

Women's Leadership for Transformative, Feminist Change at the Grassroots Level in Karen State

Naw K'nyaw Paw and Maggi Quadrini

Introduction

For over 70 years, the Karen people have faced persecution by Myanmar's military regimes. Tatmadaw policies, which have aimed to defeat armed ethnic opposition groups by targeting civilian communities to eliminate sources of food, finance, recruits and intelligence, have for decades caused widespread suffering, displacement and poverty in Karen state. As a result of these counterinsurgency strategies, women and children have been raped and sexually abused, as systematic offensives by the Tatmadaw have been designed to terrorize and subjugate Karen civilians.¹ Alongside military aggression, administrative policies (only offering education to Karen children in the Burmese language, for example) have been designed to subjugate and destroy the unique culture of the Karen people.²

Since the 2021 military coup, the regime has broken a ceasefire in place for a decade and intensified their attacks by carrying out multiple air and ground strikes. Families have had to move and hide in the forest where they are deprived of access to food, water and shelter; at the time of writing, at least 250 000 people have been displaced.³ The atrocities that the military junta are committing against innocent people amount to the most serious crimes under international law, including crimes against humanity and

1 Karen Women's Organization 2022a.

2 Ibid.

3 UCA News 2022.

war crimes. Amidst this quickly escalating humanitarian crisis, women's organizations have played a critical role in responding to urgent needs.⁴

Naw K'nyaw Paw, a Karen woman and refugee, is the General Secretary of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO), a feminist, indigenous rights community-based organization, with more than 70,000 members, which plays a leadership role in the struggle to bring democracy and human rights to Myanmar. KWO focuses⁵ on capacity building, increasing and amplifying women's voices and influence, and providing⁶ emergency support, including food, household items and women and children's hygiene kits. Naw K'nyaw Paw was born on the Thailand–Myanmar border, and became a refugee at the age of 11. She has been working for KWO since 1999, after completing her education in Mae Ra Moe refugee camp in Thailand, and was elected to become General Secretary in 2013.

Maggi Quadrini works on human rights with various women-led organizations on the Thailand–Myanmar border, and assists KWO by providing technical assistance. In this conversation, Maggi Quadrini discusses the origins of feminist resistance with Naw K'nyaw Paw, who speaks from lived experience on the progression of women's rights in her homeland of Karen State, Myanmar. Together, they unpack what revolution means to Naw K'nyaw Paw and how the participation of women in resistance movements is paramount for a future in Myanmar which is free, fair and feminist. They also explore the challenges women from Karen state face in terms of accessing gender justice and rights, and the impacts of the coup on women from ethnic minority communities.

Growing up in a War Zone

MQ: What was life like growing up?

KP: I grew up in the conflict areas in Karen State, Burma.⁷ My parents ran from one place to another. Every summer, the Burma Army would increase its attacks on Karen people and my parents had to run. So they sent me and

4 Quadrini 2022.

5 Karen Women's Organization 2022b.

6 Ibid.

7 This book uses the term 'Myanmar' to describe the country otherwise known as Burma, unless used otherwise in specific quotes, such as here.

my siblings to stay with my aunt and study along the Thailand–Burma border when I was six years old. They thought I would be safer there.

MQ: Did women and men have different roles in your community?

KP: The roles for men and women were significantly different. For example, my father was always involved in the community as a village head or a committee member. He went out looking for jobs to find money to raise the family. My mother was the one doing the household work at home. She cooked snacks and sold them. Taking care of the family and the home is a lot of work in remote villages with no electricity and no appliances. Everything must be done by hand. My mother is the eldest child, so she also had to look after many of her siblings. Her mother passed away when the youngest child was not even five years old. I grew up in a big family with six brothers and sisters, plus my aunties and uncles together.

MQ: Did these gender roles impact the roles women held in the Karen revolution?

KP: Yes, the contribution of women to the revolution in the past was mainly work in the communications sector, health, education and offering support behind the scenes during the conflict. This included cooking and packing food for soldiers on the frontlines, caring for wounded soldiers and arranging funerals for dead soldiers, caring for the widows of fallen soldiers and helping look after their families. On the other hand, most of the Karen soldiers were men and were on the frontlines or fulfilling other military roles. Still now, the majority of the government administration are men.

‘Women are Capable of Doing Anything’: Karen Women and Revolutionary Change

MQ: Is it important that women participate in resistance and revolutions?

KP: It is very important that women participate in resistance and revolutions. For a revolution to be successful it needs the whole population taking part, not just half of the population. Women are capable of doing anything only if they are given opportunities and are treated with respect and equality. There should not be any different roles. Instead, the revolutionary organizations should have clear policies that promote women by creating working

environments conducive to supporting their full participation, and where they are not afraid of being harassed or discriminated against. If this kind of working environment is created in our revolution, we will achieve our goals and have great, long-standing success.

In my community, women resist by breaking gender stereotypes, by challenging the status quo, by advocating for law changes that reflect women rights, by building women's capacity – particularly young women – so we can lead and be good examples in the community. However, women face lots of obstacles, particularly young women, who face double standards. They are not valued or respected by the male leaders in the community, and they often do not get support from their families either. Many women are restricted when there is a lack of co-operation from some male leaders and when some community members want to maintain stereotypical roles for women.

In fact, I decided to join KWO because I experienced discrimination from my male friends when I was a teenager. My male friends would often talk down to us girls and we were not allowed to play football because it was for boys only; we could not wear this and that and we had to keep our hair long, etc. There were so many restrictions on our personal choices. At that time, I was not aware of women's rights or human rights. I just felt it was not fair; I felt in my heart that it was an injustice. I joined KWO to learn about women's rights, and to understand more about women's issues. I wanted to develop skills to help girls and women who had experiences like me. I feel I made the right decision. Since joining KWO I have had a lot of opportunities to attend training in human rights, women's rights, and many rights-based workshops. I've had access to short-term training, and I have met other women's rights activists who have inspired me. I have travelled and seen the world. It has opened my eyes and my mind! KWO provides a lot of opportunities for women to develop, build their capacity so they can solve their own problems, so that women can become leaders, have more power, and can challenge the patriarchy. All of these make me feel I'm in the right place at the right time.

To me, revolution means to resist any injustice, unfairness, inequality and oppression upon us. I would like to see a future where we have self-determination in our own affairs, genuine peace, a community that respects gender equality, and where women and girls can make decisions on their own, where there is a government and laws that protect and promote women's and girls' rights and there is real respect for our ethnicity, our culture and for diversity.

MQ: What has changed since you became involved in the fight for women's rights in terms of women's rights and opportunities in your community?

KP: I have seen a lot of changes. There have been changes in perspectives from the community towards the role of men and women. Particularly in refugee camps where there is more training and more awareness raising on women's rights and human rights. There are more women working in leadership and community work in the refugee camps. We even see more girls playing football which has always been seen as a boys-only sport. Women are now wearing non-traditional clothing, like long pants, whereas before we had to wear long skirts or sarongs. Now, more girls wear skirts that are a bit shorter. In the past, all women's skirts had to cover the knees. In general, the community has moved from being very conservative to more progressive and more accepting of equal roles for men and women.

In the revolutionary areas in Karen State, the Burma Army carried out brutal operations against the Karen people, and often targeted men. They were afraid and ran away to hide. Women and family members remained in the villages and the women took up the village chief roles. They defended the people and challenged the Burmese military whenever they came to their areas.

Now there are many more women who are working as leaders and leading the services in the community by participating in decision-making, attending meetings and protecting the rights of members of the community. People can see that there are more roles for women in leadership. This is a good change. However, there are still far too few women in leadership roles. In the military, the view that the job of a soldier is only for a man has not changed.

Transitional Changes and the Military Coup: Impact on Women's Rights

MQ: Can you explain why you did not move back to Myanmar after 2011, like some other women's rights activists did?

KP: I was born on the Thai side of the border in a temporary village because my parents fled from Burma each time the Burmese Army attacked their home village. We moved back after the attacks calmed down. My family became refugees when I was 10 years old in 1991. I continued my education in the

refugee camp and graduated High School there. I lived with my family in the camp until I joined KWO, when I went to live in the KWO staff house and office. All my family resettled in 2008 to Canada through the UNHCR programme. Now I have no family members left in the refugee camps or in Burma. We were forced to be separated and spread over the world because of the Burmese army. Now my family is KWO, where my work is. KWO implements its programmes and projects in all the Karen refugee camps in Thailand and in the Karen community in Burma. Even after 2011, the year that the Burmese military government started to open up a little bit, there were still many conflicts and clashes in our homeland. There was no guarantee of safety for the people or for refugees either, so we could not return to our villages. There were no livelihood opportunities and no social services available for them. Refugees still need support: the support of INGOs and the support of CBOs like KWO. They are dependent on aid. I am committed to helping them.

Even after 2011, there was still no democratic government in Burma. The Burmese military remained in power through the 2008 Constitution, which it wrote to grant special privileges and power to the military over any form of civilian government. In the ethnic areas, the Burmese army has maintained its position of ruling over us all. There was never any attempt at a democratic government for the ethnic areas. The military kept full control of those parts of the country. The ceasefires and peace-talks have failed to materialize into safe, peaceful situations on the ground. It is not safe for refugees or IDPs to return home. There is also still no respect for human rights, which is evident through the lack of recognition of the ethnic education, health and administration systems that we had to set up in our areas because the Burmese military government did nothing for us, except attack us and steal our land. There is still now militarization going on in the Karen areas by the Burmese army. They build roads so they can set up more army bases, with more soldiers in our areas. KWO can only provide aid to our community in Burma by working across the border from Thailand. We could not do the work freely based in Burma because it is never safe enough. The Burmese military government demanded, for example, that we ask their permission to go into our own communities to provide services. They follow us everywhere and refuse approval to enter conflict zones or ethnic areas where our people live. Life and work under their control is just impossible. Due to these challenges, I could not move back to Burma. I would become powerless again.

MQ: What has changed since the transition in Myanmar, in terms of women's rights and justice?

KP: I cannot deny that since 2012 more space has opened, particularly opportunities for women's rights in urban areas. That is a good thing, of course. In the communities where we work, there have been fewer military clashes and we have been able to travel around more freely than before and so we have been able to help build the capacity of women in the community much more. However, in recent years – even before the Burma Army staged the coup – in our Karen areas the Burmese army has been building roads for military purposes. They have confiscated our land amid a significant increase in the number of Burmese army posts and soldiers. Consequently, this has resulted in more offensives and human rights violations against Karen villagers.

MQ: How do you think the events since the attempted coup on 1 February 2021 will affect women's rights and opportunities in your community?

KP: It got worse after the Burma Army staged their coup. Since the coup, there have been air strikes and air bombardment of our people, and this had previously not happened for more than 30 years. This is a whole new level of terror for women and their families. They must find caves and rocks to shelter in. Their daily survival is their highest priority. Other issues fade away very quickly when you are fighting for your life.

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