

Visible and Invisible Barriers for Women in the Karenni War Zone

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight the barriers to equality for women in Karenni State, also known as Kayah State, southeast Myanmar, since May 2021. Many people in this area, like those all over the country, are currently revolting against attempted rule by the Myanmar army. During this revolution women face more barriers to achieving relative equality than men. These barriers include gendered practices in society, cultural and ritual beliefs, and traditional values. The emergence of many new local armed forces after the 1 February 2021 coup presents new challenges to women. In this article, based on the experiences of female medical officers, chiefs of logistical units, and front line fighters, we outline the challenges women face and the challenges they live with in the revolution because of their female identity. We hope to explore ways forward for achieving gender equality, including through the current revolution and as part of a future federal democratic Myanmar.

Introduction

After 1 February 2021, when the coup led by Min Aung Hlaing overthrew the democratically elected government, Myanmar was swept by massive waves of peaceful anti-coup demonstrations. Within weeks, state security forces began crushing the protests, massacring the peaceful and unarmed, and abducting and torturing people to death. Those who resisted the coup had no option but to join the armed revolution against the Myanmar military. Self-determined youths took military training from ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs) in Karenni State, a small area in southeast Myanmar, from March 2021 onwards, and the area became a war zone once again after skirmishes

between revolutionary forces and Myanmar military troops broke out on 21 May 2021.

Women serve the armed revolution in several roles. In Dawngankhar village, Karenni State, they serve as military soldiers, clerks, accountants, healthcare providers, fundraisers, logistics managers, and political advisers. However, unlike men, women are pressured by psychological, social, and livelihood issues. Many women also struggle in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). This article describes some of the challenges faced by these women and is based on our own personal experiences and conversations with other revolutionary women in Karenni State.¹

Suicidal Thoughts and Suicide Attempts

Ma Yoe Lay, a medic in the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) told us:

We've encountered people who attempted suicide. We give psychosocial support to them. Almost all of them have been girls and young women. A very likely explanation for these suicides is that while boys and young men have opportunities to travel, to go to the front lines, girls and young women are left alone at home. Having nothing much to do, depression seeps into their minds while using social media. One female IDP was left alone with her children at home when her husband went to the front line. Being an IDP herself, feeding her children alone was not easy, and without anyone to help her, she finally chose to commit suicide.

The medic explained to us that many factors pose constant challenges to women: daily social pressures, such as surrounding conflicts, the loss of careers and homes, intermittent access to education for children, constant news of the war, and living in a

¹ The names in this article are pseudonyms for security reasons.

war zone. For men, even if they start to think that they are not useful and their lives are meaningless, they can always pick up a gun and go to war against the military in search of meaning. But that option remains closed to most women. Ma Yoe Lay believes that suicides by women outnumber those by men in Karenni State. There are no easy answers as to why.

Restricted Mobility and Physical Spaces for Women

Society does not oppress women only through laws. Assumptions and beliefs that women are inferior to men also oppress women. Ma Moe Moe, a 26-year-old nurse, rejected the military regime and refused to work under it as a public servant, joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. In October 2021, when the revolution reached a high point, and hundreds of young people had been killed and arrested, many of Ma Moe Moe's friends and acquaintances fled to the countryside and ERO-controlled areas. Ma Moe Moe herself decided to move to Karenni State from Yangon to treat injured KNDF soldiers and sick IDPs.

Because most conflict zones in Karenni State are in relatively poor villages, and Ma Moe Moe was accustomed to urban life in Yangon, not everything was easy for her. Gender discrimination also bothered her a lot. Ma Moe Moe reflected about her experience in Karenni resistance areas:

There're some women who dare to fight and join in active combat. They should be taken to the front line but they haven't been. In one battalion, the commander-in-chief himself strictly ordered that no woman is to go to the front line.²

Differential treatment like this is not based on different physiques, abilities, or bravery; rather, it is based on the unchallenged notion that women are less capable and in need of more

² However, after we concluded this article, a new armed unit collectively led by women was formed. Known as Division 4 of the KNDF B-05, women from this and other battalions can now go to the front line.

protection and attention than men in a war. This is discrimination against women. There are no legally defined restrictions on women's participation in war, but the society in which we find ourselves assumes that war is for men.

Most women are beholden to patriarchal thinking, believing military service is not for them. For women, fighting on the front line of Karenni State is an alien image and concept—unlike women thinking about fighting on the front lines in areas controlled by the Karen National Union. Since most women in the Karenni revolution accept positions far from the front line, no dissent or demands have manifested from them about joining active combat. They just contentedly cook meals in the kitchen as KNDF members (ironically a revolutionary organization). Women are not making progress for themselves and other women—even in these revolutionary times. Though the revolution is calling for radical measures such as abolishing the 2008 Constitution, dismantling the Myanmar army, and establishing a federal state, male leaders continue to exclude women from the revolution and cannot begin to see them as equal compatriots in arms. Rather, male leaders view them merely as servants holding utensils and kitchen tools in the background.

In KNDF battalions, positions such as chief medical officer, head of logistics units, and superintendent, can sometimes be occupied by women, but military ranks such as chief commander, second commander-in-chief, corporal, military strategist, and gun-loader, are held only by men,³ even though there are no gender restrictions written in the selection criteria. Discrimination works by tacit consent: people believe in gendered roles, and more importantly, women accept the notion that they are inferior. Women are discriminated against and kept from military positions; they work in only five of the seven KNDF departments. These five departments mostly concern office work. Society remains thoroughly gendered and the anti-coup armed revolution still cannot promise full and equal participation for those of all genders. The nurse, Ma Moe Moe, also said:

³ The female company commander of the new Division 4 of KNDF B-05 is now the only woman in charge of military-related positions in the KNDF.

It seems like women accept the idea that men are superior. When our living quarters were built, the women's side was at a much lower elevation than the men's. When I asked for the reason, they said it was because the lower side was for us, for women. Men think all women must stay humble and unassuming, like their own mothers.

In the KNDF, women's inferiority must even be made material through the placement of their buildings at a lower elevation than men's.

Ma Moe Moe also observed that women usually stay at home in her area, looking after the family, doing domestic work, and gardening, and it is not uncommon for some women to leave their settlements only once a month to go to the market. Usually, boys have the chance to complete their schooling until matriculation. Many girls cannot speak the Burmese language fluently since it is only taught at school, and they are always left at home doing housework. Men can also leave for cities more easily. Over time, women came to believe that 'socioeconomic development' was not for them.

Since the attempted coup led by Min Aung Hlaing, internet access has been patchy or nonexistent across the country, including in Karenni State, where phone lines are also affected. There, people can use the internet only in very few places. Daw-tawee mountain is one such place, because of its high elevation. However, women are forbidden from climbing this mountain to access the internet. The supposed reason is that the mountain is higher than the *tagondaing*, a long, wooden pole with banners, which is a religious and cultural symbol. Women are considered to have less *hpon* and power than men, a popular concept shared by both Bama and non-Bama men and women in Karenni State, and are forbidden from being physically higher than the *tagondaing*, which is also known locally as *ke htoe boe* in the Karenni language, meaning a "pole to usher in a new country"—the irony is that women fighting for a new country are not

allowed to climb up to high places for fear of derailing the plans to usher in a new country.

Ma Moe Moe, who by the end of 2022 had dedicated herself to the revolution for more than one year, lamented at that time:

When we first got here and heard about (the prohibition), we felt uneasy and frustrated, since the top of the mountain was the only place where we could access internet at that time. Men couldn't inform us of an alternative place to access the internet. They used the term hpone neint, meaning our presence in higher places will pollute male power, as well as the place. We decided not to make a fuss about it since we were new to the area.

Ma Moe Moe found herself in difficult terrain both physically and metaphorically. She was in western Demoso Township, where most people are ethnic Kayan, so how could she challenge the accepted norms of this new place? How could she share the feminist views she had acquired as an urban professional? The internet-up-the-mountain problem is an intersectional issue for her. Though the revolution is unfolding, she cannot yet talk about things that she feels passionate about. She had to try hard to be accepted by others and she had to prove that she is a revolutionary first, in a very strict sense of resisting the military, and a feminist second.

Fighting Cultural Wars in a Revolution

Ma Htet is a 25-year-old office staff member. When her hometown of Loikaw, Karenni State, became a war zone in January 2022, she moved to Demoso Township, not to flee, but to be more involved in the revolution with her friends. She is now contributing to the revolution as the head of the logistics unit of a KNDF battalion. She went through a similar experience to Ma Moe Moe. She said:

We had little choice but to climb high up the mountain to use the internet in Demoso Township, but we were scolded by local villagers for doing so.

Like Ma Moe Moe, Ma Htet faced a dilemma—to intervene or stay quiet. She chose the latter knowing her positionality as an outsider. Unlike Ma Moe Moe, she herself was already a resident of Karenni State before the revolution, but she was not a Kayan, one of the two majority ethnicities in Karenni State.⁴ Acutely aware of herself as a cultural outsider, she decided not to criticize the cultural beliefs ingrained in the community. Universal values such as gender equality are not in the popular lexicon of her new residence, and to survive and prove herself as a committed revolutionary, she had to conform to cultural norms, at least for the time being. If she were a male Kayan, things might have been different.

Apart from climbing a mountain to access the internet, menstruating women are not allowed to attend cultural or religious ceremonies and they cannot sleep in a living room. Ma Htet said:

In my opinion, those taboos should no longer exist. I don't want to show disrespect to the Karenni culture, but cultural barriers for women just shouldn't exist anymore.

Beauty Contest on the Front Line?

Mu Kanen is a 20-year-old comrade from a battalion of the Central Military Command under the National Unity Government. Her house in Demoso Township was burned down by Myanmar military forces. Her whole family was displaced and are barely surviving above subsistence level. Although she has dedicated herself and her future to the revolution, she spoke about being restricted from participating in many ways. In her words:

⁴ The ethnic groups in Karenni State are often divided for simplicity into just Kayah and Kayan.

As a woman, I can't do a lot of things ... I feel angriest about the fact that I can't go to the front line. I'm not even allowed to join the logistical unit. They tell me to stay in the office and do office-related things. I'm extremely irritated and upset. Those male officers think that we women are incapable, feeble and powerless.

There are no written rules prohibiting women from going to the front line and restricting women only to rear positions. Rather, traditional beliefs that women are incapable are what influence male decision makers to stop women from reaching their fullest potential in any context—let alone simply reaching an internet signal. Mu Kanen vented her feelings:

We were mocked as if we wanted to go to the front line just to show our bodies.⁵ We were told to stay at the back and mind our so-called business in the kitchen and office. It troubled me a lot.

When Mu Kanen wanted to check whether her house had been burned down or not, she disguised herself as a boy, went to the front line and looked at her house through binoculars. She had to break two taboos—(1) women not being allowed to climb places higher than a *tagondaing* pole and (2) women being refused permission to go to the front line—to check if her house had survived the Myanmar military's arson.

Even though there were originally many young women in the Central Military Command section of Mu Kanen's battalion, several have left. One of the main reasons behind women leaving is that they are only allowed to take supporting roles—either in the kitchen or office. But leaving the revolutionary army does not spare them from supporting men. Their families in the IDP camps need their income and they must fill the gap left by male family members fighting on the front line. They must find jobs

⁵ “Make a superficial contribution by just showing up.” လူ့လုံးပြတယ်, literally to “show one's body”.

and make money. Some try to go abroad but face problems such as being trafficked against their will, incurring large debts from broker fees, and inhumane working conditions abroad. Mu Kanen also talked about how she would like other women to be treated:

I don't want women to be devalued. We also have our rights, and one of them is to get military training. Our weak point, if you like, is our menstruation, which in fact is not a vulnerability, but natural. We don't want to be underestimated because of that.

Ma Moe Moe also reflected on menstruation and said:

I don't think menstruation is so strange or complicated. I have no idea what it would be like in active combat in other places, but here in Karenni State, fighting is usually not carried out in remote areas or isolated districts, but rather close by to villages and IDP camps. A total shortage of water (for cleaning) is uncommon, even on the front line. As for bloodstains, in my opinion, they're so trivial and not worth discussing. Our comrades, I think and hope, aren't so degraded, vulgar or narrowminded to care about that.

Ma Htet also seconded Ma Moe Moe's opinion. "Menstruation is a normal thing. It's no longer acceptable for women to be ridiculed and discriminated against because of it."

Conclusion

Women who want to actively participate in the resistance against the military are being kept in passive roles because of their gender and are accepting low social status and positions. Ethnic unity, a topic much discussed throughout the revolution, and the expectations that people respect local cultures, pose a dilemma for many women fighters and force them to think twice

about challenging the beliefs and norms that are stopping women from reaching their revolutionary potential. Entrenched messages and practices implying women's inferiority represent the revolution as chauvinistic, and women do not feel valued or welcomed. On the other hand, as Karenni State has long been a site of war, many consider safety and military issues to be more important than gender equality and human rights. Many accept that women's liberation should not come at the expense of the liberation of the people as a whole. Women will have to wait longer to overcome the many forms of oppression they endure. Though many revolutionary forces, including the KNDF, were established under the twin banner of federal democracy and equality, women in the highlands have further to march toward equality than those in the lowland areas of Myanmar. Equality seems more attainable on the plains. Women in Karenni State face challenges to achieving gender equality, one of the fundamental goals of democracy, because of invisible barriers in cultures, traditions, and militarized organizational structures.

