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Rooting out inequalities

Women's participation in forest management
in conflict-affected areas of Karen state in
Myanmar



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About Kaw Lah Foundation

Kaw Lah Foundation was established in 2012 and works with international non-governmental organisations, local civil society organisations and community-based organisations to support the peace process in Myanmar. To achieve this, Kaw Lah Foundation supports advocacy and policy development, and builds the capacity of people in Myanmar to identify and implement participatory and sustainable approaches to development and political reform.

About the Peace Research Partnership

Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a three-year research programme which generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas. Funded by UK aid from the UK government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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Layout: Marc Rechdane

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June 2020

Acknowledgements

This report is written by International Alert Myanmar (Jana Naujoks, Myat Thandar Ko and Nant Mu Say Khaleim) and the Kaw Lah Foundation (Saw Eh Htoo and Saw Eh Wah) based on joint field research.

The authors are grateful to the representatives of the Myanmar government, Karen National Union, national and international NGOs, and Karen civil society organisations and community members who generously gave their time and offered the perspectives that shape this report. Special thanks are also due to the reviewers who provided comments on this report, including the staff of International Alert (Jessica Hartog, who leads this component, Camille Marquette, Markus Mayer, Ndeye Sow, Elizabeth Laruni, Gabriel Nuckhir, Lucy Holdaway and Julian Egan), Kaw Lah Foundation, Saw Doh Wah (Land Core Group), Khin Moe Kyi (The Centre for People and Forests) and Khin Saw Htay (Forest Trends).

The production of this report was supported by UK aid from the UK government as part of the Peace Research Partnership programme. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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Abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil society organisation
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent Army
EAO	Ethnic armed organisation
GFD	Government Forest Department
KESAN	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
KFG	<i>Kawthoolei</i> Forest Department (of the Karen National Union)
KNU/KNLA	Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NSA	Non-state armed actors
NSPAW	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
VT/WA	Village tract/ward administrators

Executive summary

Forests are a critical resource for people in Myanmar, in particular for ethnic minorities such as the Karen people. Neglecting forest management in conflict-affected areas can increase conflict risks and carry adverse social and environmental impacts.

Research conducted by International Alert and the Kaw Lah Foundation identifies the subnational local governance level as an arena for opportunities to build trust around joint priorities at the grassroots and village tract level across conflict lines.¹ While the Myanmar union-level peace process is stalled, forest management can be used as a powerful local peacebuilding entry point. This entry point offers the opportunity to recognise the rights, practices and governance responsibility of ethnic minorities in a potential future democratic federal union.

This report builds on previous research, exploring the key role gender plays in opportunities for peacebuilding. The report takes a critical look at the gender and power dynamics around forest management and shines a light on the role women play. Women's participation in forest use, forest management and forest governance is shaped by gender norms and representation. Gender shapes the differences in the social expectations surrounding women and men. It influences how and why conflict turns violent, and how violence is perpetrated. Projects that do not engage women will overlook perspectives and experiences that impact the effectiveness of a project. Taking only a number-counting approach to the participation of women in meetings and trainings is, however, insufficient.

It is a right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives, from local governance to security and environmental issues.² Women have a vital role to play in peacebuilding at all levels. Evidence demonstrates that the direct participation of women in negotiations is more likely to lead to successful peace agreements. Their meaningful participation increases the likelihood of the successful implementation of peace agreements.³ Conversely, the exclusion of women and their concerns pose conflict risks because exclusive agreements are less likely to cover all the issues over which there is conflict, and are therefore more likely to relapse into violence. Bringing a gender analysis to forest management offers a unique opening for an inclusive gender-transformative approach that is conducive to building sustainable positive peace. It is vital that this information reaches both male stakeholders and gatekeepers to the same extent as it does female stakeholders, as otherwise sustainable social transformation is unlikely to be achieved.

Myanmar has been marked by decades of internal conflict and a long period of military regime and isolation before the military government allowed a gradual opening and transition to a quasi-democracy in 2008. This transition remains partial, however, and multiple conflicts in different parts of the country are still evolving on varied trajectories. This research focuses on Karen areas in southeast Myanmar. After decades of armed conflict and widespread displacement amidst reports of human rights abuses,⁴ Karen state has experienced a gradual stabilisation since a ceasefire between the government and the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) was signed in 2012.

1 S. Gray, *Forestry management and peacebuilding in Karen areas of Myanmar*, International Alert: London, 2019

2 This right is guaranteed in a range of international agreements and conventions, notably: Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (18 December 1979), United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (31 October 2000). See also United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Women and Natural Resources, Unlocking the Peacebuilding Potential*, New York: United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Women and Natural Resources*, 2013. In this text, subsequent comments on the right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives refer to these documents.

3 This is based on a statistical analysis of 82 peace agreements in 42 armed conflicts between 1989 and 2011. See: J. Krause et al, *Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace*, *International Interactions*, 44(6), 2018, pp.985–1016

4 Karen Human Rights Group, *Foundation of fear: 25 years of villagers' voices from southeast Myanmar*, Karen Human Rights Group, 2017. For more information, see: Karen Women's Organisation, *State of terror: The ongoing rape, murder, torture and forced labour suffered by women living under the Burmese military regime in Karen state*, Mae Sot, Thailand: Karen Women's Organisation, 2007

Structure of the report

This report is structured in five sections. The introduction provides information relevant to the background context and explains the methodology used for this research. The next two sections discuss the research findings, laying out barriers to women's participation and analysing women's current participation in forest use and management. Thoroughly informed by the research findings, the fourth section assesses the gendered risks to conflict and peacebuilding, and to women and men, in relation to forest use, management and governance. The final section concludes the report, including recommendations for key stakeholders.

Key findings

Barriers to women's participation and leadership

There are a number of different barriers to women's participation and leadership in forest use and management. These include those related to conflict legacies, practical barriers, the construction of gendered social norms, the double and triple burdens that women face, and cumulative secondary disadvantages. Socio-cultural norms in Karen state, as in many other areas throughout Myanmar, form barriers to women's leadership and limit recognition of their participation in forest management. These tendencies have been exacerbated by decades of conflict-related violence and insecurity, which have had contradictory impacts on women's roles in local governance. On the one hand, insecurity has increased the limitations on women's mobility and their access to the forest. On the other hand, during the years of armed violence, women increasingly took up roles as ward and village tract administrators as they were seen as better able to negotiate with and less likely to be beaten by armed actors, including the Tatmadaw. After the ceasefire, however, men have largely reclaimed these leadership roles. Peacebuilding aims towards a positive peace in which there would be no structural gender discrimination and women can meaningfully participate in decision-making. The current exclusionary system is blocking the right of women to participate in decision-making.

Women's current participation in forest use and management

In terms of how women currently participate in forest use and management, a particular focus on gender differences in leadership offers the following insights. Women and men both use forest resources frequently but in gendered ways, with some similarities in tasks such as collecting fruit and firewood. There are, however, marked differences in what is seen as acceptable for men (decision-making roles in forest management, undertaking forest-based roles in the Forest Department, climbing trees, logging) versus what is seen as acceptable for women (lighter tasks of collecting fruit, smaller trees and branches, replanting trees, attendance at forest and conservation awareness-raising events).

Gendered risks

Building on the key research findings, the assessment of the gendered risks arising in programming on forestry in conflict-affected areas reveals three primary areas of concern.

Risks to conflict and peacebuilding: Any project intervention into the conflict-affected Karen context will have an intentional or unintentional positive or negative impact on these conflict trends and gender dynamics. A conflict-

sensitive and peace-supportive approach should be applied. Discussions around the future federal union being negotiated in the current peace process should be informed by the vision of a positive peace marked by gender equality to avoid the risk of a negative peace marked by structural violence. The exclusion of women's concerns – such as safe access to forest resources – poses conflict risks: Exclusive processes are less likely to address all the issues over which there is conflict, and hence are more likely to relapse into violence. Peace negotiations in Myanmar might be more successful in overcoming current stalemates if women participate meaningfully, as women have been socialised into different solution-oriented negotiation approaches than male stakeholders.

Gendered risks to women and women's participation: Women participating in forestry and natural resource governance activities and trainings face security risks and potential social backlash in their own households and communities. They may be at risk of sexual harassment when travelling or engaging with both the broader public and institutional representatives. They are also at risk of being overburdened with more tasks in addition to the domestic and livelihood responsibilities they already shoulder in line with their gender roles.

Gendered risks to men and men's participation: There may be risks of social backlash for male stakeholders advocating for more active women's participation in forest governance in decision-making roles. There are also gendered risks related to male domination in forestry decision-making; for example, the trend of male absence in awareness-raising activities due to expectations linked to masculinity and gender roles.

The absence of gender-sensitive approaches can pose risks to the quality of peacebuilding efforts and local-level peace if such efforts are not inclusive. This could exacerbate conflicts: The status quo is a violation of women's right to participate in decision-making that affects them. Peacebuilding should aim towards a positive peace marked by gender equality, in which there is no discrimination based on the intersection of gender and other identity factors. Hence peacebuilding efforts in Myanmar should be gender transformative and informed by a gender analysis. Finally, exclusive processes face risks to project effectiveness and desired impacts since inclusive processes are more likely to be successful.

Recommendations

Immediate recommendations

All government, non-state armed actors (NSA) and civil society actors should:

- **Raise awareness about the importance of gender equality as a vital aspect of positive peace, and the importance of women's meaningful participation in forest management and conservation processes** in order to achieve better (conservation, development and peace) processes that are more representative, more effective and reduce conflict between different actors. Provide this information to:
 - men and women of all ages at the community levels;
 - civil society actors;
 - Forest Department staff and leadership; and
 - ward/village tract administrators (both current and retired, who remain influential).
- **Exchange and coordinate with one another in areas of mixed control**, with the aim of trying to reach all communities with this information to contribute to building peace by focusing on addressing joint concerns across conflict lines. **Ensure women can play their important roles in this building of trust and collaboration.**

Long-term recommendations

Actors engaged in raising awareness (civil society organisations [CSOs], the Government Forest Department [GFD] and the *Kawthoolei* Forest Department [KFD]) should:

- **strengthen internal capacities to:**
 - enact a gender policy and practical instructions to increase recruitment and promotion of female staff in forest departments;
 - train staff in gender and conflict sensitivity, and provide mentoring to trained staff, especially older more senior male leaders; and
 - strengthen collaboration with women's organisations to ensure women's concerns are brought into discussions on forest and natural resource management, from the township to the union level and in the peace process;
- **conduct general awareness-raising:** reach out through religious leaders and media to promote forest conservation and replanting efforts to address a broader audience that includes many women at the community level; and
- **ensure that the promotion of indigenous or customary practices highlights inclusion and gender equality and does not contradict women's human rights, including the right to participate in decision-making.**

The Myanmar government should:

- **ensure civil servants engage with, and listen to, community-based organisations, including women's organisations, to negotiate community access and respect their rights when setting protection areas and priorities.**

International donors should:

- **support capacity building of civil society actors and non-state actors on gender mainstreaming** policy development and implementation, particularly for smaller non-state armed actors with resource and capacity constraints; and
- **strengthen accountability for minimum levels of women's participation in donor-funded natural resource-related political processes** (including the political dialogues on land and natural resource management and good natural resource governance strengthening efforts that are taking place as part of the peace process), and encourage linking up with women's organisations and networks to facilitate this in practice.

1. Introduction

“In the short term, peace processes that included women as witnesses, signatories, mediators, and/or negotiators demonstrated a 20 percent increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years. This percentage continues to increase over time, with a 35 percent increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting fifteen years.”⁵

Women’s participation and gender in forestry is important in Myanmar, particularly in conflict-affected areas. While women constitute more than 50% of the population, this is not just about the numbers. Gender does not refer to the biological differences between men and women. Rather, it refers to the differences in the social expectations linked to gender. Gender influences how and why conflict turns violent, and how violence is perpetrated. Whether focused on peace, development or conservation, projects that understand and take into account these power dynamics will build better, more sustainable outcomes.

In Myanmar, the key framework laying out women’s rights to gender equality is the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) (2013–2022). The NSPAW aligns with the global Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, signed by Myanmar in 1997) and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a global commitment to achieving equality, development and peace for women worldwide. In the absence of a stand-alone National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Myanmar, national coordination on women, peace and security issues is led by one of the four multi-stakeholder technical working groups formed to coordinate implementation of the NSPAW.⁶

More inclusive peace processes are more likely to be effective and peace agreements are more likely to be implemented successfully if women participate meaningfully.⁷ The government has committed to addressing gender inequalities, although the implementation of these commitments has been slow. To achieve this, women’s participation must be meaningful. From senior political to village-level actors, many government stakeholders lack both awareness about the importance of women’s right to participate in governance and politics, and an understanding of the differences between socially constructed gender roles and the biological differences between the sexes, thus reinforcing gender discrimination. It is essential to increase this understanding among all stakeholders, from grassroots through middle leadership to senior leadership. By identifying and making visible the social gender norms that constrain women’s actions and contributions, these norms can be addressed to enable women to play their full role in forestry, conservation and peacebuilding processes.

This research aims to explore the current gender roles in forest use and forest governance in conflict-affected areas in Myanmar and to assess women’s participation and leadership in these domains. The report lays out how social norms intersect with conflict legacies, from practical barriers to women’s leadership in forest governance and on conflict/peace issues. The GFD,⁸ the KFD, as well as national and international civil society actors working on forest governance and conservation issues in conflict-affected areas should bear in mind potential risks to women participating, the contradictions of male domination over local decision-making (in particular their lack of engagement in awareness-raising activities), and the risks to sustainable peacebuilding impacts. The report concludes with recommendations that draw on the consultations held with local stakeholders. These recommendations are addressed to national and international civil society actors, international donors, non-state actors, the government of Myanmar, the GFD and the KFD.

5 This is based on a dataset of 181 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011. See: L. Stone, Quantitative analysis of women’s participation in peace processes, Annex II in M. O’Reilly et al, Reimagining peacemaking: Women’s roles in peace processes, New York: International Peace Institute, 2015, p.34

6 These technical working groups include government stakeholders, as well as national and international civil society stakeholders.

7 See footnote 3.

8 The Government Forest Department (GFD) is part of the Myanmar Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation.



A man and woman cut wood to make into charcoal in Myawaddy district, Karen state.

Political context

One of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia, Myanmar has been marked by decades of internal conflict, and a long period of military oppression and isolation.⁹ Starting in 2008, the military regime allowed a gradual opening and transition to a quasi-democracy, with a new constitution. This transition remains partial, however, with the military retaining 25% of parliament and direct control over key ministries (defence, home and border affairs).¹⁰ Some see the root cause of the ethnic armed conflict in "...the failure of implementing the federal system that was envisaged ... at the Panglong Conference in 1947",¹¹ a problem that remains unresolved to date by the current peace process.

There are two main dimensions to this conflict: firstly, conflict over "how state power ... from the centre relates to the periphery" of multiple ethnic minority groups in the border regions; and secondly, conflict over "how the state is governed",¹² with the current military dominance of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government being contested.

How natural resources extraction and revenues are governed is highly significant to these questions since many of the natural resources (timber, water and gems) are geographically located in the border areas of Myanmar, which are populated by many different non-Bamar ethnicities. The multiple conflicts in different parts of the country are still evolving along varied trajectories. This ranges from the current escalation of armed violence and displacement

9 M. Smith, *State of strife: The dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma*, Washington: East-West Centre, 2007; A. South, *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008. For more information, see: P. Keenan, *By force of arms: Armed ethnic groups in Burma*, New Delhi: Vij Books, 2013

10 M. Gravers and F. Ytzen (eds.), *Burma/Myanmar: Where now?*, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2014, p.29 and p.74

11 L.H. Sakhong and P. Keenan, *Ending ethnic armed conflict in Burma: A complicated peace process*, Chiang Mai: Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2014, p.i

12 T. Kramer, *Neither war nor peace: The future of the ceasefire agreements in Burma*, Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2009, p.5

in Rakhine,¹³ parts of Chin,¹⁴ and northern Shan state,¹⁵ to long-term settled ceasefires and autonomy.¹⁶ These trajectories also include other agreements currently in negotiation – either bilateral ceasefires or the formal 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Process involving the 10 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signatories.¹⁷

This report focuses on Karen (Kayin)¹⁸ state in southeast Myanmar. After decades of armed conflict and widespread displacement amidst reports of human rights abuses,¹⁹ Karen state has experienced a gradual stabilisation since a ceasefire between the government and the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) in 2012.²⁰ Karen state, however, presents a mixed picture of areas under government control, areas under KNU control, and areas of mixed control and contested governance between the government, KNU and other non-state armed actors (NSAs). This includes the KNU Peace Council, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), other militias and the Border Guard Forces,²¹ which are under the control of the Tatmadaw, although with varying degrees of integration in government administrative structures.²² Most forests remaining in Karen state are located in NSA or mixed-control areas, while the forest in government-controlled areas largely has been felled already.²³

Previous ceasefires have been marked by significant exploitation of natural resources (including forest resources), environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods and disruptions to customary and conservation practices.²⁴ Accompanied by public grievances and the maintenance of conflict economies that fuel violence,²⁵ these ceasefires ultimately collapsed into violent conflict, such as in Kachin state in 2011. There are clear conflict risks of extensive natural resource exploitation without a political resolution to the identity-based grievances of ethnic minority groups. To assess the peacebuilding potential of improving local forest governance in conflict-affected Karen areas, the 2019 research report by International Alert and the Kaw Lah Foundation, *Forestry management and peacebuilding in Karen areas of Myanmar*, identifies the subnational local governance level as an arena for opportunities to build trust and exchange ideas around mutual priorities (such as stopping illegal logging and supporting reforestation) at the grassroots and village tract level across the conflict lines. This remains the case even while the high-level political dialogue remains stalled and mired in complexities. The 2019 report calls for comprehensive conflict-sensitive approaches to conservation and development projects in ceasefire areas, proposing a triple-green light plus approach. This approach centres on ensuring that consultations for permissions are conducted with all three plus stakeholders, including: 1) the formal union or national-level government; 2) the affected local communities; and 3) non-state armed actors at both central and local levels (three plus) to avoid exacerbating conflict tensions.

13 Amnesty International, No one can protect us: War crimes and abuses in Myanmar's Rakhine state, London: Amnesty International, 2019. For more information, see: International Crisis Group, A new dimension of violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state, Crisis Group Asia Briefing No. 154, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019

14 K.L. Htoon, Civilians pay the price of conflict in southern Chin, Frontier Magazine, 10 March 2020, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/civilians-pay-the-price-of-conflict-in-southern-chin>

15 International Crisis Group, Myanmar: A violent push to shake up ceasefire negotiations, Crisis Group Asia Briefing No. 158: Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 24 September 2019. For more information, see: Institute for Security and Development Policy, A return to war: Militarized conflicts in northern Shan state, Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2018

16 B. Lintner, The United Wa State Army and Burma's peace process, Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2019

17 Current developments and annual overviews can be found at <https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org>. For a discussion of governance in NCA areas, see: A. South et al, Between ceasefires and federalism: Exploring interim arrangements in the Myanmar peace process, Yangon: Covenant Consult, 2018

18 The area and ethnic group was known mainly as Karen before the military government changed it formally to Kayin state. While many stakeholders use the terms 'Karen' and 'Kayin' relatively interchangeably, the majority of Karen stakeholders prefer the term 'Karen'. Consequently, this term is used in the report unless referring to the formal name of a body or organisation.

19 Karen Human Rights Group, 2017, Op. cit.; Karen Women's Organisation, 2007, Op. cit.

20 K. Jolliffe, Ceasefires, governance, and development: The Karen National Union in times of change, Yangon: The Asia Foundation, 2016

21 K. Jolliffe, Ethnic armed conflict and territorial administration in Myanmar, Yangon: The Asia Foundation, 2015, p.45

22 J. Buchanan, Militias in Myanmar, Yangon: The Asia Foundation, 2016, p.24

23 Interviews and consultations in Hpa-an, 17–19 September 2019

24 K. Woods, Forest governance, timber trade legality and ethnic conflict in Myanmar, Paper presented at Forest Trends, Washington DC, October 2015

25 Global Witness, A conflict of interest: The uncertain future of Burma's forests, London: Global Witness, 2003, pp.49–52

Methodology

This report draws on previous research conducted in 2019 by International Alert in partnership with Kaw Lah Foundation on conflict issues and peacebuilding opportunities related to forest management in conflict-affected areas of Karen state in Myanmar.²⁶ Based on the earlier publication, International Alert and Kaw Lah Foundation decided to undertake further research to expand the picture with an in-depth gender analysis designed to shed light on women's participation in forest management in these conflict-affected areas. The goal of this gender analysis is to document women's current roles, identify potential barriers they face and provide recommendations to civil society and other actors on gender mainstreaming efforts in forest-related activities in conflict-affected areas in Karen state.

Drawing on lessons learned in the course of prior International Alert research on gender issues in Myanmar, the research methodology is designed to take into account general low levels of understanding of gender issues and women's participation in the project areas, and lack of familiarity among women leaders with forest governance.

The research methodology consisted of two participatory consultation workshops:

- in Taungoo on 27–28 August 2019, with 14 female and 7 male participants from civil society and community-based organisations based in Htantabin, Thandaung, Bawgali and Leiktho townships; and
- in Hpa-an on 17–18 September 2019, with 23 female and 18 male participants from civil society, community-based and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) from east and west Thanlwin, west Hpa-an, Kawkareik and Myawaddy townships.

The workshops combined the mapping of participant answers to research questions with awareness-raising sessions on the topics of gender, conflict/peacebuilding and gender mainstreaming. This fostered a more nuanced discussion and built participant ability and confidence to discuss these issues.

In addition, 28 key informant interviews were conducted in Taungoo (28–29 August 2019) and Hpa-an (18–19 September 2019), with a total of 15 female and 13 male interviewees from civil society, non-state armed actors, including the KNU, DKBA and Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council, and the GFD. Due to the ongoing conflict context, interviews have been anonymised to avoid backlash against the participants; interviewees have only been identified for larger, established actors where this was less of a concern. The analysis was also informed by consultation visits to the KFD in Mae Sot and Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) in Chiang Mai in Thailand in November 2019.

The draft findings and recommendations were validated at a workshop in Hpa-an in November 2019. A total of 20 original participants (10 female and 10 male participants) from Hpa-an, Leiktho, Kawkareik, Myawaddy, Taungoo and Bawgali townships joined this validation workshop.

Note: The research participants reside in KNU, government and mixed-control areas. Hence, participants often compare between the two most significant systems, highlighting differences in their experiences with the GFD or the KFD. This research is not intended to establish an empirical comparison between the two systems, nor does (nor did) it have the resources for such an endeavour. As participants seemed unable to quantify many responses, however, they resorted to comparing the government to the KNU system as a way of indicating differences. Both International Alert and the Kaw Lah Foundation recognise that these are subjective comments based on the individual experiences of the interviewees. As such, these comments constitute neither robust data nor a reliable empirical body of evidence.

Structure of the report

Following this context-setting introduction and methodological overview, the second section of this report maps out the different barriers to women's participation and leadership in forest use, management and governance. It takes into consideration conflict legacies, practical barriers, the social construction of gender norms, the double and triple burdens that women face, as well as cumulative secondary disadvantages. Based on this analysis, practical actions to overcome these barriers are outlined.

The third section of this report explores how women are currently participating in forest use and management, with a specific focus on gender differences in leadership and governance.

The fourth section assesses the gendered risks arising in forestry programming in conflict-affected areas in Karen state, with close attention to the different impacts these risks have on both women and men.

The conclusion presents relevant recommendations to national and international civil society actors, the GFD, KFD, non-state armed actors and international donors.

2. Barriers to women's participation and leadership

Socio-cultural norms in Karen state, as in many other areas of Myanmar, form barriers to women's leadership and limit recognition of their participation in forest management. These barriers and limitations have been exacerbated by decades of violent conflict and insecurity, which have had contradictory impacts on women's participation in local governance and community decision-making.

Conflict legacies

The legacy of decades of abuse and violence experienced by Karen communities, which remain unresolved and largely unacknowledged by the government to date, contribute to an ongoing climate of fear and insecurity, despite improvements in the security situation observed since the 2012 ceasefire.²⁷ This has limited women's mobility and ability to travel or access forest areas, as forest areas are considered unsafe for women by both women and men. Interview respondents highlight the different ways in which this plays out.

A male KFD officer, for example, states that they do not send women officers to the field, for fear of the women's safety in a mixed-control area that has a history of conflict-related sexual violence against women.²⁸ This same respondent sees male KFD officers as being able to protect themselves because they carry guns (in contrast to GFD officers, who do not), despite also mentioning that female KFD officers receive training armed self-defence; he nonetheless sees them as being at risk out in the forest.²⁹

A male GFD representative also argues that it is not appropriate for female GFD officers to go into the field due to safety concerns. That is, visiting remote forest areas can require an overnight stay in the forest, with security provided by members of armed groups, who are nearly exclusively male. It is not considered safe nor appropriate for a woman to sleep in the forest without her family or husband and with only male colleagues or armed security. These concerns around women's safety form barriers to women's participation.

The high incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) also serves to undermine women's participation and leadership by creating a climate of fear and insecurity. Historical sexual violence against Karen women by the military regime³⁰ and sexual violence in Karen refugee camps in Thailand³¹ have been documented by the Karen Women's Organisation, which is an indigenous women's organisation with 60,000 women members in Karen state and in refugee communities in Thailand. Access to justice and protection has been lacking and/or is inadequate to curtail this SGBV. Respondents indicate a similar lack of access to justice for SGBV in Karen state areas under mixed state and non-state control. As one participant in the Taungoo consultation explains:

"We contacted a women's group in Thandaungyi for help with a sexual violence case but they could not help directly. Instead, the case had to be referred to the KNU because it was in KNU territory. We saw no visible action by the KNU after the referral."³²

27 Karen Human Rights Group, 2017, Op. cit.

28 Interview with head of township KFD from Thanintharyi, in Hpa-an, September 2019

29 Ibid.

30 Karen Women's Organisation, 2007, Op. cit.; Karen Women's Organisation, Shattering silences: Karen women speak out about the Burmese military regime's use of rape as a strategy of war in Karen state, Mae Hong Son: Karen Women's Organisation, 2004

31 Karen Women's Organisation, Salt in the wound: Justice outcomes and SGBV cases in the Karen refugee camps, 2011–13, Mae Sot: Karen Women's Organisation, 2013

32 Interview with women's CSO, in Taungoo, August 2019

Although the KNU has a women's department and a gender policy, the lack of visible action at the local level indicates that some women's organisations perceive gaps in KNU delivery and response to women's needs. More training is needed to overcome traditional attitudes among local-level officers so they can better understand women's rights, remove taboos around discussing SGBV and recognise women's concerns as important and in need of relevant action.

These perceived gaps illustrate differences in approach and understanding between higher-level and ground-level non-state actors. At the central level, the KNU/KNLA was the first actor from Myanmar to sign Geneva Call's 'Deed of Commitment for the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict and towards the Elimination of Gender Discrimination' in 2013.³³ Participants recall strict rules by the KNU: Before the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), for instance, sexual violence was an offence punishable by death, with study respondents reporting swift justice following criminal cases.³⁴ In mixed areas with unclear and overlapping control, criminal cases are reported to be more common due to lack of clarity on law enforcement, which further hinders women's leadership in mixed-control areas.

Paradoxically, violent conflict often creates opportunities for greater participation by women in local governance, as male heads of household and community leaders are more likely to be involved in armed groups and associated violence. Whether men are fighting, victim to armed violence or have had to flee the risk of violence, this can inadvertently create space for women to step up to local leadership and governance roles. This may have contributed to the relatively higher numbers of female village tract/ward administrators (VT/WAs) in Karen areas as compared to other areas in Myanmar.³⁵ These VT/WAs play an essential role as the key interface between the central state government and the rural population in Myanmar.

In Karen areas, the practice of electing women as village chiefs has spread since the 1980s as men were "increasingly reluctant to risk their lives as chiefs".³⁶ Many women who took on this challenge only did so when asked by respected male leaders in their community to stand, seeing it as a way of serving their community rather than as a result of a personal desire to play a leadership role.³⁷ Research commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme highlights that women administrators see themselves as both able to "work hard like men" in these leadership roles and to go beyond this to utilise their strengths as women: They emphasise their role as problem solvers and supporting community development, with a focus on cooperation and negotiation, whereas male counterparts prioritise security and are seen as less patient and more linked to alcohol abuse.³⁸ While these women chiefs courageously seek to protect the rights of their communities, they also often experience violence by the Tatmadaw.³⁹

To what degree the appointment of these women VT/WAs has changed the patriarchal nature of these institutions is questionable. Women administrators experience backlash and occasional harassment by male members of their communities,⁴⁰ which indicates that social norms have not yet changed alongside this role change. The Karen Human Rights Group observes that after the NCA, increasingly women VT/WAs have retreated from these community leadership roles because men have returned to their communities and have claimed back formal

33 The KNU/KNLA commits to the protection of children and the prohibition of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, Geneva Call, 24 July 2013, <https://www.genevacall.org/knuknla-commits-protection-children-prohibition-conflict-related-sexual-gender-based-violence>

34 Interview with community-based organisation, in Taungoo, August 2019

35 The highest numbers were in Karen state, Thanintharyi and Ayeyarwaddy. See: E. Röell, *Women and local leadership: Leadership journeys of Myanmar's female village tract/ward administrators*, Yangon: United Nations Development Programme Myanmar, 2015

36 Karen Women's Organisation, *Walking amongst sharp knives*, Mae Hong Son: Karen Women's Organisation, 2010, p.1

37 E. Röell, 2015, Op. cit., p.2

38 Ibid., p.3 and p.35

39 One-third of the 95 women chiefs interviewed had been physically beaten or tortured, including rape and gang rape, as well as gruelling interrogations and forced labour of pregnant or nursing women chiefs. See: Karen Women's Organisation, 2010, Op. cit., p.2

40 Ibid.

positions.⁴¹ Intentional action to support former women leaders and current male leaders to build on previous gains for women's leadership at the VT/WA level could be an important stepping stone for women leaders to move from local community-focused roles to higher levels of governance. At higher levels, women are frequently side-lined for their lack of experience, so it is of strategic importance to support women who do have formal experience; namely those who have VT/WA experience.

Another dimension of the legacy of conflict is the lack of formal land registration for many members of ethnic communities, particularly those in areas that have not been under government control. Land security is crucial for the survival of subsistence rural ethnic communities and land registration is key to forest management (to the setting aside of areas for conservation and to ensure community ownership over decision-making, e.g. in a community forestry initiative). While some non-state actors, such as the KNU, issue land certificates, many rural community members are lacking any form of paperwork for the lands they have traditionally farmed, especially in locations where people have been displaced by conflict. Respondents express anxiety about the threat of their lands being confiscated by the government or military for development or commercial projects due to a lack of paperwork; seeing land being confiscated from many people, along with the loss of their farming livelihoods, does not foster growing trust in the formal government.⁴²

Protecting land in mixed-control areas is more challenging as control is unclear. Respondents from mixed-control areas indicate that the delicate nature of the peace process means the KNU has been reluctant to register some community lands in order to protect them from confiscation by the government or allied commercial interests. Women are customarily discriminated against by the formal government landownership registration system, which tends to follow the male-dominated head of household system.⁴³ Research in the Dawei area shows that formalising landownership registration systems without regard to gender sensitivity can lead to "replacement of relatively gender equal forms of land-holding with formal male ownership".⁴⁴

Practical barriers

There are several practical barriers to women's participation, which are closely intertwined with gendered social norms:

- **Mobility (e.g. travel and transportation issues):** Women often need the approval of their families and communities to leave their village. This is particularly common in conflict-affected contexts, with histories of sexual violence directed at minority women and where road conditions are insecure. Some respondents cite a recent car accident near Myawaddy in which a woman was killed while travelling for CSO activities.⁴⁵ Intertwined with this is the perception that it is not acceptable, or safe, for a woman to travel by motorbike. There are, however, great variations in levels of acceptability in terms of women driving scooters. As such, parent and community fears, combined with perceptions of acceptability, pose challenges for CSOs to bring young people, women and especially young women to other villages for trainings or meetings.⁴⁶

41 Karen Human Rights Group, Hidden strengths, hidden struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar, Karen Human Rights Group, 2016, p.3

42 Consultations and interviews in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

43 Myanmar's administrative structure designates one 'head of household' per household, which usually is the patriarch unless he has migrated for work, passed away or abandoned the family. While the 2016 National Land Use Policy confirms women's ability to own land solely or jointly with their husband, the registration document only has space for one name, which is expected to be the head of household's name, cementing male economic over the household.

44 Trócaire and Land Core Group, Formalising land, marginalising women? Norms and customary practices regarding land rights in Dawei, Briefing paper, Dublin: Trócaire, 2018, p.1

45 Interview with male participant in rural Hpa-an, September 2019

46 Ibid.

- **Childcare and domestic responsibilities:** These are traditionally seen as women's responsibilities and duties in Karen areas, as in much of Myanmar. Domestic responsibilities are considerable: 40% of households across the country do not have access to water on their premises⁴⁷ and only 25% of rural households are connected to the public electricity grid.⁴⁸
- **Economic needs:** Women are often expected to play a role in contributing to the household income. This can reduce the time they have available to participate in learning or sharing gender, conservation or development-related knowledge with one another. For instance, one female participant explains that her former husband, a KNU veteran, did not support her working to disseminate knowledge to others in an early childhood care and development programme because he considered the pay too low.⁴⁹

Other barriers to women's participation are intersectional. Gendered social norms tend to be shaped by other identity factors, such as age, ethnicity, religion, education and income levels. Whether women live in urban, peri-urban or rural settings also influences what barriers they face. Women living with disabilities, especially those with restricted mobility, face additional barriers to participation. Research participants reflect that age also factors in, with younger women often taking on the more active roles with which some of the older women feel uncomfortable.⁵⁰ This latter tendency among young women partly reflects changes in education trends and the impact of an increased number of community-based development initiatives. It could likewise be the beginning of slowly changing and evolving gender norms.

Social norms

In general, social norms are regarded as restricting confidence in women's abilities. Social expectations limit how women see their own abilities and those of other women. They also shape how men perceive women (and themselves). This applies to women's physical strength and abilities, as well as to their capacities to lead at community and organisational levels: "Men always take the decision-making roles."⁵¹ This is reinforced by the gender dynamics of a typical environmental or development-focused intervention, whereby male trainers conduct awareness-raising sessions for largely female participants, while male members of the community work in cash-based or agricultural activities.⁵² One female representative of a community forest initiative in Hpa-an sums up the situation: "I have never seen a woman training on the topic of forestry."⁵³ This reinforces assumptions of men as leaders and women as followers.

Local governance mechanisms, such as household lists, institutionalise such assumptions: These divide households into a head of household, who is usually male, versus all other household members, who are listed as dependents, regardless of who earns income in the household. Socio-cultural expectations and customary beliefs further limit opportunities for women to take on leadership roles in social, religious or political areas. Whether Christian, Buddhist or Animist Karen, most religious practices include some privileging of male over female, from lay members to religious leadership.

47 Central Statistical Organization, United Nations Development Programme and World Bank, Myanmar living conditions survey 2017: Key indicators report, Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon: Ministry of Planning and Finance, United Nations Development Programme and World Bank, 2018, p.68. Access varies between dry and rainy seasons. There is also better access in urban areas.

48 Ibid., p.68. Some of these households have access to community grids and increasing numbers are using home solar systems for lighting.

49 Interview with female CSO participant from Leiktho, in Taungoo, 27–28 August 2019

50 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

51 Consultations in Taungoo, August 2019

52 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

53 Consultations in Hpa-an, September 2019



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Women and men prepare the land to make a community home garden in Hpa-an district, Karen state.

Among those women in leadership positions in women-focused organisations, they usually see other priority areas than those issues related to forests and the environment.⁵⁴ These women are often focused on social issues, such as health and education, increasing women's participation in political processes and supporting survivors of SGBV. One of the few examples of a women leader active on forestry issues is the former primary school headmistress, who is now involved in leading community forestry in Thanintharyi.⁵⁵

Both women and men perceive the forest as a male-coded space, which hinders recognition of women's participation.⁵⁶ For instance, multiple women interviewed state that they do not play any role in using or managing forests; however, further prompting reveals that they cook daily with firewood that they or their daughters usually collect from the forest.⁵⁷ A female shop owner who sells firewood in her store initially did not see herself as a relevant stakeholder in forest-related discussions but eventually came to realise that she is in fact directly using and brokering forest-derived products.⁵⁸ Making women's roles and daily use of forest products more visible could serve to strengthen their confidence in stepping in to leadership roles in forest management.

Women's workloads: shouldering double burdens

An additional barrier women face is the gendered division of labour at the household level, with women shouldering most of the domestic and reproductive tasks, alongside subsistence farming and/or other livelihood activities. These are extensive responsibilities and obligations that naturally limit the amount of time women can devote to community-based discussion forums related to forest management. They also limit the role women play in decision-making processes.

54 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019. This aligns with the author's observation of gender-related policy discussions in Yangon and Naypyitaw with national women leaders and women's organisations and networks between 2016 and 2020.

55 Interview with forest expert, Hpa-an, September 2019

56 Consultations in Taungoo, August 2019

57 Consultation and interviews in Taungoo, August 2019

58 Interview with woman from Leiktho, Taungoo, August 2019

The expectation that women shoulder most domestic and reproductive tasks also traditionally has limited access to schooling for girls. This is further compounded by the impacts of conflict on access to schooling; namely, the destruction of schools or the interruptions caused by displacement. Girls from ethnic communities in conflict-affected rural communities are especially impacted by these dynamics. Gendered barriers to education replicate gendered barriers to participation and leadership.

Participants point out that women in urban areas are more likely to be able to participate, while women in rural areas are less likely to do so because of a lack of mobilisation in rural areas.⁵⁹ In meetings and trainings, it is often the same women who can participate and who are able to increase their understanding, capacities and self-confidence, while those who are unable to participate are left further behind. Consequently, there is a need to explore ways of cascading down information from those who can participate to other community members who cannot. At the same time, male leaders are resistant to learning from women who have attended trainings, thus reducing knowledge uptake; for instance, in the case of organic fertiliser trainings.⁶⁰ This dynamic also hampers sustainability efforts at the household level: For instance, women who rely on collecting bamboo shoots from forests for their livelihoods report reminding their husbands (who also collect the shoots) to always leave some of the bamboo shoots to regrow into bigger plants, thereby conserving their livelihood.⁶¹ These women further indicate, however, that the men do not listen to them.⁶² Consequently, the long-term sustainability of the income of these families is jeopardised.

Secondary disadvantages

Limited access to education for girls and women, particularly in remote rural areas, exacerbates the gender differences in actual and perceived skill gaps. Participants state that women's implementation of forest-focused activities is quite weak because of the primary barriers to education women face and the heavy domestic workloads they carry.⁶³ This perception twists the reality of gendered barriers to women's participation into a general perception that women's ability to participate is weak, effectively blaming women for the barriers they face. This further undermines women's self-reported lack of confidence to put themselves forward for leadership roles.

Persistent concerns with security are a further impact of conflict. Security concerns continue to create barriers to women's mobility in general, and their ability to travel to access meetings, trainings or advocacy opportunities in particular. Forests are areas where violent conflict takes place. During the war years, for example, forests were coded as unsafe places for women and girls. At that time, a systematic pattern of sexual violence against ethnic minority women by armed forces was documented by women's rights organisations.⁶⁴ While leaders and civil society organisations are trying to prevent and reduce SGBV, too often such efforts are focused on controlling the behaviour of the victims, in particular reducing their mobility for their own safety, rather than targeting or effectively engaging with the perpetrators of SGBV.

59 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

60 Women from Htantabin discussed their experience of being trained in the environmental benefits of producing and using organic fertilisers (created from animal manure) but being unable to change this due to the resistance of male leaders. Male leaders did not join the training and wanted to keep buying chemical fertilisers for the sake of convenience, refusing to engage in the time and effort required to produce organic fertiliser. Consultation in Taungoo, August 2019

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

64 For example, see: Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation, *License to rape: The Burmese military regime's use of sexual violence in the ongoing war in Shan State*, Chiang Mai: Shan Human Rights Foundation, 2002; Women's League of Burma, *Same impunity, same patterns: Sexual abuses by the Burma Army will not stop until there is a genuine civilian government*, Yangon: Women's League of Burma, 2014; and United Nations Human Rights Council, *Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar and the gendered impact of its ethnic conflicts*, Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019

Practical suggestions for addressing barriers to women's participation and leadership

Based on an analysis of the primary barriers women face in Myanmar, a number of practical actions can be taken to strengthen women's participation and leadership in forest management and governance in conflict-affected areas.

Practical considerations to strengthen women's participation in trainings and implementation

- ✓ **Venue:** The venue must be accessible for women in villages and safe transport arranged or reimbursed.
- ✓ **Overnighting:** Avoid requiring women to spend nights away from home. If staying overnight somewhere else is necessary, ensure that the reasons for their absence and the arrangements made for their safety are clear to family members, especially those who might potentially block their participation; e.g. parents, husbands or mothers-in-law.
- ✓ **Timing:** It is essential to consider women's daily schedule of responsibilities for childcare and domestic labour, as well as their economic activities, when setting times for any gatherings.
- ✓ **Child-friendly:** Ensure that both the venue and the meeting are child-friendly so mothers feel comfortable bringing children or facilitate and support childcare arrangements or crèches.
- ✓ **Messaging:** Communication and training materials (including manuals) should represent women as active leaders, not just as potential victims or in their role as mothers.
- ✓ **Role models:** Consider the gender balance of the training or facilitation team, as female trainers can be powerful role models for women's leadership and agency.
- ✓ **Invitations:** Whether inviting participants from communities or civil society, be sure to request the administrator or senior staff to assign both male and female participants. Specify diverse ages and socio-cultural backgrounds to involve a broader cross section of the community, rather than repeatedly assigning the same people to all the meetings and trainings.
- ✓ **Prevent backlash:** If women are invited to gender equality trainings, ensure steps are taken to prevent backlash; for instance, by husbands or fathers who do not receive the same information. Consider inviting husbands and fathers to the gender equality trainings, as well, or conduct dedicated gender equality trainings for all-male groups of participants. Be sure to prepare female participants on how to engage male stakeholders in discussions around gender equality. Promoting gender equality challenges customary inequalities, which can cause friction in households and communities, including among women themselves. While promoting gender equality is necessary to transform gender inequalities, secure women's rights and work towards a positive peace, this should not result in backlash in the personal lives of women. To offer further protection against this, it is necessary to discuss coping strategies.
- ✓ **Cascading:** Build in specific mechanisms for participants to share the information discussed with others in their household and community to enhance impact and to model that women can share information, including to men.
- ✓ **Follow up:** Take concrete steps to involve both women and men in follow-up activities that turn the training points into action.

3. How are women currently participating in forest use and forest management?

There is no formal sex-disaggregated data on forest use available, but a forest expert in Hpa-an estimates that from 30% to 50% of local forest use is by women.⁶⁵ A community forestry programme in Kachin state estimates that women make up about 50% of the community forestry user groups and undertake about 75% of the activities because male members tend to prioritise economic activities.⁶⁶ At the same time, however, communities (including women themselves) and women's organisations fail to recognise that the type of use and daily activities women undertake in the forest should be considered in the management of forestry resources.

The extent of this significant blind spot with respect to women's forest use and forest management is well illustrated in the following interview exchange:

- **Interviewer:** *How are women involved in using the forest or managing it?*
- **Respondent:** *Not really. It is the men who go to the forest and lead forestry management. Women don't get involved much.*
- **Interviewer:** *How do you cook in your home – with firewood?*
- **Respondents:** *Yes, I cook with firewood.*
- **Interviewer:** *And how do you get this firewood?*
- **Respondent:** *I collect it, or my daughter does.*
- **Interviewer:** *From the forest? How often?*
- **Respondent:** *From the forest, most days.*
- **Interviewer:** *So you do use the forest most days.*
- **Respondent:** *Yes.⁶⁷*

Further probing during interviews maps out frequent forest use by women, albeit with both similarities and differences in women's and men's roles.

⁶⁵ Interview in Hpa-an, September 2019. While the 2014 census reveals that men make up 64% and women only 36% of skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers, these statistics are averages. Fishing is a male-dominated sector but fish processing is more female dominated. The logging and timber sectors are heavily male dominated. For more information, see: The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014 Myanmar population and housing census: Policy brief on gender dimensions, Nay Pyi Taw: Myanmar Department of Population Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2017, p.82

⁶⁶ Interview with community forestry project staff of a Kachin NGO in Myitkyina, January 2017

⁶⁷ This is a summarised version of multiple interviews with women community members in the Taungoo consultation, August 2019

Table 1: Gender differences in forest use⁶⁸

Women	Both	Men
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting firewood, especially if it is collected daily from a nearby forest • Soft work: collecting non-timber forest products: e.g. bamboo shoots, fruits, medicinal plants, and leaves for making traditional roofs (in Thantabin) • Sale of bamboo shoots and animal horn/pelts in the markets • Planting flowers, fruits, trees and bamboo • Voluntary tasks related to forests and conservation • Undertaking office-based roles in the Forest Department (both KNU and government) • Attending community-level trainings on conservation and environmental issues, or participate in awareness-raising activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting firewood • Cutting down trees for house construction • Agroforestry cultivation tasks (cardamon, durian, mangosteen); clearing and maintaining the forest to prevent forest fires • Environmental protection work, including replanting trees • Membership in forest management committee • Monitoring and reporting illegal logging • Sharing traditional practices with the next generation • Working on rotational agriculture in line with customary shifting cultivation practice (<i>Taungyar</i>) • Responsibility to protect the watershed and biodiversity • Cultural roles: paying homage to the <i>Nats</i> (spirits), especially before trees are cut down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting firewood, when an annual allowance is allocated by the KNU to each household from a forest further away • Hard work: cutting big trees, climbing trees and picking fruits, hunting animals in the forests and driving tractors • Paid jobs in forests • Undertaking forest-based and management roles in the Forest Department (both KNU and government) • Having leadership and decision-making roles at community level, in community forestry committees and the Forest Department

Participants clearly gender some of the roles and highlight the differences between them. Male and female respondents largely agree on these roles and the differences between them. There is no significant difference in women’s responses compared to men’s responses, with the exception of some localised differences in specific roles linked to variances in local flora and fauna. A male NSA representative argues that women play a much lesser role in Myawaddy than that described by female participants from west Thanlwin.⁶⁹

In general, while both men and women collect fruits from the forest, women tend to collect fruits lying on the ground under trees and men tend to pick fruit that requires tree climbing. Climbing trees is not seen as something women do. This is due to both safety concerns associated with the risks of falling and cultural beliefs. In Myanmar, the cultural assumption of men’s superiority over women is rooted in the concept of *hpone*, which is a kind of masculine power, strength or honour. *Hpone* is perceived as unobtainable by women. This masculine power also can be reduced by contact with or being positioned lower than women’s clothing (particularly their *longyis* [traditional skirts] or underwear).⁷⁰ Respondents believe that women and girls should not climb trees because this would elevate them to a higher and therefore inappropriate position than men and boys in the forest, potentially reducing their *hpone*. One woman who was forced to climb trees to gather firewood because her husband failed to provide it reports that she was subject to social criticism by the community despite her family sympathising with her.⁷¹

68 This table combines the responses from the consultation in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

69 Consultation and validation workshop in Hpa-an, September and November 2019

70 A. Löfving et al, Raising the curtain. Cultural norms, social practices and gender equality in Myanmar, Yangon: Gender Equality Network, 2015, p.34

71 Ibid., p.74

Other cultural beliefs centre on the concept of *Nats* (spirits), which are perceived as “the natural protector[s] of forests, mountains, lake, village, and people[s] health”.⁷² Respondents talk about *Nats* who live in or guard some trees in the forest and agree that offerings and ceremonies are required before logging specific trees. The consultations reveal strong differences in opinion between some women and some men on whether these ceremonies should be undertaken by women or men, illustrating locally varied but strongly valued practices.⁷³ In contrast to these sharp differences of opinion, participants share a common superstition that women or girls climbing trees would offend the *Nats*, with possible ill consequences: “*Nats* do not like women climbing trees” but they do not get offended by men or boys climbing trees.⁷⁴

Men’s roles tend to be coded as hard work, despite the fact that both women and men undertake an extensive list of physically demanding tasks. For example, while both men and women cut trees for house construction, cutting down big trees is seen as a male responsibility. This gender coding is related to the perceived strength that logging large trees requires and the risks of injury that are involved in this activity. This gender coding also may possibly be linked to the potential income from the sale of a large tree and the associated status of earning income. Participants explain that men tend to undertake paid jobs in the forestry sector, while women are more active in unpaid voluntary roles; for example, those associated with tree nurseries and replanting trees.⁷⁵ Participants also highlight gender differences in salaries: Men receive higher wages than women even for the same task, such as harvesting cardamom seeds.⁷⁶ This replicates broader gender-based wage discrimination in the agricultural sector across Myanmar, with women reportedly paid about 20% less than men as farm labour.⁷⁷ It also reflects gender-segregated jobs in other sectors.

Gender and land rights

“KNU give us equal rights ... Both [men and women] have equal rights to own [land].” Female participant from Leiktho

Linked to land rights are gendered differences in access to land for women, which combine with other barriers they face to perpetuate women’s secondary status.⁷⁸ While the Myanmar state legislative framework is not explicitly biased, the male-dominated administrative apparatus in conjunction with customary practices function to effectively exclude women from formal landownership.⁷⁹ Most participants, both women and men, have not heard about the possibility of registering land under a women’s name in the government system: Land certificates tend to record the name of the head of the household, who is usually a man.⁸⁰ Only a couple women leaders are aware of women’s legal right to own land outright, which is likely due to their networking at the national level. One female participant from Leiktho sums up how it works to be locked out of the male-dominated system of land administration and ownership, noting that Land Registration Form 7:

“...is mostly with the name of the [typically male] head of the household. If we want to talk about land issues [such as formal land registration to protect against land confiscation], only men go and talk to the

72 P. Ravangban, *Nat and Nat Kadaw: The existence of the local cult in Myanmar transition*, Paper presented at the International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, Burma/Myanmar In Transition: Connectivity, Changes and Challenges University Academic Service Centre, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 24–25 July 2015, p.2

73 Consultations in Hpa-an, September 2019

74 Ibid.

75 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

76 Interview in Taungoo, August 2019

77 Oxfam Briefing Paper, *Delivering prosperity in Myanmar’s dryzone: Lessons from Mandalay and Magway on realizing the economic potential of small-scale farmers*, Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2014, p.19

78 E. Louis et al, *An assessment of land tenure regimes and women’s land rights in two regions of Myanmar*, Paper presented at the 2018 World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, Washington DC, 19–23 March 2018

79 C.J. Pierce and N.T.T. Oo, *Gendered aspects of land rights in Myanmar: Evidence from paralegal casework*, Yangon: Namati, 2016. For more information, see: J. Naujoks and M.T. Ko, *Pulling the strings: Masculinities, gender and social conflict in Myanmar*, Yangon: International Alert, 2018a

80 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

*officials. Women don't go and I don't know why. For me, I am getting more awareness and know more after attending the training.*⁸¹

The participants who come from mixed-control areas identify different approaches to land registration, with some having registered their land in the government system and others with non-state authorities.⁸² Participants express a clear preference for the KNU system, which is seen as more explicit on the equal land rights of men and women.⁸³ The KNU land policy “recognize[s] the distinct right of women to claim effective access to land, as peasants, rural labourers, forest dwellers or pastoralists, and as women.”⁸⁴ The policy clearly states that “rural poor women have their own connections to land resources, independent of the men within the household, thereby entitling them to their own distinct land use rights”.⁸⁵ This means women can obtain land certificates in their own name, regardless of whether they have a husband or father who is the formal head of household.

The Karen customary land practices are called the *Kaw* system, a term which the Karen have traditionally used to describe their lands and the community-based governance system mediating their relationships with them.⁸⁶ The *Kaw* refers to a complete unit of territory with multiple functions: a relationship with the spirits of the land, a governance structure and an ecological management system maintaining the forests, lands, water and the living beings on the land through ceremonies and taboos in a socio-ecological governance system.⁸⁷ The *Kaw* system has specific structures for female and male youth participation, with nominated female and male youth representatives on the management body (the *Blaw*) of each *Kaw*.⁸⁸ The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) and CSOs such as KESAN advocate for strengthening the role of women role in the KFD and in the *Kaw* system overall.⁸⁹ Study participants echo similar sentiments.⁹⁰

Forestry knowledge

In order to better understand gender differences in the forestry sector, this research assesses general knowledge about forestry among the participants. This is intended to explore if gendered barriers to knowledge shape men's versus women's access to forest resources and decision-making in different ways.

“For me, I learned through my parents, especially my father. He knew the value of the forest for our family and for community survival. ... Both Karen women and men are responsible for protecting the watersheds and biodiversity [to protect community sustainability].” Male forest expert in Hpa-an, who grew up in a government-controlled wildlife area

Most participants learned what they know about the forest and accessing resources from the forest (from bamboo shoots to firewood) from their parents, without significant gender differences in the responses.⁹¹ Respondents who had been displaced by conflict report having lost their familiarity with the forest and its

81 Consultations in Taungoo, August 2019

82 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

83 Ibid.

84 Article 2.1.3 and 2.2.5; according to Article 1.1.9, land dispute resolution committees also include women and youth representatives; Office of the Supreme Headquarters Karen National Union Kawthoolei, Karen National Union Land Policy, Kilo Yaw Lay: Office of the Supreme Headquarters Karen National Union Kawthoolei, 2015

85 Ibid.

86 J. Lubanski, *Kaw policy briefer: The recognition, registration and governance structures of Karen customary lands (Kaw) under KNU policy*, Chiang Mai: Karen Environmental and Social Action Network and Sone Sie Programme, 2019, p.1, <http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FINAL-Kaw-Briefer-KESAN-Eng.pdf>

87 A. Paul, *Kaw: The indigenous Karen customary lands*, Chiang Mai: Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Final-Briefer_KAW-English_2.pdf

88 J. Lubanski, 2019, Op. cit., p.2

89 Interview with Karen Women's Organisation, in Taungoo, August 2019; and meeting with Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, November 2019

90 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

91 Ibid.



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Women and men collect bamboo from the forest to use for their community home garden in Hpa-an district, Karen state.

resources because their traditional practices had been interrupted by their displacement.⁹² Middle-aged and older male and female respondents both voice concerns that the current rapid development process emphasises a different lifestyle, with increasing consumerism and mobile phone use, which distracts from appreciation of natural forests, poses further risks of losing traditional customary knowledge and weakens forest maintenance and protection practices.⁹³

There are a few opportunities (albeit inconsistently available) to learn about forest law, environmental issues and gender at the community level in rural areas. In the main, these learning opportunities are facilitated by civil society organisations, including KESAN (primarily in KNU-controlled areas). The GFD and the KFD both provide some information sessions to villages to prevent illegal logging and to promote forest protection and conservation. These sessions did not, however, reach the participants who had returned from displacement to their remote villages, such as Bawgali, after the ceasefire.⁹⁴ Respondents in KNU and mixed-control areas report that they mainly had received or heard about forest-related trainings, including forest law, from the KNU not the government.⁹⁵

The GFD undertakes a range of awareness-raising, forest rehabilitation and community forestry activities in line with national reforestation goals (10 Year Plan Rehabilitation and Reforestation 2015–2025) and the Community Forestry Master Plans, which set targets of replanting 400,000 trees and increasing community forestry coverage to 16,299 acres across Karen state,⁹⁶ to expand from the current 8,514 acres of registered

92 Interview with participant from Htantabin, Taungoo, August 2019

93 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

94 Consultation in Taungoo, August 2019

95 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

96 Director of the Kayin State Forest Department, Presentation at a dialogue event on forest management and peacebuilding, Hpa-an town, Karen state, 3 June 2019

community forestry.⁹⁷ The GFD, however, faces constraints in terms of financial and human resources,⁹⁸ which is also a concern voiced by participants.⁹⁹

As one respondent from the GFD in Hpa-an explains, “In Karen state, there are currently no prominent roles for women in forest management or conservation but we cannot ignore women in this sector.”¹⁰⁰ Women at the community level do have opportunities to gain knowledge on forest management through engagement in civil society community development activities.¹⁰¹ An early childhood development programme operated across Myanmar by a consortium of national and international civil society actors is such an example of engaging women to learn about forestry and natural resource management. There is an appetite among women for these learning opportunities, too, particularly among young women who tend to be more active than their elder counterparts.¹⁰² Respondents request more trainings for women on forest conservation, along with support for more comprehensively integrating gender issues both in the work and policies of environmental and conservation-focused organisations.¹⁰³ Without overcoming the social barriers women encounter, however, they will be limited in these endeavours as a result of intersecting socio-cultural norms related to gender and age.

Leadership and decision-making

How decisions are taken is a key question in local governance. In a society defined by positive peace, nobody should be excluded from decision-making because of their identity or gender, or any other reasons. Women have a right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. Women’s proportionately higher participation in trainings and meetings, however, does not automatically translate into leadership roles for women. In Myanmar, local governance and leadership remain male dominated. Stereotypical attitudes contribute to situations in which “many people don’t want to follow women as leaders”.¹⁰⁴

Less than 1% of VT/WA administrators are women.¹⁰⁵ The woman administrator in Leiktho is highlighted as an example of the positive impact of having a woman in this role. Participants see female administrators as more likely to cascade information (for instance, about vocational trainings provided by the state technical school) to community members, whereas male administrators are seen as less interested in supporting community development.¹⁰⁶

These gender dynamics in relation to leadership also play out in the community forestry sector, where participants report the decision-making structures to be mostly male dominated in both the government and KNU systems. One exception of women in more senior roles is as treasurers of community forestry committees, which mirrors women’s customary role as household cash managers. Women’s participation is reported to be higher in KNU community forestry than in those established in government-controlled areas (despite the GFD setting an aim of 30% women’s participation).¹⁰⁷ The consultations could not establish the reasons for this difference but it may be linked to stronger emphasis on women’s representation in the Karen system, or to economic livelihood pressures on male stakeholders that prevent them from engaging in unpaid voluntary activities.

97 Community forests established during 2016–2019, Government of Myanmar Forest Department, <https://www.forestdepartment.gov.mm/cf-data-detail>

98 Ibid.

99 Consultations and interviews in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

100 Interview with GFD, Hpa-an, September 2019

101 Consultations and interviews in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 K. Ryan, *She leads in Myanmar: Inspiring women leaders*, Yangon: International Foundation for Electoral Systems and Young Chi Thit, 2019, p.8

106 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

107 Interview with Karen forest expert, Hpa-an, September 2019

Participants also report that women are active in the respective forest departments, with both the GFD and the KFD placing emphasis on recruiting women. The KNU increased recruitment of women after the NCA, when security concerns decreased. While this is a positive change, in both forest departments female staff tend to be placed in bureaucratic office-based positions rather than in forest-based field positions. As a result, there are few women in senior or management roles. Participants report higher women's participation in the KNU administration compared to the government but without highly visible women's leadership in the public domain in either administration.¹⁰⁸ While Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in effect leads the government, her role is inextricably linked to her unique position as the daughter of General Aung San, widely regarded as the founding father of modern Burma.

The KFD has no explicit quota requirements, although nominated gender focal points receive training on CEDAW and women's rights.¹⁰⁹ A KFD township head reports that few women apply to positions in his department, making it a challenge to increase the recruitment of women.¹¹⁰ One reason behind this could be the internalised gendered social expectations of both women and men. Women are not interested or comfortable in taking on tasks that require them to travel alone to forest areas or remote communities.¹¹¹ Male managers are less likely to assign or encourage women to take on these tasks due to the perceived risks from armed actors, male forest users and wild animals, in addition to socio-cultural taboos around women spending nights away from their own home.¹¹²

Voice and confidence

"My voice is heard in these trainings and workshops. I can speak and people listen to me. But when I go back to my village I have no voice. Nobody wants to listen to a woman." Female community forestry representative, Hpa-an

While internalised traditional norms mean that many women still do not feel confident to get involved in politics (regarded as a male space), there is a slow but growing cumulative impact from the various efforts to raise awareness about gender equality. More women are growing more confident to step up and get involved in decision-making and representing their communities. Alongside this, participants also report increasing support from male stakeholders for women's participation in decision-making, including for religious events.¹¹³

There are strong local and regional women's organisations and networks – such as the KWO and the Karen Women Empowerment Group – that play a vital role in raising awareness about women's rights and addressing SGBV. At the same time, such organisations are less focused on natural resource management issues, such as forestry, leaving their voices unheard in these fora. The KNU reportedly assigns women leaders to attend peace process meetings, although research participants are unsure about their level of participation in these negotiations.¹¹⁴ This is in line with the national picture of women playing a subordinate role in NSAs, with male leaders generally failing to recognise women's abilities and ideas, although NSAs do have far higher participation of women than the Tatmadaw at all levels.¹¹⁵

108 Consultation in Taungoo, August 2019

109 Interview with head of township KFD from Thanintharyi, in Hpa-an, September 2019

110 Ibid.

111 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

112 Interviews with KFD and GFD in Hpa-an, September 2019

113 Interview with community-based organisation in Taungoo, August 2019

114 Consultation in Taungoo, August 2019

115 Å. Kolås and L.U. Meitei, Women in ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2019, p.1

4. Gendered risks

When operating in a conflict-affected setting, any project intervention “will inevitably have an impact on the peace and conflict environment – positive or negative, direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional”.¹¹⁶ These impacts can be addressed with a conflict-sensitive approach consisting of three dimensions for all actors: 1) understanding the context in which they operate; 2) understanding the interaction between their interventions and the conflict context; and 3) acting upon this understanding in order to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts that support peace.¹¹⁷

In particular, there are several key risks to women participating in forest use, management and governance. All implementing agencies, whether civil society, state or non-state actors, should be aware of these risks. Project design and monitoring should take these into account and mainstream measures to address or prevent them to the greatest extent possible. They should build in adaptive flexibility to respond if any unintended negative impacts become visible during implementation. Minimally, actors must ensure that inadvertent negative impacts are addressed in a Do No Harm approach.¹¹⁸ Actors also need to ensure they can maximise any opportunities to support peace, trust and dialogue across conflict lines, while simultaneously supporting the transformation of gender inequalities.

Risks to conflict and peacebuilding

“In Karen state, we have so many organisations from the government and EAO side working on forest issues. The multisector organisations need to collaborate together on environmental conservation so they don’t think about fighting each other.” Older male participant at validation workshop in Hpa-an

Building peace after conflict is complex. Globally, about half of all negotiated peace agreements fail, with states relapsing into civil war within half a decade.¹¹⁹ Where conflicts are linked with natural resources, it is double the likelihood that peace agreements will break down in this period.¹²⁰ It is vital, then, that peace processes and peace agreements are as robust and inclusive as possible, as this increases the chances of durable, inclusive peace.

Women’s political participation is crucial to the global goals of achieving peace and sustainable development. It is a right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives, from local governance to security issues. Women have a vital role to play in peacebuilding at all levels. Evidence demonstrates that women’s meaningful participation in peace negotiations leads to “better peace accord content, higher agreement implementation rates, and longer lasting peace”.¹²¹ Where women’s groups are able to exercise strong influence on a negotiation and implementation process, this increases the chances of a final peace agreement being reached and implemented successfully.¹²² Conversely, the exclusion of women and their concerns (such as safe access to water, land and

116 K. Bush, A measure of peace: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of development projects in conflict zones, Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1998, cited in Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, How to guide to conflict sensitivity, London: Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012, p.3

117 Ibid., p.2

118 International aid interventions can risk reinforcing divisions in conflict-affected areas but there are opportunities for aid workers to support the processes through which societies disengage from war if programmes are designed accordingly. For more information, see: M.B. Anderson, Do no harm: How aid can support peace – or war, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999

119 C. King, Ending civil wars, Oxford: Oxford University Press, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1997, p.25

120 S.A. Rustad and H.M. Binningsbø, A price worth fighting for? Natural resources and conflict recurrence, Journal of Peace Research, 49(4), 2012, pp.531–546

121 J. Krause, Women’s participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace, London: Conflict, Security and Development Research Group, King’s College London, 2018, p.4

122 T. Paffenholz et al, Making women count – Not just counting women: Assessing women’s inclusion and influence on peace negotiations, Geneva: The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies and UN Women, 2016, p.6

forest resources, safety from landmines, social services, justice for human rights violations and so on) pose conflict risks because exclusive peace agreements are less likely to cover all the issues over which there is conflict, and hence more likely to relapse into violence.

Existing decision-making structures in both government and ethnic areas are male dominated. The leadership of the Karen National Congress and the Peace Process Steering Team, along with the overarching peace process architecture (Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee and the Joint Implementation Coordination Meeting), have not yet reached 30% women's participation. For example, there is only one woman among the 15-member Land and Natural Resource Management Working Committee on the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee, and no women at all in the Political Affairs Working Committee.¹²³ Consequently, women's concerns and contributions risk being left out, limiting the opportunities for a broader base of solutions.

When the voices of 50% of the population are unheard, the chances of achieving the ambitious goal of the peace process is drastically reduced. To achieve the goal of a union-level peace agreement with an agreed functional federal structure that can deliver positive peace for all citizens, without the structural exclusion of women or minorities, requires an inclusive process.

The lack of women leaders in joint ceasefire monitoring committees, especially given their strengths in negotiating with armed actors for reductions in violence or harassment,¹²⁴ may also contribute to the inability of these mechanisms to successfully deal with the issues that keep flaring up into violence, despite the NCA. Similarly, the inability of the joint ceasefire monitoring committees to date to successfully resolve the ongoing conflicts in some Karen areas could be influenced by prevailing predominant masculine expectations on their male members that focus on strength and zero-sum perspectives: winning over others. As such, these expectations could form barriers to compromising on flexible win-win solutions that prioritise civilian concerns over the negotiating positions of armed actors.

Previous research by International Alert on masculinities and conflict in Myanmar indicates that men mostly use power or status-based decision-making as a means to settle conflicts.¹²⁵ This is in contrast to approaches aimed at reaching consensus or win-win solutions.¹²⁶ Women are seen to employ more negotiation and compromise strategies, a tendency that likely derives from their (gendered) socialisation, which values harmony and avoiding being seen as difficult or contrary.¹²⁷ Among 109 Karen female village chiefs who were interviewed by the KWO between 2016 and 2019, for example, their key coping mechanisms are identified as strong negotiating skills, capacities for quick thinking and well-developed management skills.

Since women in Myanmar tend to enjoy less power and status than men, they face a greater need to convince others rather than merely taking and enforcing decisions. Applying this insight to the peace process and/or ceasefire monitoring setting offers a different perspective on the current status quo. That is, it is conceivable that adding more women who possess the skills to negotiate and compromise to the peace process (which otherwise consists of mostly male representatives from competing armed forces) could be beneficial to identifying more creative solutions. This is particularly important in the political dialogue component of the peace process, which needs to address a range of issues relevant to civilians. Among others, key issues to address are inclusive natural resource governance, along with economic, health and education systems for the future federal union.

123 R. Warren et al, *Women's peace building strategies amidst conflict: Lessons from Myanmar and Ukraine*, Washington DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, p.20

124 Karen Women's Organisation, 'Kill me instead of them – A report on the resilience of Karen women village chiefs, Mae Hong Son: Karen Women's Organisation, 2020, p.7

125 J. Naujoks and M.T. Ko, *Behind the masks: Masculinities, gender, peace and security in Myanmar*, Yangon: International Alert, 2018b

126 Interview with civil society organisation representative focused on dispute resolution, in Yangon, July 2017

127 *Ibid.* For more information, see: Karen Women's Organisation, 2020, *Op. cit.*, p.13 and E. Röell, 2015, *Op. cit.*, p.32

The institutions and leadership structures currently being established will form the building blocks for a potential decentralised federal structure that involves both current state and non-state actor systems. The manner of involvement will be negotiated through the political dialogues that are part of the peace process. Not only is it the right of women to participate in these structures, with their current exclusion a form of structural violence,¹²⁸ but the broader inclusion of women is more likely to secure sustainable peace. Societies with higher levels of gender inequality have higher rates of violent interstate conflict,¹²⁹ violent internal conflict¹³⁰ and higher levels of abuse of personal integrity rights.¹³¹ It is therefore vital to start tackling women's marginalisation in both state and non-state forest governance systems now, as an essential part of the current political dialogue and peace process, to achieve an inclusive and coordinated system in an eventual decentralised federal structure.

Gendered risks: women's participation

In many communities in Myanmar, women's participation in trainings and leadership roles may be perceived as counter to local customary expectations around gender.¹³² This could **risk forms of backlash** by more conservative individuals in the community and/or the home, such as traditional leaders or elderly women, objecting to women's increased voice and activism. In the community, this may be expressed in negative comments about her character, her actions, or criticism for failing to comply with gender norms, which can result in being labelled as a difficult woman or a loose character.¹³³ Closer to home, and inside the home, there are risks of potential backlash by a husband or family members resentful of or threatened by women's increased confidence and agency. This could take the form of verbal or physical domestic violence and harassment, efforts to limit her engagements and travel, marrying off vocal daughters or other efforts to prevent or undermine their participation in these processes.¹³⁴ This is why engagement with male gatekeepers and those with power is essential to secure their support and ensure that they understand why women's meaningful participation is important for their family, community and broader development processes.

There are **safety risks to women** when travelling to trainings, forests or other political and development activities. While violent conflict has largely abated, tensions and clashes do still occur in some Karen areas.¹³⁵ Landmines continue to be a risk in the forests and some farm fields.¹³⁶ In the absence of a transitional justice process, the memories from decades of violent conflict and mass displacement,¹³⁷ together with the continued presence of landmines and armed men, contribute to lingering sentiments of fear and mistrust.¹³⁸ This can shape the agency of communities in confronting forest-related issues. For example, fears of gun violence deter communities in Aye Chan Yay and Nyein Chan Yay from complaining about illegal logging by big companies, reducing the agency

128 The term 'structural violence' was first coined in 1969 by Johan Galtung. For more information, see: J. Galtung, Violence, peace, and peace research, *Journal of Peace Research* 6(3), 1969, pp.167–191

129 M. Caprioli, Gender equality and state aggression: The impact of domestic gender equality on state first use of force, *International Interactions*, 29(3), 2003, pp.195–214

130 D. Cingranelli et al, Human rights violations and violent internal conflict, *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(41), 2019, pp.1–33; doi:10.3390/socsci8020041

131 E. Melander, Political gender equality and state human rights abuse, *Journal of Peace Research*, 42(2), 2005, pp.149–166

132 A. Löfving et al, 2015, Op. cit., p.18

133 Women human right defenders campaigning on the most sensitive gender-related taboos (e.g. rights of lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people; challenging sexual violence in conflict; promoting sexual and reproductive rights; and advocating for women's participation and leadership) are found to face the highest risks of gender-based violence as backlash to their activism. For more information, see: Free Expression Myanmar, *Daring to defy Myanmar's patriarchy – An assessment of the risk of challenging gender taboos for Myanmar's women human rights defenders*, Yangon: Free Expression Myanmar, 2018

134 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid. The Tatmadaw is the only government security force worldwide that still deploys landmines, but most of the NSAs are confirmed or assumed to have manufactured improvised antipersonnel mines. As yet, there is no formal demining process to remove landmines deployed by many of the armed actors over the decades of conflict. For more information, see: Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, Myanmar/Burma country report, 2019, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2019

137 Karen Human Rights Group, 2017, Op. cit.

138 Interviews and consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019. For more information, see: Karen Human Rights Group, 2016, Op. cit., p.1



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A mother is photographed together with her daughter to inspire more community members and young people to keep community home gardens in Hpa-an district, Karen state.

of these communities.¹³⁹ This dynamic is exacerbated in a context with multiple non-state armed actors and lack of transparency over the commercial links between logging companies and armed actors.¹⁴⁰ To compound these travel-related challenges, road conditions in Myanmar are perilous, leading to risks of transport accidents, particularly in the monsoon season, which also deter some women from travelling.¹⁴¹

Organisations should also be aware of the **risk of sexual harassment, or sexual exploitation and abuse**.¹⁴² A recent study highlights sexual harassment risks in workplaces in Myanmar, particularly around work-related travel.¹⁴³ The key to addressing this is raising awareness among all relevant staff and among male and female participants to ensure they understand and recognise sexual harassment and abuse. It is also essential to have access to functioning reporting mechanisms and support to end impunity for any incidents, and to deter future incidents from happening.

There are **risks of doubling or tripling women's burden**. It is necessary to avoid overburdening women by adding forest management and governance tasks to their already full schedules of domestic, farming and livelihood responsibilities, particularly in rural and poorer areas, where domestic tasks are more burdensome due to the lack of facilities such as running water or electricity.¹⁴⁴ There may be opportunities to reconsider the division of labour at the household levels, explore rotating schedules for joint childcare or similar at neighbourhood levels during scheduled trainings or tree planting, and ensure access to running water and electricity. As (male) migration from these areas is high, women must also often take on additional tasks when their husbands migrate abroad for work. As some of these tasks, such as the collection of firewood or food from forests, bring women into the

139 Interview in Taungoo, August 2019

140 Ibid.

141 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

142 For more information, see: InterAction, PSEA Basics – Training guide: Preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), Washington DC: InterAction, 2013

143 D. Laplonge, *Respectful workplace: Assessing the costs of sexual harassment and bullying to Myanmar businesses*, Yangon: International Finance Corporation and the DaNa Facility, 2019

144 Consultations in Taungoo and Hpa-an, August–September 2019

forest sphere, they should have the right to raise their voices on issues related to decision-making around these resources at the community level. When participation in project activities, trainings or activism reduces women's time for domestic responsibilities, there is a risk of tasks being assigned to daughters instead. This can potentially impact their access to education or cause backlash at the household level, including from mothers-in-law, in situations in which families live jointly.¹⁴⁵

Gendered risks: men's participation

If men are supportive of women's increased agency, empowerment and leadership at the community level – in their roles as husband, father or community leader – they might also **face backlash from community members**.¹⁴⁶ This might take the form of questions, negative comments or jokes about their masculinity, perceived weaknesses and their lack of control or dominance over their household.¹⁴⁷ This is a particular risk in heavily militarised areas, because when violence ends, the primary expectation that men face transforms and providing for the family becomes more important than protecting the family or community.

Providing for the family can pose challenges in areas where there is slow economic recovery, where land rights are difficult to secure after displacement and where community lands have been confiscated for commercial, extractive or hydropower projects.¹⁴⁸ Being confronted by these challenges can lead to efforts on the part of men to shore up their status and self-identity by reasserting their dominance over the community or the household, including through domestic violence. Facing such challenges also can lead to risk-taking and self-destructive behaviours, such as substance abuse, which further undermines the fragile social cohesion in ceasefire areas.¹⁴⁹ Communication and awareness-raising about gender equality to the broader community should emphasise the positive contributions of gender equality to households and communities, regardless of gender. Such communication and awareness-raising should simultaneously seek to enhance the value and status accorded to domestic responsibilities. It should also highlight the inherent benefits of women's increased participation in decision-making to counteract ill-informed reactionary backlash from conservative stakeholders, either in the home or community.

Participants reflect that many trainings and awareness-raising sessions at the community level are often largely attended by women, as they are considered of less interest to men who prioritise paid work in line with the gendered expectations of them to be the provider for their families.¹⁵⁰ Although the majority of those who usually attend information sessions are women, they are not always well placed to implement lessons learned if the tasks covered by the training are largely undertaken by men; for instance, logging or house construction.¹⁵¹ This presents **a risk of projects missing out male stakeholders and audiences**, who are important to achieving change at the community level. The absence of men from such sessions also points to **a correlated risk that their concerns and interests are not being taken into account by decision-makers and/or implementers**. Any actors (civil society; state and non-state) need to be aware that awareness-raising activities at the community level should be designed carefully to reach the intended audience. The gender dynamics of participation in activities should be monitored carefully, both in terms of the actual numbers participating (collecting sex-disaggregated data) and the quality of participation. A 95% female participation rate is meaningless if decisions are then only taken by the 5% of participating men. Implementation strategies should be flexibly adapted to ensure a healthy gender balance of participation and decision-making.

145 Ibid.

146 H. Myrntinen et al, *Re-thinking gender in peacebuilding*, London: International Alert, 2014

147 J. Naujoks and M.T. Ko, 2018b, *Op. cit.*, p.35

148 J. Naujoks and M.T. Ko, 2018a, *Op. cit.*

149 H. Myrntinen et al, 2014, *Op. cit.*

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Women's participation in forest use, forest management and forest governance is shaped by gender norms and representation in Myanmar. Gender expectations around appropriate roles for women, combined with concerns about security and safety issues, can limit their participation, especially at leadership levels. In Karen state (as across much of Myanmar), there are vibrant women's organisations and networks with strong active leaders who are not hampered by the lack of confidence that can form barriers to women's participation. To date, these women's organisations have been more focused on traditional women's issues, such as health, childcare and SGBV. They are less focused on forest and natural resource management issues. If these skilled women leaders and activists could be brought into the land and natural resource management forums, this could significantly increase women's voice in decision-making on these topics.

It is women's right to participate in fora and decision-making mechanisms that affect their lives and access to resources. Forest governance and conservation programming that disregards gender norms risks being less effective in contributing to peace and protecting forests and the environment. They risk missing out on the views of important stakeholders, such as the women who rely on the forest to access firewood or collect bamboo shoots for their livelihoods. Even where mobilising women is difficult due to socio-cultural or educational barriers, this effort is worth making in order to achieve a better and more inclusive process and increase the likelihood of better results informed by a wider array of perspectives. It is equally important to ensure that awareness-raising activities at village levels reach male community members and leaders, who are currently more likely to be involved in decision-making. A lack of male engagement in project activities can undermine project effectiveness and the likelihood of achieving conservation or development objectives. Last but not least, project design and implementation should be informed by the potential risks to women participants, which need to be minimised through gender and conflict-sensitive approaches and peace-supportive approaches.

Recommendations for immediate action (within one year)

All government, NSA and civil society actors should:

- **Raise awareness about the importance of gender equality as a vital aspect of positive peace, and the importance of women's meaningful participation in forest management and conservation processes** in order to achieve better (conservation, development and peace) processes that are more representative, more effective and reduce conflict between different actors. Provide this information to:
 - men and women of all ages at the community levels;
 - civil society actors;
 - Forest Department staff and leadership; and
 - ward/village tract administrators (both current and retired, who remain influential).
- **Exchange and coordinate with one another in areas of mixed control**, with the aim of trying to reach all communities with this information to contribute to building peace by focusing on addressing joint concerns across conflict lines. **Ensure women can play their important roles in this building of trust and collaboration.**

Long-term recommendations

Actors engaged in raising awareness (CSOs, the GFD and KFD) should:

- **strengthen internal capacities to:**
 - enact a gender policy and practical instructions to increase recruitment and promotion of female staff in forest departments;
 - train staff in gender and conflict sensitivity, and provide mentoring to trained staff, especially older more senior male leaders; and
 - strengthen collaboration with women's organisations to ensure women's concerns are brought into discussions on forest and natural resource management, from the township to the union level and in the peace process;
- **conduct general awareness-raising:** reach out through religious leaders and media to promote forest conservation and replanting efforts to address a broader audience that includes many women at the community level; and
- **ensure that the promotion of indigenous or customary practices highlights inclusion and gender equality and does not contradict women's human rights, including the right to participate in decision-making.**

The Myanmar government should:

- **ensure civil servants engage with, and listen to, community-based organisations, including women's organisations, to negotiate community access and respect their rights when setting protection areas and priorities.**

International donors should:

- **support capacity building of civil society actors and non-state actors on gender mainstreaming policy development and implementation, particularly for smaller non-state armed actors with resource and capacity constraints; and**
- **strengthen accountability for minimum levels of women's participation in donor-funded natural resource-related political processes** (including the political dialogues on land and natural resource management and good natural resource governance strengthening efforts that are taking place as part of the peace process), and encourage linking up with women's organisations and networks to facilitate this in practice.

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