

How National-Level Political Changes (2015 NCA and General Elections) Have Improved Women's Political Skill Empowerment in Kayin (Karen) State, Myanmar

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Abstract

Ethnic women from Myanmar have for several decades experienced acute human rights violations related to conflict, such as violence and harassment, with limited opportunity to speak out. The objective of this paper is to explore about women's experiences in political skills empowerment and to assess the impact of training led by women's rights-based organizations in Kayin State, Myanmar. The research uses in-depth interview methodology through interviewing 14 key-informants. Interview findings show that many interviewees felt that women's participation in voting, local-level politics and peace processes have improved since the 2015 NCA and the general elections, highlighting the impact of the promotion of peace and democracy for politically marginalized groups. The research also found that as a result of the training, women participants have become better at engaging with different key actors and better equipped in the decision-making process in communities. The trained women became more involved in legal assistance for human rights violations; often, however, this involvement focuses solely on issues that are specifically related to women. Nevertheless, women still suffer from less confidence and reduced capacity to participate, gender discrimination, weak governmental initiatives, financial restraints, and fewer opportunities to access leadership in local-level politics. The research also found that the key barriers for women are communicative, both in terms of education and access to language, lack of capacity, and limited access to information, as well as socio-cultural norms that prioritize men's leadership and decision-making, and limited, poorly resourced governmental initiatives for women's political skill-building. The research recommends on-going coaching, mentoring for women, and initiating advocacy against gender discrimination in all spheres, mainly at the local and national political level to increase women's participation in political processes. The government also should formulate law and policy to provide women's political skills empowerment in line with CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

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Introduction

Myanmar comprises seven states, seven regions, and the Union territories. It is one of the most well-known countries in the world that severely restricts fundamental freedoms, civil, political, and economic rights of its population¹. Kayin State is one of the most isolated states, which has been affected by protracted conflict for over 70 years. In 2012, the government initiated bilateral ceasefires with the ethnic armed organization (EAO) in Southeastern Myanmar, and in 2015, the dominant Karen EAOs became the signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Later that year a civilian government, the National League for Democracy Party (NLD), under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, was elected. These changes have led many civilians to hope for improvements in the human rights situation and women's empowerment specifically².

The women's rights-based organizations apply the human rights-based approach to empower women and communities to know their rights and to support political participation. This approach supports to collect the views of rights-based organizations discussed below. A study was undertaken from January to June 2019 looking at the role and impact of the work of women's organizations to increase women's political skills empowerment in Kayin State, Myanmar. This research mainly focuses on the qualitative approach to represent the data gathered from the interviews using a semi-structured method. The research design is narrative to show the experiences of women's rights-based organizations and trained women. The findings presented in this paper are taken from the key findings of that research³.

Findings of Women's Political Skills Empowerment

This research focuses on women's political skills empowerment, which aims to engage with local-level key actors, local-level decision-making process, women's leadership, and to increase women's awareness of their rights. The research also focuses on how women overcome the challenges by using political skills in their communities, as these women live in the conflict areas of Kayin State.

The key argument for the analysis is that trained women leaders from the community are aware of their rights, and they can pursue the human rights issues in their communities by engaging with key actors, networking, and communicating with women's organizations for rights violations after the political changes in 2015. However, trained women can be identified mostly at the grassroots level and are rarely seen to reach the State-level politics because of lack of political education, social and cultural norms, language barriers, gender discrimination, and lack of governmental support for women's political empowerment. Moreover, there are still on-going armed clashes, and political oppression continues to affect women's political participation. As the troubles continue, women from communities still face challenges to participate in local-level

¹ United Nations Development Programme, 2018.

² Asian Century Institute, 2016.

³ Nant May Nandar kyaw, 2019. <https://asiapacific.gchumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nant-May-Nandar-Kyaw-Thesis-Cohort-2018.pdf>

political participation and peace processes⁴

A. Women's Political Participation

Before the 2015 political changes, there was a history of politicians being tortured, killed, and imprisoned; thus, women from across Myanmar did not dare to participate in politics, even the local-level peace processes, and politics. In addition to the long-term armed conflicts, there is a severe lack of education in politics and lack of access to information. Additionally, language and communication continue to be a key barrier, although the female literacy rate is at 70.98 percent in Kayin State⁵. The lack of well-resourced education and the presence of a multiplicity of ethnic and minority languages not only provide a barrier but also discourage active participation.

All respondents said that fewer women voted in the 2010 elections, and the majority of women were compelled by male family members and authority figures to vote for specific candidates, a clear example of the lack of female political autonomy present in these areas. In some villages, only men voted, claiming to represent the voice of the whole village in the 2010 elections. The analysis shows that the main reason for the low rate of women's voting was women's unawareness of the value of voting and no media updates. However, from 2013 onwards after the 2012 bilateral ceasefire agreement, women's organizations, local civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gave voter education and gender equality awareness training to spread women's awareness of how to vote, and also women were encouraged to vote the right candidate in the 2015 elections by their children from abroad⁶

A women's leader from Hlaing Bwe Township, Respondent A⁷, stated such statement.

'There were no polling stations in the 2010 general elections in the ethnic-controlled area and some mixed-controlled areas (government and EAOs' administration). In the 2015 elections, some polling stations were built, and more women voted in this election.'

A women leader from Hpapun Township, Respondent F⁸, said the followings.

'Regarding the election involvement in 2015 elections, all the women currently living in the area took part but not from a too remote area and EAO's administrative area. No significant number of women is involved in the peace process because women still face armed clashes.'

⁴ Nant May Nandar kyaw, 2019. <https://asiapacific.gchumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nant-May-Nandar-Kyaw-Thesis-Cohort-2018.pdf>

⁵ Myanmar Census, 2014.

⁶ Nant May Nandar kyaw, 2019. <https://asiapacific.gchumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nant-May-Nandar-Kyaw-Thesis-Cohort-2018.pdf>

⁷ Interview with a women leader from Hlaing Bwe Township, Hpa-an city, Kayin State, 10 April 2019.

⁸ Interview with a women leader from Hpapun Township, Hpa-an city, Kayin State, 12 May 2019.

Respondent M⁹ from Local CSOs (Kayin) stated the followings.

‘Women’s role in political participation was not apparent before the 2015 NCA and political changes. After the NCA and elections, the State minister was a woman, and also women were encouraged to participate in the peace process, so women’s participation and the decision-making process is a bit improved. Before 2015, the prime minister was male, and when we say women’s participation, he brought his wife in women affair committee, and they did not have gender mindset before 2015.’

Respondent K¹⁰ from women’s organization mentions the followings.

‘One representative (a man) votes for the whole village in the mixed controlled area in the 2010 general elections. Some women vote, but they do not understand how to vote. Some women do not vote, but their names are listed in voting rolls.’

B. Women’s Political Leadership

Women face considerable challenges to participate in formal political processes at village tract, state, and national levels, which have been outlined above. There has been some improvement at state and national levels since 2015. However, in local-level positions of village tract administrator, for example, women’s participation has now reduced in the most conflict-affected areas as men took the lead, and has only slightly improved in the improving conflict-affected areas.¹¹

Notably, the number of female candidates for the Parliament of Myanmar (13.7 percent) has increased in the 2015 general elections. There have only ever been two women state ministers, both from Kayin State, in 1953 and 2015 general elections¹². In the 2015 general elections, a female chief minister, a female vice minister and four female MPs from the Upper House and one woman MP from the Lower House of Parliament were elected in Kayin State¹³. Following are the examples of women’s leadership field situations, recorded when the field research data was gathered.

Respondent F¹⁴ from Hpapun Township stated:

‘There were more female village tract administrators during the armed conflicts as the men had to hide in the forest to avoid the military’s forced labor before the signing of the NCA, and men

⁹ Interview with a regional manager from Local Resource Center, Hpa-an city, Kayin State, 8 April 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with a secretary from Karen Women Organization Kayin, 9 May 2019.

¹¹ Nant May Nandar kyaw, 2019. <https://asiapacific.gchumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nant-May-Nandar-Kyaw-Thesis-Cohort-2018.pdf>

¹² The Asia Foundation and Pan Htee Eain, 2017.

¹³ Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with a women leader from Hpapun Township, Hpa-an city, Kayin State, 12 May 2019.

took leadership after 2015 NCA in the most conflict-affected areas.’

In contrast, Respondent B¹⁵ from Hpa-an Township (the capital city of Kayin State) expresses the following opinion:

‘There was only one woman village tract administrator in the 2010 elections in Hpa-an Township. After the 2015 general elections, four out of 99 VT administrators and the communities chose more ten households and 100 household village head in local-level administration.’

There are more than 20 EAOs in Myanmar, and it is rare to see women’s leadership in any EAOs across Myanmar. Significantly, the women’s decision-making process and empowerment from one big EAO in Southeastern Myanmar was active before the 2015 general elections as a women’s leader led the initiative for the NCA. The participation of women in political processes, particularly the peace process, was noteworthy to respondents, even when it was only one woman.¹⁶

Respondent L¹⁷ from Local CSO noted the following:

‘A KNU female secretary was initiated to sign the NCA, and so, significantly, a female leader participated in the decision-making process for the NCA. After the 2015 NCA and elections (from the EAO side), there were no women leaders who would continue leading for consultation from the Karen EAOs, so it has been a drawback for women’s participation in politics and the peace process.’

Moreover, there are around 90 political parties in Myanmar, and mostly 90 percent of their executive members are male. In the 2015 general elections, 18 political parties won in elections but with only seven women candidates, two female ministers at Union level and two female chief ministers at State/Regional level¹⁸. The women’s participation in political parties is low, and also women face challenges to become candidates in the political party. Among the political parties, the significant changes were found in the NLD party as women become candidates in parliament in the 2015 general elections. However, at the local party level, there appears the same mindset where men dominated in the party, and rarely were women candidates found. Because of this domination, the evidence gathered shows that women leaders had not received any particular political skills training from the government or their political parties before they become MPs.¹⁹

¹⁵ Interview with a women leader from Hpa-an Township, Hpa-an city, Kayin State, 9 April 2019.

¹⁶ Nant May Nandar kyaw, 2019. <https://asiapacific.gchumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nant-May-Nandar-Kyaw-Thesis-Cohort-2018.pdf>

¹⁷ Interview with a leader from Karen Civil Society Organizations Network, Hpa-an city, Kayin State, 9 April 2019.

¹⁸ Salween Institute and Women’s League of Burma, 2018.

¹⁹ Nant May Nandar kyaw, 2019. <https://asiapacific.gchumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Nant-May-Nandar-Kyaw-Thesis-Cohort-2018.pdf>