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Rooting out inequalities

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

Research summary



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International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. Together, we believe peace is within our power. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict, bringing together people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we come together to build everyday peace. Peace is just as much about communities living together, side by side, and resolving their differences without resorting to violence, as it is about people signing a treaty or laying down their arms. That is why we believe that we all have a role to play in building a more peaceful future.

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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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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.

The report on which this summary is based 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

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

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.

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

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,



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

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



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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.

- 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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