-censorship. Operational challenges—particularly funding shortages, banking restrictions, and donor compliance burdens—further undermine organizational stability, diverting leadership capacity away from strategic engagement. For many women-led and community-based organizations, survival has replaced long-term objectives, such as advocacy and collective action. High stress levels, declining physical health, fear of arrest, and harassment reflect the cumulative toll of prolonged insecurity.

Despite these immense challenges, women leaders continue to sustain civic engagement through resilience and adaptation. However, coping strategies are largely defensive and place the burden of survival on individuals rather than systems. Without targeted, gender-responsive support, the capacity of Myanmar’s women leaders will be increasingly strained, with serious implications for civil society resilience.

Recommendations

To sustain and strengthen women’s leadership in Myanmar’s shrinking civic space, coordinated action is urgently required. Based on the assessment findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

ENHANCE PROTECTION AND LEGAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN LEADERS

Provide context-sensitive legal assistance, risk advisory services, and protection mechanisms for women-led CSOs, particularly community-based and informal groups that face heightened vulnerability under restrictive laws and surveillance.

INCREASE FLEXIBLE AND LONG-TERM FUNDING

Donors should prioritize flexible, multi-year funding that covers core organizational costs, staff retention, security measures, and well-being support. Funding modalities should recognize the realities of operating in conflict settings and reduce financial risk borne by individual women leaders.

■ **ADOPT ADAPTIVE AND CONFLICT-SENSITIVE DONOR PRACTICES**

Simplify reporting and compliance requirements, allow adaptive programming, and avoid practices that increase visibility or risk for women-led CSOs. Donor engagement should prioritize safety.

■ **INVEST IN PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND WELL-BEING**

Integrate mental health and psychosocial support into civil society assistance, including peer-support mechanisms, counseling services, and safe spaces for women leaders to address stress, burnout, and isolation.

■ **STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND COLLECTIVE NETWORKS**

Support initiatives that enhance women's decision-making power and peer networks, particularly across conflict-affected and ethnic areas. This will assist in reducing isolation and reinforcing collective resilience.

Implementing these recommendations is essential not only to protect women leaders, but to sustain community resilience as civil society continues to work for a peaceful, democratic Myanmar.

