

## Women of Faith: The Unsung Peacebuilders of Myanmar

March 15, 2021

Dear friends,

Often unsung and quietly operating outside of formal processes, women of faith are playing critical peacemaking roles on the frontlines of unrest and violent conflict worldwide. ICRD has been supporting these women of faith peacemakers in a number of countries, including those who have been working for peace, democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

After the military government began to allow for notable democratic reforms in 2011, there was great hope for Myanmar and international praise for the transition. However, only a few years later, large-scale violence in the Rakhine State against the Rohingya Muslim community caused global concern and outrage. A great deal of international pressure was put on the government, and the military, to cease actions against the Rohingya community, renounce and indict those in civil society who were actively fomenting violence, and commit to protecting Rohingya rights. Perhaps because of this pressure, and the light that it shed on reforms that were still needed to fully realize democracy, the military stepped in and reclaimed power last month. While the ongoing conflict in Myanmar is complex and compounded by a long history of ethnic and religious division, the overthrow of the democratic government by the military junta has raised concerns that there will be major escalations of violence. As we have witnessed significant civil society resistance to the military takeover, and the new government's violent response, these concerns are very real for people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds in Myanmar.

The tragedies of the protracted conflict, and its reescalation in recent days, make understanding the struggles and successes of women of faith peacebuilders over the years even more important. An example of one such peacebuilder in Myanmar is Shenden (whose name means “she who overcomes the negative”). Shenden was raised in a devoutly Buddhist household, and her identity was closely tied to the majority Burman ethnicity. However, as a young girl she witnessed firsthand the contentious relationship between the country's Buddhist majority and its various ethnic and religious minorities. Early on, Shenden felt called to help heal these social divides in her country. The tragedy of massive destruction and humanitarian need caused by Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta in 2008 offered an opportunity for Shenden to help build collaboration, understanding, and dialogue among adversarial groups in response to collective trauma and need. These moments, while some of the most challenging and difficult in Shenden's life, solidified her commitment to peacebuilding.

Shenden sought training as a conflict transformation practitioner and, in recent years, has focused on building peace among Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian religious communities, as well as diverse ethnic groups. In the face of the recent upheaval, however, Shenden's continued activism to promote peace, human rights, and democracy in collaboration with all faith and ethnic groups puts her and fellow women peacebuilders at great risk. Standing on the front lines, with a clear vision of a peaceful Myanmar, and raising her voice against targeted violence and abuse marks her as a threat to a military government that is quelling any resistance to its assumption of power.

Shenden's story is one that is repeated in communities across the world, where there are innumerable examples of extraordinary women of faith peacebuilders working on the front lines of violent conflict. ICRD, in partnership with the United States Institute of Peace, has been working to compile case studies of women of faith peacebuilders from around the globe, in order to identify key elements of their peacebuilding practice and highlight their unique contributions, as well as generate support for them in areas of crisis. Women of faith have cultural, religious, and social tools that allow them to have significant impact on advancing peace, often outside of formal institutional roles. Sadly, it is not unusual that these capacities are overlooked in peace processes, and women of faith, many times with less public attention or protection, are also frequent targets of violence by militant actors.

Not only is gender-inclusivity a key element of successful peacebuilding practice for practical reasons, considering the different experiences, access, and influence that men and women can bring to the work, but women peacebuilders must be made more central in order to highlight their contributions and increase their protection. It has been demonstrated that the long-term sustainability of peace negotiations is greatly improved when women are included in all levels and stages of the process, from early warning and to post-conflict reconciliation. ICRD has repeatedly been asked by women of faith peacebuilders to help facilitate a space where they can network and learn from one another across national, cultural, and religious boundaries. Highlighting the stories and successes of women of faith peacebuilders like Shenden, and turning their heroic work into strategic tools for other women across the globe, promises to strengthen the role and impact of these critical voices for peace.

Please join us in lifting up the stories of these women of faith, supporting them in their work, and protecting them. Together we can make faith part of the solution.

Warm regards,



James Patton

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