PARTNERSHIPS FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Expanding Opportunities to deepen women's participation in decision making processes and initiatives for peace and reconciliation in Rakhine, Northern Shan and Kachin

PILOT PROJECT REPORT

Rosemary Kabakki, Ashish Pandey, Marta Bernal, Mang Pi, Nang Seng Raw, Lily Aeint Popoaung, Rachel Julian. Leeds Beckett University: Ghazala Mir and Emerging Women Leaders from Chin, Kachin, Northern Shan and Rakhine

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Executive Summary

In 2011, Myanmar's political and economic reform agenda was launched, and the President U Thein Sein invited Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) to take part in a three-step plan: bi-lateral ceasefires, nationwide ceasefire and political dialogue[1]. During the NCA talks process there was no meaningful engagement to foster the participation of women or include gender perspective in the issues covered. This on-going exclusion of women poses a substantial risk to achieve sustainable peace in Myanmar[2]. The exclusion of women is further aggravated by the military coup in 2021, which is overriding human rights guarantees.

The history, culture and politics in Myanmar have resulted in a fractured society with many excluded and feeling distant from regional and national peace processes, where there is a broad meaning of peace (social cohesion, land rights, livelihood, health and education). To respond to this reality Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar (NPM) created a new advisor network to feed in experience of challenging exclusion on land rights, health and education. This was established with support from Partnerships for Equity and Inclusion, an international equity-focused network, which enabled NPM to work with the 'emerging women leaders' network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in 4 states in Myanmar Chin, Kachin, northern Shan & Rakhine States. Hence NPM trained the 5 identified partners who are impacted not only by the armed conflict but also by structural inequalities that prevent them to enjoy fully their rights.

The following study explores specific enablers and obstacles to women's participation in politics and peace negotiations in Myanmar. The study was conducted in and influenced by the context of women's broader socioeconomic marginalization. It identifies positive and enabling practices from various contexts that can inform recommendations for the increased and equal participation of women in public affairs in Myanmar.

According to the research findings, there are huge barriers for women to participate in peace initiatives and their experiences, needs and capacities are not included in discussions for peace. As a result, the peace process is developing policies without a gender perspective. Findings show that women's equal participation in politics and peace processes, as well as in communities and legal structures, is needed to provide women's unique perspectives, networks, skills, and abilities to contribute to governance, prioritise women's and girls' needs and avoid discriminatory practices.

It is critical to strength women's confidence and capacity which has been weakened as a result of historical exclusion and gender-biased education or lack of formal education. Women's political engagement also requires support for childcare, the competing demands of domestic responsibilities and for public safety and security owing to the fear of gender-based violence.

Women have a valuable contribution to make towards improving education, increasing facilities for health-care or infrastructure that targets the basic needs of the communities in which they live. The inclusion of women and their priorities at all levels of public decision making and management is thus fundamental to achieving sustainable peace and development.

Introduction

In 2015, Myanmar and a number of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO) signed a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). From the government side, the Myanmar peace negotiation structure operated through two main committees: The Union Peacemaking Central Committee (UPCC) and the Union Peace-making Working Committee (UPWC); for the government representatives conformed the UPWC only two out of fifty-two members were women. Likewise, the EAOs negotiation team represented by the Senior Delegation (SD) included only two women in their fifteen delegations (AGIPP 2022). A conclusion is evident: there were few women participating in the NCA process. The NCA process did not meaningfully managed to foster the participation of women or include genders perspective in substantive matters. The male dominance at the negotiation table reflects the underlying socio-cultural norms that prevent women to play leadership roles.

"Women's participation in decision making bodies and politics is to build a stronger and powerful country in the FUTURE. Women are also citizens of this country and thus it is important for us to involve in decision making bodies of the politics. Women participation in politics will create positive peace for our country".

Female participants from Kachin

Added to this, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which ousted State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (BBC 2021), not only represents a set back to advance women rights and to ensure that they have more opportunities, power, and influence in society but also places an unaccountable military with a history of gender-based violence (Kuehnast 2021). Beyond the direct threat this poses to women's physical safety, the military is expected to reinvigorate Myanmar's long history of patriarchal oppression and cultural discrimination. Furthermore, Myanmar strong women's organizations who are documenting human rights abuses, providing services to Internally Displaced People, including survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, are currently under threats from the repressive military junta.

Within the UN Security Council resolution 1325 (UN 2000) framework on Women, Peace and Security, women participation in Myanmar peace process is paramount on the promotion of women's inclusion. This is not only important work for the sake of equality, but also necessary for peace processes: women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution improves outcomes—before, during and after conflict. Women are recognised as the first responders in the aftermath of conflict who broker harmony and peace in their communities. The exclusion of women and omission of gender analysis, therefore, poses a substantial risk to achieve lasting peace in Myanmar.

But why is so that very few women participated in Myanmar's peace process? Why gender considerations is absent in the negations? What factors prevent a meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding? How can women advocate with diverse stakeholders and undertake strategies to foster a more substantive participation in peace initiatives?

To address these questions and develop strategic interventions to increase women's participation in decision-making process and initiatives for peace, Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar (NPM) established an Emerging Women Leaders (EWL) network of CSO in 4 states of Myanmar: Chin, Kachin, Northern Shan and Rakhine.

In the past, NP worked with a cohort of 80 Emerging Women Leaders (EWLs) in an eight step skill enhancing process to supporting them to advocate for civilian protection and women's right in the 5 sectors discussed in the nationwide political dialogue – Land, Environment, Security, Social, and Political as key elements to support the transition from 60 years of armed conflict to peacebuilding.

From this cohort, NPM identified 5 local partners in Kachin, Rakhine, Shan and Chin State, for a pilot research project where NPM create a new advisory network to feed in experience of challenging exclusion on womens' right and participation in peace process. However, due to security concerns and limitation to internet access only EWL from Kachin and Paletwa were able to finalize the research.

The pilot project enabled women to do their own micro-research project which aimed to a) provide details on needs and inequalities within the context that could not be generated by 'outsiders' b) give the women credibility as participants in local and national processes by presenting data they have generated, and c) build the research skills of the women and help them achieve their aims of participation in politics and peace initiatives.

This report outlines the status of women's participation in decision making process and initiatives for peace. It identifies factors that act as barriers to their participation, and some areas for strategic interventions. The study presents the findings of two groups of EWL – Kachin and Paletaw and a conclusion summarising key factors that inhibit the participation of women in peace initiatives and proposing strategic interventions.

This report is a concise overview, with key analysis and recommendations based on the research undertaken by EWLs in their communities, and it is an invitation to reflect on inequalities and how to undertake strategies to counter this exclusion.

Methodology

The research methodology is a feminist participatory approach (Julian et al 2019) which values the experiential knowledge of those experiencing the multiple threats and recognises the capacity of those currently excluded from participating to gather and share that knowledge. We take an intersectional view of disadvantage, recognising that this relates not only to gender, ethnicity, disability, and age, but often a combination of these factors. By taking an interdisciplinary approach to needs and exclusion (incorporating health, education, security, land, and human rights) we will explore how to support communities to see how oppression weaves across them and reinforces their disadvantage within the peace process. We recognise the capacity of communities to gather, analyse and share this knowledge to improve their conditions.

In this study the overarching research question was 'what are biggest challenges women face in building peaceful future, where peace means safety, equality, health, education and livelihood?' This research question was chosen because the challenges faced by women in communities include more than the threat from armed actors, they are also related to the vast impact of exclusion and structural discrimination. This study will provide data on specific contexts and highlight factors that empower women so they can play a strong role in building peace.

We began the project by providing research training to the women. We did this through videos on participatory methodologies by Rachel Julian for the Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar staff. NPM then designed half day online trainings for the women (due to Covid restrictions). NPM trained a total of 80 EWL on research skills: question design, data gathering, analysis and dissemination of the findings. At the end of the training, every group designed their own research plans which included: goals of the research, research questions, data collection methodology, and how it will be disseminated.

The trainings were in Burmese, with interpreters translating into the local languages and dialects of the women. Through active discussion to understand how the research could work in their local contexts, the women designed a process of what and who to ask then began to do interviews in their local communities.

The women identified a diverse group of people to be interviewed and wrote down the interview responses in their local languages. There was one leader in each group, who collected the results and checked the results for sensitive data and removed information that could be a security risk for the communities then translated the results into Burmese. The group leader then sent in the results. The analysis process of dealing with the results included checking back with group leaders (who sometimes then checked with the women) to ensure the meanings were clear when the translation was through the two languages. Once the translations were compiled and agreed the results were presented in this report.

Although women in Rakhine, Chin state, Northern Shan, and Kachin participated in the research, not all of them had the opportunity to share their results before the coup. In this report we share the results from Chin and Kachin. The women are still isolated and it is too risky in Rhakine and Northern Shan for the women to share interview data and be in contact with other organisations. Despite the great commitment and work conducted by EWL, the research was impacted by the 1st February 2021 military coup. The security threats and safety concerns prevented EWL from Northern Shan and Rakhine to continue collecting the data. In addition, internet restrictions imposed by the Military limited significantly the access to communicate with other community members. The research was further impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. Giving this scenario, EWLs from Northern Shan and Rakhine could not finalize their research as they were not able to conduct the data collection nor analyse it.

In addition, the Rakhine partners are located in a highly contested area, with stronger internet restrictions that prevented them to participate in the online training, therefore NP conducted an online training exclusively for them later in January 2021.

The goal of this participatory research was to obtain details on needs and inequalities within the EWLs' contexts, build research skills of the women so they can gain credibility in local and national processes by presenting data they had generated, and increase their participation and influence in peace initiatives.

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Community data

The EWLs from Paletwa chose to conduct research around customary practices and law, as they considered that these normative structures are discriminatory and prevent women from participating in decision making processes. The research question was: *'How can customary law and practices that discriminate against women be changed?'* Annexe 1 includes the research plan.

As figure 1 shows, the EWL from Paletwa interviewed a total of 32 participants using Key Informant Interviews as research method (METoolkit n.d.).
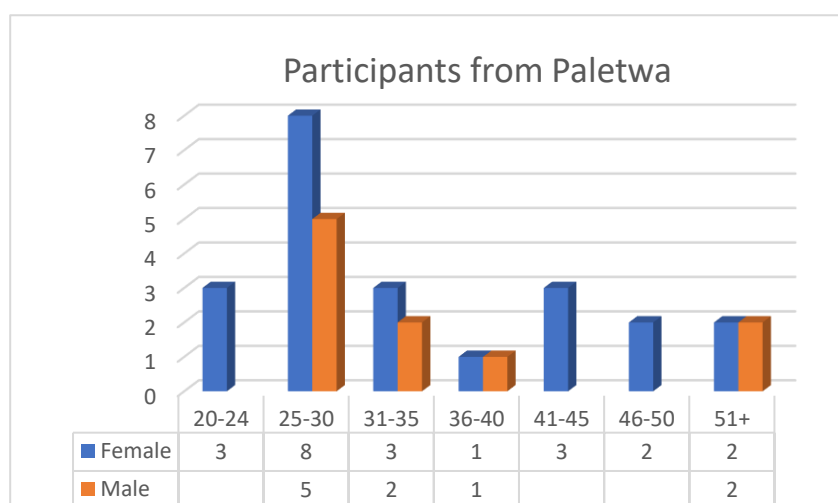
Figure 1: Participants from Paletwa interviewed by EWL.

	20-24	25-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
Female	3	8	3	1	3	2	2
Male		5	2	1			2

EWLs from Kachin chose as their research topic "How can we i*ncrease women's participation in decision making process and politics?"* with the goal of identifying factors that are undermining women's participation in peace process and local governance. EWL form Kachin want to understand the perceptions that women and men have around women leadership, what skills women need to become leaders. As a result of the findings Kachin are planning to develop evidence-based advocacy strategies, by demonstrating the advantages to increase women participation. Hence, as figure 2 shows, Kachin's EWL conducted 72 interviews mainly women.

	24	25-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+	N/I
Female	3	3	9	12	6	5	8	23
Male			1		1	1		
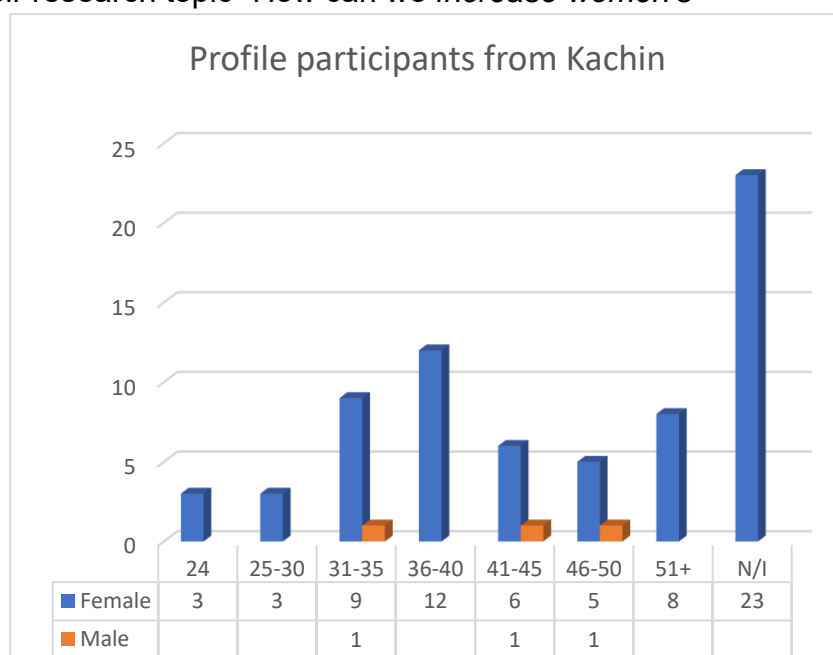
Figure 2: Profile of participants from Kachin

Findings

Within the overall research question: 'What are biggest challenges women face in building peaceful future, where peace means safety, equality, health, education and livelihood?', the women discussed what was most important in their own communities to enable this question to be answered. The women explained to group leaders that method and approach was empowering to them. They not only learnt about research, but through this process they learnt why they are marginalised. They wanted to understand. It is not just about counting the women, but making women count.

In Kachin the focus was on understanding why women were not involved in the political processes.

In Chin state the EWL were focused on the impact of customary law.

1.1 Discriminatory customary law in Paletwa, Chin State

Women in Paletwa are governed by a pluralistic legal system composed by national statutory regulations (formal law) and customary law. From the interviews, customary law has ethnic origins and only operates within the area occupied by the ethnic group, in our research the Khumee Chin ethnicity. Participants in the research considered that the sources of customary law in Paletwa are historically and accepted as authoritative because they are a product of social conditions, as one of the participant mentioned:

"I don't know about the government laws to compare the impact of customary law. I only know customary laws all my life"[3]. "In my village only elder governed under customary laws, and I just have to listen to what they say. So, it is more comfortable for me"[4].

Preferred System

|	Customary Law	Depends on the situation	Formal Law
Female	11		11
Male	4	1	5
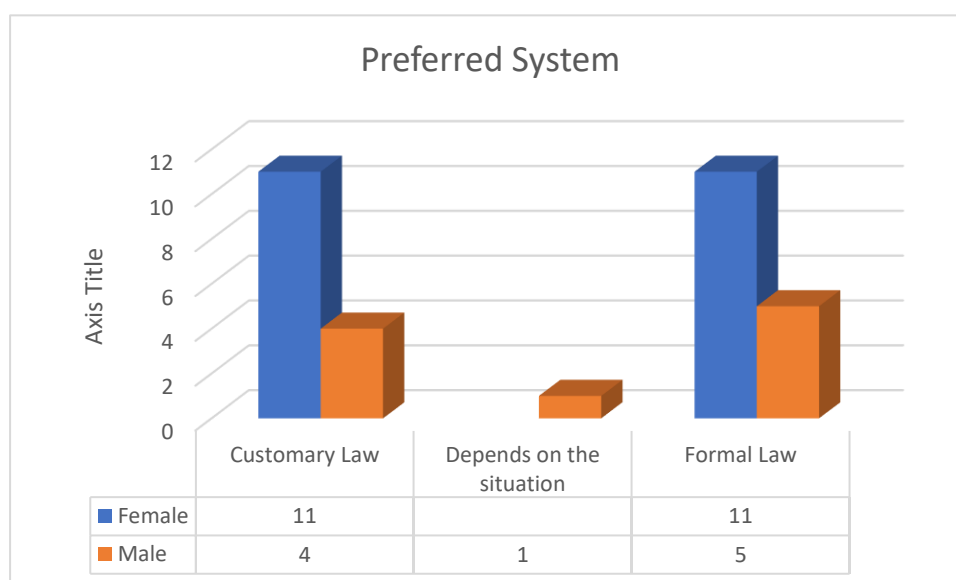
a) **Figure 3: Preferred normative system according to gender in Paletwa**

In terms of which of these systems – formal or customary law are preferred, as figure 3 shows female participants were equally divided in their preference; similarly, for male participants with a slightly higher number who opted to prefer formal law. This preference reflects how strong social norms remain entrenched in society and that participants saw pros and cons in both systems. Customary law, rooted in cultural norms and practices, provide an inexpensive and accessible structure for regulating social behaviour and overcoming conflicts:

"I want to solve the problem by customary law because it cost less. The government court and trials are expensive and take so much time"[5],

"the customary law is the decision of our tribe and it doesn't take time so I like it"[6].

Half of the participants expressed that they conduct their personal activities in accordance with and subject to customary law because it is less expensive, expeditious, accessible and issues are resolved by elders of the village. Furthermore, mostly women mentioned that the lack of technical support, language barriers, mistrust to government institutions, the costly and cumbersome of the procedures are factors that prevent them to seek support in the formal legal system. As some of the participants stated:

"I don't want to solve by government law because I cannot afford the cost. I don't know how to go to the government offices. I am shy. I live with my widow mother. If we want to solve according to the government law, it will cost much more than we can afford and it will take time."[7] **"As I do not know how to speak well, I don't want to solve problem with government laws. The village elders only practices customary laws. I do not dare to go to government offices. I am not fluent in Burmese language"**[8].

Those participants who preferred formal law reasoned that conventional law is applicable nationwide and all citizens must respect decisions that are made; some considered that formal law is fairer and includes the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. However, it is important to note that mainly men considered these advantages to using the formal law:

"I want to solve my case by government official laws because I believe every citizen must obey their government's law. After the government's court has made its final decision, no other institution should be able to change it. The government's court should be the highest decision making body, which mean the case should end there"[9].

"I feel the formal law is more just than customary law. Customary law gives advantages to the men side, on the other hand the government constitution look the truth of the case and decide upon the case. It is the law for all the citizens in Myanmar"[10].

Another man added:

"I prefer to solve with government constitution because the government constitution gives more equal rights to the women compared to the customary law"[11].

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Customary law has a great impact on the private sphere of women from Paletwa. In that regard, the data collected by the researchers from Paletwa shows that some customary law provisions affect women's ability to enjoy basic human rights

Testimony

"Customary laws provide no benefit for my only daughter. My daughter's husband cheated on her with another woman and left my daughter with 3 children. The custody of all my three grandchildren was taken by her family-in-law. They have destroyed my daughter's life. No elders would help my daughter to get divorced or get her children back *as* we are poor".

Female participant, case23

"I feel like I have no strength and no hopes. Although I gave birth I don't have the custody. It brings me sadness. I am like a dead person because I have to live with customary laws. I always feel threatened because women are being treated like a slave with this law"

Female participant, case 11

"There is not any rights for women in my village. Women jobs are to give birth and do household chores. Women do not have any chance to manage financial matters. When the husband died, they lose the custody of their children. So, I want to change this law and want to get equal rights with men".

"Women are not given a place in community neither they get enough education. They are not given a decision making role within the family. The customary laws are discriminating against women",

"I do not get any benefit from the customary laws. I feel I am being discriminated and ousted by my society"[12].

Over the years, women in Paletwa governed by customary laws have faced issues and discriminatory practices in such areas as 'bride price', guardianship and child custody, inheritance, divorce, appointment to traditional offices, access to employment, economic resources, equal remuneration for work and access to education: "I think the customary laws that encourage discrimination against women are about inheritance, guardianship of children, leadership and decision-making"[13].er, customary law tends to see women as subordinate to men or as having stereotyped roles that are difficult to change because they embedded customs and belief reinforced by traditional authorities.

The findings of this study shows the following three areas of customary law that are discriminatory:

a) Family matters: child custody, inheritance, divorce and marriage.

Participants shared that a discriminatory practice is related to bride price. In Paletwa there is a practice of paying a "bride price" which give the authority to the husband to treat his wife as a slave:

"The groom side needs to give to the bride side about 3,000,000 MMK (or) 1,500,000 MMK as a bride price. After they get married, the bride needs to take care of her in-laws as a slave with the idea of giving back same amount of bride price. The in-laws treat her as a slave"[14].

Moreover, according to the research participants, customary laws provide that women cannot inherit land from their fathers or husbands. In addition, married women are considered not to have property; all goods are the property of her husband to dispose of without necessarily having the consent of his wife. Widows and divorced women similarly lack rights to inherit from the estate of their deceased husband and to keep the custody of their children, and sometimes they are subject to violence at the hands of in-laws.

"Customary laws have many disadvantages for women. In customary laws, men get guardianship to the children"[15].

"Women do not have rights for inheritance. When a husband passes away, the wife cannot own their properties. There is no chance for guardianship of the children for women. Also, if women cannot deliver a baby boy, the husband has right to marry another woman. Men can marry more than one woman. Men practice polygamy. Women do not have much chance in getting proper education. Women are not considered as family. They are treated as the stranger"[16].

b) Access to employment, economic opportunities and education

Participants expressed that women do not have access to employment and equal wage. In the community it is expected that men work while women do the chores of the house, some of the interviewed shared that their husband do not even allow them to work. Another limitation that women face is lack of access to education, parents or relatives do not send their daughter to school which prevent them to have good job opportunities:

"My grandparents didn't send my mom to school because she is a girl. It was the huge barrier for her life. I am very sad about this kind of discrimination to women"[17].

"Women don't have equal chance to get education; women do not have equal rights with men including in the case of daily wage"[18].

c) Protection against gender violence

According to the female research participants, the customary law justifies gender-based violence as a form of control with no protection for women. Giving this scenario there is no legal response to domestic violence nor access to justice in rural areas and under customary law.

"The customary laws for Khu Mi Chin women make women to suffer and do not have any rights. Women are nothing. I faced domestic violence many times and my parents didn't do anything about that for me because of the bride price they took when I married. My husband is having affair though I cannot ask for punishment because I am afraid that I will not get guardianship to my children and I cannot live away from my children. I am suffering domestic abuse".[19]

1.1.1 Facilitating changes of customary law

This research demonstrates the importance of women's rights to those who participated in the research including some men in their communities. Women's accounts show there were few rights for the women before the February 1st coup in 2021, but since then our fieldwork has shown they have even fewer opportunities to influence and raise awareness. Protests have been outlawed, it is too risky to call on phones and no travel is allowed. The formal structures of the peace process have been disbanded and nothing is in its place (Human Rights Watch 2022).

The research that the women did fits into the Advocacy Cycle through which the Emerging Women Leaders have previously worked with CSOs and Non Government Organisations to influence their communities and improve their lives (ref). From their research findings the EWL identified the following activities, as ways of addressing the inequalities that are possible to do within their own sphere of influence. They said that they needed a donor to help them plan and carry out the activities, but that they felt ownership of the change and the leadership needed for these activities.

The participants mentioned the following activities to change customary law:

- Training about women's rights and gender equality in their communities and for other people.
- Coaching on gender issues for other leaders
- Gender equality workshops being available for CSOs
- Counselling services for women affected by discriminatory practices
- Dialogue with authorities and elders about the use of customary law to discriminate against women.
- Materials such as pamphlet about women's rights that the women themselves want to produce
- Sessions for both men and women to explain and share the pamphlets about why we should change these laws.

These findings also highlight the need to change formal law to make it less difficult for women to access this as half of the research participants would prefer to use national legal frameworks. Making these less expensive and complex and providing financial and other support to navigate formal legal processes and structures would support women to find alternative routes to justice and social inclusion.

1.2 Increasing women's participation in decision making in Kachin

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UN 2000) on Women, Peace and Security enshrined the participation of women in peacebuilding activities and peace processes. For the EWL in Kachin fostering women's participation in decision-making process and politics meant having an active role in the community to resolve social issues, the opportunity to speak out, bring new perspectives and be involved in different sectors relevant to achieving peace in the community:

"Women's participation in decision making bodies and politics will build a stronger and powerful country in the future[20].

Women are also citizens of this country and thus it is important for us to be involved in political decision making bodies.[21]

Women's participation in politics will create positive peace for our country.[22]

Women can contribute invaluable and good results in solving political and society's problems.[23]

Participants from Kachin identified several advantages resulting from women's involvement such as a gender perspective in local policies and decisions that could respond to women's needs, change structures of discrimination against women and mediate to resolve conflicts. The voice of women was seen as essential to achieving inclusive and detailed solutions at the level of both society and communities, starting at a local level and reflecting this nationwide:

"Women's participation is important because only women know about the problems of women.[24]

"Women can do from the small little things to the big important things with detailed critical thinking. And so, I understand women need to participate whether in politics or in church with important roles"[25].

"A wise woman can bring peace not only in marriage but also in politics. Even if there is no peace between villages, reconciliation can be achieved through women's mediation"[26].

"By increasing women participation, the community will be more inclusive and will be able to produce more leaders which will benefit the development of the whole country"[27]

"by increasing women participation, the vulnerable people will get more voices, and most importantly, there will be more inclusive development in every sector.[28]

Furthermore, due to the close relationship with their family members participants expressed that women can easily identify the needs of the community.

"Women can see details from the family matters to the society needs. When women make requests to the decision makers, they accept. For examples, the increasing number of clinics and schools are at the request of women"[29].

Participants from Kachin highlighted the importance of receiving support from governmental institutions to become politically active. For instance, the Women's Working Committee established by NLD (National League for Democracy Party), contributed to increasing women knowledge around politics, raise awareness about the role of women in politics, strengthen women networks, increase reporting and speaking skills, increase women ability to take positive decision:

"Although it was difficult to form a committee due to lack of trust, the Women's Working Committee was finally formed after repeated advocacy. Many positive results can be seen in the community that women learn to make better choices and develop their decision-making skill"[30].

1.2.1 Challenges to women's participation in politics

Most interviewees in Kachin expressed their willingness to participate in politics, but they acknowledged some challenges that prevented them from fully playing a leadership role. Among the challenges, the interviewees mentioned that women activist and networks on gender based violence and social justice are often disregarded and not linked to peacebuilding:

"Women get very small opportunity to participate in decision making bodies. Most of the time, women get roles to raise children "[31].

Moreover, women responsibilities in the house, lack of family support and low literacy are other reasons that prevent women to have leadership roles:

"Women in my community have very few opportunities to participate in decision making bodies and politics.[32]

Cultural stereotypes of women that perceive them as uncritical and naïve were further obstacles:

"Women are discriminated for being a woman. Also traditional practices discriminate women, even more women are seen as unknowledgeable and stupid"[33].

Some participants indicated they felt insecure and threatened if they participated in politics

"I am willing to participate. I have to struggle. I am worried about my security [threat to life] because of the large number of armed groups"[34].

Further there was a lack of willingness in local administrations to include women:

"Qualified young women are generally chosen but are not given leadership positions, saying they are "young and inexperienced". Although women are allowed to participate in the committee they only get the caring and cooking tasks" *35*

Another challenge that women faced is that they are seen to lack the education, negotiation, public speaking and other valuable skills related to leadership roles. This perceived lack of ability is linked to the consequences of women's exclusion

"I think I am not good enough yet. I can only accept the leadership position only when I have my capacity, knowledge, social status and wealth ready". [36]

In addition, women received strong pressure from their families, who feared that they would neglect their household duties if they became involved in community affairs. When women did participate in politics they found it challenging to consistently attend meetings due to family obligations.

"I want to participate but my husband would not allow me and I have many household chores to take care of" [37].

"women are subjected to being judged. The wives of the elders have been monopolizing their leadership positions without passing on power for generations. When women have problems with each other, only powerful leaders win. Women discriminate against each other. [38]

1.2.2 Increasing women's participation in politics

Education and support were seen as important determinants of women's participation in politics. For participants in Kachin, education was considered an asset for involvement in public affairs. They linked education with confidence, outspokenness, and a sense of contributing positively to public decision making. Women's generally low level of education was seen as a hindrance to their participation,

"Women should not only stay at home. Instead, they should attend trainings to improve their knowledge. Women should attend political conferences, and trainings provided by different organizations. Women should not think that community meetings are only for men, and should participate more" *39*.

Participants expressed that there is need for concentrated capacity-building on themes related to women's rights, leadership skills and project implementation. This was considered key to empowering women by increasing their technical knowledge, self-esteem and public speaking skills:

"to participate in politics and decision-making roles, women need to be active. She must have a reasonable education and have the courage to speak up. If she is not educated, she won't know what to say. You must be educated and knowledgeable about many things[40].

"Women need to have their own passion to participate. For women's participation, they need to get capacity-building trainings". [41]

"do not neglect women in rural areas and provide educational, political awareness training and livelihood trainings. If women can harness their natural skills and capacity, they will be more involved in the politics and fill the target of women participation in politics"[42].

Another important element to increase women participation in Kachin was seen as changing the attitudes and ideas that only men could participate in community meetings, and political positions:

"Women should get out of the influence of men. Be a courageous and get rid of all the insecurity". [43]

Finally, a key issues was the need for a top- level leadership through laws and public policies that supported women's safety and the chance to participate in politics:

"we need to have a law which fully guarantee the security of the women. And also, women to give chance to participate". [44]

1.2.1 Facilitating changes to political inclusion

The EWL analysis of findings showed that there needs to be more inclusion of women in every level and stage of political process in Kachin. By doing the research themselves, they were directly involved in developing the results and could design actions that enabled them to take ownership of findings in order to effect changes.

This ownership of dissemination and follow-up activities to address the inequalities EWLs found resulted in meetings with all the political parties to get each of them to nominate more women when they put together their candidates for elections. The women also began focusing on Township elections and began going from house to house in their neighbourhoods asking women if they would be prepared to stand in these elections. EWLs also helped and supported those who stood for elections, who could see how this would improve their representation.

The importance of the participatory nature of the research was that it directly strengthened the relationship with diverse members of the communities. The local interviewing helped EWLs with building the network and helped introduce mentors for social change. The women got new skills that would help them in the future. The deep level of the engagement helped support the women when they felt isolated by helping them understand they were not forgotten and abandoned.

As a result of this research the women involved made new connections which have continued. By still working and talking together they are using their skills to build protection and security under military rule.

The research was innovative and demanding particularly within the constraints of COVID-19 restrictions and the military coup, but the women have demonstrated adaptability and flexibility.

Conclusion

In answering the research question, 'What are biggest challenges women face in building peaceful future, where peace means safety, equality, health, education and livelihood?', the women have shown that for Kachin and Chin, their exclusion and marginalization from political and legal structures results in hardship, poverty and insecurity and has negative consequences for peacemaking processes.

This research shows that women's equal participation in politics and peace processes would be productive and more efficient because it provides women's unique perspectives, experiences, knowledge, networks, skills, and abilities to contribute in governance and prioritise women's and girls' needs. Often these needs are different from men's and boys' because of the unequal position of women. Women's perspectives could also be better reflected in customary law and practice if they were part of the decision-making roles. Their access to formal legal structures also needs to be increased significantly to give them more options to avoid discriminatory practices.

The widespread perception that the public terrain of politics and public affairs is "male space" and that women are relegated to domesticity poses strong barriers to women's participation in politics and governance and does not contribute to good leadership. It is critical to strength women's confidence and capacity which has been weakened as a result of this history of exclusion and their gender-biased education or lack of formal education. And even where such capacity is strengthened, women's political engagement may be constrained by the lack of childcare support and competing demands arising from domestic responsibilities as well as the overall lack of public safety and security and the fear of gender-based violence.

It is important that women have a greater role in decision making as it means a real access to resources and benefits for women and the community as a whole, including changing customary laws that can have negative impacts on them. Even more, increasing women's participation at a local level is critical not only because it is their right to participate but also because they have a valuable contribution to make towards improving education, increasing facilities for health-care or infrastructure that really targets the needs of the communities. The inclusion of women and their priorities at all levels of public decision making and management is fundamental to achieving sustainable peace and development.

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[2] Paffenholz, Thania et al. 2015. Making Women Count: Assesing Women's Inclusion and Influence on the Quality and Sustainability of Peace Negotiations and Implementation. Graduate Institute Geneva, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding: 13 April.

[3] Female participant from Paletwa, case 1

[4] Female participant from Paletwa, case 5

[5] Female participant from Paletwa, case 13

[6] Female participant from Paletwa, case 1

[7] Female participant from Paletwa, case 17

[8] Female participant from Paletwa, case 8

[9] Male Participant from Paletwa, case 19

[10] Male Participant from Paletwa, case 2

[11] Male Participant from Paletwa, case 9

[12] Female participant from Paletwa, cases 4, 24 and 20

[13] Female participant from Paletwa, case 7

[14] Female participant from Paletwa, case 7 $1 is about 1400 MMK

[15] Female participant from Paletwa, case 10

[16] Female participant from Paletwa, case 11

[17] Female participant from Paletwa, case 9

[18] Female participant from Paletwa, case 6

[19] Female participant from Paletwa, case 10

[20] Female participant from Kachin, case 50

[21] Female participant from Kachin, case 53

[22] Female participant from Kachin, case 54

[23] Female participant from Kachin, case 62

[24] Female participant from Kachin, case 55

[25] Female participant from Kachin, case 17

[26] Female participant from Kachin, case 16

[27] Female participant from Kachin, case 41

[28] Female participant from Kachin, case 55

[29] Female participant from Kachin, case 18

[30] Female participant from Kachin, case 8

[31] Female participant from Kachin, case 41

[32] Female participant from Kachin case 53

[33] Female participant from Kachin, case 7

[34] Female participant from Kachin, case 12

[35] Female participant from Kachin, case 16

[36] Female participant from Kachin, case 1

[37] Female participant from Kachin, case 10

[38] Female participant from Kachin, case 16

[39] Female participant from Kachin, case 7

[40] Female participant from Kachin, case 11

[41] Female participant from Kachin case 75

[42] Female participant from Kachin, case 2

[43] Female participant from Kachin case 9

[44] Female participant from Kachin, case 63