

PROTECTION NEEDS AND CAPACITIES OF YOUTH

A Preliminary Report Exploring Youth Protection in Myanmar

Irena Grizelj

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has been operating in Myanmar since 2012, primarily supporting the establishment of informal networks of civilian ceasefire monitors (CCM) and civilian protection monitors (CPM), in support of Myanmar's ongoing peace process. This includes training on international laws and standards, protection methods, and reporting mechanisms. A Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in October 2015 between the government, military, and several ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), which established a formal Joint Ceasefire Monitoring (JMC) committee to track the implementation of the NCA. The JMC monitoring efforts span Union, State and Local level committees, with Local Civilian Monitors (LCMs) to be rolled out in NCA-signatory areas. Though the CCMs have distinguished themselves by focusing on the impact of ceasefire violations on civilian populations and operate in NCA as well as non-NCA areas, the emergence of a formal ceasefire monitoring mechanism has raised questions about the role of civil society groups in monitoring the NCA. Due to political sensitivities in terminology and scope of work, the CCM/CPM networks have repositioned themselves as 'community peace observers' (CPO) or 'community peace support groups' (CPS) since mid-2017.

While local partners and networks were in the process of re-orienting themselves, NP sought to strengthen the capacity and leadership role of specific marginalised groups – particularly women and youth – within the CPS networks. The aim is to better support the networks in addressing issues, including protection concerns, within their communities that they identify as most important and relevant. NP has begun its work on women empowerment and enhancing the leadership capacity of emerging women leaders within the CPS networks. As part of the launch of the *youth* focus, NP hosted a national forum on *Strengthening Youth in Peace and Security* in September 2017. The forum initiated NP's strategic programming by inviting over 100 youth from CPS and peace education networks around conflict-affected parts of Myanmar to assess protection needs specific to youth in their regions, and begin outlining the type of programming they would be interested in joining to address these needs. Youth from all key CPS networks attended from Kachin, Northern Shan, Southern Shan, Kayah, Karen, Rakhine, Chin, Tanintharyi, and Mon states.

Following the forum, NP hired a '*Youth, Peace and Security*' external consultant to conduct a deeper assessment within the CPS networks on the needs and opportunities of youth protection. The consultant conducted interviews and focus group discussions with youth from CPS networks across the country, as well as provided trainings to CPS networks to explain and explore the *youth* focus in protection work. Following a phase of interviews, trainings and discussions, NP hosted a follow-up '*Strategic Youth Workshop*' with 30 youth CPS members from across the states of Myanmar. The workshop was intended to review and prioritise recommendations from the external assessment, and develop an action plan to continue NP's engagement in youth protection moving forward.

This report was produced as part of the youth protection assessment of NP's work in Myanmar, and is based on key issues extracted from the September 2017 Forum, interviews conducted between February and March 2018 with youth CPS members, and outcomes from the strategic workshop in May 2018.

WHAT IS YOUTH PROTECTION?

GLOBAL TRENDS

Today, there are 1.8 billion youth in the world, the largest percentage of young people ever to have existed.¹ With a global median age of 29.7 years, it is estimated that 600 million youth live in fragile and conflict affected states.² As a significant proportion of the population in many parts of the world, *youth* have been distinguished for their importance in the stability of peace and prevention of violence in fragile and conflict-affected states. On 9 December 2015, after several years of advocacy by thousands of young people worldwide, the United Nations Security Council adopted its first ever resolution on **Youth, Peace and Security (UNSCR 2250)**.³ The resolution defines **youth as aged 18-29 years old**, however it also recognises and accepts the diverse socio-cultural definitions of youth across different countries and institutions.

This important step **places youth firmly on the peace and security agenda**, recognising the role of youth in peacebuilding and advocates for direct youth involvement in peace processes. The resolution further urges Member States to consider ways to increase representation of youth in decision-making processes at all levels and to offer mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict in partnership with young people. As a member state of the UN, the Myanmar government has agreed to carry out and accept the decisions of the Security Council, hence has a direct obligation to implement this resolution.

Youth protection as a concept and practice is relatively new in international discourse. While children (defined as those aged 18 years old and under) are protected through numerous international treaties, conventions, and standards, “youth” as a stakeholder (18-29 years old) with specific needs is a more recent development. Looking at global practices, there is an information and programming gap related to **protection of, and protection by, young people in conflict**.

Youth, unlike other forms of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, or race, is a *transitional* phase of life. It is a cross-cutting lens, for which an integrated approach needs to be taken. This includes viewing youth in all areas of protection work, including Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR). Young women and men, as separate to children (under 18) and adults (35 plus), have unique short-, medium-, and long-term protection needs that manifest during and post-conflict.

UNSCR 2250 statement on youth protection:

Recognizing that the protection of youth during conflict and post-conflict and their participation in peace processes can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security, and being convinced that the protection of civilians, including youth, in armed conflict should be an important aspect of any comprehensive strategy to resolve conflict and build peace. The UNSCR 2250:

¹ More information available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/es/node/9174>

² *UNDP Youth Strategy 2014-2017: Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future*, UNDP (New York, 2014)

³ See Youth4Peace for an introduction to UNSCR 2250 <https://www.youth4peace.info/UNSCR2250/Introduction>

7. Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take the necessary measures to protect civilians, including those who are youth, from all forms of sexual and gender-based violence;
8. Reaffirms that states must respect and ensure the human rights of all individuals, and protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity;
9. Conformity with international law, that ensure, during armed conflict and post conflict, the protection of civilians, including youth.

MYANMAR STATUS

Following decades of rule by a military-led government, Myanmar began a transition towards a quasi-civilian government in 2010/2011, along with the initiation of a national peace process. **Ongoing peace negotiations** between ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), the civilian government, military, and political parties are seeking to end over six decades of civil war. The partial signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015 laid the ground for an ongoing national political dialogue process, which will ultimately result in a Union Peace Accord – to be ratified in parliament.

While the **Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and Framework for Political Dialogue** call for a “reasonable” number of women representatives to be included, the documents do not contain specific provisions for the inclusion of youth as a key stakeholder. This suggests limited awareness and understanding by negotiating parties of youth perspectives and experiences from youth of the armed conflict and aspirations for peace. The NCA contains 17 provisions under Chapter 3, related to the Protection of Civilians – several of which directly relate to specific challenges for young people, including education, forced recruitment, and freedom of movement. As elaborated in the report, young people are disproportionately affected by certain elements of the conflict.

Furthermore, while the NCA has been analysed through a gender perspective in Myanmar,⁴ a youth-lens analysis is absent, suggesting the need for greater understanding on the role and implication of the NCA and political dialogue for young people. A better understanding of the specific threats and

Area	Median age
Magway	29.4
Yangon	28.3
Mandalay	28.2
Bago	28.1
Ayeywady	27.7
Sagaing	27.4
Union	27.1
Nay Pyi Taw	26.8
Mon	26.7
Rakhine	26
Kachin	24.7
Shan	24.4
Tanintharyi	24
Kayin	23.6
Kayah	22.9
Chin	20.1

⁴Muehlenbeck, Allison and Julia Palmiano Federer (July 2016) Women’s Inclusion in Myanmar’s Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. SwissPeace <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Womens-Inclusion-in-Myanmars-Nationwide-Ceasefire-Agreement.pdf>

insecurities youth face can help to strengthen the implementation of the NCA and sustainability of peace agreements.

Youth in Myanmar (15-35 years old) currently constitute one third population, with a national median age of 27 years old ⁵ and about 55% are under the age of 30, according to the 2014 census. ⁶ In terms of defining youth within the Myanmar context,



Group photo following two-day strategic youth workshop; May 2018

youth are strongly perceived to be under 35 years old, which falls slightly beyond the range of current international definitions. ⁷ Within this context, young people are experiencing tremendous changes in their social and cultural context. The ongoing prevalence of intercommunal conflict at state and community levels in various parts of the country further impede the full development of Myanmar's youthful population.

Most communities are able to identify their "youth" constituency, as well as a "youth leader" who can speak on behalf of youth within the community. There are positives and negatives to being able to identify this category: while this enables young people to mobilise (or be mobilised) rapidly for various causes and community activities, it also places young people within a particular hierarchy within their communities.

Myanmar passed its first **National Youth Policy** was passed in December 2017, after a government-youth partnership and consultation process. ⁸ The policy has legally defined youth as aged 16-35 years old. The policy contains a section on *Youth, Peace and Life Security*, with the following elements related to protection: ⁹

- The state should afford rule of law for youth, especially for women, to have security and safety.
- In order to have better future development of youth, the state should provide protection and rehabilitation in areas where peace, security, and rule of law are weak.

⁵ Myanmar Census, 2014: <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/index.php/politics/myanmar-census-2014>

⁶ See: http://www.dop.gov.mm/moip/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=140

⁷ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (Passed December 9th, 2015). Youth defined at 18-29 years old.

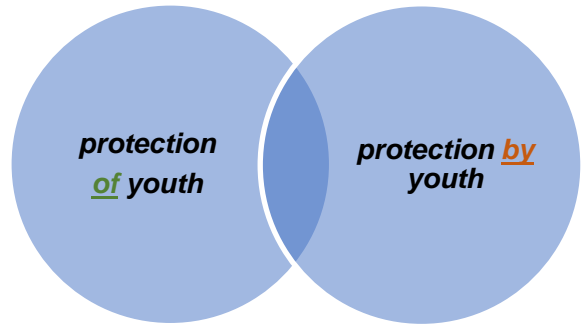
⁸ See Paung Sie Facility (2017), *Youth and Everyday Peace: Fostering the Untapped Potential of Myanmar's Youth*; pg 15-16 for more information.

⁹ Translation provided by an interpreter based in Lashio, often consulted upon for NP's work. An official translation of the policy into English is not available.

- Protect and reduce crime and conflict where youth are included and provide more opportunities for youth participation in protection work related to these issues.

2. ISSUES FOR YOUTH PROTECTION

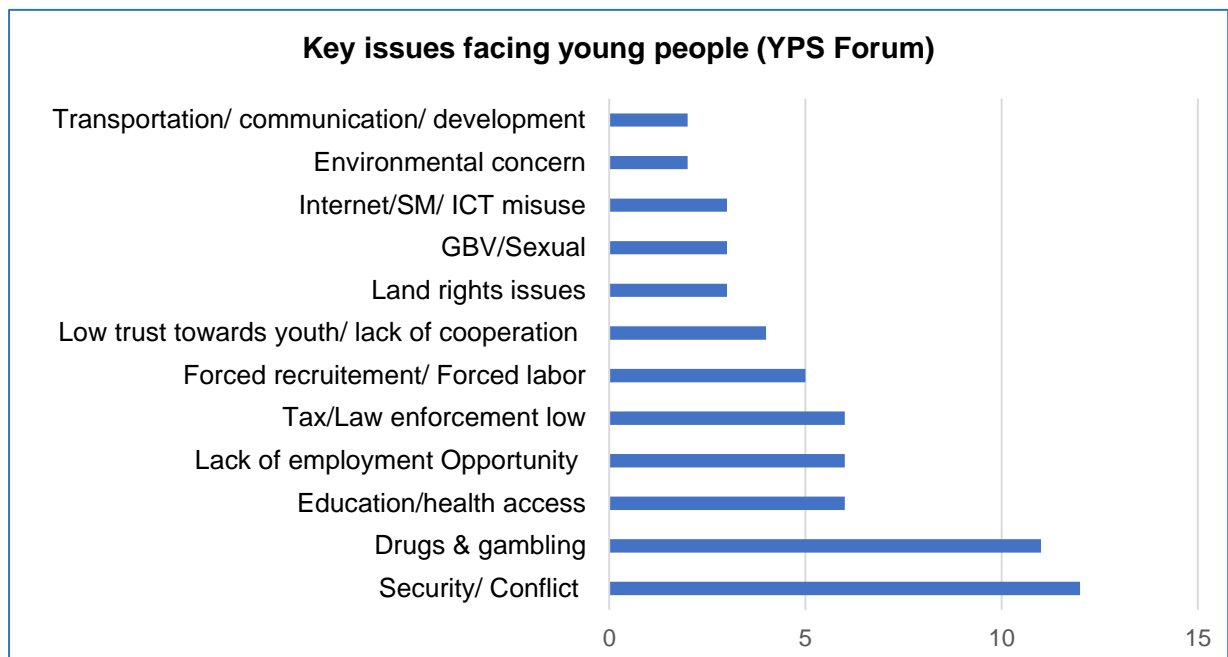
In understanding youth protection needs, there is a necessary overlap between protection *of* youth and protection *by* youth. In short, *protection of* youth relates to the issues that young people face as a specific sub-group within their community. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that young people transcend many spaces and roles in society and should not be viewed in silo from community more broadly.¹⁰



Protection by youth explores the needs, challenges, opportunities and advantages of protection mechanisms and approaches that young people encompass, as part of their roles within CPS networks. The overlap in these two analytical frameworks underscores the need for a holistic ‘youth’ lens across programming and approaches. The below section explores the issues within these two frameworks.

SPECIFIC PROTECTION NEEDS OF YOUTH

Feedback from interviews with CPS members suggest that a “youth” lens had not previously been applied by the networks nor strategically utilised by NP as part of the protection programming. Applying a youth lens added a new layer of protection issues and opportunities to promote civilian participation in the peace process. As youth are affected differently by armed conflict, there is a clear need for the various networks to tailor their protection and monitoring strategies to be more aware of (and respond to) the security



needs of youth. The most prominent protection needs highlighted by youth include:

Security and distrust: A significant portion of Myanmar's population live in conflict-affected areas. Notably, the **median age of the population is lower (younger) in Myanmar's States compared to Regions**, potentially highlighting the high portions of migration and displacement in the States with high conflict and low development opportunities.¹¹ Young people in areas where the networks operate are furthermore facing pressing security threats.

One of the key issues, as described by youth, is the **mistrust from ethnic armed groups and the Tatmadaw towards young people**: with an increase in movement and presence of signatories, non-signatories, and the military within Shan, Karen, and Kachin states, and the high portions of youth that technically comprise armed groups, has resulted in young people perceived as potential threats by the government and military. In Lashio, particularly since 2016 and increasingly since 2017, Ta'ang youth for example expressed the increase in Special Police present at youth events, but this was not limited to their ethnic group. The fear and risk of ad-hoc arrests, torture and recruitment additionally perpetuates displacement as young people (especially men) leave their communities when armed actors move into the area.

“So many young people go and seek jobs at the China border or remote rural areas. It is not easy for IDP young people. When KIA finds them, they are checked and recruited to be KIA soldiers. When Government military finds them, they are detained. They are forcibly asked to serve for military and if they denied, the military accused them of violating article 17(1), of unlawful association act.”

–Young male, Kachin CPS

Drugs, gambling, and alcohol: Drugs is consistently a significant protection issue raised by both by youth and adult peace observers when discussing specific protection concerns for youth.¹² Drugs are described as both a consequence and a driver of the armed conflict – affecting disproportionately **young men** in conflict areas, with higher concentrations in Shan, Karen, and Kachin State. The effects are felt across the whole community, with crime rates, community violence, insecurity, gender-based violence all purportedly associated with drug use. Sexual assault and rape were reported as affecting **women** in higher proportions, which is further intertwined with the conflict.

Forced recruitment: The ongoing forced recruitment of soldiers and non-combatant roles, by both the Tatmadaw and EAOs, particularly in Kachin State and northern and southern Shan State, threatens the safety of young adults and deprives their families and communities of critical social capital and workforce. While there are no verifiable numbers of

¹¹ Roughly 4.25 million Myanmar migrants are estimated to be working abroad according to the 2014 Census, with over 80% between the ages of 15 and 39. Research by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) also indicated that the age of potential migrants was generally between 18 and 24 (55%). International Labour Organization. 2015. [Safe migration knowledge, attitudes and practices in Myanmar](#). ILO.

No official data is available on the number of drug users in Myanmar, but the number of people estimated to be injecting drugs is approximately 83,000, while the use of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) in poppy-growing regions tripled between 2012 and 2014.¹² Drug use is particularly prevalent among young men, with high concentrations in Shan and Kachin State.

forced recruits among young adults, reports indicate young people, particularly young men, continue to be forcibly conscripted in villages affected by conflict.¹³ Kidnapping and abduction of young women by armed entities has also been reported.¹⁴ Recruitment by armed groups of “volunteers to help” from communities has been on the rise in community peace support group areas. The recruitment is not always forced; stories have been shared whereby community members may voluntarily give their time to support EAOs they feel affiliated with or protected by.

Education, employment, and health access: Related to the second pillar of UNSCR 2250, lack of access to quality higher education, employment, and health services limits youth development. This in turn can become a driver of youth engagement in acts of violence and decisions to join armed groups. In addition to limited access to education, freedom of movement constraints, particularly for young people in Rakhine and Kachin States, remains a key obstacle. Restrictions on movement marginalise and disenfranchise vulnerable youth, cutting them off from communities, and entrenches divisions within society. There is furthermore a language barrier for ethnic youth – both to Burmese and English – that was cited as key access issue, such as to access trainings, education, and including to obtain their identity cards. Without identity cards, the ability to travel is limited.¹⁵

ROLE OF YOUTH IN PROTECTING CIVILIANS

OVERVIEW OF YOUTH IN CPS NETWORKS

The CPS networks contain a significant proportion of young monitors: **out of the current 744 monitors supported by NP, 252 (34%) of them are youth (18-35 years).**¹⁶ This means that over one third of the CPS network relies on the energy and commitment of young women and men, highlighting an opportunity to harness youth within NP’s programming.

The chart below illustrates the proportion and percentage of



Young female CPS monitor presents situation of Northern Shan state and role of youth to peers

¹³ See Human Rights Watch. Burma: 2016. [Events of 2016](#). HRW; Lynn, Nyan Hlaing. 2016. [Fear, taxes and forced recruitment](#). *Frontier*. 02 November.

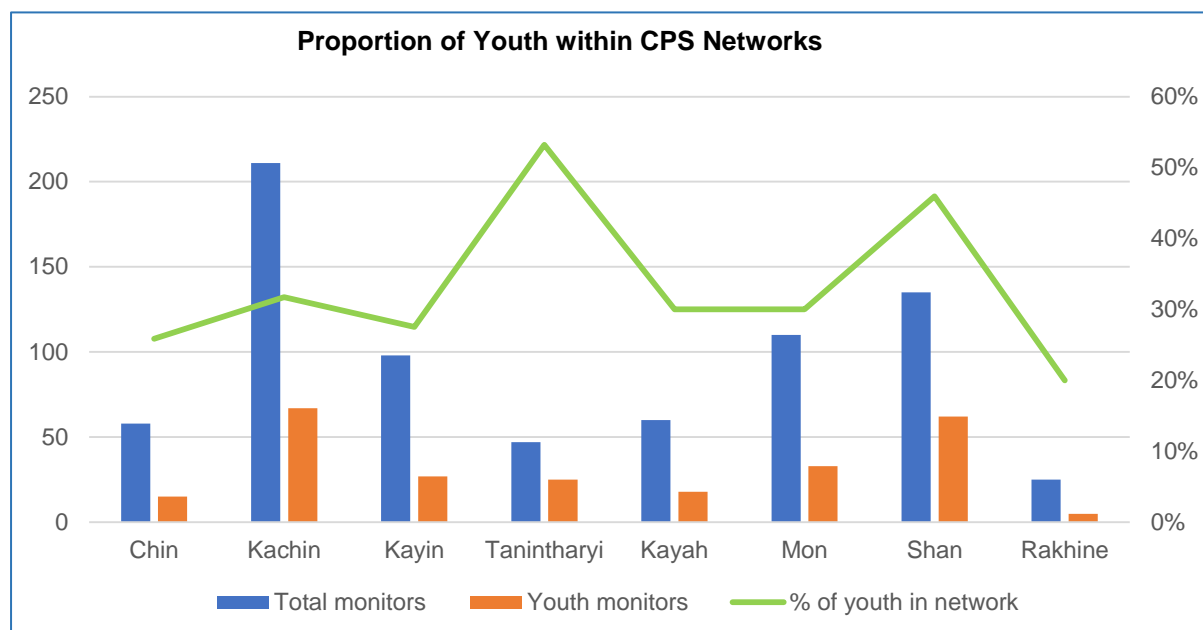
¹⁴ MacGregor, Fiona and Aung, Thu Thu. 2016. [More fighting and more abductions: Northern Shan villages robbed of children](#). *The Myanmar Times*. 05 February.

¹⁵ See Amnesty International. 2017. [Myanmar 2016/17](#). Amnesty International.

¹⁶ Numbers valid as of September 2017.

youth peace observers within CPS networks, according to region. Note, some of the CPS monitors may overlap in certain townships, however each peace observer is only counted once in this analysis.

Table and chart below: Overview of network numbers and proportion of youth monitors



Area	Network name	Total monitors	Youth monitors	% of youth in network
Chin	Chin CPS	48	8	17%
	GDI Chin	10	7	70%
Kachin	DPF CPS	24	7	29%
	Kachin CPS	131	32	24%
	GDI Kachin	56	28	50%
Kayin	GDI (Hsarmuthaw) CPS	20	5	25%
	GDI Twee CPS	18	12	67%
	KSPMN CPS	60	10	17%
Tanintharyi	KDN (Hsarmuthaw) CPS	47	25	53%
Kayah	KWEG CPS	60	18	30%
Mon	Mon CPS	110	33	30%
Shan	NGSS CPS	76	47	62%
	Northern Shan CPS	59	15	25%
Rakhine	Rakhine CPM	25	5	20%
Grand Total		744	252	34%

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF YOUTH MONITORS

Following discussions with youth monitors within the networks, several strengths and challenges have been identified specific to the participation of younger members within CPS networks.

A significant portion of the CPS peace observers are young women and men, who often take active and innovative approaches to protection, from monitoring and documenting human rights violations to supporting the design and implementation of protection networks. Young peace observers note their deep connection to their communities, and consequently access to accurate information, as a key strength. For youth who do become engaged within the CPS network, they highlighted strong communication and coordination with one another, and an active interest to participate in issues related to peace locally and nationally.

Young people also described their energy, drive, and fearlessness to pursue the injustices that they perceive within their communities, despite the real threats they face as part of their involvement in the peace observer network.

It is the younger members of the CPS – as described by both youth and senior members – who often **conduct the field work as part of monitoring process**. On the other hand, the adults within the networks are often the ones who “make the decisions.”¹⁷ This limits youth agency and ownership of the protection networks.



Youth community peace observers (CPO) map how they connect with other actors in their communities and state.

“Whenever we have to cooperate with the authorities we feel very small. We ask the authorities for information, but they didn’t give it to us. They told us to go away, saying that this is not the place for us”.
 – Young female, Rakhine CPS member

As such, one of the biggest challenges for youth is the **hierarchical culture that pervades Myanmar, which impedes participation for youth peace observers**. Senior community leaders and authorities may question the maturity of youth to be in leadership positions and fail to recognise the value and contribution of the work of the

young monitors. Youth peace observers consistently describe needing greater confidence and speaking skills in navigating hierarchical systems. One key method that has supported youth participation is through the voting system implemented within at least one of the CPS networks, which has provided a channel for youth peace observers to express their voice: youth peace observers voted for a youth representative within zone and state-level committees. The presence of a young representative within high-level committees is testament to the large numbers of youth within the network itself.

¹⁷ FGD with youth monitors, February 2018.

Another key impediment to the CPS network as a result of the hierarchical system is the **lack of access youth peace observers have to decision-making platforms**, such as community meetings. Community meetings are more easily accessible by the senior members of the CPS network. This limits younger peace observers from obtaining important community information and, subsequently, disseminating information or holding awareness raising trainings in

“As youth, we are discriminated but also as monitors. In village meetings, youth are excluded altogether. As monitors, if we want to be involved, we have to tell them in advance and then we can come. Adult monitors are able to attend because they are adults. We cannot do our trainings and get information.”

– Young male, Karen CPS member

communities. When granted access/permission to the meetings, some youth peace observers further express that their ideas and suggestions are not listened to nor implemented. The hierarchy is particularly difficult for youth engaged in state-level committees. More information is needed to understand if this issue affects all youth peace observers consistently across the country, and where (and why) there are exceptions.

Interestingly, the name change from **‘civilian ceasefire monitoring’ to ‘community peace support group’** has **positively supported youth monitors**, in some instances, to carry out their work: while ‘ceasefire monitoring’ was perceived as too “big” a task for youth, working on ‘peace’ has enabled some young peace observers to manoeuvre more easily within the hierarchical culture. The name change has additionally allowed some youth to more easy access to stakeholders and areas not covered by the NCA and bilateral agreements. Similar to the broader protection needs of youth, youth peace observers fall between the lines in being misperceived as part of EAOs by the military, or part of the military by EAOs. Particularly noting that the young peace observers are often the CPS members that conduct field work, this poses a practical challenge and threat for youth undertaking protection work.

While young peace observers felt they were well connected and coordinated with one another within their networks, **youth across the CPS networks are not sufficiently connected**. The strategic workshop underscored the importance of providing a space for youth monitors across the states of Myanmar to connect with one another, share common experiences and challenges, and build a coalition that can advance their protection capacities. Greater technical and financial support in undertaking protection work was highlighted. Youth within the CPS networks further noted limited connection with other youth groups and youth-led civil society in their regions, presenting an opportunity to expand and strengthen work related to youth protection.

Young female peace observers face an added layer of discrimination for their involvement in the CPS, as one youth female monitor expressed, *“People do not listen to me because I am youth and a girl.”* This poses security and protection issues that further need exploration for female peace observers, as highlighted by the example below. Exploring the advantages of being female and young in the CPS may additionally highlight useful opportunities.

Case study on security of young female peace observer: One young female monitor explained she joined the CCM following a forum explaining the mechanism that was held in 2015 in her village. After she joined the CCM, her community was fearful of the repercussions of the sensitive work she does. “It was not my place, they told me like that.” Her family did not approve of their daughter working on ‘security and protection’ issues, particularly related to the political sphere. The ethnic armed group in her area also questioned her involvement: “You are a young girl, why are you doing this, they said to me”. Despite these challenges, she continues to work as CPS monitor and resides in another village today.

3. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The assessment highlights some of the key strengths, challenges, and opportunities in addressing both the protection needs of youth and the participation of youth in protecting civilians. There is a clear need to further understand the protection needs and resilience methods utilised by youth, as well as the specific advantages of young people towards protecting their peers and communities. As the Youth, Peace and Security sector progresses, several follow-up actions can be taken forward by NP and partners to support mainstreaming YPS and youth protection into current programming and consider for future activities.