

Hosted by Gender and Development Studies (GDS)

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## **GENDERLAB TALK SERIES # 1: PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY AND FEDERALISM - SUMMARY NOTE**

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28 April, 2023

Gender and Federalism in Myanmar

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photo source: GSCN Facebook

The speaker aimed to the audience understand well about the principles of “democracy” and “federalism”, outlining the presentation with principles of democracy and federalism; variations of democracy and federalism among countries; and similarities and differences but complementing each other of federalism and democracy. It is noted that the speaker not only discussed theoretical concepts but also presented the various regional and global research findings in her presentation, particularly while talking about comparisons among countries, and reflecting on the Myanmar situation.

The speaker discussed that in a democratic system, all individuals, including government officials, are subject to and must abide by the law; laws must be just, consistent, and applied equally to everyone. Multiple political parties and diverse viewpoints are allowed to exist as well, by providing citizens with choices and fostering healthy competition in the political arena. Democracies protect fundamental human rights and civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and the right to vote. These rights are considered inviolable and are protected by the state.

# GenderLab Talk Series#1

## Principles of Democracy and Federalism - Summary Note

Regular elections, conducted freely and fairly, allow citizens to choose their representatives and hold them accountable. The electoral process should be transparent and accessible to all citizens. She made specific caution about a drawback of the system, since this political system has based on the rule of people, representatives elected by majority rule may not necessarily address the rights of people from minority groups, giving examples of ethnic groups in Myanmar.

Because of variations in defining democracy, ranging from minimum definition (competitive elections) to maximum, the systems of different countries are referred to as “semi-democracy”, “quasi-democracy”, “illiberal democracy”, and “Asian-style democracy”. The minimum level of definition in illiberal democracy includes competitiveness that means multiparty, free and fair elections and rules by the people, by the majority of the people, while liberal democracy ensures a rule of law (not by whims of individuals), freedom of speech/assembly; freedom of media, individual rights, check and balance of power (executive, judiciary, legislature); inclusivity and tolerance for diversity (women, ethnic and religious minorities); equality of rights; and peaceful transition of power.

The talk also covered key issues to be considered when the democratic system is going to established such as an electoral system, check and balance pillars, power sharing among elected and appointed, and political parties. She made a comparison that in Myanmar, political parties are mostly based on ethnicity, while in the US are based on ideologies like Democratic and Republican.

The speaker explained that the significant essence of Federalism is a division of power between a central/federal government, and regional/local governments with both levels of government having separate spheres of authority as well as shared sovereignty.

Regional or local governments have a degree of autonomy and decision-making authority over issues that directly affect their jurisdiction. She stressed that Federal systems allocate powers between the central and regional governments through a written constitution or legal framework.

In Federalism, some powers are exclusive to the central government, some are reserved for regional governments, and others are shared or concurrent. A principle of subsidiarity emphasizes that decisions should be made at the lowest appropriate level of government; cooperation, collaboration, and coordination between the central and regional governments are essential in a federal system. Inter-governmental relations help to address shared challenges, resolve conflicts, and promote unity while respecting regional diversity. She explained that Federalism, not like democracy, can protect the rights of minority groups by allowing regional governments to exercise power and make decisions that consider their specific needs and aspirations. This helps prevent the domination of minority groups by the majority. She underscored the fact that Federal systems allow for policy experimentation and flexibility at the regional level. This enables different regions to tailor policies according to their unique circumstances and experiment with innovative solutions to local problems; experiences and lessons learned from such experiments can be copied by other regions later.

The speaker concluded the talk by reflecting on the existence of different democratic political systems and federal arrangements; reminding the fact that all models are useful but should not be imposed without considering the unique features and needs of Myanmar's situation since every country needs to adjust/change their approaches depending on evolving situations.



## GenderLab Talk Series#1 Principles of Democracy and Federalism

### Follow-up dialogue with participants



#### THE LANGUAGE ISSUE IN FEDERALISM IN MYANMAR?

Participants had a high interest in different models of using language in federalism. The speaker explained that, in federalism, language plays a significant role due to its impact on identity, representation, and effective governance. Moreover, in the context of federalism, language also matters in cultural identity; representation and participation; access to government service, legal and administrative frameworks; and communication and unity. For cultural identity, language is closely tied to culture and identity. In diverse federal systems, different regions may have distinct linguistic communities with their cultural heritage. Recognizing and preserving linguistic diversity helps foster a sense of belonging, cultural pride, and social cohesion among various communities. Language is also important for status and economic values. If we know it, we can have more job opportunities.

Participants have discussed how Myanmar can do it for a language policy and a medium of communication. There are various examples among federal countries about the language. For example, US is only the English language is utilized but in Canada, there are two official languages which are French and English; although the English language is effective, and efficient, communication is smooth, and everyone can speak. For schooling, people can choose either English speaking school or a French-speaking school. Another example is Indonesia in which, Javanese is almost 40% of the population. But they don't use it as an official language. They use Bahasa which happened to be known as a trade language for everyone around the region including Malaysia. By using that language, conflict among different ethnic groups is reduced because the official language is not taken from any specific ethnic group as it is taken from a common language. Singapore and India, use different languages. In India, as a common language, they use English but at the regional/state level, people can use ethnic/official language. Nigeria also has the same system.



She also explained the three models of usage of language: one language only; using different languages for the official language; or using a neutral language. In terms of Myanmar, the people have to discuss and think of which model will be more suitable for the context. Though it is easy to say it is done, it is a very difficult as well as expensive task. It requires a lot of resources to change every policy to implement it. In Myanmar, many practical issues have to be taken into consideration and need to be addressed. Though language survival is good if it makes an official language, it is not that simple like that and needs different aspects such as the size of the people who speak that language. She shared her own experience, "For example, in Chin, there are approximately 54 languages. I learned the dialect of one group when I was young. But even in the area within 10 miles, I speak that language but no one understood it."

It had been discussed about the importance of other factors in language: "Family" role in linguistic capability since family is first hand in introducing language to people; the need for enough resources for having literature; the role of non-state actors, faith-based organizations, and non-profit organizations can also play a big role, for example like opening summer language school; and technology including a social media playing in a critical role. For example, some critics said using Facebook is already a Burmanization because it uses the Burmese language. But others say that different languages are also being used.

She concluded by suggesting that it is required to discuss and decide by people themselves in choosing the language model/policy; one language policy is easy and efficient but it can be dangerous for other minority languages; using a multi-language may be good and can maintain identity and reserve them, but other practical issues have to be considered whether we have enough resources and personal.

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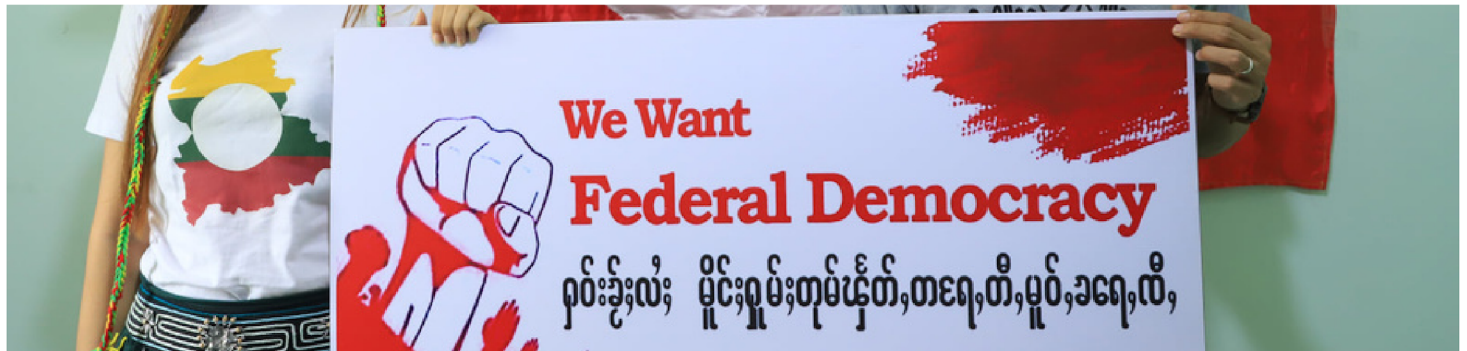
### WHICH FEDERALISM MODEL IS SUITABLE FOR MYANMAR?

Rather than taking one specific model, suggested to be adapted from different models based on the context of Myanmar. Encouraged to learn about the neighboring countries: to study India's model of self-autonomy and China's self-autonomous model with more centralized power. Indonesia's model can also be interesting to study it too. In addition, discussion about symmetrical models in which all states have the same power, while asymmetrical one has shared power differently. Canada can be an example of an asymmetric model. it has different autonomy. For example, Quibac has more power than others. Participants also discussed whether Myanmar should be ethnicity-based or non-ethnicity based for Federalism. Response from the speaker is it should be based on history, context, and negotiation. Moreover, the needs of a minority within a minority are also required to be considered.

### HOW FEDERAL ARMY HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED AROUND THE WORLD?

All the federal countries have only the national army under the federal army but the national guard and police are under the state/region while there is no army. The division of labor has to be clear between two entities. For the national army, it is to protect from the invasion of foreign countries, but not about enforcement. Enforcement of law and order – crime, and political stability are roles of the police and national guard.

photo source: GSCN Facebook



### DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH FEDERALISM IN OUR COUNTRY?

Depends on the political will and negotiation process. When looking 10 years back with the 2008 constitution; it is almost no power sharing to the state. For example, the Chief Minister of the state even had been appointed by the central government.

### THE STATE CONSTITUTION HAS BEEN DRAFTED AND DEVELOPED IN DIFFERENT STATES. WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

The speaker informed that she has participated in the review process of drafting the Karen constitution. In general, it looked good and mentioned about how people will be selected and how it runs for state affairs and development. But it still needs to be aligned with a transitional constitution and ensure the division of powers between the state and federal levels. It also has to be consistent in the relationship between federal and state while the state constitution is closer to the people.