This is the published version:

Henry, Nicholas 2013, A place on the platform: the participation of women in Karen community organizations, in Journeys from exclusion to inclusion: marginalized women’s successes in overcoming political exclusion, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockhholm, Sweden, pp.266-293.

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Chapter 8

A place on the platform: the participation of women in Karen community organizations
Chapter 8

NICHOLAS HENRY

Abstract

This case study focuses on the collective agency of Karen women in organizing for change within the governance processes of their communities, primarily through participation in the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO). The case study charts the development of the KWO as a political organization promoting the role of women within the Karen communities.

The contribution of the KWO to the inclusion and participation of women in customary governance has been achieved through inter-related processes: promoting women’s participation within the KWO itself; engagement at the community level to support the inclusion and leadership of women; working with other community-based organizations (CBOs) such as the Karen National Union (KNU) to promote the inclusion of women; and networking with international organizations to mobilize support for the empowerment of Karen women.

Political education programmes for women are crucial in building the confidence and capacity of women activists to take part in the political life of their communities. Building relationships between women’s organizations and other CBOs is also essential for achieving and maintaining women’s participation in customary governance.

The case study identifies lessons for CBOs pursuing education-based strategies of women’s empowerment, and seeking to balance organizational autonomy with customary affiliations. International organizations can help by supporting the independent activities of women’s organizations, promoting networking opportunities, and mainstreaming gender issues in all projects.
**Acronyms and abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>BWU</td>
<td>Burmese Women’s Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>community-based organization</td>
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<td>ELP</td>
<td>Emerging Leaders Programme</td>
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<td>KNLA</td>
<td>Karen National Liberation Army</td>
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<td>KNU</td>
<td>Karen National Union</td>
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<td>KWAT</td>
<td>Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand</td>
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<td>KWO</td>
<td>Karen Women’s Organization</td>
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<td>KYO</td>
<td>Karen Youth Organization</td>
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<td>MMCWA</td>
<td>Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association</td>
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<td>MWAF</td>
<td>Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>UNHRC</td>
<td>United Nations Human Rights Commission</td>
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<td>WLB</td>
<td>Women’s League of Burma</td>
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<td>YWLS</td>
<td>Young Women’s Leadership School</td>
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A place on the platform: the participation of women in Karen community organizations

Background

If the KWO or our staff are asked to be involved in an event, or training or anything, we will not only do the cooking or decoration, we have to be on the platform too. If we are not on the platform, we will not do other work. (Interview with KWO team leader 2011)

This case study looks at the changing role of women in customary governance in Karen communities in Myanmar and on the Thai–Myanmar border, with a focus on the collective agency that Karen women have exercised through the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO). The success of the KWO in promoting women’s participation in customary governance was shown most dramatically by the election of former KWO leader Naw Zipporah Sein to the position of Secretary General of the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2008, a position she held until December 2012, when she was re-elected as vice-Chairman.

The success of individual women leaders such as Naw Zipporah Sein has been made possible by the ambitious programme of community organizing based on education, social services and advocacy pursued by the KWO over the past decade. Karen women have been able to overcome barriers to their participation in community decision-making through collective action to build the KWO as an autonomous organization that gives women activists a base from which to engage with male leaders as equals. While this process is far from complete, and barriers still remain, women’s participation in the customary governance of Karen communities has been significantly advanced by the activities of the KWO.

This case study is based on a review of reports issued by the KWO and other organizations, secondary sources, and interviews conducted with members of organizations based on the Thai–Myanmar border. Interviews with spokespeople for the KWO and Karen National Union (KNU) were conducted for this case study in October 2011. The focus of this case study is therefore on the insights and experience shared by the interview participants, with further material included for background and context. The case study is intended to complement existing material documenting the work of the KWO, including work reports available on the organization’s website (http://www.karenwomen.org).

Customary governance is defined broadly and includes a range of forms of decision-making which are based in Karen communities but not formally integrated into the governing apparatus of any state or government. As Boege et al. (2008: 10) point out, customary governance varies widely: authority in a community can be exercised in a hierarchical fashion by individual leaders, or more communally through various forms of participatory governance.
No clear lines can be drawn between customary and state governance, since traditional forms of community governance take on new meanings and functions in new political contexts (Pur 2002: 4283). Traditions themselves are re-invented and selectively mobilized to suit present purposes. Rather than define certain forms of governance as customary or traditional, the approach here is to examine the forms of non-state governance existing in Karen communities in terms of how women participate in decision-making and the constitution of political authority.

The KWO’s participation in organizing women in Karen communities can be considered as part of the processes of customary governance. The KWO elects its own representatives in each of the seven districts in which the KNU operates, and in each section of the refugee camps on the Thai–Myanmar border. Through these parallel structures, Karen women can exert considerable influence over affairs in their communities. The KWO was first established in 1949 under the leadership of Daw Nita, the wife of the Karen leader and founder of the KNU, Saw Ba U Gyi. However, the organization was inactive until it was re-established in 1985, again at the initiative of the KNU, this time under the leadership of Naw Lah Po, the wife of then KNU chairman, General Saw Bo Mya (McCarten 2008).

The purpose of the organization in both incarnations was to support the participation of women in the work of the KNU at various levels. However, the role of the KWO has changed over time, from one of supporting the KNU and engaging in social work, to being an independent political organization in its own right. The political role of the KWO has been strengthened since the organization joined others representing women from various ethnic groups in Myanmar to form the Women’s League of Burma (WLB) in 1999. Since that time, the KWO has taken on an increasingly engaged role internationally, which has in turn enabled the organization to raise funds from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations to support local work in Karen communities.

The political legitimacy of organizations like the KNU and KWO is based on intensive processes of community organizing and relationship building in which non-state organizations compete with the state for political authority and become major providers of public goods (Henry 2011). Just as communities have come to depend on these organizations for representation and survival, the organizations depend on their base communities for support. As one member of the KNU described it: ‘through the whole struggle we didn’t get any support from outside, we only got support from our own Karen people from inside’. To maintain its base of support, the KNU has had to reorganize in response to challenges from Karen groups that were
marginalized within the original structures of the organization. The most dramatic split occurred in 1995 when the KNU lost the support of sections of its Buddhist membership who felt discriminated against by the predominantly Christian leadership. The defection of Buddhist Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers, who formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and allied themselves with the regime, led directly to the fall of the KNU’s headquarters at Manerplaw.

In response, the KNU incorporated Buddhist members into its central committee and its religious affairs department, aiming to shore up support for the KNU among the Buddhist majority in Karen state (Aung Zaw and Moe Gyo 2000). A quieter, but equally dramatic, shift is now beginning to take place in response to the demand from Karen women that their voices be represented in decision-making within Karen organizations, including the KNU.

**Background to the exclusion of women**

The KWO (2010) has argued that traditional beliefs about the role of women have constituted a barrier to women’s participation in political leadership. According to Naw Zipporah Sein, traditional beliefs that women ‘had to take responsibility for household work and social work, but not in political areas’ have had a negative impact on the confidence of women in taking on political work. According to the KWO, women were historically seen as unsuited to leadership roles (e.g. as village headwomen) in Karen communities. Although individual women were particularly capable and chosen as leaders, they were seen as exceptions to the general rule that women were unsuited for leadership.

However, the KWO also acknowledges the importance and status of some of the roles traditionally taken by women. Oral histories record significant and powerful women—known as Kaw K’Saw Mu—who were recognized as animist spiritual leaders and as holders of knowledge and authority on land use and traditional practices. These women authority figures are remembered as being prevalent in animist Karen villages as recently as the 1930s (KWO 2010: 8). Western anthropologists have also noted the significant roles of women in Karen society, especially in hill areas, in the organization of social rituals, land rights and shifting cultivation (e.g. Marshall 1922; Aberle 1961). There are therefore traditional precedents for women’s leadership and participation in Karen customary governance, although some of these roles have been displaced by the introduction of patriarchal institutions and the disruption of community life by military conflict.

As the WLB (2006: 6) has argued, cultures are not static and patriarchal leadership should not be treated as an immutable part of Karen or Burmese
culture, any more than of Western cultures. Interpretation of gender discrimination should therefore avoid the temptation to project the prejudices of the present onto a stable vision of the past, and should acknowledge that cultural tradition is always a product of social histories that are more complex than any one story that can be told about them. Conservative attitudes towards women which claim to be representative of tradition may actually be drawing on and produced by more recent histories. Aspects of customary governance in Karen communities which have been interpreted as reflecting traditional patriarchy, such as the system of village headmen, can actually be traced directly to the imposition of British colonial authority.

The system of headmen, instituted under martial law by the 1886 Village Act, cut across traditional forms of social organization to impose a singular, geographically defined unit of male authority (Taylor 2009: 82). The functions of this system—streamlining the extraction of taxes and forced labour and aiding in the ‘pacification’ of communities of resistance by instituting practices of collective punishment—have been carried over from the colonial administration to the counter-insurgency programmes of post-independence regimes in Myanmar. This process of social reorganization by the central state since the colonial period has involved the marginalization of complex and overlapping forms of customary governance through which women had previously exercised some degree of authority over land, knowledge and social practice.

Current ideas about the role of women in Karen traditional culture also owe much to the nation-building efforts of several generations of Karen leaders. Until recently, influential Karen leaders have tended to be Christian men from the S’gaw-speaking Karen group, such as Saw Ba U Gyi and General Saw Bo Mya. Leaders such as the late General Saw Bo Mya sought to promote a united Karen identity combined with strong Christian moral values (Kuroiwa and Verkuyten 2009: 395). These values can be seen as clearly influential in some of the early roles of the reconstituted KWO in the late 1980s, when members were ‘expected to help preserve the “traditional moral character” of Karen women—explained as being a reference to chastity before marriage’, as well as to promote the wearing of Karen traditional dress by women (Curwen 1989). As Karen leaders and intellectuals have sought to secure the place of Karen people within the political environments of both colonial and post-independence Myanmar, they have drawn on narratives of tradition, and consequently of the traditional role of women in a Karen nation, to support their cause.

This ‘narration of nation’ (Bhaba, cited in Rajah 2002: 518) has served a purpose in seeking recognition and legitimacy, both from outsiders such
as representatives of government and international organizations, and from members of Karen communities, reinforcing collective identity and solidarity through popular education. Outside observers of this process have sometimes argued that the idea of a Karen nation is therefore compromised by the ‘politicization of ethnicity’ (Harriden 2002: 84). If we accept however, that all nations are ‘imagined communities’ which are ‘distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’ (Anderson 2006: 6), then it becomes possible to discuss the political consequences of particular nation-building narratives without needing to attack the political movement within which they occur. The fact that those in a position to influence authorized accounts of Karen tradition have been predominantly male and Christian should allow some critical perspective on received ideas about the traditional roles of women in Karen society, without opposing the goals of gender equality to Karen tradition or to the Karen project of nation building as such. Indeed, the resurgence of women’s leadership in Karen society associated with the growth of the KWO and the leadership of Naw Zipporah Sein as KNU Secretary General has taken place on the basis of a firm commitment to promoting the role of women within Karen nation-building.

Organized religion, both Baptist and Buddhist, has at times served as a vehicle for the introduction and entrenchment of new forms of patriarchal authority in the customary governance of Karen communities. Baptist evangelism in Karen areas during the colonial period was highly male dominated, with missionary organizations taking active steps to restrict and suppress the agency of women within churches and in evangelical work (Womack 2008). While Karen women now take more significant roles in Christian CBOs and as informal prayer leaders, they are unable to become pastors or take leadership roles within Christian churches (KHRG 2006: 17). Buddhist institutions in Karen state, as in other parts of Myanmar, are also based on an exclusively male leadership structure, with the role of women restricted to preparing temple offerings and alms for monks (KHRG 2006).

State regulation of the Buddhist Sangha (monastic community, including the religious leadership of prominent monks and abbots) in Myanmar has promoted conservative interpretations of scriptures implying the inferior status of women and moral obligations to be subservient to men (WLB 2008: 19). Organized religions, both Christian and Buddhist, have displaced animist practices, which persist in a significant minority of communities in more isolated areas, where women take a much greater role as spiritual leaders within extended families (KHRG 2006: 17). While both Christian and Buddhist institutions have provided education and social development opportunities for women,
and women are involved in a range of faith-based community organizations, religious leadership in Karen state continues to be a male-dominated affair.

Forced displacement of civilian populations as part of military counter-insurgency campaigns in Karen state has further undercut the economic and social basis of women’s traditional roles, and hampered efforts by women’s organizations to organize new forms of political participation. In Karen state, as in other conflict areas, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) has systematically targeted the civilian population in an attempt to weaken resistance. Abuses reported by Karen community leaders included the systematic destruction of villages and crops, with villagers confined to their homes or forcibly relocated and cut off from their fields and food supplies. Abuses such as these led the International Committee of the Red Cross to publicly criticize the Myanmar regime in 2007 for creating ‘a climate of constant fear among the population’ (cited in Brees 2008: 4). These abuses have been official military tactics since General Ne Win introduced the ‘four-cuts’ policy in 1962 to deprive the rebel KNU of food, funds, intelligence, and recruits (Grundy-Warr and Wong Siew Yin 2002: 101).

In 2010 the Thai–Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) estimated that over half a million people are displaced by armed conflict in South East Myanmar (including Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan states), and that 3,700 civilian settlements in the region have been destroyed by the state military and allied forces since 1996. The period from August 2010 to July 2011 was the worst in a decade for forced displacement, with the clearance of 105 settlement areas in South East Myanmar affecting 112,000 people. Karen communities were among the hardest hit as fighting broke out between the regime and elements of the previously allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and counter-insurgency operations against the KNU continued to target civilians. The figures also include over 28,000 people from Karen communities who were forcibly displaced from areas affected by the KyaukNaGa dam project, which has flooded large areas of Karen and Eastern Bago states (TBBC 2011: 18). In the current situation of military oppression and economic hardship, the responsibility that women take for the survival of their families has become a full-time job. According to Naw Zipporah Sein, the impact of the need to focus on family survival has been to make it ‘very difficult for women to explore outside and to have extra time to work, to focus on politics or to focus on extra things like community work’. This situation has entrenched existing gender roles in which ‘men usually take the work, like revolutionary work, or economic work, while the women stay behind and work for the family and look after the children’.
The militarization of life in Myanmar, particularly in the border areas, is a gendered process. The WLB (2006: 2) points out that the Tatmadaw is an exclusively male institution and that military domination of political and social institutions therefore constitutes a direct barrier to women’s participation in governance. Official women’s organizations such as the Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWAF) and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) were established by the government and remain firmly under the control of male government leaders. In Karen state, military units have been reported to force villages to ‘buy’ a set number of memberships in MWAF and MMCWA, even though women in these communities have no knowledge of these organizations or interest in joining (KHRG 2006: 38). Moreover, militarization has involved gendered violence against civilian populations, including the widespread and documented use of rape as an act of war (KWO 2004). The systematic use of sexual violence against women by military forces has impacted on the ability of women to travel and work independently, contributing to a ‘culture of fear’ in which women fear for their safety at all times (KWO 2004: 22). There is also evidence of sexual violence being deliberately used as a tactic by the Tatmadaw to discourage women from asserting themselves in positions of leadership. Many of the women village leaders interviewed by the KWO (2010: 14) reported that they or their family members had been raped by army officers, sometimes as punishment for non-compliance with orders. In many of the cases documented earlier by the KWO (2004: 17), women subjected to sexual violence were accused of supporting or having relatives belonging to the KNU.

**The impact of exclusion from political decision-making**

While it has adopted a policy commitment to promoting women in leadership roles, the KNU has struggled to make progress towards this goal. While it supports the standard set by the WLB of a 30 per cent quota for women in leadership positions as an aspirational goal, the KNU has had difficulty meeting the current five per cent quota set by its own constitution. While the KNU is undergoing a process of change in recognizing the leadership potential of women, progress is uneven, especially at the district level. The KNU has no female district leaders and although some districts have women members on their governing committees, others remain completely male dominated. As a KWO spokesperson put it: ‘at the KNU central level we can see the involvement of more women, but at the district level there is still some belief that they don’t have women, they can’t find women.’

In the past, a vicious cycle operated in which women were not recognized or promoted as leaders, and lacked the confidence and experience to put
themselves forward for leadership positions. The barriers to women’s participation in Karen organization have not been formed by deliberate policy but by apathy and neglect of gender issues by a male-dominated leadership. Where women have advanced in the organization, this has primarily been achieved through the initiative of the KWO. Even as the KWO has achieved recognition of the importance of empowering women leaders and activists, it has struggled to overcome apathy in other organizations, which now perceive gender issues to be the responsibility of the KWO. As a KWO spokesperson states:

Traditionally they say we need more women participating, and it is up to KWO to send ... they think that KWO is the one who should provide women, rather than them bringing the women in and helping training them, or inviting them to meetings and trainings, building up their capacity like that.

Women taking on positions of leadership have had to overcome scepticism from male colleagues as to their abilities and experience. Naw Zipporah Sein described her difficulties after becoming KNU Secretary General:

I am the first women in this position, and I think that for the male leaders, for some of them it was difficult to accept a woman in this position. So I felt, sometimes at the beginning, a little bit different from the male leaders ... It was quite difficult for me at the beginning.

The combination of factors that allowed Naw Zipporah Sein to achieve this position, including her previous experience as leader of the KWO, is discussed later in this case study. However, even with training and organizational support from the KWO, many women find it a daunting task to break into previously male-dominated roles within Karen organizations. As a KWO spokesperson put it:

We are afraid because sometimes the organizations do not brief the women or hand over the work properly, or not give enough information. So of course, when she goes to a meeting she doesn’t feel like she’s capable of doing that. They need guidance and information.

The lack of support that some Karen women have experienced in joining CBOs has been a barrier to full participation in political work. When women are prevented from fulfilling their potential and working to the best of their ability by a lack of institutional support, this also serves to reinforce the distorted view that women are unsuited for political work.

Hostility and harassment in the informal culture of organizations is another barrier that women face in participating in CBOs. The KWO has received feedback from members who were harassed while working with male staff from
other Karen organizations: ‘sometimes, if women travel with the men they can be harassed verbally, joking or saying things that are not nice about women. It doesn’t make women feel comfortable working in those environments.’ This kind of harassment was one explanation that the KWO cited for the difficulty that CBOs and human rights groups have reported in finding female staff to work as field researchers inside Karen state. Human rights organizations explained this difficulty by referring to barriers at the level of the community, where women’s family responsibilities and traditional social roles made it ‘less common for women past a certain age to travel outside the village’, and to the physical dangers posed by military presence in the area (interview with KHRG staff 2011). However, KWO staff have countered this view, stating that ‘a friendly gender policy and environment’ was a more important factor in whether organizations could recruit female field staff, and that ‘if they have good policies, that understand our needs, then they would be able to recruit’. The policy approach that the KWO itself has taken to recruit, develop, and retain female staff and community organizers is detailed below.

A further barrier to participation in customary governance that women involved in organizations like KWO have faced is the perception that their organizations only exist to support and care for the needs of male-dominated organizations. Women from a range of organizations in Myanmar’s border regions have often described this problem as a key factor motivating the politicization and assertion of autonomy of their organizations. For instance, the multi-ethnic Burmese Women’s Union (BWU) was originally formed as a women’s organization within the rebel student army, the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front. However, as indicted by one interviewee, women organizers became frustrated that their role was seen as ‘to do for the soldiers what they need. Just preparing for them and this is their role as Burmese Women’s Union’.

This experience prompted the BWU to form an autonomous organization with a strong commitment to networking with existing ethnic women’s organizations to strengthen the women’s movement in Myanmar. A similar story was told by a member of the Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (KWAT). When the association was first formed, it was expected to act as a kind of women’s auxiliary to the Kachin Independence Army, ‘helping the men from the background. They have to cook while they are fighting, you know. The women have to cook and send the food, the rice, to the front’. KWAT was formed as a separate organization in Thailand to support the goals of the Kachin organizations, while also networking with other women’s organizations as an autonomous group representing the specific interests of Kachin women.
When the KWO was first formed at the initiative of the KNU in 1949, it fulfilled a similar role as a humanitarian and support organization. Later, women were recruited to work as teachers and medics within the education and health departments of the KNU but were not expected to take on political roles or to have a say in the decision-making of the organization. Naw Zipporah Sein recalls meetings in the Karen refugee camps on the Thai–Myanmar border at which bamboo mats would be laid down for community members to discuss the issues at hand but ‘many women would sit far away near the door, feeling that their lack of education meant they did not have the right to sit on the mat and voice their opinions’ (Zipporah Sein 2003: 1).

Since the reorganization of the KWO in 1985 as a political organization, and subsequent efforts to improve educational opportunities for women, the situation has changed, but perceptions still persist that the KWO can be called on to offer services in a support capacity, without being offered a role in decision-making. As a KWO spokesperson described it, ‘traditionally we were seen as only caring for the people who were in need and in any ceremony, like a mother who is cooking for the children, we were always seen like that’. The effect of this long-standing expectation was that women were providing essential labour for community events at which their voices were not represented. This had a negative impact on women’s participation in customary governance, as they were denied the opportunity for public recognition of their political work:

If we are only cooking, it doesn’t match our objective to develop and promote women’s living standards and leadership. How can we become leaders if we are always in kitchen cooking and never at the front and never able to face the public?

The expectation that women will be primarily engaged in support work, while men take decision-making roles and act as the public face of organizations, extends beyond ceremonial events and affects the roles assigned to men and women in CBOs. This can be especially problematic in office environments where job descriptions are fluid and promotion within the organization often depends on demonstrating aptitude and initiative in a variety of tasks. Informal systems for distributing work tasks can be as much of a barrier to the advancement of women as formal hierarchies, depriving women of the opportunity to prove and develop their skills:

When they are recruiting and training new staff or trainers, they also need to find a gender balance, and then train them and give them important jobs. Because okay they have a number of women in the office, but what are their jobs that they do in the office?
This is why the KWO insists that measurement of opportunities available to women in CBOs needs to go beyond quantitative measures of numbers of women staff, in order to pay attention to the work experiences of those women. When organizations recruit women staff and then fail to develop and value their skills, this creates a barrier to the advancement of those individual women, but also deprives other organizations and communities of effective advocates and organizers:

while some are being promoted to higher levels, some remain the same, and we say ‘if you are not able to use them, we want them back’, and then the organization didn’t want to send them back either, but continued to give them the same work. Then later, they are not at the levels that we would like to see them.

The prevalence of informal organizational cultures in which women struggle to be recognized as worthy of responsibility and promotion is one explanation for why many Karen women feel that they ‘have to be much more skilful than the men at the same leadership level’ in order to be recognized as equals.

**Inclusion processes undertaken**

The contribution of the KWO to the inclusion and participation of women in customary governance has been achieved through interrelated processes: promoting women’s participation within the KWO itself; engagement at the community level to support the inclusion and leadership of women; working with other CBOs such as the KNU to promote the inclusion of women; and networking with international organizations to mobilize support for the empowerment of Karen women. Women are now gaining recognition for their leadership roles, both from grassroots communities and from male colleagues.

The example set by the achievement of Naw Zipporah Sein exemplifies the success of the organizing strategy pursued by Karen women leaders. The appointment of a woman as the head of the KNU was hailed as an important sign of change, with the general secretary of the WLB, Nang Yain, describing it as ‘an acknowledgement that the KNU recognizes the role of women in the political movement’ (Saw Yan Naing 2008). The process by which Naw Zipporah Sein reached this point also highlights the extent to which the KWO remains the primary vehicle for the advancement of women within Karen communities. Her initial involvement in the KNU was as a delegate to the organization’s congress, nominated by the KWO. The right of the KWO to send voting delegates to the congress had been negotiated in recognition of the growing political status of the women’s organization. However, there were only a handful of women present, meaning that running a successful
campaign for election required persuading male delegates that she had the skills and commitment to represent the Karen communities as a whole.

Although she could not match the long careers within the KNU of some of the male leaders present, Naw Zipporah Sein was able to draw on other experiences, as a teacher in Karen communities and as an organizer and leader of the KWO, that gave her an edge. She counts the training she received through the KWO as the most important factor that has enabled her success: ‘I have experience in my background of different kinds of training that give me courage’. In particular, just before the election she had had the opportunity to attend a training programme at Yale University for women running for political office, sponsored by a grant to the WLB. She credits the experience of taking part in this programme with giving her the confidence boost she needed to put herself forward for the position of KNU Secretary General, as well as developing the skills required to successfully lobby for support: ‘[i]t helped when we were there, how to work with the different leaders, to have the skills of communication.’

The path through the KWO and into other CBOs has been the main route for women to achieve positions of influence in Karen customary governance. Women such as Naw Blooming Night Zion, who rose through the ranks of the KWO before leaving to take up a position as joint director of the Karen Relief Committees, now command significant authority and respect among Karen refugee and internally-displaced communities. In moving into positions within a range of CBOs, Karen women leaders are following the lines of relationships established by the KWO.

The relationships between the KWO and other Karen CBOs combine characteristics of autonomy and affiliation. In some respects, the KWO is an autonomous organization with independent processes of decision-making and resource mobilization. In other ways, the organization is strongly affiliated with other Karen CBOs, both in formal terms as in the case of the KNU, and through informal ties of identity, common interest and personal connections, as in the case of Karen relief, human rights and environmental groups. Progress in women’s participation and leadership in all facets of Karen community life has been closely linked to the developing relationships between the KWO and other Karen organizations. The earlier dynamic, in which the KWO functioned as a support organization while male-led organizations took the political limelight, is now changing as the KWO asserts itself as a political organization.

Where the KWO would have previously have been expected to cater for events in which male leaders took a central role, the organization now has a policy that ‘if they have an event and they want the women to help, they
can cook but they should not be the only ones who cook, and they should also be on the platform’. As a result of this policy, the KWO is increasingly being included on the platform of public events in refugee camps and in Karen state, alongside leaders of the KNU and other organizations such as the Karen Youth Organization (KYO). As one KWO interviewee explained, this development is a sign of growing recognition of the KWO as a political organization, and is important for the continued growth of the organization:

now, the KWO is being asked to be on the platform, to talk or give a speech. Other organization, when they are given a chance to speak, they promote their organization and their work ... If we are never at the front line, talking about our role, we will never get that recognition. So we need to be on the platform so we can talk to the people and let them know about our work and how we are supporting the community.

The evolving relationship between the KWO and the KNU has been of central importance, with the growing recognition and respect afforded to the KWO as a political organization translating into a slow but steady improvement in the status of women within the governance structures of the KNU. The experience of the KWO has been that:

in our movement within KNU, we can see the changing attitudes of some men in recognition of women. In the work they are doing they think about women, like we should have KWO involved or have women’s views on this. So we can say that this is a success. In the past, if they have a meeting they would not invite KWO for the meeting, but now within the Karen community based groups, women are recognized and we will be invited for the meetings, and involved in the planning and in the implementation. So we see that as progress.

There is no necessary contradiction between the autonomy of the KWO as a parallel structure to the KNU and the affiliation between the two groups, but there are tensions. As described above, the KWO has in some ways been a victim of its own success, with other organizations now seeing issues of gender equality and women’s empowerment as the KWO’s responsibility. This issue has become a key focus of the KWO’s relations with other organizations, as it seeks to combine the advantages of an independent organization representing women with the need for mainstreaming of gender issues as a concern for all organizations:

So this is one thing that we always talk to other groups, to have women, to increase women’s leadership and participation, is not only KWO’s duty, it is also their duty to bring in. We have responsibility to empower women, to provide the opportunity for women to empower themselves and later to be involved in the leadership level, but it is also the organizations themselves that need to work hand in hand with women.

Communication about gender issues between organizations often takes place in response to specific feedback from women who have attended KWO
courses about issues affecting them within their organizations. KWO efforts to get action on gender issues from other organizations are also facilitated by contact with former KWO staff and trainees now working for those organizations. For example, Naw Zipporah Sein now provides a link between the KWO and the upper leadership of the KNU, and is able to ensure that women are included within training and decision-making processes within the KNU.

The support that the KWO is able to offer to emerging women leaders is based on long experience of working to overcome barriers that women face in engaging in politics. For example, the maternity leave and childcare policies developed by the KWO provide a model for other organizations seeking to support women to balance work and family commitments:

In KWO we have so many women who have had babies, but they continue to come to work, because you have to look at the needs so that women can be able to work. We try to provide childcare to every woman in the community, even if not a lot. Here also, we have a good policy on maternal leave and childcare issues. We encourage every organization to do this. They can recruit women, but when they have children of course they have to take leave.

The KWO also reports that its members are starting to gain more recognition from male partners of the importance of their work. Husbands of KWO members were reported to be increasingly ‘supporting and encouraging their wives’ KWO involvement, and sharing domestic duties more to facilitate this’ (KWO 2011: 59)

In common with other women’s organizations in the region, the KWO places a high priority on education in its efforts to promote the participation of women within the organization and in the community. Within the organization, the leadership capacity of young women members is developed through further education and internship programmes. A new generation of Karen women leaders and community workers is emerging through programmes such as the Young Women’s Leadership School (YWLS), a ten-month intensive course followed by two months of field work. The YWLS curriculum covers community development and management; human rights, women’s and child rights; basic law and administrative skills; information collection and documentation (e.g. library skills and interviewing skills); Karen history and politics; Burmese and English language; reading and research skills; practical life skills (such as typing, crochet, embroidery and cooking); and leadership skills (KWO 2011, 28)

The YWLS programme includes a focus on public speaking, both to develop this particular skill and to build the general confidence of women in speaking
on matters of politics, so that ‘through practising they feel more confident to speak out’. However, the confidence that young women leaders gain through their involvement with the KWO is based on more than public speaking practice alone. The organizing and education practice of the KWO offers a basis for collective strength which women can trust to support them in their efforts to speak out and take action for change. As one KWO interviewee put it:

We can say that because of KWO that if there is any problem that women have to face, that women don’t have to be afraid and keep silent, they can speak out and then they know that this organization will try to help them.

Many graduates of the YWLS have gone on to take up key positions in the KWO and other organizations. According to the International Women’s Development Agency, which funds the programme, 220 Karen women have participated in the YWLS, of whom 90 per cent are now working in Karen community organizations (IWDA 2013). Graduates of the programme have also been elected to leadership positions within refugee camp governance structures, including vice-chair, secretary, auditor and treasurer positions. These positions had not previously been held by women, and the KWO considered this development a highly significant ‘recognition of the capacity of young women’ (KWO 2011: 28).

One woman who has worked for the KWO and now serves on the executive board of the WLB was one of the first graduates to come through the school:

The first year, I attended that school. After that year the women go back and work with the community and we can see more women’s participation in the community and also in the decision-making.

The ongoing commitment of the KWO to follow up with training participants is crucial to the success of the programme. Participants who are recruited from other Karen CBOs return to their organizations on completion of the programme, and the KWO follows up with them to check on their progress. Graduates may also choose to join other organizations on their return to their communities, such as the KNU, where ‘women who are trained at the KWO young women’s leadership school have more chance to be involved at the district level’. As women trained by the KWO spread throughout other organizations in the community, the reputation of the KWO training programmes is enhanced, along with relationships between the organizations:

After these young women have graduated, they go back and work, and we hear very positive feedback, that they are talking more and have better critical thinking skills, and are reliable in their work. And they keep asking when we organize another one, and want to send more people.
To further develop graduates of the YWLS, and to support women seeking advancement within other Karen CBOs, the KWO also established a more advanced Emerging Leaders Programme (ELP). This programme, which ran over ten months, covered a wide range of subjects including an introduction to gender; the history of Myanmar and the Karen; democracy and federalism; public speaking; economics and development; policy making; lobbying skills and many others (KWO 2011: 30). The ELP ran twice in the period 2008–2010, with 28 participants graduating and returning to work in Karen CBOs. However, the programme was not able to run in 2010–11 due to a lack of secure funding (KWO 2011: 30). Nevertheless, the YWLS and ELP programmes have greatly enhanced the capacity of Karen women to make an impact in the governance of their communities, and have also helped to develop cooperative relationships between the KWO and other CBOs:

Other organizations have sent representatives to our Young Women’s Leadership and Emerging Leaders programmes. When we organize training we invite other organizations including student groups, environment groups, relief and development groups.

Within the broader community there is also a strong focus on training programmes to communicate the political and practical aspects of women’s participation. For example, to address the marginalization of women within the customary justice system in the refugee camps, the KWO took an education-centred approach:

KWO supported women in their participation in the traditional justice system ... To empower women and the community to participate in and access the traditional legal system, KWO gives training in customary law as part of its education programs. We also support and encourage women through the court process itself, assisting them with representation and explaining the process (KWO 2006: 15).

The KWO also contributes to general education for women and children in the refugee camps, running a nursery school project, adult literacy projects, and special education projects for disabled students, as well as providing direct support for women and children to engage in education. Education also features prominently in the organizing work undertaken by the KWO within Karen state:

Every year we have the organizing trip. We went inside, met with the women there, conduct the training, talk to them, so that to inform them about KWO activities and if they’re interested they can involve or apply for the membership.

This approach, which combines appeals to collective solidarity with individual voluntary choice to join the organization, differs markedly from the forced recruitment approach of the official MWAF and MMCWA women’s organizations.
Changes in knowledge, practices and behaviours

Women in Karen state have responded to military conflict in ways that have won recognition of their leadership abilities. In response to gendered violence against men and boys, who would be killed as suspected KNU members or supporters, women in Karen state have increasingly taken on political roles where contact with the military is required. In conflict regions, village headmen had frequently been summarily executed for minor or perceived non-compliance with state forces occupying their territory. In response, from the mid-1980s onwards, communities began to put forward women as village heads in the hope that army officers would hesitate before ordering them killed. The tactic worked to some extent, although village headwomen have still faced abuses, and the practice has spread.

Many village headwomen have now held their positions for decades and have won respect from their communities for their ability to negotiate and mitigate the demands for labour and materials issued by military commanders. As headwomen they ‘have to negotiate to protect their villagers, so there will be less work for the villagers and at least the villagers are not tortured or forced to do a lot of work’. Interviews with headwomen carried out by KHRG (2006) and KWO (2010) demonstrate that these women are exercising genuine positions of authority within their communities and are entrusted with the essential task of representing the interests of villagers in interactions with the military. As one KWO member said, ‘we can see that in those difficult situations, the capacity and skills of women are recognized’. Speaking for the KNU, Naw Zipporah Sein also spoke highly of the courage of women taking on leadership positions in Karen villages:

Women have the confidence to face the problems, because they have different skills for dealing with the situation and, even though they have to face a lot of problems in taking the leading roles, but still they keep their courage to do that. Many of the women were also tortured and abused by the military, different kinds of violations, but they kept going. In this situation I see that women have the skills and the courage to take the leadership roles in the communities.

As Naw Zipporah Sein identifies, village headwomen have paid a high personal cost for their advocacy on behalf of their fellow villagers. As detailed in the previous section, women in positions of authority in Karen villages have faced extreme pressure to bow to the demands placed on their communities by the Tatmadaw, and have suffered abuses including rape, torture and murder. Despite these extreme difficulties, women leaders have been recognized for their persistence and bravery in negotiating situations of life or death for their community members.
Karen women have also responded collectively to the armed conflict in their territory through the peacebuilding efforts of the KWO. The mission statement of the KWO states as a core belief of the organization that ‘women’s contribution is an essential factor in the peace-building and national reconciliation processes of Burma’ (KWO 2006a). The KWO shares the view of the KNU that a only a political settlement that addresses the underlying causes of conflict with the Myanmar Government will bring about lasting peace in their territories. However, as an independent women’s organization with a commitment to non-violence, the KWO is able to access local and international networks not available to the KNU. Through local networks such as the WLB, and contact with international women’s organizations, the KWO is able to mobilize additional pressure on the Burmese government to negotiate with the KNU. In November 2011 KNU leaders including Naw Zipporah Sein began preparations for peace talks with the administration of President Thein Sein (Irrawaddy 2011). Although previous ceasefire agreements have faltered, the KNU hopes to make progress towards a political settlement.

The capacity of Karen women to engage in peacebuilding has been strengthened by networking with other women’s organizations, both local and international. Since establishing independent organizations and the umbrella WLB, the women’s movement has taken a leading role in international lobbying to challenge the legitimacy of the military regime in Myanmar. One of the BWU’s first actions internationally was to make submissions to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), following on from contacts made at the Beijing Conference on Women. This was seen as important so that general issues of human rights abuse would be linked to the particular abuses faced by women. Since the WLB was formed in 1999, with the KWO as a founding member, this group has taken on the role of coordinating these international lobbying activities. Representatives of ethnic women’s organizations such as the Shan Women’s Action Network and KWO have played high-profile lobbying roles, meeting state leaders and tabling reports on abuses against women by the regime in Myanmar.

Speaking about her role with the KWO, Naw Zipporah Sein emphasized the successful international lobbying work undertaken by that organization as a key factor in achieving recognition from other Karen organizations of the importance of the KWO within the political movement:

We also have a lot of activities for international advocacy where we talk about the Karen people’s suffering. We don’t talk only about the women, but about the whole people’s suffering. So this is something that is recognized.
Experiences gained in international networking have also fed back into local organizing work, particularly in the way that women’s organizations relate to each other. Participation in the Beijing Conference on Women was a watershed moment for women’s organizations from Myanmar in terms of recognizing the importance of local and international networking. A series of symposia for women leaders from different ethnic communities in the late 1990s led to the decision to form the WLB as a federation of women’s groups. Naw Zipporah Sein describes the importance of this process for the KWO:

I think that women are stronger when they form networks with other women. Like for the Karen Women’s Organization and other organizations, before we formed the Women’s League of Burma, the women’s organizations worked separately and we didn’t develop as political organizations. But when the Women’s League of Burma formed as an umbrella organization, it was more focussed on the political, and Women’s League of Burma is a political organization. So that is where it benefited the member organizations because they came to focus more on politics. I can see the changes after we formed the networking and formed the League, that it strengthened the women and also supported the women’s movement, and we see that the women’s movement is not only for each ethnic group, but for the whole of women in Burma.

**Lessons learned and their policy and practice implications**

For groups seeking to address barriers to women’s participation in customary governance similar to those Karen women have faced, there are a number of lessons to be learnt from the experiences of the KWO. Although there are no shortcuts in terms of the kind of sustained community organizing approaches used by the KWO, there is some good news in their story for women’s organizations struggling to attain recognition and respect in their communities.

First, a strategy of community organizing based on political education of women activists (training the trainers) takes time to show results but can then produce exponential growth in the base of the organization and sustained political change for generations of women. Second, networking with other women’s organizations—locally, regionally, and internationally—can be an invaluable process, not just for mobilizing resources and practical support for an organization, but for the processes of change that networking initiates within the organization, broadening the perspectives of activists and inspiring further politicization of the organization’s work. Third, insisting on organizational autonomy and democratic processes controlled by the women members of the organization can support the further integration of women into the structures of dominant customary institutions and community
organizations, as long as women leaders are prepared to sustain pressure and engagement in support of women’s participation. The experience of the KWO suggests that male leaders will move to accommodate greater participation of women once they see the value to the broader community, and that this value is most easily demonstrated from a position of autonomous organizational strength.

The dynamics of the relationship between the KWO and the KNU are specific to the context of protracted conflict in Karen state and the particular articulations of Karen collective identity that have emerged in the process of resistance. However, women’s organizations in communities facing similar challenges could study the details of the KWO’s work to see what aspects apply to their situation. For women’s organizations in developing countries, especially in marginalized communities and those affected by protracted conflicts, the KWO’s focus on education-based strategies of women’s empowerment will resonate. The KWO’s programmes for women in grassroots communities show how practical training in areas such as literacy and income generation can be combined with political education to empower women to participate in decision-making and take leadership roles. The leadership development programmes of the KWO, including the YWLS and the ELP, have proven to be powerful drivers of political change in Karen communities and could provide models for other organizations seeking to build the confidence and capability of women activists.

The need remains for further work by both CBOs and international NGOs to develop strategies for gender empowerment based on long-term sustainable engagement and relationship building in Karen communities. Several points of feedback from the KWO are of particular relevance in this regard, and are instructive for organizations working in similar circumstances. First, organizations should focus on developing female staff as a long-term commitment, rather than relying on recruitment strategies that headhunt experienced staff from other organizations. Karen organizations already struggle to retain staff and organizers due to the unstable situation inside Karen state and the resettlement of refugees to third countries. NGO recruitment can be a further drain on scarce human resources in the community unless outside organizations commit to sustainable strategies for developing local staff. Second, organizations wanting to work on gender issues and women’s empowerment within target communities should work with local organizations such as the KWO which are already doing this work and negotiate partnerships, rather than duplicate existing programmes.

Third, according to a KWO interviewee, international organizations and NGOs ‘should look at the community based organizations, look at the skills
and abilities there and then continue to work with them, not to start from
the beginning and ignore them’. International organizations should also
work to understand and support the strategies that women’s organizations
are taking to combine organizational autonomy with customary and
community affiliation. As well as supporting the independent work of
women’s organizations, donors should work to ensure the mainstreaming
of gender issues including the promotion of women’s participation and
leadership through their programmes with other organizations. Finally,
donor assessment of funding proposals should include ‘looking at how the
project will involve women and what the impact will be for women’.
References and further reading


— Interviews with Karen women’s organizations, October 2006 and October 2011


Notes

1 Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in this case study are taken from interviews conducted by the author with various members of Karen organizations in October 2006 and October 2011. Due to the sensitive nature of these interviews, interviewees have not been named or otherwise identified.