

The Production of Gendered Knowledge of War

Women and Epistemic Power

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Introduction

For decades, women in and from Myanmar have engaged in documentation of human rights abuses by the Myanmar military, report writing and international advocacy campaigns as key strategies in pursuit of political change in the country. Approaching these practices of knowledge production as expressions of narrative agency, this chapter examines how bearing witness has allowed women from conflict-affected, marginalized ethnic minority communities to gain significant visibility and influence and inform perceptions of armed conflict in Myanmar. Human rights documentation provided a format and a language for women's knowledge production that could be understood and acted upon on an international political arena. This made it possible for women's human rights activists to position themselves and be recognized by both the international community and other local actors as legitimate knowers of war and violence. In our analysis, we trace the evolution of human rights documentation targeting international audiences as a key strategy for the Burmese women's movement in exile from the late 1990s and onwards, and explore the politics of how narratives about violence and human rights abuses are produced, circulated, silenced or heard.

The strategy of bearing witness has been an effective way for the women's movement to produce knowledge about the gendered effects and practices of war, and counter official narratives about the political situation in Myanmar. International advocacy centred on documenting and exposing abuses of women's human rights has been a key strategy since the founding of the multi-ethnic alliance Women's League of Burma (WLB) in the late 1990s, elevating the exile-based Burmese women's movement to a position of significant political influence in international networks as well as diaspora politics during the era of military rule up until 2011 (Women's League of Burma 2011; Olivius & Hedström 2019). This development coincided with a surge in international attention to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), encapsulated in the dominant framing of sexual violence as a weapon of war, which allowed Burmese women to narrate their experiences of abuse as instances of a broader, global phenomenon (Hedström & Olivius 2021). At the same time, the salience of CRSV over time tended to crowd out other narratives of gendered violence and suffering, notably those focusing on patterns of

structural violence and insecurity rather than violent events such as rape. In this sense, the international political context shaped what knowledge was produced through human rights documentation, and to what extent different narratives could be heard.

However, the conditions for women's narrative agency in an international context have shifted dramatically over time. After a long period of successful international human rights advocacy, the decade of political transition in Myanmar that begun in 2011 turned the interest of international audiences towards economic investment as well as state-building efforts in collaboration with the Myanmar government, rendering oppositional advocacy strategies less palatable. This shift illustrates how the space for human rights documentation as a site of narrative agency changes over time, and how it is shaped by dominant temporal assumptions about trajectories of war and peace. Following the 2021 military coup, women's organizations and activists are again drawing on human right documentation as a site of narrative agency, desperately trying to mobilize international support to the resistance against military rule.

In this chapter, we outline the contours and changes in women's human rights documentation practices over time to explore how narratives about violence and human rights abuses are created and circulated, silenced and heard. To develop this analysis, we draw on our respective and collaborative histories of research with women's organizations in Myanmar, which we put into conversation with documentary sources such as human rights reports by women's organizations, building an extensive narrative archive (Rose 2023).

This chapter is structured as follows. Next, we explore how human rights documentation has been effectively deployed by women's organizations from Myanmar since the 1990s. However, the knowledge production of women's organizations has also been shaped by dominant narrative frames as well as political interests at the international stage, which they have needed to navigate in order to be heard. This illustrates how individual testimonies and micro-level narratives are mediated by dominant macro-level narratives of war. Notably, this has led to an emphasis on CRSV at the expense of more complex narratives of structural gendered violence and insecurity. Further, the shift in international receptiveness to women's narratives about human rights abuses after 2011 demonstrates the sensitivity of women's narrative agency to geopolitical shifts and changes in the international politics of aid. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for understanding the interplay between narrative agency and epistemic violence in the encounter between local and global narratives of armed conflict and peacebuilding.

Human rights documentation as narrative agency

Since shortly after independence from the British in 1948, multiple ethnic minority groups in Myanmar have fought the Bamar-ethnic-majority-dominated central government against long-standing marginalization and repression (Saw Ralph & Naw Sheera 2020; Sadan 2016; Thawngmung 2011). From 1962 to 2011, Myanmar was ruled by successive military juntas, and popular uprisings, most notably in

1988, were brutally struck down by the military. The counter-insurgency strategies of the military juntas caused massive human suffering, particularly in ethnic-minority-populated areas, with repeated waves of displacement into rebel-held ‘liberated’ areas and across the borders to neighbouring countries (Smith 1999).

These areas, where not only arms, people and commodities circulated, but also political ideas and connections, became dynamic spaces where oppositional politics flourished, providing a node for opposition to the military juntas ruling Myanmar. This is also where an organized women’s movement emerged in the 1990s, as women who had often initially mobilized for the armed struggle developed an increasingly independent, and feminist, agenda (Olivius & Hedström 2019). An important milestone was the formation of the first multi-ethnic women’s network from Myanmar, the WLB, established in late 1999 in the northern Thai town of Mae Hong Son, close to the Myanmar border (Women’s League of Burma 2011; Hedström 2016).

Burmese oppositional groups had increasingly and effectively used international norms on human rights as tools for advocacy since the violent crackdown on the 1988 student uprising, in which then-democracy icon Daw Aung San Suu Kyi rose to prominence as a key figure. In the early 1990s, the UN expressed their grave concern at the human rights situation in the country and installed a special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, mandated to monitor and report on the situation (Yokota 1993). The early strategies of the women’s movement emerged in this context, but were also shaped from the outset by its transnational feminist connections. For example, women who would come to be the founders of the WLB attended the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, reporting on the “plight of Burmese women, including forced relocation, portering, and labour, as well as rape and sexual violence” (Mi Sue Pwint 1993; Center for Peace and Conflict Studies 1995).

With international sanctions against the Myanmar regime in place, many donors were keen to support organizations seen as representing democratic oppositional forces, such as the WLB, and a focus on human rights abuses committed against ethnic minority women living in conflict areas or women active in the struggle for democracy soon gained prominence. The publication of reports, in English as well as Burmese, became a key practice for WLB and its member organizations. The reports were presented and used as advocacy materials in contexts such as different UN forums.¹ In these reports, the experiences of women from Myanmar were explicitly contrasted with the narratives of the junta, which not only denied that human rights abuses occurred, but also claimed that women in Myanmar enjoyed unparalleled rights and equality. For example, in 2002 the junta-friendly paper *New Light of Myanmar* claimed that in Myanmar “women have never been discriminated against” (Lieutenant general Khin Nyunt quoted in *New Light of Myanmar* 2002). Reports by women’s organizations provided a powerful antidote to such claims; as expressed by the WLB, “these stories bear witness to the fact that, despite the regime’s claims to the contrary, nothing has changed in Burma” (Women’s League of Burma 2004, p.1). Such practices explicitly positioned the act of bearing witness as critical for broader political change. In line with feminist

research traditions (Enloe 2010; Sylvester 2013), women's everyday experiences were understood as a vital source of knowledge about the nature and effects of war, and the requirements for peace. As the acknowledgement page of a report published by the WLB in 2004, and presented at the UN, states: "We firmly believe that their [women witnessing in the report] courage in speaking out is a first step to bringing about genuine political change in Burma and restoring the peace and safety they so fervently desire" (Women's League of Burma 2004, p.iv).

An event that effectively illustrates the power of women's human rights advocacy, and the power of the individual testimony, was the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women of Burma in 2010. The tribunal was organized by the WLB and the Nobel Women's Initiative to highlight gender-specific abuses perpetrated by the Myanmar military and experienced by ethnic minority women and women human rights defenders and politicians from Myanmar. In the absence of any domestic legal accountability in Myanmar, this informal court aimed at achieving a form of moral accountability as well as recognition of crimes against women, hoping to spur international legal action.

The International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women of Burma was first held in conjunction with the UN Commission on the Status of Women annual meeting in New York in March 2010, and a second tribunal was held in Tokyo in July of that same year. The day-long tribunal in New York heard the testimony of 12 women who shared their personal experiences of abuses perpetrated by the military regime. The court hearings were presided over by female Nobel Peace Laureates and two regional human rights experts acting as judges. The testimonies were organized around three categories of crimes: sexual violence against women; civil and political violations and social, economic and cultural violations. At the hearings, the judges considered whether human rights violations experienced by women constituted crimes against humanity, war crimes or human rights violations. The women were, in the words of the judges, 'bearing witness' to a wider human rights crisis in Myanmar, including 'breaking the silence' on sexual violence (International Tribunal on Crimes against the Women of Burma 2010).

Based on the women's testimonies, delivered in Burmese with simultaneous translation in front of an audience of more than 200 people attending in-house and over 2,000 attendees online (including one of the authors of this chapter), the judges concluded that the Burmese regime had been committing and continued to commit war crimes, crimes against humanity and human rights violations. The findings of the tribunal were presented to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and members of the UN Security Council, and the recommendations included a call to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC), prosecutions through Universal Jurisdiction and the application of measures granted to Security Council members under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (see International Tribunal on Crimes against the Women of Burma 2010; Burma Tribunal Webcast Part 1 2010).

The tribunal exemplifies the critical role played by the exile-based Burmese women's movement in using human rights documentation to draw attention to the gendered nature of war in Myanmar. The strategy of bearing witness, here literally giving testimony in a quasi-legal court, has been an effective way for the women's

movement to build knowledge about the gendered effects and practices of war, and counter official narratives about the political situation in the country. Here, the power of the personal, individual narrative is central. As one woman framed her testimony: “This is my witness...this is not something that has been told to me... this is my witness” (International Tribunal on Crimes against the Women of Burma 2010, p. 15).

The tribunal also illustrates the transnational connections and alliances that amplified women’s narratives and made human rights documentation a site for narrative agency reaching well beyond Myanmar’s borderlands, in line with similar feminist initiatives clustered under the Women’s Court umbrella (cf. Duhacek 2015). Thus, transnational feminist networks, an international consensus regarding the illegitimacy of the military junta in Myanmar and a peak in international interest particularly in CRSV together constituted a conducive political environment for the circulation of Burmese women’s narratives of gendered violence.

The dominance of conflict-related sexual violence

While the human rights documentation practices of Myanmar women’s organizations have focused on a range of issues, from human trafficking, poverty and drug problems to the situation of women village chiefs in conflict areas (see, for example, Kachin Women’s Association Thailand 2005; Palaung Women’s Union 2006; The Karen Women’s Organization 2010), the issue of CRSV has proved particularly salient as a tool for international advocacy. The utility of this issue for capturing international attention quickly became clear after the release of a landmark report by the Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN), a member organization of WLB, in 2002. This report, titled “License to Rape – The Burmese Military Regime’s Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State,” documented the Myanmar Army’s use of sexual violence against ethnic minority women in Shan State, an area of the country that had been the site of armed conflict since the 1950s (Shan Women Action Network 2002). The report gained immediate and widespread international attention, resulting in follow-up studies conducted by the US State Department, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, among others, and even compelling the Myanmar regime to stage their own investigation of the issue in which villagers “were forced to sign documents testifying that no incidents of sexual violence had been committed” (Women’s League of Burma 2004, p. 7). Charm Tong, one of the authors of the report, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and met with then-US President George W Bush (Ferguson 2013). The release of the report coincided with a broader momentum on CRSV internationally, making the report, with its focus on sexual violence, particularly conducive to international circulation and uptake. In 1998, four years before the release of the report, the Rome Statute of the ICC became the first legal instrument to define sexual violence as a crime against humanity, and in 2000, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325) was adopted, positioning international norms on sexual

violence in war as a powerful resource for Burmese women activists (Hedström & Olivius 2021).

Following the release of *License to Rape*, the exiled women's movement, based primarily on the Thai–Myanmar border and under the stewardship of the WLB's secretariat, increasingly positioned itself as a key actor in Burmese exile politics. Successful international advocacy raised the status of women's organizations in the eyes of military and political ethnic minority leaders. As one senior SWAN activist recalled in an interview in 2017, the release of *License to Rape* paved the way for women's participation and leadership within ethno-nationalist movements:

Yeah, all the leaders, we get attention from them and they say 'oh, we are fighting for over 50–60 years with our guns, but the Burma army or the government they didn't change. But the women's power with the pen...have really got the attention from the global or the international [community]'. So, later, they came to accept women's participation.

(Women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2017, cited in Olivius & Hedström 2019, p. 7)

Thus, their success in gaining international recognition through human rights documentation practices also generated recognition of women as legitimate knowers, and of their experiences as valid knowledge, within ethno-nationalist resistance movements.

War-time sexual violence was not the only issue raised by Burmese women in international fora, but the narrative about rape against ethnic minority women being used by the Myanmar state as a 'weapon' or 'tool' of military warfare was especially effective in capturing the attention of the international community. This issue therefore raised the profile and standing of the women's movement, and several reports on sexual violence were released in the years after *License to Rape*. For example, two years after the release of the report, another women's group under the WLB umbrella, the Karen Women's Organization, published a report detailing sexual violence perpetrated by members of the Myanmar military against women living in Karen state (The Karen Women's Organization 2004), followed by one published by the WLB and presented to the committee in 2004 (Women's League of Burma 2004). The continuing emphasis on CRSV was also visible in the tribunal proceedings some years later, as discussed above. This illustrates how international dominant narratives during the period shaped which type of testimonies from Burmese women could be taken up and heard in a wider context. The effectiveness of aligning their narratives with the predominant framing of rape as a weapon of war thus came to inform the human rights reporting of Myanmar women's organizations from the early 2000s and onwards.

While the focus on CRSV in women's human rights documentation and advocacy did reflect the widespread use of sexual violence in conflict areas in Myanmar, the dominance of this issue over time also tended to crowd out other narratives of gendered insecurity and suffering. Early reports published by the WLB and its member organizations identify broader patterns of violence and insecurity,

positioning sexual violence as occurring on a continuum of intersecting gendered violence, ranging from environmental destruction and the absence of health care and education to poverty, displacement, trafficking and drug use (see Women's League of Burma 2000, 2002; Kachin Women's Association Thailand 2005, 2008; Palaung Women's Union 2006). Over time, however, attention to these broader patterns of gendered insecurity and violence decreased in favour of a more concentrated focus on sexual violence in conflict. As noted by Anne-Kathrin Kreft, skyrocketing international engagement around CRSV provides both critical resources and receptive audiences for local women's political mobilization during armed conflict, but can also result in other types of suffering being less easily circulated and made visible (Kreft 2019; cf. Hedström & Olivius 2021).

Moreover, even in the reporting on CRSV, other silences persisted. The reporting of women's organizations exclusively focus on violence committed by the Myanmar Army against ethnic minority women, while coverage of sexual violence committed within ethnic armed groups fighting against the military regime is generally missing, even though crimes committed by soldiers associated with ethnic minority communities most certainly took place (Davies & True 2017). This suggests a deliberate political choice on behalf of the report writers to not include these types of abuses. The political salience of an international narrative framing sexual violence as a weapon of war did not only become a useful resource and site of narrative agency for women's organizations, but was also picked up by the military leaders of ethnic armed groups and used as an effective tool for demonizing the enemy, mobilizing public outrage and legitimizing their continued insurgency, which, in no small part, relied on women's unpaid labour (Hedström & Olivius 2021; Hedström 2018). This points to the complexities and politics of women's narrative agency in armed conflict: while women's human rights documentation practices most certainly aimed at making visible women's experiences and suffering, gendering prevailing knowledge about the war in Myanmar, it was also always a political tool in that war. Ethnic minority women's organizations under the WLB umbrella emerged in a context of ethno-nationalist resistance movements, and have remained affiliated with armed groups fighting the Myanmar Army, even if this relationship has at times been tense (Olivius & Hedström 2019). Yet, this is not an aspect of their identity that is foregrounded when they appear as human rights advocates in international fora, speaking the language of international law rather than ethno-nationalist struggle. Nevertheless, international norms, for example around CRSV, have been useful both to draw attention to women's situation in war, and to mobilize support for continued armed struggle (Hedström & Olivius 2021).

A changing political context for human rights documentation

Starting in 2011, the domestic and international political context for women's human rights documentation practices came to change significantly. In 2010, the military junta held elections, which were considered neither free nor fair by international observers (Egretau 2016). Following this, the military handed over

power to a semi-civilian, elected government led by ex-general U Thein Sein, who embarked upon an ambitious reform agenda. In the following years, political prisoners were released, freedom for media and civil society increased, a new round of peace negotiations was initiated and the previously closed economy was liberalized, leading international investors to the country in search of new opportunities. The emerging international peacebuilding and development industry in the country predominantly geared their support towards the government, seeking to amplify democratization efforts, contribute to reforms and strengthen state institutions (Bächtold 2015; Olivius, Hedström & Zin Mar Phyto 2022).

This shift came to change the domestic and international political context for women's human rights documentation practices significantly. The interest of international actors shifted towards collaboration with the Myanmar government rather than with oppositional actors, such as women human rights defenders, significantly constraining the opportunities for testimonies related to continuing human rights abuses to be heard. Funding to oppositional organizations, in particular those based in exile, decreased significantly, as did the receptiveness of international audiences to narratives about state-sponsored human rights abuses (Olivius 2019). As a result, strategies of human rights documentation and international advocacy, which the Burmese women's movement had perfected in exile, were no longer as effective as they had been. As one activist lamented in 2017:

There is less and less interest in the lives of the people who are in the conflict areas, who are running and who are IDPs and refugees. Less and less interest. [...] That doesn't mean that the situation got better. But there is less interest and less coverage from the media and international people. So that means that, somehow this is silenced. [...] For example, rape, sexual violence, committed by the army who also have the power, is still happening.

(Interview with women's rights activist,
Chiang Mai, Thailand, November 7, 2017)

In response, many women's organizations struggled to demonstrate to the world that armed violence and human rights abuses were still ongoing, and that Myanmar's democratic transition was unfinished at best. For example, the WLB shadow report to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women commission in 2016 was entitled "Long Way to Go: Continuing Violations of Human Rights and Discrimination Against Ethnic Women in Burma" (WLB 2016). The same year, the Kachin Women's Association, Thailand, released a report documenting human rights abuses in Kachin areas in Northern Myanmar, where armed conflict had resurged after a previous ceasefire broke down in 2011. The report, seeking to draw attention to the still present reality of war, was illustratively titled "A Far Cry From Peace: Ongoing Burma Army Offensives and Abuses in Northern Burma Under the NLD Government" (KWAT 2016). These experiences resulted from a temporal dissonance wherein dominant narratives of political transition and peacebuilding clashed with women's experiences of continued violence and insecurity (Hedström & Olivius 2022; Mueller-Hirth 2017). This illustrates

how the space for human rights documentation as a site of narrative agency shifts over time, and is shaped by dominant temporal assumptions about war and peace.

The decreased effectiveness of human rights documentation and advocacy also prompted many women's organizations to consider new strategies. In response to a lack of donor funding, but also due to a desire to capitalize on new opportunities for impact in Myanmar, many organizations founded in exile relocated their operations into Myanmar. Many also adopted new priorities, seeking to influence legislative processes through engagement with state institutions and parliament, and new, more diplomatic and less confrontational, styles of advocacy (Olivius 2019; Olivius & Hedström 2020). However, these shifts and difficult strategic choices led to tensions within the women's movement, as not everyone agreed that the price for these changes was worth paying. As one activist and former leader within the WLB argued in 2017, adapting to the new political context had rendered the organization quieter on the issues that had historically been at the heart of its advocacy:

WLB used to be the strongest women organization, when it comes to the human rights violations and the offensives in ethnic areas. And when it comes to sexual violence committed by the military. But now it has become very quiet.

(Women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2017. Cited in Olivius 2019, p. 160)

On February 1, 2021, the decade of political transition that had reshaped the landscape for women's activism as well as Myanmar's international relations came to an abrupt end as the Myanmar military attempted to take power in a coup d' état. Alleging electoral fraud, the military prevented the newly elected parliament from assembling and arrested parliamentarians, politicians and activists across the country. Within days, huge crowds took to the streets to protest against the coup, but peaceful protests were soon brutally repressed (Marlar, Chambers & Elena 2023). Since then, resistance against military rule has taken other forms, including new forms of armed resistance (Hmung 2021; Loong 2022). In response to military crackdowns, many high-profile women activists, such as leaders of women's organizations, have left the country. For organizations with a history of mobilization in exile, most notably along the Thai–Myanmar border, these areas have again emerged as key sites of refuge but also a key space for continued political activism (Hedström & Olivius 2023). However, legal precarity in Thailand as well as continued threats from Myanmar military intelligence have forced newly exiled activists to move towards online platforms as the main space for mobilization, and social media as the key site for advocacy. In the meantime, many women's organizations continue to work in Myanmar, providing life-saving emergency relief to internally displaced people and human rights defenders, along with their regular work of supporting women victims of violence and advocating for women's rights.

In this context, women's organizations have returned to historically prominent strategies for human rights documentation and international advocacy, desperately

trying to incite the international community to act against large-scale violence and human rights abuses that have followed after the military coup.² For example, soon after the coup the WLB started publishing bi-monthly situation update reports, which documented specific cases of human rights abuses by the new military junta.³ In 2023, WLB representatives implored the UN to act at an event held in conjunction with a Security Council meeting on Myanmar:

Along with the conflict, sexual violence and gender-based violence continues to threaten the life of women from Burma. This has continued to worsen since the coup. From 2021–2022 (we have) documented 100 cases of GBV and SGBV including CRSW. This is only the tip of the iceberg.

(Hser Hser, March 13, 2023)

Thus, again, human rights documentation, and the power of the individual testimony has emerged as a key site of narrative agency, knowledge production and resistance, as other arenas for political contestation have closed down, and as oppositional activists are yet again pushed into exile and into hiding (Olivius & Hedström 2023).

However, two years after the coup, it is doubtful whether women's human rights documentation practices are as effective in capturing international attention and inciting action as they were before 2011. As representatives from women's organizations and human rights organizations argued in February 2023, "Myanmar's crisis has been forgotten by the world and neglected by aid donors" (The New Humanitarian 2023). This demonstrates that the gravity of violence alone does not mean that international audiences are receptive to women's narratives about human rights abuses; many other factors shape the politics of which knowledge can be heard and used, and which knowledge is silenced or ignored. The first decade of the millennium represented a rare window of opportunity, when international conditions made it possible for marginalized women and their stories to be propelled into the international limelight and shape knowledge about as well as policy responses to war. After the 2021 military coup, international condemnations of the new military junta, the State Administrative Council, have largely failed to move beyond rhetoric, and those resisting it, including women's organizations fighting for democracy as well as gender equality, overwhelmingly feel abandoned by the world. These shifts over time point to how sensitive the epistemic power of women's narrative agency is to geopolitical shifts and changing dominant interests and narratives in an international context.

Concluding reflections

This chapter has analysed human rights documentation practices by organizations in the Burmese women's movement as a site of narrative agency and traced the changing contours of and conditions for these practices over time. The analysis illustrates the epistemic power of the individual testimony, which is central in human rights reports and contributes to establish credibility and capture attention.

Bearing witness in reports, pseudo-legal courts, and UN forums has allowed women from conflict-affected, marginalized ethnic minority communities to gain significant visibility and influence and inform international perceptions of armed conflict in Myanmar. Human rights documentation and reporting thus provided a practice and a language for producing gendered knowledge about war in an internationally intelligible format.

However, political interests and dominant narratives on the international arena have also shaped and constrained what knowledge is produced, and how narratives about gendered violence, insecurity and suffering can be circulated and heard. Notably, an international preoccupation with sexual violence as a weapon of war for many years led to an emphasis on CRSV at the expense of more complex narratives of structural gendered violence and insecurity. While this points to how women's narrative agency is mediated by dominant international macro-narratives, it also points to a more general feature of the power of the individual story. Dramatic and measurable violent events, such as rape, lends themselves more easily to effective narrative use as compared to the widespread, slow, and deeply gendered structural violence of poverty, fear and struggles for survival in war. A reliance on the individual testimony as an impactful tool for narrative agency and a source for knowledge about war can thus obscure more complex analyses of the gendered realities of war. In other words, while the practice of human rights documentation is effective for making some stories heard, other stories are simultaneously silenced.

Our analysis also demonstrates how sensitive women's narrative agency is to political and discursive shifts on the international arena. Here, temporal assumptions about how political transitions or peace processes are expected to unfold are central, as these assumptions can determine whether international audiences approach a country or a region as a place of recurrent war and human rights violations, or a place of peacebuilding, democratization and supposed linear progress. After the onset of a political reform period in Myanmar in 2011, the interest of international actors shifted towards collaboration with the Myanmar government, which made them less receptive to oppositional narratives of still ongoing, state-sponsored human rights abuses. This created a sense of abandonment amongst women activists who had mobilized in exile and perfected human rights documentation and international advocacy as strategies for change and prompted a reassessment of their activist practices. The aftermath of the 2021 military coup has yet again made human rights documentation more salient as a key practice in struggles to incite the international community to act against the violence of the military junta, but international audiences seem to be less receptive to narratives of human rights abuse than they were before the decade of political transition in Myanmar. Thus, looking back, the first decade of the millennium appears as a rare window of opportunity, when international political conditions made it possible for marginalized Burmese women and their stories to be propelled into the international limelight and shape knowledge about as well as responses to war and violence in Myanmar.

Notes

- 1 For example, the year after its formation, the WLB published its first the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) shadow report, which it presented to the CEDAW commission (WLB 2000). The CEDAW shadow reporting has since then become a recurring advocacy practice of the WLB, and later other women's organizations (Cardenas & Olivius 2021).
- 2 See post-coup UN events where women from WLB and other women-led civil society are – once again – imploring the international community to act based on their human rights documentation (Norway in the UN, May 12, 2021).
- 3 See, for example, monthly human rights updates published by WLB at <https://www.womenofburma.org/reports>

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