



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

International Women's Day 2017

March 8th 2017

Today, on International Women's Day (IWD), a day to appreciate women's rights, Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) would like to draw attention to the situation of gender equality and women's rights in southeast Myanmar. The United Nations (UN) has set a theme this year to focus on "*Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50-50 by 2030*" using the slogan "*Be Bold For Change*". This theme highlights that there are still changes needed for women to enjoy their rights fully and equally and we all need to be bold to fight for those rights. KHRG Programme Director, Naw Htoo Htoo, stated for this year's IWD theme that:

"Equal rights for women are not widely recognised in Myanmar, especially in rural ethnic areas. Despite efforts by organisations working on women's rights and empowerment, women in rural areas lack sufficient knowledge of their rights and are not yet able to fully enjoy them. For women in Myanmar to get equal rights, not only women, but also men should know and support women's rights. Men should recognise women's potential and give them space to involve in the changes occurring in the country in order to improve the situation for all, not only for men. If everyone in Myanmar is 'bold for change' and recognises that women's rights are human rights, it will be easier to achieve gender equality."

In an [Op-Ed](#) published on News Deeply Women & Girls Hub in October 2016, Naw Eh Thaw, KHRG Advocacy Coordinator stated:

"Women have their own sets of ideas and critical thinking skills, and can help in solving certain problems faced by society. They have the energy and strength to protect and promote the rights of their community. No one else – and certainly no man – can take their place."

Myanmar acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 and it has since been binding on Myanmar. Last year, June 2016, Myanmar's state report to the CEDAW Committee was [reviewed](#) in the 64th session. Due to the NGO stakeholder submissions, including [KHRG's](#), the Committee and the world could see that women in Myanmar are still struggling with human rights violations and face many challenges to claim their human rights.

In southeast Myanmar, especially women from rural areas are prone to face human rights violations and are not able to enjoy their rights fully. They have faced barriers to access education and health services during the conflict era and still during the current time of ceasefire due to ongoing militarisation, sporadic clashes and the continued presence of armed forces and landmines.

Other important negative factors are the long distances between rural villages and post-primary education and health facilities; traditional cultural attitudes that women should stay home and

help take care of the household, marry young, have children and raise them; and the prohibitive cost of sending a child to secondary school and university (as boys are often given preference over their sisters for education).



This 47-year old woman was injured by a landmine near her village. Her left leg was badly injured, as was her left foot, which later had to be amputated. (Feb. 2012)
[Photo: KHRG]



These girls are studying in a school in Toungoo District. Villagers reported the children were trying to learn how to read and write the Myanmar alphabet, but that they were not able to do so due to poor teaching. (Jan. 6th 2015)
[Photo: KHRG]

Lack of education often leads to a lack of confidence and because they do not have the chance to participate at the local level, Karen women cannot make a mark on the national level either. One 35-year-old woman who was elected village leader in an ethnic Karen area in 2013 spoke to KHRG researchers about how she could not accept the position due to her lack of education:

"I replied that, 'I can't do it, I can't read and I have never gone to school'. They said, 'Go and take the salary.' And I replied, 'No ... I wish to quit from the village tract leader position. I don't want to do this. But I can't help it'."

Naw M--- (female, 35), L--- village, R--- village tract, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District/Northeastern Kayin State (interviewed in October 2013)

Moreover, justice for victims of sexual abuse is still a major issue in Myanmar, even more so for underage victims and victims with perceived mental health problems. The serious problem is compounded in cases where the perpetrators are powerful actors such as military personnel.

"We do have quite a few women who suffer from mental disorders who are raped and then get pregnant. [...] People will [frequently] blame the woman [for the abuse], because she has a mental disorder. [...] Most of the blame will go to the woman first, but some blame will also go to the man: how can they do such a thing to the woman who really doesn't know what's going on?"

Naw T---, representative from Karen Women Organisation (interviewed in March 2016)

Taking the opportunity of celebrating this year's International Women's Day and in line with this year's theme, KHRG would like to reiterate important and related recommendations from our August 2016 report: ['Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar'](#).

Recommendations to the Government of Myanmar (executive and legislative branches) and/or the Karen National Union (KNU)

- Ensure that local officials, village heads, law enforcement authorities and military actors are trained in gender sensitivity to appropriately respond to cases of gender-based violence and that their awareness is raised to change practices and social norms that are harmful for women. Moreover, justice mechanisms should be improved so that women can safely report cases of gender-based violence and other abuse, such as land confiscations, to local authorities who can bring the perpetrators before independent and impartial civilian courts.
- Work towards equal representation of women in leadership positions, including women from different ethnic backgrounds and women that have returned after being displaced, at local, regional and national levels of governance, as well as representative functions at the international level.
- Invest in making more middle and high schools available in rural areas, after consulting with local communities, to ensure that young women can access education without concern for their personal safety. School curricula should be gender-sensitive and include awareness-raising on sexual violence.
- Ensure that healthcare, in particular maternal healthcare, is made available and affordable to all women in rural areas without discrimination.

Recommendations to local and international civil society organisations working in southeast Myanmar

- Support and encourage women's participation and representation in meaningful consultations, dialogues and community decision-making, for example by empowering women through trainings and providing educational resources.

Recommendations to the international community supporting the peace process and/or programmes in southeast Myanmar

- Support and fund programmes that require the equal participation and involvement of women from different ethnic backgrounds at all levels of governance, decision-making and dialogue.