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# Myanmar

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## Abstract

Based on primary interviews conducted with women involved in the Kachin armed resistance movement and in Kachin women's peace networks, this article explores the many roles women play in the armed conflict in Myanmar, highlighting how identities shaped by ethnicity, religion, gender and class influence participation in the armed struggle and inform women's actions. This article<sup>1</sup> will show how, in Kachin state, the reasons why women from religious- and ethnic-minority groups enlist in ethno-political organizations include experiences of oppression, a dearth of social services, poverty, gender-based violence and nationalism. In other words, these women's participation in the armed struggle is motivated largely by political and ideological purposes closely related to their identities as members of ethnic and religious minorities. Interestingly, this also seems to inform the motivations of women who join the peace movement, and who advocate the inclusion of women in public deliberations on the conflict and for an end to the war. This means that women have expectations for what peace and security means to them, and as political agents, are able to act on their motivations if needed. This research will bring to the forefront the narratives of religious- and ethnic-minority women in Myanmar, who are typically sidelined from public discussions and state-building exercises in post-conflict settings. In doing so, it will highlight their expectations for political action and settlements, enhancing and broadening analyses of the conflict in Myanmar.

## Introduction

During the research on women's involvement in nation-making projects undertaken by opposition groups on the borders of Myanmar (Hedström 2013, 2015), and in discussions on the development of country programmes in Myanmar with institutional partners working in the policy field, it became

clear how marginalized and sidelined the women's movement was. To the extent that women were taken into consideration in programmatic decisions or discussed in academic analyses, a disproportionate amount of interest seemed to be focused on urban women of Bamar<sup>2</sup> descent, such as Aung San Suu Kyi. The perspectives and opinions of religious- and ethnic-minority women were then not heard unless those women were seen as victims. As a consequence, the conflict and subsequent (multiple) ceasefires in Myanmar have largely been discussed from the perspective of the nation state and institutions dominated by men. These discussions have failed to analyse both the impact of gender relations and norms on the conflict, and the opposite: the impact of the conflict on gender relations and norms. In contexts such as the conflict in Kachin, however, women's presence along a continuum of violence and nonviolence, militarism and pacifism, suggests the need to take the concerns and opinions of minority women seriously.

In Kachin, women participate as soldiers or military-trained members of the civilian administration of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political entity that is seen as representing the Kachin people. The military wing of the KIO, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), is currently the only non-state armed group in Myanmar that actively drafts women. Kachin women are also members and leaders of a multi-ethnic women's peace movement involving Myanmar women from different ethnic groups, including the Bamar majority. Despite their multiple roles in the conflict, women have not been invited to participate in the ceasefire process currently taking place between the KIO and the Myanmar Government,<sup>3</sup> and Kachin women's input in transitional governance processes has similarly been severely circumscribed. The erasure of women's experiences and knowledge from the public agenda has denied Kachin women the opportunity to define and address their own concerns and needs. As argued by D'Costa (2006: 131), this does not appear to be an oversight but rather a deliberate attempt by dominant groups to set the agenda by controlling the agency and voice of women from ethnic- and religious-minority communities. This will have consequences for how norms relating to gender roles, inclusion and participation are framed and conceptualized in public negotiations and discussions, a particular concern for women from ethnic and religious minorities.

## Methodology

This chapter is based on qualitative research data collected through interviews with key informants and supplemented by a desk review of grey and academic literature. Semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of general, open-ended questions, allowing the interviewer to elaborate on issues when needed,



while ensuring that the interviews remained grounded in the general topic of interest for this research project, namely the motivations, experiences and security needs of Kachin women. Employing quantitative methods to study the structure and make-up of the KIO and KIA would probably enhance the analysis provided in this study. However, the collection of quantitative data proved too difficult in practice, as the KIO and KIA consider demographic data related to their organizations a military secret, and limit access to, or the collection of, such data accordingly.

The data for this study were collected on two field visits to Myanmar, Thailand and the United States in 2013 and 2014. In all, 22 interviews were conducted with 25 women and one man currently or previously working in key Kachin resistance or civil society organizations. These included the KIO, KIA, the Kachin Women's Association, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand and the Kachin Women's Union. In 17 cases, the women interviewed were former or current soldiers or reservists. In addition, 16 interviews were also conducted with 23 women and three men who were active in Kachin religious associations, multi-ethnic civil society organizations and peace missions, as well as with external human rights groups and other non-state armed groups not associated with the KIO.

Each interview began by explaining the purpose of the fieldwork and the motivations for undertaking the research, and then giving the respondent some information about the interviewer's background. The study subjects gave their consent to carry out and record each interview and to use quotes in subsequent publications, and were assured that the recordings would be kept confidential. The interviewer attempted to build trust by referencing her decade-long involvement with Myanmar pro-democracy activists on the Thailand-Myanmar border, particularly her familiarity with Kachin women's groups and individuals, as well as previous research trips to areas where Kachin people reside. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours, with most lasting just over an hour. To ensure the safety of the individuals who contributed to the study, neither their real names nor their whereabouts are divulged in this chapter.

During the research trip to Myanmar in 2013, three of the interviews were conducted in English. The rest were conducted with one of two local interpreters—one woman and one man—arranged by a gatekeeper.<sup>4</sup> Both interpreters self-identified as Baptist Kachin and were Jinghpaw speakers; consequently, all interpreted interviews were conducted using Jinghpaw, including those of two minority language speakers who said they felt comfortable speaking Jinghpaw. The male interpreter, who interpreted 15 interviews, may be connected to, or work for, the KIO's intelligence service.

The veracity of this suggested association has not been confirmed, but it raises questions concerning the validity and truthfulness of some of the responses provided by the interviewees. Attempts were made to take this into account when analysing the data by looking for inconsistencies and convergences between transcripts of the interviews interpreted by the two interpreters and those conducted in English.

For the trip undertaken in 2014, 14 out of 25 interviews were conducted in English with no interpretation needed; 11 interviews were conducted in Myanmar language rather than Jinghpaw, as the interpreter, a woman, was not proficient in any of the languages spoken in Kachin. This interpreter identified as Karen, another ethnic-minority group in conflict with the state. This led the interviewees to conclude that she was not only a member of an ethnic minority, like them, but also a Christian. The fact that the interviewees identified with the interpreter in this way helped to create a safe space in which to discuss experiences and issues of gender-based discrimination.

## Background

### Ethnicity and gender in Kachin

While the many conflicts in Myanmar are usually explained in terms of ethnic cleavages, the notion of ethnicity—in Myanmar, as well as everywhere else—is complex and multifaceted. It is informed by religious norms and traditions (Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, predominantly) as well as by a recent history of anti-imperialist struggle, which in Kachin society is strongly associated with a proud history of male fighters in the colonial forces, akin to the Gurkhas in Nepal. Kachins in Myanmar are predominantly Christian, unlike their relatives in neighbouring China, where many are Animists, and in India, where Theravada Buddhism dominates (Sadan 2013). The association between Kachins and Christianity is important in the context of the dominance of Buddhism in Myanmar, as the KIO and KIA were formed on the eve of the planned enforcement of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961 (a policy that never entered into force) (Lintner 1990). Moreover, the Kachin language was first written down by a Baptist missionary in 1885 and consequently, religious texts were the first to appear in Kachin (see Hanson 1913). Ethnic nationalism is therefore not easily separated from religion in the context of Kachin identity and the conflict in Kachin, and churches play an important role in the construction of Kachin identity and nationalism. They feature as political spaces in which information about Kachin culture, history and language is disseminated: recently, churches have hosted ceremonies where devotees prayed for success in the war and independence



from Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> The dominance of the Myanmar language in state schools means that tuition in minority languages has often taken place in civil or religious settings in Myanmar (Sadan 2013); in Kachin, the churches provide this instruction. Attacks by the Myanmar Army against Kachin communities have included the deliberate targeting of Christian places of worship and the torture of civilians using methods alluding to Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

The term 'Kachin' typically refers to a number of linguistic groups and clans or families that have historically lived in the India- and China-Myanmar border regions. Kachins were first categorized by the British colonialists who governed the country as part of British India from 1886 until independence in 1948, and the term was used later by the post-independence, national governments. In Myanmar, Kachin came to be used as an overarching, unifying identity, while in China and India the term 'Jingpo' is used instead (Lahtaw 2007). Jinghpaw is the main language used by the Kachin people, and it is commonly used to refer to all Kachin living in Myanmar regardless of their linguistic affiliation (Lintner 1990).

Leach (1954) has argued that Kachin identities are fluid and unstable, informed by relationships that structure access to power. Perhaps in response, the British attempted to impose some rigidity onto this fluid social organization through the application of fixed categories of racial identities, as used in censuses in colonial Burma (Ikeya 2011). Consequently, ethnicity, at least officially, ceased to be interpretative. It came to be seen as connected to claims of indigeneity (Sadan 2013), and therefore strongly associated with specific territories. In the case of the Kachins, this association was with the 'ungovernable' Frontier Areas, which were ruled separately from lowland Burma by the British (Hlaing 2007).

This is important because, as Yuval-Davis (1997) notes, the construction of ethnic and racial identities delineates and situates collective interests in relation to the 'Other'.<sup>7</sup> In this way, ethnicity can be seen as a political project that can be utilized for nationalistic purposes to advance rights or power, and adapt to shifting landscapes and political environments (Cockburn 1998: 36). The centrality of gender roles in these nationalistic projects is highlighted if one sees ethnic communities as an extended family or religious body writ large, as suggested by Moghadam (cited in Alison 2009: 107). This approach demonstrates how the very construction of womanhood and manhood lies at the heart of Kachin society, as elsewhere in Myanmar (Ferguson 2013). Women in Myanmar have been used as symbols in nationalist narratives, branded as traitors to the race by both the Myanmar state and by ethnic-minority groups when they have subverted traditional gender roles (usually by engaging in public political activities) (Ikeya 2011; Hedström 2015).

## The conflict in Kachin

The Kachin armed uprising was one of the last to begin in Myanmar, ignited by the government's attempt in 1961 to expand Buddhism as the state religion and ban the use of ethnic-minority languages in state schools. The primary objective of the revolt was to defend ethnic- and religious-minority interests against central Bamar Buddhist oppression (Lintner 1990). Four decades of conflict followed until the KIO signed a ceasefire agreement with the ruling military regime in 1994. No women were involved in the ceasefire negotiations, and issues related to gender or women's rights do not appear in the agreement. In fact, the ceasefire agreement did not allow for any political discussion concerning ethnic- and religious-minority rights to take place at all, although it did include a statement confirming that these issues would be addressed in second-stage negotiations, for potential inclusion in Myanmar's revised constitution.<sup>8</sup> However, any attempts on behalf of the KIO to influence the writing of the 2008 Constitution were disregarded by the military government. Of particular concern to the KIO, as well as to other armed groups, was a clause in the proposed constitution stating that there should only be one army in the country, resulting in an attempt by the central government to assimilate the country's many non-state armed groups into units controlled by Myanmar's military. The KIO refused, along with several other groups, and in 2011 the conflict began anew (International Crisis Group 2013).

Despite being engaged in civil warfare, the KIO was able to set up a full civilian administration in the areas of the states of Kachin and Shan that it controlled, an administration that expanded during the ceasefire period. The KIO provides essential services for people living in these areas, including in education, health, infrastructure development and the judiciary.<sup>9</sup> The KIO's armed wing, the KIA, is one of the country's largest armed forces, rumoured to have 20,000 troops (including civilian reservists).<sup>10</sup> It earns revenue through tax collection, visa fees and natural resource management. The KIO's official women's wing, the Kachin Women's Association, which is mainly responsible for providing clothing, food and emotional support to KIA troops, has seats on the Central Committee, the KIO's highest decision-making body, but at the time of writing these seats were vacant.



## Barriers to women's inclusion and participation

When men talk a lot they will bring more profit, when women talk a lot they will bring more damage.

Kachin proverb (cited in Minoletti 2014: 30)

Structural barriers restrict women's political participation in Kachin, as is the case elsewhere in Myanmar. Paramount among these is the 2008 Constitution,<sup>11</sup> which guarantees the military 25 per cent of all seats in the national parliament, endorses the appointment of men to positions that are 'deemed suitable for men only' (p. 150) and holds that the president and the two vice-presidents must be 'well-acquainted' in military matters (p. 15). The constitution also states that key ministerial positions are reserved for military personnel, and that the military must approve the appointment of ministers, the president and vice-presidents. The dominance of the military and the insistence on military experience effectively disqualifies most women from gaining strategic positions in the government, as women were, until October 2013, barred from entering Myanmar's army apart from as members of the medical corps or as administrative assistants (McLaughlin 2014). The parliament in Myanmar has one of the lowest levels of women's representation in the world: the average member is a middle-aged Buddhist Bamar man, and less than 6 per cent of seats are occupied by women (Global Justice Center 2013). Only two out of 33 ministerial positions are filled by women: the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, both of which focus on areas that gender norms suggest are particularly suitable for women.

Despite evidence to the contrary, a recent debate held in the Lower House concluded that women in Myanmar do not suffer from discrimination.<sup>12</sup> This argument has been echoed by officials attending international forums to counter claims of sexual violence committed by Myanmar's army, thus rendering as unnecessary the need for policies advancing women's equality and addressing issues of gender-based violence and marginalization:

Gender equality has never been a big issue in Myanmar mainly due to the fact that Myanmar women traditionally enjoy [a] high degree of equal rights with men. Their rights are being protected by tradition and the existing laws. (Myanmar delegation, 67<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly)



Another potentially discriminatory clause in the constitution holds that ministerial and presidential candidates must be 'loyal to the Union', which could be used to disqualify those involved in political opposition activities, such as women participating in struggles on the part of ethnic and religious minorities. The constitution also states that political parties must demonstrate loyalty, and may not directly or indirectly contact or abet non-state armed groups, organizations or people associated with them. This provision could be used to prohibit or control the formation of ethnic- and religious-minority political parties, such as Kachin political parties, that may be deemed to have links to the KIO or the KIA. Language may also be a barrier prohibiting Kachin and other ethnic-minority women's full political participation, as Myanmar is used as the *de facto* official language in government proceedings, thereby discriminating against minority-language speakers.

In addition to the legislated obstacles mentioned above, cultural norms serve to inhibit women's public roles. These hold that men are more suitable for leadership positions than women, as reflected in proverbs and practice. For instance, no women are employed in decision-making positions at the township level in Myanmar (Minoletti 2014: 10). Women often lack the time and income to participate in decision-making processes, as many are the primary breadwinners in their families. This is due to the high numbers of male drug addicts, and men working in jade and gold mines located in remote areas of the state. The number of female-headed households in Kachin ranks second in the country after Yangon, according to a report published by the United Nations Development Programme in 2011.<sup>13</sup> This number is probably under-reported, however, as it does not take into account families with members conscripted into the KIA, with male soldiers often based away from their families for most of the year (Minoletti 2014: 27). The lack of inheritance rights in customary law also means that many women may be financially dependent on male family members, which has a negative impact on their ability to bargain in the household and participate in public life. Women may also have to struggle to maintain an income after the death of male family members (Minoletti 2014: 19). Poverty experienced by Kachin women is thus closely intertwined with structural gender inequality and access to, and influence over, decision-making processes.

Religious norms also act as barriers to women's full political participation in Kachin communities. Within Kachin Baptist congregations, women cannot become pastors, and the lack of female leadership in churches is reflected in the very low number of key positions filled by women in Baptist community organizations (Minoletti 2014: 13). One woman interviewed explained that she wanted to attend Bible school but was initially denied the opportunity,



as she was told that women should get married and not undertake higher education. She persevered and was finally able to go but could not serve as a pastor upon graduation, as this was reserved for male graduates. During her period of study, she felt discriminated against by her teachers, who thought women were unfit for religious leadership positions within the community. This made her aware of the unequal position of women and men in her community, and eventually led to her becoming involved in the women's wing of the KIO.

Religion is one of the most fundamental reasons why women and men have different roles...Male ministers become pastors, women cannot become pastors and are only responsible for traditional [women's] issues [such as children's and women's affairs] and cannot move away from there. Their career has ended. So men are more powerful. This is the most obvious [form of] gender segregation. Kachins are very Christian, so this has big impact, and...the pastors are very influential. (Reservist, KIA)

Gendered dichotomies are also enforced by other means. Women in active service in the KIA are expected to retire once they get married in order to fulfil their duty to have children. In other words, women are wives and mothers first and soldiers second. This practice maintains traditional family values, which perceive women as the cultural and biological reproducers of the nation, and men as their primary defenders and protectors.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, this means that women cannot become leaders in either the civilian or the military administration, as extensive military experience, including official combat experience, is a *de facto* prerequisite for high-ranking positions. The gendered division of labour is thus ensured:

They say women are not qualified enough...If you are serving and then your wife is also serving in [the] KIA, you know, you cannot both serve after marriage, so many women quit their job...And because you have to have many years of the military experience...after they get married, mostly the [women] have to quit their job, so how can they get many years' experience? Right? Because first they have to take care of their family, they have to take care of their kids so they will get no more chance to be a leader or a [high-ranking] leader in the military. Only men. Why do these men not quit their job? (Community activist)

## Mapping women's involvement in conflict

Women have been part of the KIO and KIA since their inception in 1961. In the beginning, however, women were banned from undertaking military training or using weapons. Instead, they were to be involved in support roles that mirrored women's traditional family duties: they were encouraged to provide food, clothing and shelter for male soldiers and to nurse injured and disabled veterans. The division between combat and support roles reinforced a gendered division of labour, as women's roles in the movement were structured as an extension of their domestic duties, and kept them out of decision-making positions. They were not given status in the army, as their contribution was not recognized as soldiering. This compartmentalization into combat and non-combat positions was largely fictional, however, as women experienced conflict both on and off the front line:

On the way to the military camp, we were ambushed by the Burmese troops. We had to run [through] the middle of an opium field, in...plain open sight. We were chased, and I fell down, pretended to be dead, stayed flat on the ground...I managed to escape, but, in the evening, Burmese troops also came to the camp. They started shooting, so we had to flee into the forest. I got lost in the forest, [separated] from my friends. I stayed the entire night with leeches sucking on my blood. In the morning, when I removed the leeches, the bleeding could not be stopped. (Unranked member of the KIA)

After lobbying by female recruits who argued that they needed to learn basic military skills in order to survive, military boot camps opened for women at the end of the 1960s, and are still operating today. Recruits at the military camps are taught the organizational mandate, purpose, and structure of the KIO and the KIA, learn about Kachin history and military tactics, and undertake physical drills and weapons training. They sleep in barracks, salute the flag and carry a wooden rifle with them at all times. At the end of the training, each recruit swears an oath on the Kachin flag, promising to put the defence of the Kachin motherland and Kachin community before her own individual safety. This mix of political lectures and cultural rituals, with a strong religious emphasis, has helped to foster a high degree of political consciousness and community awareness among the graduates. The basic training is offered to everyone working within the KIO, whether they are to serve as soldiers or not, contributing to the growth of a nationalistic spirit among members of the community. Additionally, since early 2003, high school and university students have been undergoing basic military training on a voluntary basis outside of school term times.



In 2011, the KIA Defence Academy began welcoming women recruits to participate in its officer cadet training. Combat positions are still restricted to men only. The reason for the change in policy is not clear, but as it coincided with a renewal in the conflict between the KIA and Myanmar's army, it might relate to a need to increase the number of people serving in the Kachin army. Additionally, there was a generational shift in the leadership in the KIO and KIA around this time, resulting in the recruitment of leaders frequently referred to as younger and more liberal-minded and inclusive compared to the older generation of KIO leaders.

### **Reasons for participation in the conflict**

Each family living in KIO-controlled territory is requested to contribute resources such as a family member to the organization. Consequently, the majority of women interviewed came to the KIO or KIA through this drafting process. However, they would often frame their conscription in voluntary terms, emphasizing that they had volunteered on behalf of their family or in addition to other family members already in the KIO. Despite a lack of basic democratic rights, such as being able to vote for the KIO leadership, the organization is largely seen as the legitimate representative of the Kachin community. When asked to describe what the KIO meant to them, the women interviewed frequently used the words 'mother', 'defender' and 'protector'.

I am connected to the KIO as a mother organization. It's more emotionally connected, not like officially connected, not like you have to go and do training, you know, it's more about being emotionally involved, an awareness of being an ethnic minority, and that we are an oppressed people. (Reservist, KIA)

Many of the women interviewed spoke about their desire to defend the Kachin people and the Kachin homeland and religion against the Bamar-dominated government. They grounded their motivation to join the KIO or KIA in the concept of the national cause or the national interest. Some referred explicitly to self-determination, but most spoke in terms relating to freedom, ethnic- and religious-minority rights and access to, and control over, land, in particular land rich in natural resources.

Accounts of oppression experienced either by the women themselves or by other people in their community during the conflict and the period of the ceasefire frequently informed the women's narratives. This oppression was felt

in both the public and private spheres, encompassing a range of interconnected issues, including the labour market, education, health and infrastructure development. In this way, class is a factor informing their decision to join the KIO: as members of a marginalized group, they lack opportunities for educational and economic development. In addition, the trafficking of young women and heroin use by young men, seen either as a direct consequence of the conflict or as a consequence more generally of Bamar oppression, was mentioned by several of the interviewees.

Young boys, they became drug addicts, lots of girls are exploited because we don't have many business or job opportunities in our area, because there are not many Kachins in government service...A lot of women, they lost their regular jobs, their regular life, so they don't have [an income] because of the conflict, so a lot of people, especially from the IDP camps, they went to other areas, some people even have to sell their bodies. A lot of Kachin women move to big cities in search of some income to support the family. Most of them ended up in brothels. (Captain, KIA)

The conflict itself and the suffering it has caused the community have also helped motivate Kachin women to join the army. All interviewees raised the issue of women-headed households as a consequence of husbands being stationed at the front line, or disabled or killed in the conflict. This was frequently linked to poverty and the trafficking of young women.

Women would discuss the situation involving refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in general or refer to their own or their families' experiences of being forced to flee from the fighting. Some women interviewed had male family members working for the KIO or KIA or mobilized in village home guards, and they mentioned threats and violence encountered by male soldiers on the front line. A few women also brought up issues of sexual violence against Kachin women. They referred to accusations made by Kachin women's organizations that rape was being used as a strategy of warfare by Myanmar's military against women from ethnic and religious minorities. One woman discussed her own fears in this regard:

I was very afraid of being captured by the Burmese army. So sometimes [on] the front line I had a pistol, a handgun to protect myself. I always thought if I [were] captured by the Burmese army, I would use this to commit suicide...Sometimes I had to go to the village to find things, like supplies, medicines and batteries and some cigarettes...but even though I had a pistol, I felt unsafe and very nervous. (Corporal, KIA)



These experiences of oppression, whether experienced communally or individually, suggest that these women's position in a religious- and ethnic-minority group was a significant contributing factor in their initial and continued involvement in the KIA or KIO. Their ability to practise their religion or speak their language has been circumscribed by the dominance of the Myanmar language and Buddhism. This is attributed to decisions enforced by the regime, who the Kachin people hold responsible for their marginalization, and, importantly, for the conflict. The women described the central government as an unaccountable and illegitimate entity, in stark contrast to the KIO. The KIO, then, is the only organization they feel they can depend on to protect their interests and their community in the conflict:

The Kachin society has to continue the resistance, whether it is led by the KIO or not, but right now this is the organization we have, so we have to support [the] KIO. This is the legitimate organization to resist the Burmese; we must have an organization to do so. (Reservist, KIA)

All women interviewed agreed that women should be allowed to fight on the front line if they so wished, and several of the younger recruits stated that they would like to engage in combat. Some had lobbied their superiors to get access to combat positions. They thus expressed the opinion that women had the same basic capacity for violence as men, and reasoned that gendered norms describing women as vulnerable and weak were behind the ban on women in combat positions:

I want to be a very brilliant fighter in combat, but as a woman I cannot go... When I was in the [Defence Academy], the other [women] cadets and [I] demanded, 'Let us go to the battlefield', because a lot of our schoolmates, the male soldiers, went to the battlefield, but we were left behind at the school...We were just very excited to go. We wanted to go very strongly. We wanted to go to the battlefield. (Second Lieutenant, KIA)

The importance of both seeing and including women as political agents in discussions linking conflict, nationalism and gender is clearly illustrated here. The women interviewed positioned themselves as protectors of the community, alongside men. They claimed roles as military defenders of Kachin identity, arguing for women's equal capacity for violence and political action, upsetting dominant notions stating that "protection" is the sole domain of men and masculinity and "being protected" that of women and femininity' (Eriksson-Baaz and Stern 2013: 721).

In sum, the motivations for women to enlist, conscription notwithstanding, ranged from a sense of duty to experiences of oppression and insecurity, feelings of trust and dependence, and nationalism. Only oppression and insecurity, as articulated in actual or perceived threats of sexual violence, trafficking and forced sex work, stand out as gender-specific reasons for women enlisting in Kachin military organizations. These motivations are linked to the women's position as members of a marginalized ethnic- and religious-minority group, as well as to class: Bamar women and men were perceived as having access to opportunities and recourses closed off to people belonging to the Kachin community.

## Mapping women's involvement in peace

The space for civil society and local activism seemed to expand during the ceasefire period, as women were exposed to the idea of gender equality and gender politics, resulting in an increase in the politicization of women.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the steep rise in female-headed households and female responsibility in the family—due to the inability of men to move about freely for fear of being arrested as KIA or KIO spies or of being used as porters by Myanmar's army, the drafting of male soldiers to the front lines and the prevalence of drug addiction among young men—has resulted in a shift in responsibilities:

During this conflict and the last one, women [have been taking on] the role of community [leaders]. For a long time...many women have been village [leaders]. But when the conflict is over, then [the] men come and take [over these roles]: 'women, come back to [the] kitchen, and then we will take our role again'. But during the first war, women, you know, organized relief aid, organized local people and people from abroad, Kachin people from abroad and people from China...And in government-controlled areas [too]...At that time, we women [didn't] know about, you know, [women's issues], [women's] rights, we [didn't] know, but now the situation has changed. We mobilize women. We are [raising awareness] of gender [issues], women's rights. So now women have woken up. Women know. (Community activist)

The absence of a clear division between the front and the home may have facilitated the increase in women public figures, since a perceived threat or an actual attack on the KIO and KIA could be interpreted as an assault on all Kachin people. Therefore, Kachin women feel they have a responsibility to defend their home and do their duty alongside Kachin men.



As a Kachin, we have to serve, we have to struggle for our people...because in [a] serious situation like this, all Kachin families have to [provide] at least one or two family members [to serve] because we need to protect and defend our motherland. (Second Lieutenant, KIA)

In this context, the increase in the number of women active in both the military and in civil society is framed as an anomaly, ensuring that their inclusion does not upset gender roles but is rather seen as an exception: in times of national crisis, everyone is responsible for defending the nation (Jacoby 2010: 82). Accordingly, despite a reported change in gendered perceptions and abilities, women are still prevented from participating in formal ceasefire negotiations in any great numbers, as normative gendered perceptions prevail. Until May 2013, no women had taken part in the Kachin negotiations with the government. In late May, a technical team to advise on the peace process was formed. After lobbying from women's groups, a third of the seats were allocated to women, although, as of 2014, only two of the 15 seats had been filled.

All of the women interviewed agreed that women should be involved in the ceasefire process; however, most concluded that they did not personally have the capacity to participate, indicating an internalization of normative gender roles that deem women unqualified for political discussions. High-ranking military experience as a prerequisite for participation was also brought up as a reason for excluding women, although, as indicated above, women are often unable to reach high-ranking positions due to gendered expectations of family responsibilities. Additionally, arbitrary selection criteria for participation in the ceasefire talks make it difficult for women's groups to become involved:

[The KIA says] if you are too young, then the other side [the government] will look down on you and also if you are too young then you don't have enough [experience] and then knowledge to compete with the other side. And if you are too old, they meant for the women, then you can't concentrate... (Central Committee member, Women's League of Burma)

The lack of women's participation in formal ceasefire processes at the local level is mirrored at the national level. In August 2011, Myanmar's president declared a peace plan for national reconciliation. A number of institutions were established to further this aim, such as the Union-Level Peace Team, made up of a Central Committee that is responsible for designing policies related to ceasefires, and a Working Committee that is responsible for implementing the policies designed by the Central Committee, and the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC), which coordinates the government's peace



activities and reports directly to the Office of the President (Hedström 2013). In 2013, a joint committee called the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) and made up of representatives of armed ethnic groups was formed to agree on a common position on the peace process in negotiations with the government. Out of a total of 82.5<sup>16</sup> strategically important positions across these institutions, women hold 3.5 seats—less than 5 per cent of the positions.<sup>17</sup>

Interviews with women's groups indicate that even when women are physically included in meetings, their ability to provide input has been effectively circumscribed by male leaders leaving the room or removing their earphones when women's groups are presenting. When women's groups initially approached the government in 2011, requesting a 30 per cent quota for women in the negotiations, the response was that the government's chief negotiator would bring his wife, suggesting that if women wanted to be involved they would have to talk to her and let the men talk politics:

We met with the [government's chief negotiator]...and then we [talked] about women's participation and then he said that next time he [would] bring his wife. Then they [laughed] every time we [spoke] to them...nearly everyone at the Myanmar Peace Centre says the same words...‘The military [is] asking for 25 per cent in the Parliament and women [are] also [asking] for 30 per cent. So where does that leave us [men]’, they joke, ‘how about [quotas] for us [men]?’ (Central Committee member, Women's League of Burma)

## Reasons for participation in the peace movement

Although women are *de facto* excluded from participating in formal ceasefire processes, they are organized in informal peace movements across the state and the country. As mentioned above, the space for civil society has widened, resulting in the politicization of women, who are now leading peace efforts through informal channels. Key among these are two multi-ethnic and multi-religious women's peace networks, which include ethnic Kachin women: the Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Women's Initiative Network for Peace (WIN-Peace), totalling 51 member organizations between them. They are demanding a quota for women's participation in the ceasefire and peace processes, and lobbying both the non-state armed groups and the government for the inclusion of more women. In addition, there is a Kachin women's forum that is working on coordinating efforts inside the state to include the women's perspective in the peace process, with assistance from both



the WLB and WIN-Peace. In this way, ethnic Kachin women are working together with ethnic Bamar women and women belonging to other ethnic and religious groups to multiply the demands for gender-just peace.

I mean, you can have peace, but if you cannot [include] women, [it won't work]. Why? It's because...who is going to speak out about a woman who is raped? [Or] a woman who has to struggle through domestic violence? [Or] a woman that doesn't have the right to [an] education? (Advocacy group member)

The women interviewed for this study who are active in civil society highlighted the importance of collective action to influence local leaders and enact change. This might not be so surprising given the women's movement's 20-odd years' worth of experience of cooperating across ethnic and religious divides. The current negotiations were deemed not conducive to women's interests and unlikely to ensure long-term peace and development in the country. The proposals advanced by the women's peace movement emphasize the importance of paying attention to human security and transitional justice, the rehabilitation and reintegration of both soldiers and refugees, and just land reforms and development initiatives that are inclusive of social-service needs.

It is not just about stopping the fighting. There should be a guarantee of security for the people and also [a guarantee of everyone's] livelihood [and land]...We also must be able to ensure that there is no need to worry about [our] children's education...Without justice, there is no meaning of peace...Otherwise by the interpretation of lasting peace would be like just stop fighting. That's why we [are trying] to emphasize how justice is important in the peace process. That's what we do. (Community activist)

As such, the women interviewed chose to be active in civil society on strategic grounds. They judged that the women's peace movement's assessment of what it takes to end the conflict and transition into a post-conflict Myanmar was better suited for long-term peace and development than the perspectives put forth by the actors involved in the current ceasefire discussions. An understanding of gender-based inequalities and the impact of gender relations on both conflict and democratization efforts informed their narratives.

In order to overcome politicized cleavages, the women involved in the peace movement frame the conflict in Kachin as representative of how the central government treats marginalized groups elsewhere in the country. They also apply the concept of 'woman'/'women' as a collective identity, existing

alongside and in dialogue with collective ethnic and religious identities. As such, many of the women interviewed professed support for the conflict in Kachin as self-identified members of marginalized ethnic and religious groups. Military action is then interpreted as self-defence, and so women's involvement in the peace movement cannot be interpreted as a rejection of conflict *per se*, but as a rejection of the actions of the central government. In other words, although they criticize non-state armed groups for not including women in the ceasefire discussions, they also support Kachin military actions taken in defence of ethnic- and religious-minority rights.<sup>18</sup> This highlights the need to see and include ethnic- and religious-minority women as stakeholders in the conflict; support from these women bolsters and legitimizes decisions taken by the KIA and KIO, potentially prolonging the ongoing conflict. Moreover, women civil society leaders may influence the opinions of community members, and by extension, influence the actions, violent or otherwise, taken by the KIA and KIO.

## Consequences for state building

Concerns raised by the WLB and WIN-Peace illustrate the significant gender biases inherent in Myanmar's peace process. With its focus on (male) public violence, the process fails to address issues related to security, and the lack thereof, as experienced by women and, importantly, fails to understand the connection to sustainable peace and democracy. In silencing the experiences of marginalized women from ethnic and religious minorities, the negotiations are not taking into account (gendered) structural inequalities that have shaped not only the continuation of the conflict but also women and men's roles in it. The interviews reveal that gender-based violence informs women's participation in the conflict as violent actors but also influences the women's groups' tacit support for armed ethnic-minority organizations. As such, ignoring gendered concerns can undermine opportunities for sustainable peace. Moreover, unless women are included in the deliberations, they will be unable to influence the conceptualization of norms—and the design of subsequent policies—related to gender roles, inclusion and participation. This is a particular concern for women from ethnic and religious minorities.

The definition of security and conflict used in the discussions taking place between the non-state armed groups and the government does not reflect women's realities, and has belied calls by women's groups for attention to be given to violence as experienced by women in both the public and private arenas. The use of sexual violence against women belonging to ethnic minorities during the conflict, identified by women's groups as a strategy of warfare used by Myanmar's army, continued during the ceasefire period, as



ethnic-minority areas saw an increase in the number of battalions posted to these regions, ostensibly in order to secure and monitor the ceasefire in resource-rich areas. The use or threat of sexual violence undermines women's ability to participate effectively in peace- and state-building activities, such as elections and governance processes, as do other forms of gender-based violence that go unaddressed. Dominant norms concerning family and gender relations have resulted in widespread acceptance of domestic violence, which, studies have shown, often increases in ceasefire and transitional periods as former soldiers return to their families (Call 2007). Intra-family bargaining power is informed by these gender norms, and impacts women's ability to address domestic violence and participate fully and effectively in public life. Women, and in particular women from ethnic- and religious-minority backgrounds, face serious barriers to accessing justice. In areas under KIO control, issues related to gender-based violence are often delegated to customary authorities or, if the case involves KIA soldiers, are dealt with by a KIO military court. Kachin women's groups have accused both of these systems of discriminating against women by not taking issues of sexual violence or domestic violence seriously enough. On the national level, women in Myanmar lack legal protection in the form of laws penalizing domestic violence and marital rape<sup>19</sup> (Gender Equality Network 2013). In addition, the current constitution includes a clause that effectively absolves the state military of any responsibility for crimes committed against women from religious and ethnic minorities during the conflict.<sup>20</sup> However, the demands of women's groups that the ceasefire negotiations take into consideration the need for transitional justice and legal reforms related to gender-based violence have been sidelined from the discussions.

If women are excluded from the process, then in the transitional or post-conflict plan, there might not be included a consideration for women, a truth and justice commission, for example, looking at violence against women...Even some of the ethnic armed groups do not want to talk about these issues, [such as] sexual violence against women, because they are afraid the finger will be pointed at them also. So, you know, these issues will definitely not be brought to the table if women are excluded. (Central Committee Member, Women's League of Burma)

Many of the women living in the conflict areas are affected by poverty, reflecting the gender-based discrimination that they experience as it intersects with ethnicity and religion, as well as class. This results in women experiencing exploitative work situations or struggling as single heads of household to provide for their families. The renewal of the conflict has exacerbated economic insecurity, as many rural families have had to leave their farms and

businesses behind when fleeing attacks. Men face restrictions on travel, as they can be accused of being KIA associates, or they might be drafted to the front lines for either army. This means that it is mostly women who travel to secure food, water and firewood for their families, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence: as mentioned above, sexual assaults against Kachin women have continued during the ceasefire and the current conflict period. Additionally, the land around the IDP camps is pocketed with landmines, adding a further threat to women's security (Htoi Gender and Development Foundation 2014).

[Men] might disappear for one whole season [for] mining and [logging]... So [this] means it is really putting [a] burden on the [women] in the camps. That's why...it's usually [women] [stepping on landmines]. [Because] they are trying to find bamboo shoots, or...forest [products] like mushrooms or firewood or [vegetables]...Sometimes also they try to find a job in China...and sometimes [at] sugarcane [plantations] for one season, and then they were trafficked...Sometimes they were raped and sometimes they were taken by the soldiers or arrested... So in terms of the burden, day-to-day burden...many people thought that men risk more in the war zone, but actually from my point of view [women] [face graver] risks, day to day. (Community activist)

Interviews also revealed that women, rather than men, stay behind when villages are attacked to care for people who are unable to flee—the elderly, young children and people with disabilities—thus increasing their susceptibility to gender-based violence. Pregnant women may face additional challenges in and around IDP camps because of their inability to access health services. This may also be a problem for women during menstruation:

When they run to the IDPs camps from the conflict, on the way, if the women have monthly menstruation, and they don't have anything to cover themselves with, in that instance, in our culture, it can be seen as bad luck or stigma, so sometimes women are left behind because of the blood. (Community activist)

In this way, structural income inequalities intersecting with gender restrict poor and rural women's ability to participate in public life. This has a negative impact on their opportunities to influence transitional policy frameworks and, by extension, the development of institutions and norms related to human rights and gender in a democratic Myanmar.



Moreover, the exclusion of the women's movement from the official peace process means that women's considerable expertise in peacebuilding is being ignored: the women's movement has been involved in community peacebuilding projects for almost two decades, facilitating the meeting of people from both majority and minority groups to identify commonalities in their views and needs resulting from the conflict. All the major non-state armed organizations with the exception of the women's movement have fallen apart or have had open disagreements. Consequently, for the peace process to be sustainable, the experiences of the women's movement concerning how to build lasting and inclusive alliances need to be taken into account.

## Conclusion

Public discourse on the conflict in Myanmar has been dominated by men in military uniforms and by men in public office, with the latter predominantly (although not exclusively) Bamar, Buddhist and from urban settings. Women, particularly those belonging to ethnic- and religious-minority groups residing in rural areas, have been prevented from participating in the negotiations in any meaningful way despite their involvement in both military ethno-political organizations and civil-society-based peace organizations. This marginalization risks undermining the democratic process that follows the signing of peace agreements, as women's input into the design and development of democratic institutions and practices will be severely circumscribed, resulting in weak support for democratic processes. This highlights the need for policymakers and academic researchers alike to apply a more complex framework of analysis in their work on the civil wars in Myanmar that includes gender and identifies women as politically motivated actors who can inhibit or foster transitions from war and conflict to peace and stability.

## Recommendations

- Myanmar's nascent democratization, including the ceasefire, should be supported and the process be made legitimate, accountable and inclusive, by *building the capacity of interethnic networks and minority women's grass-roots organizations* to enable them to participate in the democratization process. Without the full and substantial inclusion of women, particularly women from ethnic- and religious-minority backgrounds, the current democratic deliberations risk losing relevance (and thus momentum), which will have a negative impact on the sustainability of peace and contribute to a lack of legitimacy for state building.

- As the conceptualization of norms and the design frameworks related to women's human rights, gender roles, inclusion and participation have a direct impact on the quality of democracy and the successful management of diversity, these processes must be inclusive of women from ethnic and religious minorities. It is therefore imperative that *funders be supportive and inclusive of locally led, multi-ethnic women's movements.*
- Unless women's groups are consulted, interventions will fail to address women's needs in both conflict and non-conflict areas. *International agencies and actors must therefore include women's voices in their planning and execution of country programmes in order to visualize and address the impact of interventions on women and gender relations within communities.*
- Importantly, *the capacity of women's networks needs to be strengthened* so that they can influence the design and execution of domestic policies and interventions.
- *The experience of the women's movement in building alliances across ethnic and religious divides needs to be used to enhance the prospects of sustainable peace.* The importance of having indigenously crafted and substantially inclusive agreements cannot be underestimated.
- Women's groups stress the need to *recognize women's insecurity in deliberations on peace and democracy*, arguing that violence against women as experienced at the hands of military actors can be used as a marker of the country's lack of progress. *Outside actors need to highlight the status of women's human rights as a marker of progress toward peace and democracy, and to recognize and address human rights violations perpetrated by military personnel stationed in ceasefire areas, as well as in areas of active conflict.*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Additional analysis based on the underlying research discussed here will be published in Hedström, J. "Before I joined the Army, I was like a Child": Militarism and Women's Rights in Kachinland' in Sadan M. (ed.), *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar –the Kachin Ceasefire 1994 -2011*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> In this case study, 'Bamar' is used to refer to the ethnic majority in Myanmar, and 'Myanmar' to describe all men and women from Myanmar without specifying ethnic or religious origins.
- <sup>3</sup> For information about the ceasefire process, please see the Myanmar Peace Monitor website, which provides updated information about the conflict and peace process, available at <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/component/content/article/57-stakeholders/155-kio>>.

- <sup>4</sup> The gatekeeper was someone with strong connections to the leadership of the KIO.
- <sup>5</sup> Author's interview with a KIA reservist, Kachin, Myanmar, 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> See Asian Human Rights Commission (2014), Fortify Rights (2014) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2013: 23–4).
- <sup>7</sup> The 'Other' is a relative concept that is defined in relation to the 'Self/Same', which it is not, as, in this case, a group (ethnic) identity as defined in relation to another identity. For the Kachin in Myanmar, for example, Sadan (2013: 38–9) has argued that Christianity has become a marker of difference vis-à-vis the Buddhist majority population. The 'Other' is often portrayed as different and negative. See Beauvoir (1997: 16–21) and Yuval-Davis (2012).
- <sup>8</sup> See Euro Burma Office, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Kachin National Organisation, 'The Republic of the Government of Kachinland', available at <<http://www.kachinland.org/>>, accessed 5 January 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Myanmar Peace Monitor, 'Stakeholder Overview: Kachin Independence Organization', available at <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/stakeholders-overview/155-kio>>, accessed 2 July 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> The full text of the 2008 Constitution can be found at <<http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/asia/MM/Myanmar-Constitution-2010/view>>, accessed 21 January 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Euro Burma Office, 2014, p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 'Integrated Household Living Conditions (IHLCA) Survey in Myanmar (2009–10): Poverty Profile', Yangon, Myanmar, June 2011, available at <[http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/FA1MMRPovertyProfile\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/FA1MMRPovertyProfile_Eng.pdf)>, accessed 29 June 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> See Enloe (2000), Jacoby (2010) and Yuval-Davis (1997).
- <sup>15</sup> Sebastian Rumsby et al. 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> One position is part time (0.5).
- <sup>17</sup> Calculated based on the NCCT (13 members, of which one is a woman), the Union Peace Central Committee (11 members, all male), the Union Peace Working Committee (52 members, of which two are women) and MPC (7.5 positions, of which one part-time position is filled by a woman).
- <sup>18</sup> See Ferguson (2013) for an analysis of this on Shan women.
- <sup>19</sup> Marital rape is only criminalized if the wife is younger than 14. See Gender Equality Network (2013).
- <sup>20</sup> Article 445 of the 2008 Constitution states that, 'No proceeding shall be instituted against the said [previously ruling] Councils or any member thereof or any member of the Government, in respect of any act done in the execution of their respective duties'. Moreover, article 381 states that '[e]xcept in the following situations and time, no citizen shall be denied redress by due process



of law for grievances entitled under law: (a) in time of foreign invasion; (b) in time of insurrection; (c) in time of emergency'. Article 382 states that, '[i]n order to carry out their duties fully and to maintain the discipline by the Defence Forces personnel or members of the armed forces responsible [for ensuring] peace and security, the rights given in this Chapter [Citizen, Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Citizens] shall be restricted or revoked through enactment [of] law'.