

## **Involved but Not Included**

### Karen Women's Care Work as Transformative Vision for Peace

*Terese Gagnon and Hsa Moo*

**H**sa Moo is a Karen environmental and Indigenous activist and journalist working for the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), a leading non-profit environmental organization on the Thailand–Burma border. She has provided testimony to the International Criminal Court in support of charges of Crimes Against Humanity brought against the Myanmar Military. At the time of this conversation, Terese Gagnon was a PhD candidate in anthropology at Syracuse University where she was writing her dissertation, ‘Seeding Sovereignty: Sensory Politics and Biodiversity in the Karen Diaspora’. In this conversation, conducted across multiple video chats between New York and Thailand, Hsa Moo and Terese discuss issues of women’s gendered care work within the Karen revolution and ongoing struggle for just peace. They focus on new challenges and possibilities for gender dynamics, and for women’s transformative visions of peace unfolding during Myanmar’s fraught transition period.

Hsa Moo and Terese, in dialogue with the other authors of this volume, call into question dominant perceptions, held within Karen leadership and Myanmar studies alike, of who and what is worthy of being taken ‘seriously’ (Enloe 2013). They do so by taking seriously the work of Karen feminists who are engaged in the broader struggle for Karen self-determination, while continuing the decades-long work by Karen women of challenging patriarchal militarism and capitalism within this very struggle. Hsa Moo and Terese also discuss the ways in which Karen women push back against male efforts to (re)inscribe them into highly limited gendered scripts after the worst of the fighting has subsided. Such gendered scripts too often attempt to slot women into a narrow performance of social reproduction to preserve

the status quo. Hsa Moo and Terese discuss what such efforts to put women ‘back in their place’ after the war may tell us about the workings of militarized patriarchal and capitalist power in Myanmar more broadly. Drawing from their grounded experiences, Hsa Moo and Terese uncover ways in which Karen women have the power to transform conflict and to shape visions for just peace. As Hsa Moo notes of Karen women, ‘we are involved, even though the men do not include us. In *Kawthoolei*,<sup>1</sup> for the women, if we don’t get a chance, if we don’t get recognized by our male leaders – we *don’t care*. We have to serve our community anyway. That’s the resilience of Karen women. If there is no woman, there is no peace.’

### ‘Women Not Recognized as Front Line in the Revolution’

**TG:** Hsa Moo, it’s wonderful to see you again! Thank you for taking time to have this conversation.

**HsM:** Yes! Although I’m not sure I can answer your questions. I’m just one of the activists in the community, the woman activists, no? I am working for the Karen community related to environmental issues, but my expertise is directly related to media work. For me, I was born in a refugee camp. I resettled to Canada for just a year and a half, but I was always thinking about coming back and helping my community. So in 2014 I came back to Thailand and started working for The Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). That’s just a little bit about my history, my background.

**TG:** Thank you. Related to this idea of commitment and your desire to return to work for your community, I’ve been thinking a lot about what it means to be engaged in struggle and committed to an effort even when there are many problems internal to that effort. I’m thinking especially about hierarchy and some of the negative consequences of top-down organization within a militarized context. I’m wondering if you could speak about any ways that you or others have pushed back against this, especially in male-dominated spaces.

**HsM:** In our community, we can see clearly that men dominate. Until now, in most of the Karen organizations the leaders are men. Women’s organizations, the donors, they try to push them to include woman. But *still* this happens

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1 Kawthoolee is the name of the free Karen homeland.

in our community, and it's really hard to change. I think things are getting better, but we still really need to push. We need to educate. However, it's really hard to educate our leaders. If you talk to the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) you will understand more about the woman's struggle.

For example, if we talk about this transition period, in the past, before the ceasefire, most of the village heads are women. Then, after the ceasefire, when things are getting a little bit better, then men get all in – they get their power. If we talk about the positives and negatives, there are both. I think for the woman, they really struggle as the village head. They really have to deal with the situations and also with the two different armed groups, the Burma army (the *Tatmadaw*) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The women village chiefs had to go between the two groups, especially in mixed-control areas, where both armed groups were present. Now that things have gotten better, with less violence and less danger for village chiefs of getting killed or tortured, it is mostly men who are village heads. The former woman village heads, they are still struggling and working hard for their communities, but only without an official title now. They don't really care about their title but maybe they feel like they have no power anymore.

**TG:** A few years ago I read the KWO report about women village chiefs, 'Walking amongst Sharp Knives' (Karen Women's Organization 2010). That was a really eye-opening report. As you know, it draws on the testimonies of 95 former and current woman chiefs. It presents their stories of extreme hardship and struggle during their times as chief. These women village chiefs suffered a great deal from the brutal tactics the Myanmar military used against them and the members of their community. The report details numerous instances of torture and sexual violence against villagers and against the women chiefs, as well as murders committed by the Myanmar military. In addition to torture and abuse from the Myanmar military, the women chiefs also suffered great stress from the expectations placed on them by their husbands to fulfill their 'duties' to take care of their families, households, and farms. The report notes that several women chiefs were, 'blamed by their husbands for being "married" to Myanmar military "because they had to follow their orders"' (Karen Women's Organization 2010: 2).

**HsM:** It's true. The woman chiefs still had to deal with everything. They had to take care of the household work, take care of their kids, the cooking, gardening ... everything. That's care work. But the men, they don't really

care. That's part of our culture, Karen culture, this idea that men have to be the head of the household. But we really talk and try to explain to our new generation that this is the stereotype that men have to be the leaders. Actually, women can be leaders too!

**TG:** Yes! Also, the report was written in 2010, before men began taking over the role of chief again to the degree that they have now. So, it doesn't go into detail about this key occurrence. Do you know why it is that so many men have become village head after the ceasefire, after everything that the women chiefs endured on behalf of their communities?

**HsM:** It's really obvious, men dominate! The patriarchy style. Before the ceasefire, in the most difficult time of the conflict, the men are not there to be a leader, to deal with the army. So the woman has to lead, has to take risks. And then now, in the ceasefire times, and men became village heads again.

**TG:** What you say reminds me so much of what feminist political scientist Cynthia Enloe has said about how again and again, across different parts of the world, women are mobilized only 'for the duration' (2013: 11) of the war-waging or the revolution. She points out that during the war and during the revolution, women are called on to step up and make sacrifices, to do what men need them to do. But when the fighting's done they're told (and I'm paraphrasing), 'Enough. We needed your help just for the war, just for the revolution. Now you have to go back to your house, back to the kitchen, back to the care work.' I was thinking about this, and also considering the fact that the Karen revolution is such a specific example because this war has gone on for so long. Because it's been more than 70 years since the Karen revolution began, do you think it's harder for the men to convince those women who have taken on leadership roles that 'now you have to go back to this domestic role'?

**HsM:** Yes. But no matter what, women have to work, still they are fighting. Even if they cannot be a chief, actually they are a chief in their household. They have to manage everything: for their kids and for their education, cooking, look after everything. The men just sit and say, 'I am a leader,' something like that. [laughs] So, sorry for that! I don't want to blame the men. Actually, they have to know that. They abuse the woman's rights. I don't want to talk about broader things, just only my family: my aunt, my grandma. My aunt used to be a village head. My grandfather was a village head, but he got killed

by the Burma army. Maybe when you've been to Karen villages you've seen, at the entrance to the village there is a structure. They hung my grandfather there. After he died, my grandma had to take his role.

Then my uncles, they all joined the KNLA. I think they wanted to help their community after what happened to my grandfather. When my uncles all became Karen soldiers, then they cannot come back to the village. If they do they can be killed. So, my grandmother, she is very clever. She wants to take some food for her sons. And then she puts the food under the straw and carries it on her head. And then, when the Burma army saw her walking with the straw, they asked her, 'Where are you going?' She said, 'I will go to my farm.' Then she placed the straw with the food hidden in it near where my uncles were staying. On her way back she sang in Karen (so the Burma army soldiers couldn't understand), 'The food is near here.' It's very clever to do that. That's why I really respect the women's leadership.

**TG:** So, she was the village chief, she was farming, feeding people ... that is so much.

**HsM:** As the village chief, the villagers, when they need help, they will just come to her and say, 'We have a problem. This is what has happened. What can we do?' She will have to manage that, and encourage them, saying, 'We will look after each other, we are the same community.'

It's very interesting, the women, their talent, no? They know how to deal with the situation. But I feel like the men, they don't recognize it. Or maybe they recognize but they don't want to talk about it. They just thought that this is the woman's job. They have to do it because the men are the people who guard them or protect them. In this way the women's labour, their care work, is naturalized, while the men's labour is seen as 'skilled' (see Hedström 2017).

**TG:** Something along those lines made a huge impression on me when I was staying in the Peace Park area during my fieldwork. I went to visit the mother of my friend who lives and has a farm there. My friend's mom is in her sixties. She was basically growing the food for all the soldiers who stay there, and there were quite a few. In addition, she was caring for two of her very young grandchildren who had been left to stay with her because their fathers are Karen soldier and their mothers are travelling with them. This woman is extremely brave and has done incredible things in her life, including writing two books, one about Karen history and the other her autobiography.

After visiting my friend's mother at her farm I was thinking a lot about what counts as leadership, as bravery or, like you say, as 'being on the front lines'. I can see how maybe her contribution has not been valued as much as her husband's role as a former soldier.

**HsM:** Maybe you already read in a KWO report, most of the time at the KNU meetings they ask those of us at Karen organizations to go and help. My friends at KWO, they told about their story, they just have to be at the kitchen and cook for the men. In most of the meetings, the KNU meetings, you can see mostly men. And then for the women's organization they have to cook, and then do the decorations, and cleaning. So next time, they don't want to go.

**TG:** Ugh, not again! That is awful. This reminds me of what Jenny Hedström writes about women's social reproduction within parastate armed conflict – that, in this context, 'the duty to reproduce both the individual soldier and the army writ-large is placed disproportionately on the shoulders of women'. Because of this, she says, women's work, 'far from being peripheral, carries with it the possibility to both maintain and transform parastate armed conflict' (2020: 2). Therefore, this imbalanced gendered labour can be disheartening for Karen women, but it also presents possibility. Crucially, it shows that Karen women possess the seed of social *transformation*, which has the potential to alter the course of armed conflict. Taking a broader view of things, we can see that women across Myanmar have the power to transform militarized patriarchal and capitalist power in the country, and in its ethnic borderlands, by leveraging the power of their vital labour of social reproduction. In addition, women have the power to shape what a truly just peace might look like for everyone, women as much as for men. I wonder, what would it look like for women across different ethnic groups in Myanmar to withhold or leverage their reproductive labour in acts of solidarity in order to assert their role in defining peace?

### **'We Have to Acknowledge the Life-Making Aspect'**

**TG:** In this vein, I have been thinking a lot about the word 'care', which is supposedly a very feminine thing. Like what you were saying about your friends at KWO, they want to support the movement, they *care*. Yet, they're asked to always fill this one role when they can do so many things. Whether

it's caring for people or caring for the environment, I wonder if you could talk a bit about your relationship to care. Is it something that is important to you? If so, do you also push back against being told that 'this is your role' because of how you are perceived?

**HsM:** We have to acknowledge the life-making aspect. For women, that includes both paid and unpaid labour. Like I mentioned before, for our Karen community and for the woman, for example, if they are cooking and caring for their family, it's important for a woman, for her family, no? They don't think about other things, they just think about their family: they need to feed their children. It's as important as a woman sitting in the parliament or at the Peace Talk table. The whole narrative of care work that women have been doing, we need to be ready to talk about it. The feminists involved in struggle have to be bold to talk about care work, the social reproduction.

**TG:** Do you think this message about care work is reaching the leaders, the KNU leaders, for example?

**HsM:** I think this question we also need to ask the male leaders! [laughs] And then I just want to see what they respond.

**TG:** Definitely! Thinking about the fraught concept of the 'transition' and the complex changes that have come with it Myanmar's borderlands (see Woods 2011), are there ways you have seen gender roles changing because of the transition? For example, are more women going to work in the formal sector, or has the transition changed relationships within families – including opening up possibilities for women that they didn't have before?

**HsM:** I don't see so many differences in this transition period. Mostly, in the Karen community the women need to take so many responsibilities: they go to work, they have to care for their children. For example, for the ordinary people from the rural area they go to the farm, gather some vegetables, firewood, and come back, feed their animals, cooking. For the men they don't really do like that. Some go to the farm. But for the women they take more responsibility. So it seems that during the transition period, men get more opportunities while women's already heavy workload gets heavier. For me, I think for the care work we need to have class analysis as well. Nowadays, most feminists they advocate only for gaining entry into the corporate leadership or the patriarchal political setting, but always forget about the women who



are at the bottom. So lifting those women up to come up to the corporate or political role is also important.

**TG:** Mm, yes. And then even if we do have women represented in political roles, is it enough just to have women in those seats, or do we need a more fundamental change? For example, is it enough to aim for representation – to have women in the parliament, in leadership positions, corporate positions – is that the goal? Or is the goal to *change* all those systems, to reimagine them in a more transformative way?

**HsM:** For me I feel like women and men, we have a different thought. For example, in the parliament and also the communities if we have more women in leadership roles then things will change a *lot*, so that we can go forward equally. For the community representative we always talk about democracy, self-determination. In order to achieve that we need to have women's participation, *fully*.

I know that most of the men don't care about this. But from now on they should care because we women have been contributing to all parts and stages of the betterment of our Karen community, whether at the village, local, national or international level. As women, we know that our involvement in all levels, including decision making, is vital for men in our Karen community and for governing structures. So, while men may act as though they don't need us, deep down they know too well they cannot do a whole lot of things without women. They know that for a fact. Therefore, we have to demand that they care. They will value our work only if they care, or the other way around: if women prove how much we are needed by withholding our labour and contributions. One way or the other, they have to accept that women's participation at all decision-making levels is vital. And the most important thing is they have to *acknowledge* the importance of women's participation and contribution to the betterment of the Karen community. Only if they acknowledge it publicly will we know they care about our contributions and value the product of our work.

However, as women, we don't have to give up. In fact, we have to keep demanding our rights and our visibility so that we are valued like men. In a perfect world, we would not have to do this. But the very sad thing is that there is only the concept that 'all men are equal' but nothing like 'all men and women are equal'. So, for us to get to the equal level, we still have to work very hard. All women, older and younger, we all have to struggle to get to our



rightful place. And we won't be able to get there unless we make our voices heard. Men are not going to speak out for us. In particular, those women who have more freedom have to amplify the voice of women who are suppressed. Like here, [holds up t-shirt] 'No Woman, No Peace.'

### 'As a Woman, You Don't Need to Give Up At All'

**TG:** Thinking about young women who are just coming up now, maybe in the refugee camps or other places, who are just getting trained: what kind of message do you hope to pass on to them?

**HsM:** When I was working with the youth doing community radio in the camps, I always tried to encourage them to know their rights to help their community. For people like us, the women in the community, most of the ones in leading roles are men. So I try to encourage them not to get disappointed, not to move back. We have to move forward. I feel like men never need to ask for their rights. But women have to call for their rights, they have to fight to get their role in the community. To get a chance in the place in the leading role, we have to try a *lot*. Even for me, I also have the experience of being discriminated against by male dominance. So I would say to young women, 'don't give up'. As a woman, you don't need to give up at all. Where there is life there is hope.

**TG:** That is a wonderful message. This is a really unfair question, but now that you are someone in a leadership role do you think your presence or the ways you choose to challenge expectations is helping other people realize the possibilities for themselves?

**HsM:** I am not really in a leading role. But for them, I think there is always a possible way to do something. You just have to try hard and find a way to make it happen. For me, sometimes I got a chance to do something that other people cannot. Sometimes I feel like that is a privilege, it's not fair for other people. But I try my best enough to do things. So they also, if they do like me they will be successful. They can do like me.

**TG:** Hsa Moo, I know you are a hard worker because I remember you were working during your own birthday party! We went to sing karaoke and you were working on your laptop the whole time and stepping out to take phone calls. Do you remember that? I think you were doing something for Radio Free Asia (RFA).

**HsM:** [laughs] Yes. That's kind of what it's like, committed work. When you give a commitment, you commit to do something, you have to do it. You have to do it and you have to do it very well, so people can see your good work. So I live my life always under the commitment, and then I am depressed sometimes.

**TG:** Yes, this is something important to talk about. I feel like even the little bit that I've done now, trying to write about my research, it's very hard emotionally, because peoples' stories and their situations are so difficult. I can only imagine what it's like for you, doing that work all the time for so much of your life. Is it something that you just accept or have you found ways to make the sadness a little bit less?

**HsM:** Even if I get stressed or depressed, I try to make myself happy, hanging out with friends, talking to family. But, if you do something that you are happy with, you are not really getting tired. Because you are happy to do this. I live my life under the depressions and the commitment. But this is the way I choose. I think this is something that is really important in my community, so I take it. As you know, people can see things, what can I say in English words? People can see things only on the stage, on the television, for the behind the scenes, they don't see it. That's why, for the women who work behind, nobody recognize them. So I always salute those women. Women like me, because I got a chance, I can be on the television, on the stage, so people can see me. But actually, I'm not that good of a fighter. If you talk to those women, you got a *lot* of ideas, you got a lot of education from them. We see their education, their skills.

**TG:** Absolutely, you have said it so beautifully. I very much feel that some of the best things I've learned about feminism, about persistence, all the things you've just mentioned, have come from Karen women I have been fortunate to know. I feel incredibly grateful and humbled by that. Thank you so much, Hsa Moo. It's been such a pleasure to get to talk with you about these things. Thank you also for all the ways your work, commitment and joyful tenacity inspire me to keep caring and keep struggling. Have a good day there.

**HsM:** Thank you. Have a good night. We'll keep in touch!

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