



The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement

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Abstract

In Karenni State, political leaders seek to determine what constitutes women’s and men’s affairs. Power cuts, increases in commodity prices, and whether or not soldiers should bathe naked in common areas, are examples of what are considered to be women’s affairs: events unworthy of serious attention. On the other hand, peace, conflict resolution, and protests against the central government are considered to be national affairs, and in the male domain. This article charts how such a dichotomy creates a two-tier system in Karenni State, where men dominate almost all of society, from the family to politics. It also highlights how Karenni women’s organizations strive to participate in national liberation movements and fight for more space for women.

Background

“*Amyothameeyay* movement activists are now joining our *amyothayay*¹ movement.”

A male activist said this to me at a peace forum organized by women’s organizations in Karenni State in May 2019. His remark prompted me to question the commonly held views toward women activists working for the right to self-determination and other movements in Karenni State. One such view is

¹ In the Burmese language, *amyothayay* (အမျိုးသားအရေး) literally means men’s affairs, considered to be national affairs, whereas *amyothameeyay* (အမျိုးသမီးအရေး) is women’s affairs, associated with the protection and delivery of social services to women. There are no direct translations for these words in many of the other languages of Myanmar, including Kayah (only one of the nine dialects of the Karenni language family).

that women are associated with only the *amyothameeyay* movement and no other. We must question why men think that women should be active in their own women's affairs but not in other matters, especially in *amyothayay* or national affairs. Do women only pursue causes exclusive to women's affairs?

The dichotomy between *amyotha* and *amyothamee* creates a gendered hierarchy in political affairs. In other words, women-led movements or movements that women support are usually not considered to be 'national' (*amyothayay*) and therefore are not paid attention to by wider society. Gender-based violence and domestic violence are considered issues of *amyothameeyay*, artificially separating these issues from *amyothayay*, yet movements such as the protests against the 2021 military coup and against the General Aung San statue in Loikaw are considered to be men's movements emblematic of *amyothayay*. Prioritizing "men's" issues over women's jeopardizes women's movements and trivializes their concerns.

Based on my experience working with local activists in Karenni communities in Karenni State, in this article I discuss this tendency to view or label movements as either male (conflated with "national") or female.

The Karenni National Liberation Movement

The term Karenni refers to the place and people of what is called Kayah State by the Bamar military government.² The Karenni have a unique political history and background.³ Karenni State was never formally incorporated within British Burma and, when Burma gained independence in 1948, the new state was promised the right of secession in recognition of its historically

² Karenni State is one of the least populous states in Burma and shares borders with Shan State, Karen State and Thailand. Karenni State was incorporated into modern-day Myanmar only after the country's emergence from colonial rule in 1948. Before then, the area was nominally independent. For more, see Dee Dee, 2019.

³ There are over a dozen ethnic Karenni subgroups including the Kayan (the women famous for their long necks), Kayah, Geko, Geba, Bres, Manumanaw, Yintale, Yinbaw, Bwe and Paku (Smith, 1994).

independent status. Burma came to the Karenni; the Karenni did not seek to be part of Burma. In fact, the Burma army invaded the area in 1948 because Karenni leaders refused to join the newly formed Union of Burma. In mid-1947, nationalist leaders under U Bee Tu Re declared the independence of Karenni State. Following the murder of U Bee Tu Re by the Union of Burma's military police in August 1948, Karenni people took up arms against the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League government.⁴ The Karenni armed struggle was not born out of aggression but of defense and was initiated only to defend our territory, culture, and people.

Since then, the Karenni liberation movement has grown. Karenni people seek to unify around demands for rights related to Karenni ethnicities, identities, and self-determination, in opposition to the Myanmar military government and its Burmanization policies. Bamar people dominate decision-making positions and force non-Bamar populations to assimilate to hegemonic Bamar culture and religion. An example of Burmanization is the unilateral renaming of our state: in 1952, the Burmese government officially changed Karenni State's name to Kayah State.⁵ Therefore, the name one calls the state is inherently political. The Myanmar military prohibits the term "Karenni" as they see it as a term of resistance.

The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) was established in 1957 along with its armed wing, the Karenni Army (KA). The KNPP also runs a de-facto government and organizes aid, healthcare, education, social welfare and protection for local populations and Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). In 1964, the Kayan New Land Party (KNLP) was established and the newly named Karenni National People's Liberation Force split from the KNPP, allying with the KNLP and the Shan Nationalities Peoples Liberation Organization. Internal divisions between Karenni groups at that time weakened the overall armed struggle against the Burma army.

⁴ The date of 9 August was then marked as Karenni National Resistance Day.

⁵ Tadayuki, 2014.

During decades of armed conflict, many Karenni people have fled to and across the Thailand border, becoming IDPs or refugees, with heavy fighting in the years 1994-2000 forcing thousands to move to border refugee camps. Under the Burmese government's Four Cuts campaign,⁶ many Karenni communities have been forced to relocate from their homes and their adopted homes, in a pattern of repeated forced displacement. According to the Border Consortium's 2019 annual report, 9.6 per cent of all refugees living in refugee camps in Thailand (a total of 93,333) are Karenni.⁷ Simply put, Karenni people have been politically and socially marginalized under each successive government and military regime of Burma, from independence until the present.

Women in Karenni Society

In Karenni society women are expected to take responsibility for conserving their culture, reproducing, taking care of the home, and providing care work for family members and relatives. However, similar to other patriarchal societies, Karenni men in positions of power set the standards, social and cultural norms for the rest of society to follow. There are only a few written documents and records discussing Karenni culture, history and tradition, and even fewer written by Karenni people themselves, as Karenni society has long relied on oral traditions to pass down knowledge. Many Karenni people know traditional proverbs such as "*parah maw hae*", which roughly translates to "women talk". It belittles women as it creates a binary that men work and women talk. Karenni traditional folktales and experiences circulate in family and community conversations and perpetuate a negative depiction of women, which only reinforces women's low status in society.

Traditionally, Karenni women's roles are tied to supporting and looking after their families. Karenni women have an important role in farming, cooking and making food for the family,

⁶ Cutting the enemy's access to information, food, recruits and finances.

⁷ The Border Consortium, 2019.

and taking care of the household. As in other patriarchal societies, Karenni men are the head of the household and the decisionmaker of the family.⁸ The head of the household sets the standards inside and outside the house, and if the women in the family (wife, daughter or otherwise) do not meet these standards, they will be excluded or marginalized. Afraid of this, women conform to gender expectations and meet the standards laid down by men. There is a very clear division of work based on gender; women are expected to do household chores and men are expected to do ‘outside’ work like hunting. Both men and women usually participate in farming activities. Men rarely help to raise children, work in the kitchen or do other chores. In my family, my grandmother (very much an ordinary Karenni woman) always woke up early in the morning to prepare meals for the whole household. Then she joined other male household members doing farm work. On top of that, she also took responsibility for domestic chores.

Society has strict expectations on young Karenni women: to handle the household work, get married with someone from the same community and support their family. Often, young Karenni women are forced to choose partners of their own ethnicity. One prominent Karenni male activist remarked to me, “We are a small population in Myanmar, so we should encourage Karenni women to marry within the same ethnic community to preserve our culture and increase our population”.⁹ He linked protecting the Karenni race with national duty. This is a prime example of men controlling women’s bodies and expecting them to reproduce to maintain ‘culture’ and sustain ‘race’.

Karenni women’s womanhood is defined by a constant, heavy workload of household and care work. Rather than caring for themselves, they must prioritize taking care of other people. My grandmother’s routine for her whole life of 70 years was

⁸ A few women-headed households do exist, but socially, men are still the most important member in the family. Sons assume their father’s role if there is none. Older sons enjoy favoritism and usually have the final say within their families.

⁹ Male activist, personal communication, June 2018.

dedicated to serving her husband and family members. She did all the domestic work such as cooking, washing, and cleaning as well as helping with farming. She woke up at around 4 a.m. and worked straight through until she lay down to sleep at night. My grandfather, as head of the household, however made all the important decisions.

There are many things that Karenni women cannot do that men can freely do. Many traditional ceremonies practiced by different Karenni groups are prohibited to women. For example, women are forbidden from participating in the Kay Htoe Boe festival, the traditional celebration of the Karenni new year held on a date proposed by a fortune teller. Society identifies leaders and individuals from only certain backgrounds to lead the Kay Htoe Boe ceremony. Women are not allowed to go anywhere near the ceremonial compound because they are considered to be second class, and some communities even consider them to bring bad luck. Karenni women, while accorded duties to preserve their culture and ethnic identity, do not enjoy equal rights to participate in their own cultural heritage and the ceremonies that make up Karenni tradition.

Hunting festivals are another tradition that women cannot join. In some areas, community leaders restrict women who are on their period to bathe, even when all male family members have left the house. They believe that menstruating may bring bad luck to the family and to male's hunting prowess and that any area touched by women's blood is not clean. Men supposedly embody good luck whereas women embody bad luck; women must protect men from their bodies and bodily fluids.

I am a Karenni woman who strove to meet the expectations placed upon me. My community and family expected me to learn to cook and do all the housework, build a new family and support it, and behave as a woman 'should'. I grew up living in fear of being marginalized and excluded. I followed the social protocols and tried to meet the standards set by society. I dared not raise critical questions to 'superiors' and learned to do housework and performed my duties. But I was aware of all this, and

frustrated: when I came back home late, my mother told me off, yet my brother could explore the nightlife as he pleased.

Women are at higher risk than men outside the home and are more likely to be attacked, and if attacked, we are the ones who are blamed because we have supposedly 'been warned'. If a woman acts or lives against the social norms set by powerful men, society judges all women as a whole. For example, if a single assertive Karenni woman expresses her opinions in a meeting, argues with or is critical of elders and leaders, is generally outspoken about her ideas and advice, wears Western style clothing, sits at tea shops or bars, or goes out late at night, the whole of society thinks that all women are behaving like that individual. If men do the same things, society considers that these are the choices of just one particular man. Individual women are representatives of the whole whereas men are freed from that representation, liberated from norms and standards. Women are made to take responsibility for others' actions. There is minimum tolerance for deviation and yet the standards and expectations are set high.

But there are some women who are trying to change this.

Women in the Revolution (and National Liberation Movement)

Women are trained as both soldiers and medics for relief operations. There are many female medics who go to conflict zones to rescue villagers and provide treatment to sick and injured villagers. They are the breadwinners of their families and protect their children and elders in times of danger. In Karenni liberated areas, most teachers are women. They provide education to the children of revolutionary leaders and soldiers. Also, they are the ones who help to preserve and promote the culture and literature of the Karenni people. They teach and pass down these practices and knowledge to younger generations. More and more women are emerging as

*community leaders in areas that support the liberation movement.*¹⁰

At the beginning of the Karenni liberation movement after Burma's independence, it was difficult to find histories, textbooks and other written sources about the Karenni in any of our languages as there was no unified Karenni written script. In the late 1980s, one written script was invented by former Chairperson of the KNPP, Khu Hte Bu Peh, and it started being used in refugee camp curricula. In 2017, the Myanmar government formally recognized Karenni literature. Karenni groups use three different scripts: Burmese and Roman consonants, Roman consonants, and the Karenni script invented by Khu Hte Bu Peh, which was restricted by the Burmese military until after 2017. Some groups continue to use Roman scripts while others use the new script.

Existing written sources and oral histories place men at the center of Karenni history and there are very few female role models. Karenni national leaders are imagined to be male and society is not prepared to accept women as leaders. Women working for women's rights and women's affairs are regarded as social workers and not considered qualified to talk about politics or participate in setting political agendas. Women cannot incorporate or share their personal experiences in discussions about regional affairs. When women talk about their experiences, men criticize them for being emotional and personalizing the political agenda.

A common belief by prominent political leaders is that when all Karenni are liberated, women will be liberated by proxy; that Karenni women do not suffer from gender-based oppression and therefore do not need to be liberated from the patriarchy. When women raise issues like gender-based violence and discrimination with male leaders, they usually respond: "We can solve these issues later when we have self-determination. The priority is ethnic rights, and women's rights will be granted if we can win

¹⁰ Maw Thel Mar, technical support team to KNPP, personal communication, May, 2019.

our ethnic rights”.¹¹ This lack of understanding of gender inequality and the intersectional aspects of discrimination makes men ignorant of the problems women face and the violence they are subjected to. Male leaders do not recognize gender-related problems as critical problems in society and think that the concept of gender as opposed to sex has been imposed by foreign countries. They think they are national leaders working for all the people, all the men and women in society, so there is no need to talk about women-only issues in the national agenda.

Decades of militarization, armed conflict and intercommunal violence in Karenni State fuels the gender-based violence that traps generations of women in dangerous situations. In most cases of violence against women, survivors cannot access justice. There is also a culture of victim-blaming and silencing the truth. Female victims and their sympathizers are afraid to speak out because of threats and lack of security. Those benefiting from privileged positions in society rarely stand with victims for fear of losing those benefits.

Some women, however, have organized to resist the deep-rooted patriarchal values in Karenni State. Woman leaders such as Naw Phaw Shar, Nan Eme, Naw Tular Paw, Maw Day Day Phaw, Arr Mu Doh, Naw Bwee Phaw and Naw Mu Wah Phoe came from Karenni refugee camps and formed the Karenni National Women’s Organization (KNWO) in 1993 at Nan Soi refugee camp in north-west Thailand. Since 1993, the KNWO has been increasingly recognized as a leading organization in the promotion and protection of women’s rights in Karenni State and the refugee camps. The KNWO is a pioneer in the Karenni women’s movement that challenges patriarchal values and practices within Karenni society. Other Karenni women’s organizations emerged later, taking advantage of the political change in Myanmar after the 2010 general elections.

Even with these strong leaders, my own experience leads me to understand that male activists in the Karenni liberation movement are not comfortable having women activists around.

¹¹ Male leader of unnamed ethnic revolutionary organization, personal communication, May 2019.

When asked in March 2019 about women's participation in the Karenni team's negotiations with the ruling government about the General Aung San statue in Loikaw (which was held the previous month), a male leader aggressively responded that:

*We are all very busy negotiating with the government about the statue. The questions you asked about women's participation in our negotiation team were perplexing. We did invite women, but none came.*¹²

Male leaders often say they welcome women's participation but that women simply do not want to participate. Instead of empowering and facilitating women, male leaders just claim they choose not to participate, ignoring historical and ongoing oppression, marginalization, and low expectations by society for women's civic participation.

Karenni Women Role Models

Many women have taken part in the Karenni liberation movement over time but very few have enjoyed leadership positions. Although there are relatively few women serving in the KNPP leadership, most women have played important, though less recognized roles, in keeping the movement alive. Since the beginning of resistance against the unlawful annexation of Karenni State by the Burmese government in 1948, the area has been engulfed in political turmoil and war. After the sudden death of Saw Shwe, the Chairperson of the Karenni Supreme Council (former name of the KNPP), Katherine Shwe, wife of the late chairperson, was chosen to replace him. She served as a chairperson for three months but resigned to look after her young children, alone and in harsh conditions. She is recognized as the first and the only woman to serve as chair in KNPP history.

¹² A typical remark made by male leader in March 2019, Loikaw.

The KA recruits both men and women. Female soldiers are known as Karenni *yemay* or Karenni female soldiers. Most *yemay* are discharged as active soldiers when they marry or start a family. The mothers and wives of Karenni revolution leaders and soldiers should not be forgotten in Karenni history, for they in fact are the ones who sacrifice most for the movement. When men go to the frontline, women must immediately become the breadwinner of their families and communities. They feed not only their own children, but also the soldiers they support. When the enemy advances in their areas, women are the ones who have to carry their children on their backs and run for safety.

Currently, the KNPP leadership for the term of the thirteenth KNPP Congress has two women leaders in the central committee and two in the reserved committee. Maw Day Day Phaw and Naw Bwee Phaw are in the former and Naw Khu Phaw and Maw Deh Mer Phaw are in the latter. These women have been through many obstacles in their lives to be recognized as leaders. Beside taking care of their families, they carry out all the responsibilities put upon them by society. All these women I mentioned are living role models to many Karenni girls and women. Their sacrifice and commitment to the revolution are no less than those of men. They are bold and resilient throughout prolonged armed conflict.

Marginalization of Women in the Aung San Statue Protests

The case of resisting the construction of a statue of Burmese leader General Aung San by the government in Loikaw, capital of Karenni State, is an example of how Karenni youth resisted Burmanization. It is a contemporary liberation movement of the Karenni People. The statue movement highlights the marginalization of women in important political and civic processes such as negotiation and dialogue with the authorities. Karenni activists strongly believed that the erection of a General Aung San statue in their capital city was an example of Burmanization,

and the regional and central governments' decision to continue with its construction despite protests symbolized the doubly coercive power of democracy and cultural hegemony.

Opposition to the statue began in February 2018 when the state government began the project. After erecting the statue against Karenni peoples' wishes, many came out on the streets and demanded its removal. The state government responded by shooting by rubber bullets and using water cannons on the protesters. But the movement did not stop; instead, it spread to other parts of the country. The leaders of the protest were arrested. After some negotiations, the government did not charge the protest leaders.¹³

Individual women and women's organizations played important leadership roles in organizing protests opposing the statue. They organized a successful demonstration on 12 February 2019, getting 6,000 people onto the streets and generating widespread media coverage. Even the organizations that did not join the movement in the beginning later joined the mass demonstrations. The state government responded by calling for negotiation with the leaders of the protest. There was a total of three negotiation meetings between the movement leadership and the government. Negotiations focused on the question of whether or not the statue would be removed. The negotiations failed and it stands upright in Loikaw even today. During the demonstration, however, women protesters were able to defuse tensions when they noticed male protesters picking on women police officers and making sexist comments. The relatively few casualties in the protest movement could also be contributed to women's participation, as they influenced their male colleagues to stay calm.

One of the reasons the negotiations failed was that they were led by male activists and female activists were limited to observer roles. Male leaders could not well represent the demands of the protesters in the negotiation meetings. Women's expertise and shrewd mobilization skills were not well utilized.

¹³ Myanmar Cultural Research Society, 2019.

In the second negotiation meeting, the Karenni side was composed of seven persons: five male leaders, who spoke during the meeting, and two women, who kept quiet as mere observers. One of the female observers said the process was dominated by men.¹⁴ There was not enough discussion within the team about how to negotiate, their strategy and roles. In the final negotiation meeting, the five men stormed out during the opening remarks by the state's Chief Minister, so as to refuse using them as the basis of negotiation. The two female negotiation team members were sitting in the back row and were not informed of the move in advance, let alone consulted. They were attending apparently merely as tokens.

From my observations, in formal meetings related to Karenni society attended by both men and women, the front role is usually taken by men of age with formal positions of power or social authority. Before 2021, in public meetings I myself organized, men often confidently voiced their ideas about the future of the region and the nation, freely shared information about politics, peace processes and their analyses of Karenni history, while women sat in silence at the back of the room. Men enjoyed both physical and symbolic importance whereas women lowered their physical and symbolic positions. Based on women's gestures, body language, and the tones of men asking women critical questions, women who spoke in these meetings were insecure and likely felt unwelcome in what they saw as a male space. Women anticipated hostility from men in general, believing they were thought lowly of. In one meeting conducted in July 2019 during which both men and women gave political updates, a woman volunteered with the most pressing present issue for her: a price hike in electricity bills. All the male meeting attendees rejected her update, arguing that the issue was not political, and they admonished her for bringing up what they saw as a trivial affair.

In another meeting where different state actors in Karenni State met and set an agenda for peace and reconciliation, a

¹⁴ Female member of the negotiation team, personal communication, March 2019.

female participant talked about women feeling insecure and unsafe in their villages, especially when showering, due to the many unknown armed men wandering around. Frequent military deployments by various groups burden Karenni women, especially in rural areas, where they suffer conflict-related sexual violence, especially by the Burmese military and armed groups. Karen Human Rights Group's documentation reveals that sexual violence remains an ongoing issue in southeast Myanmar including in Karenni State.¹⁵ According to an information update from the KNWO, there are about 50 known cases of rape, child rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment every year in Karenni State.¹⁶ But in this meeting, these women's security concerns were denounced by male representatives from armed organizations, who said harassment, gender-based violence, and domestic violence (i.e., women's issues in general) were not considered part of the national agenda and therefore could not be part of the discussion for peace and reconciliation.

From these examples, women's experiences and women's suffering—be it physical, emotional, or psychological—are not recognized. Instead women's lived experiences of ongoing war and their fears are trivialized or labeled as *amyothameeyay* and not worthy of national-level attention, or even worthy of discussion during meetings. The plight of women is not considered to be related to civil war or armed conflict.

Women who resist the oppression brought about by cultural norms, social structures, or political power are often labeled as troublemakers, while men who resist the oppression are labeled as assertive and strong. Women's issues are always pushed back against. For example, changing the constitution, and building a federal democratic union are considered the most critical issues, with women's issues raised by women activists always less important in meetings and rarely discussed.

In the ongoing 2021 anti-coup resistance movement, young women are still dealing with the same problems that older generations have dealt with. Women have always been involved in

¹⁵ Karen's Human Rights Group, 2018.

¹⁶ Hein Ko Soe, 2018.

the revolution in different roles but there is still no recognition of their contributions.

A few of my friends and I were labeled extreme and aggressive for bringing up the marginalization of women with local activists working for the Karenni nationalist movement. There is a lack of understanding of gender as a national issue. One prominent male civil society leader commented in June 2019, “We cannot see everything from a woman’s perspective”, a tacit concession that national agendas are always set through male perspectives that fail to accommodate women’s needs and concerns. Furthermore, many women’s critical concern about the impact of militarization in the community was and still is ignored, even when women are becoming ever more vulnerable in a post-coup conflict-ridden Burma.

Conclusion

The dichotomy of men versus women can weaken social movements and their construction as women do not enjoy an equal position to men and cannot contribute their skills and knowledge freely. In order to achieve what Karenni people long for, i.e., self-determination, both men and women should be able to participate equally in the struggle. The Karenni people’s resistance against militarization was made more visible by women’s criticism of the presence and behaviors of men in their vicinity. All political systems oppressing Karenni people—both men and women—should be considered, and one of these systems is the patriarchy that prioritizes men over women in almost every realm of society.

There is a feminist saying: “The personal is political”.¹⁷ If we cannot bring women’s personal experiences into politics, there will be no inclusive process for social movements, such as against the building of the Aung San statue, or efforts to change the political system. How can one nation be liberated without the liberation of women, which is half of the population?

¹⁷ Feminist Carol Hanisch made this phrase popular with her essay *The Personal is Political* (1969).

There is always time to highlight the critical issues faced by women and discuss them in political dialogue, especially during the ongoing revolution against the military.

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