

## Navigating Contradictions

### How Political Transition and the Resurgence of Conflict has Shaped the Activism of the Kachin Women's Association Thailand

*Magda Lorena Cárdenas*

The political opening in Myanmar between 2011 and 2021 provided increased opportunities for civil society activism in the country, spurring the emergence of new movements as well as incentivizing activists to return from exile. These positive changes for civil society actors, among them women's organizations, were, however, unevenly distributed across the country. In Kachin areas in Northern Myanmar, the onset of the transitional period did not bring increased freedom, but a resurgence of armed conflict. A ceasefire between the government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) had held since 1994, but it never resolved key political grievances, and economic marginalization and militarization in Kachin state persisted throughout the ceasefire period. The breakdown of this ceasefire in 2011, at the dawn of a decade of political reforms, and the resulting intensification of armed attacks, displacement and human rights violations throughout Myanmar's transitional period, demonstrate that the effects of transition were never uniform, or entirely progressive, across Myanmar (Sadan [ed.] 2016; Nilsen 2019).

This chapter explores how women activists in and from Kachin state have navigated this paradoxical situation. It focuses on the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT), an organization founded by Kachin refugees and exiles in Thailand in 1999 (KWAT 2018b). After 2011, the increased space that became available for civil society in many parts of Myanmar reshaped the political landscape of Myanmar women's activism, as new organizations and networks emerged within Myanmar, and many ethnic minority women's organizations founded in exile relocated to Myanmar (Olivius 2019; Aye Thiri Kyaw, this volume; Pepper, this volume). KWAT, however, decided to keep

their headquarters in Thailand, considering that it was not safe to move their work to Kachin state. Against the backdrop of ongoing war, KWAT activists prioritized continued documentation of state-sponsored abuses over accommodation with the Myanmar government. The resurgence of Tatmadaw aggressions against Kachin communities ‘rapidly led to the displacement of over 100,000 people’ (Kachin Baptist Convention et al 2018: 6) and reinforced KWAT’s conviction that ethnic self-determination is a precondition for the realization of ethnic minority women’s rights, thus reinforcing their support for the KIO armed struggle. This illustrates the historically close relationships that many of Myanmar’s ethnic minority women’s organizations have had with armed groups (Olivius and Hedström 2019). Thus the transitional period forced KWAT to reappraise its strategies and its partnerships, both with allies in the women’s movement and within the ethnic Kachin struggle.

In this chapter, I draw on interviews, participant observation, reports, papers and statements produced by KWAT and other women’s organizations as well as women’s activism literature to trace the ways in which KWAT has navigated the dilemmas of the transitional period, which created both opportunities and constraints in relation to their work, and the ways in which this led them to change their agenda and strategies. By doing this, I hope to generate broader insights into how women’s mobilization responds to changing political contexts. The chapter also adds to the literature exploring how feminist activism relates to militarism and armed movements.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I will situate KWAT and their agenda and strategies in the context of the history of conflict in Kachin state and at the intersection between the struggle for women’s rights and the Kachin ethnic struggle. This is followed by an overview of the methods and data upon which this chapter is based. In the analysis that follows, I go on to discuss how KWAT has navigated substantial, but contradictory, political changes during the period of transition, and how this has challenged and reshaped their strategies and alliances. In conclusion, I reflect on how the 2021 military coup might again reshape the landscape of Myanmar women’s activism.

## **A Twofold Activism: Ethnic Rights and Women’s Rights in a Changing Political Landscape**

In feminist scholarship, women’s empowerment and the pursuit of women’s rights has often been considered at odds with ethno-nationalist projects. As

Pinkaew Leungaramsri (2006) argues, ethnicity as a main identity marker overlooks the multiple narratives and experiences of marginalization. Projects that are ethno-political offer limited possibilities for addressing other experiences of discrimination and other expressions of unbalanced power relations within society. Feminist scholars have analyzed how ethno-nationalism often reinforces male-dominated power structures and dichotomized gender roles, which limit women's enjoyment of rights and their participation in formal decision making (Yuval-Davis 1997; Banerjee 2006).

However, a growing body of research has demonstrated that despite this, women sometimes do identify strongly with ethno-nationalist agendas, and use them as platforms to mobilize in pursuit of women's rights, particularly in contexts of ongoing or recent armed conflict. For instance, Ashe (2007) analyses the case of Northern Ireland and argues that women's identification with ethno-nationalist political goals and culture does not necessarily imply that they reproduce traditional gendered roles. Instead, they can find opportunities for agency and change within these contexts. Similarly, in their analysis of Kurdish women's activism Al-Ali and Tas (2018) show how this consists of a dual struggle – for the recognition of Kurds, and against male-dominated societal structures. With regard to Myanmar, Olivius and Hedström (2019) explore the ways in which women's involvement in the military structures of ethnic armed organizations has built a platform from which to expand women's participation and foster an agenda for gender equality (see also Pepper, this volume). This chapter engages with this theoretical discussion on the spaces and limitations for women's activism within ethno-nationalist movements in conflict contexts. KWAT provides an excellent case study for exploring these broader questions.

For decades, the space for Kachin women's activism has been shaped by the dynamics of armed conflict in Northern Myanmar. In order to analyze the emergence of KWAT as an organization in exile and to make sense of the evolution of its agenda, it is therefore necessary to understand the evolution of the Kachin conflict with the Myanmar government. The fighting between the KIO and the Myanmar military began in 1961 and intensified in the 1980s. The effect of the conflict on civilians became more pronounced in the early 1990s, when entire villages were forced to flee from government offensives, first to rebel-controlled areas and then to Thailand (Lintner 1994; South 2009; Sadan 2013). Despite the ceasefire agreed in 1994, conditions in Kachin state did not support refugee return, as social and economic needs

were not effectively addressed by the government. As Smith argues, the ceasefire period is seen as a ‘time of lost opportunities, economic marginalization and, ultimately broken political promises’ (2016: 83).

In response to this situation, KIO authorities, together with Kachin community-based organizations and diaspora groups, mobilized to provide for the humanitarian needs of the IDP population (Ho 2021). In this context, KWAT was founded in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1999, with the primary objective of improving living conditions for Kachin women, both in Kachin state and as migrants in Thailand, particularly through providing emergency aid to Kachin internally displaced persons (IDPs). However, KWAT soon developed a more comprehensive agenda, encompassing ‘women’s rights, children’s rights and gender equality; promoting women’s participation in politics and in peace and reconciliation processes; opposing all forms of violence against women including human trafficking; providing health education and health services; and promoting women’s awareness of how to manage and protect the environment’ (KWAT 2021a).

The goal of promoting and facilitating women’s involvement in decision-making is not just a priority; it is acknowledged by KWAT to be an integral part of the Kachin ethno-political project. While not organizationally part of KIO structures, KWAT has, since its inception, supported KIO’s agenda for Kachin self-determination. The resurgence of armed conflict in Kachin state has reinforced this commitment, underlining the urgency of freedom from Tatmadaw aggression and central state domination for Kachin communities in general, and Kachin women in particular. At the same time, KWAT is a founding member of the multi-ethnic umbrella organization Women’s League of Burma (WLB), and has throughout its existence also been a key driving force behind broader efforts to mobilize a national movement of Myanmar women. These alliances have, however, been challenged by the transition; after 2011, many women’s organizations turned their attention to engagement with the state in order to influence transitional policymaking and governance (Aye Thiri Kyaw, this volume). For KWAT, this reorientation was not an option, given ongoing war and displacement in their areas of origin.

Thus, as an organization representing ethnic minority women and as a member of an inter-ethnic women’s movement, KWAT has, since its founding, navigated two fields of political mobilization, seeking to combine the promotion of ethnic rights and support for the cause of Kachin self-deter-

mination with the promotion of gender equality and women's participation in all spheres of society. Both gender equality and ethnic minority rights are at the core of the political and societal project that KWAT envisions. However, the means and arenas through which these aims are pursued have been shaped by the political changes during the transitional period and have pushed KWAT to reappraise its relationship with the broader women's movement as well as with the Kachin struggle.

## Methods and Material

The empirical material on which I draw in this chapter was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Chiang Mai and Yangon from October to December 2018 and through participant observation with KWAT. The interviewees included members of KWAT, both based in its Chiang Mai headquarters and in its office in Myitkyina in Myanmar. I also interviewed women activists from other organizations, including representatives of the multi-ethnic alliances Women's League of Burma, Women's Organizations Network (WON) and the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP). Among the interviewees there were also representatives of international organizations and research centres. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, and were mainly conducted in English.

The process of participant observation was aimed at experiencing the organizational dynamics within KWAT. I enrolled as a volunteer for two months at the KWAT office in Chiang Mai. In that capacity, I was able to support the formulation of project proposals and the drafting of evaluation reports. I also participated in planning and conducting trainings. My observations and reflections on my work as a volunteer were recorded in the form of field notes. It is worth noting that the field notes express personal reflections on KWAT's agenda and ongoing initiatives. I also reflect on my personal experience of working with the organization and on my exposure to Kachin culture. The content of the evaluations and internal discussions on specific projects in which I participated remain confidential. KWAT, as my host organization, was informed of the aims of my research and verbally offered its consent, as did all of my interviewees.

## KWAT in the Transitional Political Landscape

During the transitional period, KWAT found itself in the midst of intense, but contradictory, processes of change. The political opening in Myanmar generally shifted the priorities of international donors and partners, who became more focused on supporting peace and democracy efforts in collaboration with the state rather than on supporting exiled opposition groups. Many women's organizations attempted to exploit the increased political space in Yangon and Naypyidaw and to have an impact on transitional politics and policymaking; thus, they targeted their advocacy increasingly towards the state rather than international audiences (Olivius 2019). At the same time, renewed armed conflict in Kachin state gave the Kachin struggle for self-determination and freedom from majority dominance renewed urgency as a precondition to realizing Kachin women's rights. Below, I describe how KWAT negotiated this position in Myanmar's transitional political landscape in relation to three different audiences and allies: the international community; the broader Myanmar women's movement; and the Kachin ethno-nationalist struggle.

### *We are Still at War: Human Rights Documentation and International Advocacy*

Human rights documentation and international advocacy constituted a key feature of the activism of ethnic minority women's organizations that emerged in exile from the 1990s and onwards (Olivius and Hedström 2019; Cárdenas and Olivius 2021). This was the case for KWAT (Hedström and Olivius 2021). This type of activism often involved a confrontational style focused on drawing on the power of international norms to condemn the Myanmar military and government. After the transition, this form of activism decreased in importance for many organizations, as other arenas of influence opened up in Myanmar (Olivius 2019). However, for KWAT the urgency of letting the world know about events in Kachin state was heightened, as, in their view, the world seemed to have forgotten that armed conflict and political repression was still a reality in some parts of the country. This point was made with significant frustration by a KWAT activist, in an interview with Elisabeth Olivius, explaining why KWAT needed to continue their human rights documentation activities, and why this work needed to be conducted from exile in Thailand:

Most of the big donors, international donors, are just seeing like ‘Oh Burma is totally changing to democracy’. Actually, it is not. And they think we all can move into the country and then work freely, actually we ... for example for social work it is okay, but political activities we cannot do freely in the country. Most of the people do not understand that.<sup>1</sup>

This meant that the transition made it more difficult for KWAT to capture international attention with their reporting on the situation of Kachin women. Nevertheless, KWAT continued to produce reports during the transitional period, grounded in their desire to let the world know about the ongoing suffering of Kachin people and the disproportionately gendered effects of the conflict. For example, one of the themes consistently prioritized in KWAT’s advocacy work is conflict-related sexual violence. This is the topic of reports such as *Ongoing Impunity: Continued Burma Army Atrocities Against the Kachin People* (KWAT 2012) and *Justice Delayed, Justice Denied* (KWAT and Legal Aid Network 2016). Reports such as these highlight the fact that state-sponsored sexual violence continued, in conflict areas, throughout the transitional period. Research conducted by KWAT and Asia Justice and Rights (2019) also delved deeper into the challenges experienced by civil society in trying to bring perpetrators to justice, given the constant interference of the military and the structure of the military and police courts.<sup>2</sup> Particularly in relation to cases of sexual violence, the report reveals that ‘prosecutions and convictions in military and police courts are extremely rare, and punishment is often weak and not adequate in comparison to the seriousness of the crimes’ (KWAT and Asia Justice and Rights 2019: 22). Emphasizing the limits of on-the-ground improvements in political freedom and human rights in Kachin areas due to emergency rule and ongoing military operations, a recent press release states that:

Justice is not being served under Burma’s military justice system. At the same time, fear of the military is preventing the civilian legal system from functioning. Lawyers are afraid to take up cases against the military, and in the rare instances they do, the cases are dismissed: such as the case of 28-year-old Sumlut Roi Ja – abducted, sexually assaulted and killed by

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- 1 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 8 November 2017. Cited in Olivius 2019: 159.
  - 2 In accordance with the 2008 Constitution, the military and the police have complete control of the investigation and prosecution of their own members.

the Burma Army in October 2011 – which was dismissed by the Supreme Court for ‘lack of evidence’. (KWAT 2020: 2)

In recent years, KWAT’s work on documentation of cases and advocacy has provided an important counter-narrative to widespread international perceptions of Myanmar as a democratizing state.

Moreover, KWAT has investigated the ways in which the post-2011 context has given rise to new forms of insecurity, for example through a spiralling drug crisis in Kachin State. In the report *Silent Offensive: How Burma Army strategies are fuelling the Kachin drug crisis* (2014), KWAT analyses how production and trafficking of drugs has been used as a counter-insurgency strategy to combat the KIO. Building on surveys and interviews in Kachin areas, it states that:

[M]embers of the military including Border Guard Forces and proxy militia are leading armed players in the drug business [ ... ] They are either involved directly in growing, producing and trafficking drugs, or else tax and provide security to others carrying out this trade.

(KWAT 2014: 12)

KWAT has also analysed the gender dimension of this problem, manifested in women’s vulnerability to abuse and the increased financial burden they have had to take on. The testimonies collected in the report mentioned above also reveal the difficult situation of ‘mothers, wives or sisters, who not only have to become the main family breadwinners, but also have to deal with the debts and sometimes criminal charges incurred by the addicts. At the same time, they have to continue taking responsibility for all household tasks’ (KWAT 2014: 26).

After the resumption of war, resulting in large-scale displacement in Kachin state, the issue of human trafficking became a new central issue for KWAT, again reflecting a changing conflict landscape. High levels of displacement and poverty, along with a demand for ‘brides’ across the border in China, created a market for the trafficking of Kachin women (Kamler 2015). In response, the issue of human trafficking received increased attention in KWAT human rights documentation work, resulting in reports such as *Pushed to the Brink – Conflict and human trafficking on the Kachin–China border* (KWAT 2013). A recent study conducted by Johns Hopkins University in partnership with KWAT explores the conflict-related determinants of forced marriage and trafficking of women to China. This study reveals that



‘a total of 157 (39.8%) out of 394 Kachin women in interviewed by KWAT in Kachin state, Northern Shan state and Yunnan province in China, have experienced forced marriage and among them, 103 (65.6%) were trafficked’ (Johns Hopkins and KWAT 2018: viii).

Thus, by drawing attention to the persistence of armed conflict and human rights abuses in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar, KWAT has attempted to counter a simplified perception of Myanmar as a democratizing state among international audiences, which, particularly in the early years of the transition, tended towards optimistic accounts of Myanmar as a ‘development partner’ and a new market for investment (Bächtold 2015). While human rights documentation and international advocacy was not a new form of work for KWAT, the transition increased the urgency of this work, while also posing new challenges.

*Expanding Women’s Alliances: Bridging Differences  
in the Pursuit of Gender Equality*

As noted above, the initiation of political reforms after 2011, such as steps towards democracy, increased media freedom and the release of political prisoners, signaled a new era with regard to political space for civil society in Myanmar. In response, the transitional period saw a rapid expansion and growing role of new women’s networks such as the Gender Equality Network (GEN), WON and AGIPP (Aye Thiri Kyaw, this volume). Ethnic minority women’s organizations, organized under the umbrella of the WLB, had dominated the pre-transition landscape of women’s activism in terms of visibility and international support. This quickly changed as Myanmar women’s mobilization expanded in numbers and diversity. In response both to shifting donor priorities and to new opportunities to impact processes of change in Myanmar, many organizations founded in exile began to relocate their offices and activities into Myanmar, and in 2017 the WLB congress voted to move the WLB secretariat to Yangon (Cárdenas and Olivius 2021). For organizations within the WLB alliance, the question of return to Myanmar gave rise to significant tensions and difficult choices; exile had provided a conducive political environment for feminist mobilization, and public work within Myanmar demanded that they reinvent themselves and their ways of working in the hope of furthering feminist goals through a new, broader national women’s movement (Olivius 2019). One activist in exile contended

that this geographical shift jeopardized the cohesion of the movement. In her words, ‘the movement won’t be broken but it will be weaker.’<sup>3</sup>

This argument is echoed by another activist, who expresses her concern about the future of the women’s movement as an actor that can openly address politically sensitive issues and express criticism in national and international forums:

Before, their [women’s organizations which relocated to Myanmar] statements were stronger. Now they have to be more careful. Many organizations increase their self-censorship because of the pressure from the authorities. There is a close monitoring [ ... ] At the end of the day you have to remember why you are doing what you do. Organizations based in the borderlands and in the conflict zones are reminded of the threats.<sup>4</sup>

For KWAT, it was not an option to relocate completely to Myanmar. As noted in an interview excerpt above, KWAT activists did not feel that their human rights documentation work could be safely and freely carried out in Myanmar; indeed, as noted by the activist just cited, organizations that did relocate experienced significant surveillance. However, KWAT was present in Kachin areas of Myanmar through offices in KIO-controlled areas and in the Kachin capital of Myitkyina. From these locations, they have developed practices in response to everyday needs, such as health care provision and humanitarian aid. KWAT was one of a handful of WLB members that kept their main office in exile throughout the transitional period.

The growth and increased diversity of Myanmar women’s activism also meant that differences among women activists and organizations became more significant. While women from different ethnic minority organizations could find common ground in their experiences of armed conflict and displacement at the hands of the Tatmadaw and in their aspirations to a federal democratic state, the urban, middle-class activists of many new organizations in Myanmar did not share these experiences and goals. From the perspective of KWAT, the transition to democracy is not the ultimate goal in itself. Their vision is federal democracy, which implies self-determination for the Kachin people. Moreover, for KWAT the goal of gender equality cannot be separated from political solutions to core conflict issues, such as addressing long-standing dynamics of injustice for the ethnic minority

3 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 13 December 2018.

4 Interview with activist, Yangon, 16 November 2018.

populations. This, as argued by the activist quoted below, sets KWAT apart from women's activists and organizations that lack experience of armed conflict and ethnic persecution:

They only think on the democracy, like if we have a democracy in Burma, the mission will be fulfilled. But for us, democracy is not enough, right? [...] So, they are just focused on gender equality, only work for women's rights, you know, in general. It is fine and may be easier and they are very free to work on that issue, but who are working for more focus on conflict area?<sup>5</sup>

Another tension within the women's movement emerged in relation to women's participation in the peace process. While women's organizations and activists, particularly in the urban areas of Myanmar, advocated for women's participation in the official peace process, other organizations, including KWAT, did not recognize the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement as a legitimate framework. Therefore, the debate about women's participation 'is not about having women sitting at the table'<sup>6</sup> but about making sure that women's voices from conflict areas are also recognized and incorporated in peace talks. An activist, in an interview with Elisabeth Olivius, echoes this argument:

The women from conflict area should participate in [the peace process]. So that is why we are worried that some are thinking only about women's participation. Our meaning of women's participation is not like that. So not only women, but women who can really, you know, represent women's voices from the ground.<sup>7</sup>

During the transition, differences between women from conflict-affected areas and organizations based in Yangon became more salient. Moreover, different positions in relation to the ongoing peace process under the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) framework created tensions within the WLB alliance, as described by a KWAT representative:

There is ongoing offensive and ongoing war crime and crime against humanity happen in the Kachin area. So, how can we feel the same with the other organizations who are just based in the urban area and also

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5 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 15 December 2018.

6 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 15 December 2018.

7 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 1 December 2016.

non-conflict area? So this kind of, you know, position is now is little bit different with the WLB and other member organization. [...] especially for the position on ICC<sup>8</sup> or something for finding justice. We strongly, strongly call for ICC, you know, but as the other members, not all members, but other member who are signing the NCA, they don't want to speak out on this kind of risky issue [...] So that's why this signatory NCA women's leaders have a different feeling and different position with us.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, the transition has expanded and reshaped the political landscape of Myanmar women's activism, giving feminist agendas and goals far more visibility in Myanmar public life. At the same time, for KWAT the strain of bridging growing differences, and the frustration of seeing movement allies ignorant of the conditions in conflict-affected Kachin state, has been deeply felt. During the transition, strategies aiming at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in transitional politics were prioritized among women's organizations that relocated to Myanmar, while KWAT continued to emphasize the protection of women in conflict-affected areas and the need to link women's rights and ethnic rights.

### *The Kachin Struggle: Opportunities and Challenges to Change from Within*

Historically, there were important linkages between KWAT and the leadership of the KIO. While KWAT was founded as an independent organization, there are significant personal relationships between the two organizations, and KWAT has supported the KIO armed struggle as a means to Kachin self-determination. This position derives from the conviction that ethnic equality and gender equality are interlinked political goals. The resurgence of armed conflict in Kachin state in 2011 reaffirmed KWAT's loyalty to KIO, as it underlined the importance of freedom from majority aggression and domination as a precondition for the realization of Kachin women's rights. Moreover, over time KWAT has earned the recognition of KIO leaders, not least on the basis of their work with human rights documentation and international advocacy. Through this, KWAT has improved the visibility and

8 As part of its international advocacy work, KWAT has constantly demanded the opening of investigations by the International Criminal Court with regard to human rights violations perpetrated by the Myanmar Armed Forces.

9 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 19 December 2018.

legitimacy of the Kachin struggle in relation to international audiences, and has thus proved itself instrumentally useful to KIO (Hedström and Olivius 2021). As a result, new opportunities for pursuing change from within the ethno-nationalist project have opened up. For example, KIO has been holding public consultations with civil society, including women's organizations, since 2011. These links to civil society are a source of legitimacy for KIO, as it also demonstrates commitment to staying in touch with Kachin grassroots (De la Cour Venning 2019). This is in itself a small step towards change, and has also led to further changes in KIO rules and governing practices:

They [KIO] are aware of people caring about gender equality but I am not sure that they know what this means [...] anyway, they gradually understand a little bit more. Some rules have changed, for instance, opening possibilities for women to get married and continue working in service.<sup>10</sup>

Seeking to better exploit these openings for women's participation in KIO decision-making, KWAT has contributed to strengthening the leadership skills of women from the Kachin Women's Association, a women's wing that is organizationally part of KIO, through its internship programme and trainings. More than 50 women holding leadership positions within KWA have received these trainings. Through these, the aim is to create a critical mass of women who can position themselves within the structures of Kachin leadership and transcend the support roles traditionally expected from women within KIO. The content of these trainings encompasses democracy, human rights and political affairs, aiming to provide women with tools to take part in KIO decision-making and policymaking.

However, seeking to advance women's rights from within the militarized, male-dominated structures of the KIO also entails significant challenges and obstacles. There is still a long way to go before KWAT can effectively influence the agenda-setting in Kachin politics and the ethno-political project as a whole. One of the recurring demands and policy recommendations expressed by KWAT has been a guarantee of women's participation in peace efforts. As one KWAT representative argues, although the KIO has been receptive to input from KWAT, this sign of political will has not been translated into outspoken acknowledgement of the contribution that Kachin women can make to the Kachin struggle:

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10 Online interview with representative of Kachinland Research Center, 16 June 2020.

They listen to KWAT about women's participation. They have accepted 30% quota, actually they have said 'you can come as much as you want. You should empower women, don't ask, just come.' They don't listen to women in public, only at the back. But, slowly, they are listening.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, there is resistance to accepting and articulating the problem of gender discrimination within the KIO. This is probably informed by a desire to maintain a sense of social stability and of the status quo in a highly unstable political context. This can be clearly seen in the sensitivity around raising issues of violence against women within the Kachin community. While KWAT advocacy that draws attention to sexual violence perpetrated by Tatmadaw troops is readily taken up and publicized by KIO, violations perpetrated by KIO soldiers are raised only in closed meetings with KIO leaders (Hedström and Olivius 2021).

There is also an apparent unwillingness on the part of KIO commanders to address issues of sexual violence during ongoing conflict. Sexual violence acquires political significance when is portrayed as violence by the enemy against the ethnic minority. Although this can be an entry point for women's organizations to get access to the KIO agenda, it is still insufficient from a women's rights perspective. A KWAT representative reflects on the low priority that sexual violence more broadly holds on the KIO agenda:

They [ethnic rights and women's rights] should be combined but some men leaders don't understand that. They are just thinking 'this is an important time, we cannot talk about women now'. When we discuss that sexual violence should be brought to the table most of them don't understand that. They say 'Later, later, later ...' And later is when many women have been raped.<sup>12</sup>

A similar pattern can be seen in KIO attitudes to the issue of human trafficking of Kachin women. As Kamler (2015) argues, this topic is still considered by KIO leaders to be a women's issue, and despite having been in dialogue with women's groups, they have not developed effective policy responses.

Thus, during the last decade there has been improvement in KIO awareness of the importance of women's involvement, but the possibility of greater participation depends on a structural transformation of social attitudes and

11 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 19 December 2018.

12 Interview with activist, Chiang Mai, 15 December 2018.

narratives in the Kachin community as a whole. Not only does the political and military KIO leadership continue to be male-dominated, but so does the religious leadership in Kachin State, and this is something that constrains the possibilities for the societal change in gendered dynamics that organizations like KWAT envision. Christian Baptist networks have been crucial in shaping Kachin identity (Pelletier 2021). The Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), in particular, played an important role after conflict resumed, as one of the most prominent civil society organizations, as providers of emergency relief and as a bastion for the nationalist project.

Recently, support for the promotion of traditional values has gradually grown among the youth. One of the interviewees described how he had witnessed ‘young men complaining about women’s rights’ as part of ‘a shift in pro-western narratives and attitudes to more traditional views.’<sup>13</sup> Thus, one of the main challenges for KWAT in maintaining a role of influence within the Kachin community is demonstrating how the idea of gender equality does not oppose ideas of Kachin identity; instead, it is important to convince sceptics that it is an integral part of a broader agenda for justice.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored how KWAT has navigated contradictory political changes during the transition, namely the simultaneous opening of political space in many parts of Myanmar and the resurgence of war in Kachin state. This has pushed KWAT to respond by reappraising and adjusting their strategies and alliances both within the women’s movement and within the ethnic Kachin struggle. These developments shed light on the potential as well as the challenges of pursuing feminist agendas from within ethno-nationalist, armed movements, and thus adds to existing scholarly debates on this theme. The work of KWAT illustrates the possibility of navigating two fields of political mobilization: the promotion of ethnic rights and support for the cause of Kachin self-determination on the one hand, and a feminist activism focusing on promoting gender equality and women’s participation in all spheres of decision making on the other hand.

Since its foundation, KWAT’s agenda and main political goals have been aligned with the KIO aim of securing Kachin self-determination through

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13 Online interview with scholar, 12 June 2020.

adopting a model of federal democracy for Myanmar. Kachin women's activism is largely located within this ethno-nationalist struggle, and is in many cases motivated by a sense of duty towards the Kachin community as well as by the opportunity to position itself politically within that community (Hedström 2016a). However, KWAT activism has increasingly emphasized the fact that a genuine model of federal democracy requires that women be included in decision-making. These arguments have been strengthened in the post-2011 context. During KWAT's 10th Congress in February 2019, there was a reaffirmation of 'KWAT's strong commitment to work towards genuine peace and reforming federal democracy in Burma and to promote women's participating in decision making at all levels' (KWAT 2019). Thus, for KWAT gender equality and a just political settlement of the conflict are interlinked political goals. Activism deployed by KWAT since 1999 demonstrates that in its political vision, ethnic rights, self-determination and federal democracy are key aspects of a political landscape in which minority women can enjoy equal rights. Thus, it is not possible to focus on women's rights in isolation, as KWAT suggests that some other organizations within the women's movement have done in response to the dynamics of transition. However, promoting women's rights within and in close association with militarized, male-dominated KIO structures comes with significant challenges.

Even if Kachin self-determination is eventually achieved, this will not mean that the struggle for gender equality will be over, and KWAT's activism will continue promoting the agenda of women's participation within all spheres of Kachin community. The relationship with KIO remains strategic and became more reciprocal in the context of transition, but structural changes are needed in order to challenge the militarized and patriarchal structure, which constrains the advancement of the agenda for gender equality. In order to guarantee women's involvement in political affairs it is necessary to address the structural barriers obstructing women's enjoyment of rights within the Kachin community and the persistent narratives that disenfranchise women's leadership. Women activists have made efforts to transform this mindset and raise awareness about the role of women in the context of the political project of federal democracy. However, there are challenges making it difficult for them to play a more assertive and independent role within KIO structure. Questions about gender equality are still considered a domestic matter and therefore outside of political discussion. From the KIO perspective, the aims of self-determination, democracy and enjoyment of human rights are



understood in relation to the struggle against the Myanmar government, and not as a process of change that also needs to take place within the Kachin leadership and community (Nilsen 2019).

The transition has made it more urgent to overcome these challenges, as the resurgence of armed conflict has, for KWAT, underlined the necessity of the KIO struggle in order to secure rights for Kachin women. The transition has also brought new challenges concerning the work of KWAT within the broader women's movement, as international donors as well as women's organizations have increasingly turned to the Myanmar state as a partner and target for advocacy. One of the implications of the relocation to Yangon by several of the organizations that are members of the multi-ethnic alliance has been a more limited space in which to make outspoken denunciations of the human rights violations perpetrated by the Myanmar Armed Forces, and limited capacity to do this. These limitations have been criticized by KWAT as a factor that jeopardizes the cohesion of the women's movement.

The military coup on 1 February 2021 can be expected to reshape the political conditions for Myanmar women's activism yet again. The coup, and the new junta's violent repression of protesters, have already reversed the shift towards the state in donor and investor strategies, and many women's activists have fled to neighbouring countries or gone into hiding. KWAT, along with other organizations, has called on the international community to prioritize 'placing at the center of its response local CBOs and CSOs that have the expertise, agency and legitimacy' (Progressive Voice 2021). KWAT statements and actions after the coup continue to draw attention to the ongoing conflict in Kachin State and to underscore the continuing need for a dual struggle – for democracy and for self-determination.

Drawing on historical experiences, the women's movement may thus resurface and reorganize in exile once more. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the differences between women's organizations in terms of political agendas and strategies during the transition period may be reduced and that they may converge again. This might be expressed in a more vocal and articulated international advocacy. While the effects of the coup are still uncertain, recent developments emphasize how for KWAT, and for women's organizations more broadly, their work has been and continues to be constantly negotiated in response to changing political conditions.

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