



# Women in Ethnic Armed Organizations in Myanmar

## *Numbers and narratives*

Women's participation in the Myanmar peace process is an oft-cited goal. While the agreed target is for women's representation to reach 30%, the actual share of female negotiators is much lower. The only parties to the negotiations are the military and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), and the parties choose their own delegates. So, how well are women represented in the EAOs, what kind of work do they do, and do they participate in decision-making as members of the EAOs' central executive committees? We carried out a survey in Myanmar to find some answers to these questions. In this policy brief, we present the findings in the form of numbers and narratives.

## Brief Points

- Women play subordinate roles in all armed organizations in Myanmar.
- Armed organizations are the only actors at the Burmese negotiating table.
- Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) have brought far more women into the peace talks than the Burmese military has done.
- Male leaders tend to ignore the ideas of the women in their organizations, and fail to recognize their abilities.
- Women's potential to contribute to peace in Myanmar is still greatly undervalued.

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## Women, Peace and Security

Armed conflict between non-state Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and the armed forces of Myanmar (previously known as Burma) has continued for nearly 70 years. Over several decades, the Burmese military has negotiated countless ceasefires with EAOs. In 2013, the military finally started to negotiate a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). As many as 21 EAOs were involved in the talks or invited to attend meetings, and in June 2015, a woman, Naw Zipporah Sein, became the lead negotiator on behalf of the EAOs. With this, 4 out of 67 NCA negotiators (6%) were women. All of them were delegates of EAOs.

Women's organizations across Myanmar demanded that the peace process should involve more women, and in October 2015, when the NCA was signed by the government and 8 EAOs, they agreed that a "reasonable" number of women should be included in all future peace talks. A few months later, parties to the NCA signed a "Framework for Political Dialogue", which included a pledge to make efforts to reach 30% women's participation in future dialogues. However, not a single peace conference or negotiating committee has met this target, and there is no mechanism in place to make sure that 30% of seats at the negotiating table are filled by women.

In 2015, after the landslide electoral victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD), a new government was inaugurated, and Aung San Suu Kyi became the first State Counsellor of Myanmar. Suu Kyi herself called for 50% women's inclusion in the peace process. Subsequent peace conferences, the so-called "21st century Panglong conferences", invited large numbers of delegates, where up to 17% were women. However, the key parties to negotiations are still the military and the EAOs. This raises the question of how women are involved in the EAOs, what kind of work they carry out in these organizations, and not least, whether they are engaged in the EAO's highest decision-making body, the Central Executive Committee (CEC).

We examined these questions as a part of the project on 'Gender Equality, Peace and Security in Nepal and Myanmar' (WOMENSPEACE). This policy brief presents our findings.

## Numbers

The primary aim of our survey was to gather basic data on the share of women among the cadres of each EAO, and the share of women in each group's CEC. Out of 21 EAOs that were engaged in ceasefire negotiations at some point in time, we were able to collect primary data on all but 3 of them. Those were the Lahu Democratic Union, the United Wa State Army and Wa National Organization.

We managed to gather data on the number of cadres in each of the remaining 18 EAOs, though we could only find data on the female cadres of 6 of them (see Table 1). Out of these, the share of female cadres varied widely, from 3% (Karen Peace Council) to 37% (New Mon State Party). Note that figures should only be taken as rough estimates, as we explain below.

We made an effort to collect data from more than one source for each EAO whenever it was possible, and we found wide variations in the numbers of cadres. The numbers listed here are those provided by the source(s) we deemed to be the most reliable. These were not necessarily EAO sources, as EAOs have a tendency to exaggerate their membership.

The accuracy of the information we collected on the number of cadres is difficult to assess. We are far more confident about the accuracy of our data on women's participation in CECs. We were able to gather such data on all but

three EAOs, namely the Kachin Independence Organization, Karen Peace Council and Shan State Progress Party. In most cases, sources gave the name of each female CEC member, and this information was usually consistent from one interviewee to another. Table 1 provides the numbers we gathered, and shows the female share in cadre membership (where available) and in central executive committees (CECs). According to our data, 6 EAOs had no women in their CEC, 2 made no information available. The highest share of women in any CEC was 20% (Kuki National Organization-Burma).

If we compare the share of female cadres in a group with the share of female CEC members in the same group, we see that, except for the New Mon State Party, the shares are roughly equivalent, though female CEC membership is consistently slightly lower than rank and file female membership as cadres.

If we include only the EAOs that we have complete information on, the overall share of women in the CECs is 7%. It is interesting to find that this share is similar to the share of females in the NCA negotiation team (6%). As noted, as of 2015, all female negotiators were delegates of an EAO, while the total number of negotiators includes the all-male military delegates. The 6% share of female negotiators against the 7% share of females in CECs suggests that female CEC members in EAOs are more likely to be involved in the nationwide peace talks than their male counterparts.



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Name of armed organization	Total cadres	Female cadres	Female cadres (%)	Total CEC members	Female CEC members	Females in CECs (%)
AA (Arakan Army)	1000			3	0	0%
ABSDF (All Burma Students' Democratic Front)	400	60	15%	21	2	10%
ALP (Arakan Liberation Party)	500	60	12%	13	1	8%
CNF (Chin National Front)	200			45	3	7%
DKBA (Democratic Karen Benevolent Army)	1500			8	0	0%
KIO (Kachin Independence Organization)	9000	900	10%	7		
KNPP (Karenni National Progressive Party)	600			16	1	6%
KNU (Karen National Union)	5000			11	1	9%
KPC (Karen Peace Council)	4000	100	3%	5	1	20%
MNDAA (Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army) (a.k.a. Kokang Army)	3000			5	0	0%
NDAA (National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan)	4500			5	0	0%
NMSP (New Mon State Party)	800	300	37%	31	2	6%
NSCN-K (National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khaplang)	500			4	0	0%
PNLO (Pa-Oh National Liberation Organization)	800	160	20%	15	2	13%
RCSS (Restoration Council of Shan State) (a.k.a. Shan State Army-South SSA-S)	8000			11	0	0%
SSPP (Shan State Progress Party)	8000			31		
TNLA (Ta'ang National Liberation Army)	4500			23	1	4%
KNO (Kuki National Organization-Burma)	200			10	2	20%

Table 1: Women's participation in ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar

Since 2015, the Burmese military has slowly started to include female delegates. However, the Burmese military is more male-dominated than most EAOs. EAO women have a better chance of being included in a nationwide peace talk, since there are more women who occupy a high position in the ranks of an EAO, as compared with the Burmese military.

### Narratives

While collecting the quantitative data, we also carried out in-depth interviews with EAO cadres and CEC members, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women's groups, including women as well as men. Here we present examples of the narratives we heard from some of our female sources, when they were asked to describe women's participation in the EAOs, and the role of women in the peace process.

### CEC members

A female CEC member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) gave us details about the participation of women in her organization:

*"Women cadres in the ABSDF receive basic military training on how to march, and how to use weapons, so as to be able to fight just like male comrades on the frontline. After basic military training, they are not permitted to take rigorous training. They are just told to obey the orders of the men. Sometimes they are sent to the frontline, not to fight, but to encourage male comrades and provide them with ammunition. Most women in the ABSDF work in non-political committees like the finance committee, or they do medical work, or work as cooks. Some are engaged in the Information Department, where they are in charge of administrative activities."*

On the aspirations of the female cadres in her organization, she had this to say:

*"Before they join, women are usually determined to participate in the political struggle. They don't join to become a cook in a camp. Many women are committed to fight for the dignity of our society. In the camps, they have to follow the orders of the leadership, who are mainly men, but most women are hoping to be promoted to a higher position. They want to have more responsibility."*

*A majority of women cadres have problems after they get married. Once women are married, their*

*workload doubles. Many of them move to family-line camps, rather than staying at headquarters. There was a woman in the CEC of the KNPP, and her husband was also in the CEC. They were equal in the party hierarchy. After their marriage, she disappeared from party politics and shifted her priorities to family affairs."*

A CEC member of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) offered her views on the role of women in her organization, and in the peace:

*"Most women in the ALP work in offices, clinics and schools, and spend their time on concerns about education. There are very few women who would like to continue with armed struggle. They have very bad experiences of war. Children and women are the worst-affected victims of armed conflict. Most women in this country want peace."*

### Leaders of civil society organizations

When we interviewed leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU) in Mae Sot, Thailand, they explained that Karen women participate actively in workshops for peace organized by civil society organizations (CSOs) associated with the KNU. However, they could not tell us how many women there are in the KNU, or what they do. We later interviewed a female Karen CSO leader

in Kayin State, and this is what she had to say:

*“In the KNU military units, women are employed mainly in civil police, health care, communications, and general administration. After completing basic military training, they are put to work as cashiers, accounting staff, office assistants and clerks. They are program secretaries but not coordinators. They are not trained as commandos, even if they want that training. In most functions or meetings of KNU and other organizations, women are invited to serve food, clean, and entertain, not to share their ideas. There is no role for women in the KNU decision-making processes. Some women are in the KNU steering committee. They speak in the meetings of the CEC. But few of their ideas are reflected in the decision-making.”*

A Yangon-based Kachin CSO leader shared her knowledge of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO):

*“In KIO-controlled areas they have schools and health care centers with women doctors and nurses. In schools, most head teachers are women. At least 15% of KIO members are women, but there are very few women in the KIO leadership. There is a condition in KIO-controlled areas that in every house with more than one boy, one boy should enroll as a member of the KIO as an obligatory national service.”*

In Chin State, the female head of a CSO was very frank about the role of women in her community, in its major EAO, and in the peace process in general:

*“Women are treated as second-class citizens in Chin society. They do not have inheritance rights. Many women are leaders in kindergartens and Sunday schools, but they are barred from becoming religious leaders. The majority of decision-makers in CSOs are males, and even more so in EAOs. Few women participate in the Chin National Front. The current peace process is running with very high-level politics. The share*



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*of women involved is very low. Due to the limited participation of women in the peace process of this country, the dreams of women of getting basic rights are not going to be fulfilled.”*

In the western border region of Sagaing, another female CSO leader was even more outspoken:

*“Men make most of the rules in Myanmar society. Women are treated as a kind of creature, not as a full human being. Men dominate with the stereotypes of culture. They create problems, not only at home, but in all of society.”*

About the peace process, this CSO leader had the following comment:

*“The peace process is for men, for armies, for EAOs, for those who are fighting with guns.”*

In Taungyi, Shan State, a Pa-Oh CSO leader expressed a similar view:

*“The majority of women think the peace process is only about killing and fighting. They are not involved in that kind of business.”*

## Conclusions

Women’s potential to contribute to peace is still undervalued in Myanmar. Male leaders of EAOs and CSOs tend to ignore the ideas of the women in their organizations, and women’s abilities and even their presence may go unnoticed.

In much of the current advocacy for women’s empowerment in the Myanmar peace process, women are portrayed as marginalized, or as victims of discrimination. However, as our survey confirms, EAOs have in fact brought women into the peace talks to a far greater extent than the Burmese military has done.

A deeper issue is that peace talks are limited to ceasefire negotiations, in which the only parties involved are the Burmese military and ethnic armed organizations. Since women are in the minority in the EAOs, and because the roles available to women are perceived by their male leaderships as marginal, women are not well represented in the EAOs, nor do EAOs offer attractive leadership opportunities for women. These challenges to women’s meaningful inclusion apply even more to the Burmese military. ■

## THE AUTHORS

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## THE PROJECT

Funded by the Research Council of Norway, the project ‘Gender Equality, Peace and Security in Nepal and Myanmar’ (WOMENsPEACE) investigates the promotion of women’s empowerment through peace processes. WOMENsPEACE partners are Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR) in Nepal and Ar Yone Oo (AYO) in Myanmar.

## PRIO

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