



# Observe and Act

The Role of Armed and Political Movements in the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Myanmar



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# Acronyms

<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>CBO</b>	Community-Based Organisation
<b>CEC</b>	Central Executive Committee
<b>CNF</b>	Chin National Front
<b>CSC</b>	Central Standing Committee
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>EAO</b>	Ethnic Armed Organisation
<b>ERO</b>	Ethnic Resistance Organisation
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced People
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>KA</b>	Karenni Army
<b>KDHW</b>	Karen Department of Health and Welfare
<b>KHRG</b>	Karen Human Rights Group
<b>KLAC</b>	Karen Legal Affairs Committee
<b>KNLA</b>	Karen National Liberation Army
<b>KNPP</b>	Karenni National Progressive Party
<b>KNU</b>	Karen National Union
<b>KNWO</b>	Karenni National Women's Organisation
<b>KSCC</b>	Karenni State Consultative Council
<b>KWO</b>	Karen Women's Organisation
<b>KYO</b>	Karen Youth Organisation
<b>MNCWA</b>	Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs
<b>NAP</b>	National Action Plan
<b>NCA</b>	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
<b>NDL</b>	National League for Democracy
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NSPAW</b>	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
<b>NUCC</b>	National Unity Consultative Council
<b>PDF</b>	People's Defence Forces
<b>SCR 1325</b>	Security Council Resolution 1325
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>WLB</b>	Women's League of Burma
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace and Security



# 1. Executive Summary

In 2000, the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), and among its objectives it notably seeks to better protect women and girls during armed conflict and to promote their participation in building peace. This resolution was initially designed to be implemented by UN Member States, and its adoption and wider application could improve the lives of an estimated 75 million women and girls currently living in areas controlled or influenced by armed and political movements.

Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity, with the support of the German Federal Foreign Office, conducted a participatory research project examining the role that these movements can play to implement SCR 1325. The research is based on the experiences of two Ethnic Resistance Organisations (EROs) from Myanmar: the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Karen National Union (KNU).

Over a period of six months, the research team – which was spread out over Myanmar, Thailand, Berlin and Geneva, and led by a local researcher in conjunction with two insider experts close to the two movements – designed the methodology, collected the data, and analysed it. In addition to an initial desk research, they conducted 47 interviews with ERO leaders, associated civil society organisations (CSOs), women activists, as well as external stakeholders. They investigated the movements' perceptions, regulations, practices, needs, progress and challenges regarding the implementation of the WPS agenda.

One of the key findings is that the movements do engage with this agenda and have maintained a constant dialogue with women's organisations in their territories. However, a conservative mindset still exists among parts of the leadership as well the general population, often leading to a situation in which women are simultaneously perceived as 'weak' and in need of protection, while also remaining responsible for their own empowerment and protection.

The movements have taken important steps to promote women's participation and protection, but formal internal policies need to be improved to fully implement the WPS agenda. Women's participation in the movements' political processes – even if encouraged – is still relatively low at the decision-making levels. Consequently, measures to protect women in conflict areas are limited and mainly decided on by men, which reduce their effectiveness. However, some actions have already been taken, such as reforms to the movements' internal justice systems. The current political situation in the country, following the 2021 military coup, has further hindered processes related to the promotion of women's rights.

The research offers a set of recommendations for ERO leaders in addressing these challenges. They notably include the necessity of encouraging inclusive discussions among conservative members of the movements to change their perceptions of women as 'weak' and 'vulnerable', and to make women's protection the joint responsibility of both men and women. This can be supported by an emphasis on capacity building for the leadership to better address the WPS agenda, in addition to a recommendation for the movements' continued engagement with women's organisations associated with the EROs.

The movements are also encouraged to include women's participation and protection at all levels of their political agenda, and to integrate these concepts formally within their justice, security and defence sectors. This includes enhanced efforts to review internal policies and laws to fully integrate the protection and participation of women, and to develop concrete action plans for their implementation. The establishment of internal coordination and monitoring bodies for women and youth could facilitate the follow-up and enforcement of these rules.

The research also includes recommendations for international NGOs, donors and policy actors, who are encouraged to engage in continued dialogue with ERO leadership on WPS. They are encouraged to provide technical support for EROs in reviewing internal policies and to strengthen the leaderships' capacities to address and understand WPS. Further, external actors are encouraged to support the creation of spaces for exchange and support systems to help increase women's participation and improve their access to health services and justice. The funding of these initiatives is critical for their long-term success, as is the promotion of consistent discourse on WPS on the highest levels of international agencies.

Through this approach, that emphasises the inclusion of both ERO leadership and women's movements, it is possible to extend the impact of the WPS agenda for women and girls in areas controlled or influenced by armed and political movements, and thereby contribute to a truly universal promotion of women's rights in conflict situations.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Research Background

According to the ICRC, an estimated 150 million people live in areas controlled or influenced by armed and political movements.<sup>1</sup> Of these populations, about 50% are women and girls. To fully implement Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), it is vital to look beyond the states that are addressed by the resolution to increase our understanding of how armed and political movements are also contributing to its implementation.

Following a joint webinar held in November 2020, Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity developed the idea of an in-depth research initiative to assess and promote efforts to enhance the rights of women and girls in areas under the control of armed and political movements. The webinar dealt with the promotion of the rights of women and girls in conflict settings, and highlighted the perspectives of women in leadership roles within the territories of armed and political movements in Syria, Yemen, Colombia and Myanmar. The webinar focused on areas of progress and challenge regarding the rights of women and girls in these territories, and explored how to further promote these rights.

In 2021, the organisations initiated an applied research project with students at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. They investigated which armed and political movements had made declarations and/or adopted internal or external policies in favour of or against the WPS agenda, and reviewed measures taken to implement these policies. The students selected 18 armed and political movements according to several criteria, such as geographic location, territorial control and orientation. Some preliminary findings from this work showed that most of the groups had indeed implemented measures in favour of the WPS agenda; however, only a third of them had taken positive steps towards concrete policy commitments, including detailed written rules. The students concluded that even the groups that had low participation of women could still take positive steps towards implementing protective measures. Some groups had protective policies for civilian women within the territories under their control, yet discriminated against their own female members. Interestingly, none of the armed and political movements researched explicitly referenced the WPS agenda, and data related to the agenda were also found difficult to access, especially answers to more complex questions such as how the movements understand the WPS agenda, and what factors and actors influence their policies and practices on such issues.

In review of the project's research and surrounding discussions regarding the progress and remaining challenges related to the resolution's implementation, as well as the wealth of studies reviewing two decades of global engagement on WPS, it has become apparent that more needs to be done to fully implement SCR 1325 and to promote the rights of women and girls across the world.

Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity share an inclusive and positive approach to influencing the attitudes and behaviours of conflict protagonists by engaging in dialogue and demonstrating good practices and examples of respect. Thanks to its longstanding experience in building trust-based relationships with armed and political movements for peacebuilding purposes, Berghof Foundation holds substantive knowledge and understanding of how movements operate during conflict and peace processes, including information on their internal gender practices and norms. Fight for Humanity likewise has extensive experience working with non-state armed actors and affected communities in a variety of contexts. This work has included engagement with female members of armed and political movements, both within and outside peace processes, focusing both on the participation of women and girls and their protection, including work on sexual violence prevention. Given the organisations' complementary

<sup>1</sup> See: Irénée Herbet and Jérôme Drevon (2021), Engaging Armed Groups at the International Committee of the Red Cross: Challenges, Opportunities and COVID-19, in: Non-State Armed Groups. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 102 (915): 1021–1031, p. 1026. Available at: <https://international-review.icrc.org/reviews/irrc-no-915-non-state-armed-groups>.

expertise and engagement in women’s participation and protection rights, the research conducted for this report focuses specifically on these two pillars of the WPS agenda.

## 2.2. Background on Myanmar

Building on the aforementioned and preliminary desk-based global study,<sup>2</sup> this report presents the results of a six-month qualitative research project focusing on two armed and political movements operating in Myanmar. This country context was selected based on previous engagement and access by Berghof Foundation. The organisation has worked with various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) or Ethnic Resistance Organisations (EROs)<sup>3</sup> in Myanmar since 2012, and supported their efforts for effective and inclusive peace negotiations. Given the amount of territories controlled and governed by various EROs in the country, Myanmar is a context particularly well-suited for in-depth participatory analysis and policy consultations that assess and promote EROs’ efforts to enhance the rights of women and girls. Moreover, since many women’s rights organisations are linked to these movements, they represent suitable entry points for the proposed analysis and advocacy work.

Armed conflict in Myanmar began just after its independence from Great Britain in 1948. The conflict is considered the longest running civil war in the world,<sup>4</sup> and continues more or less throughout the country with multiple ethnic armed groups involved.<sup>5</sup> Documented evidence reveals a climate of impunity in Myanmar that not only enables the military to evade prosecution for war crimes, but also fosters a culture of continued violence.<sup>6</sup> Reports indicate that the military has been systematically committing gender-based violence (GBV) and other crimes, throughout the country.<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2017, the military conducted operations targeting Rohingya civilians, forcing over 700,000 people – the majority of whom were women and children – to flee to Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup> During these operations, it was reported that sexual violence against men and women, including gang rapes, was systematically practiced,<sup>9</sup> causing unspeakable harm to all victims and unwanted pregnancies for women and girls.<sup>10</sup> The government, at the time led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), did not respond effectively.<sup>11</sup>

The Women’s League of Burma (WLB) has emphasised the failure of state authorities to take effective action against GBV in Myanmar, and has highlighted the absence of justice and adequate services for survivors. Existing gender norms, based on patriarchal values, often work in favour of perpetrators of GBV and fail to protect victims.<sup>12</sup> Hence, impunity prevails for sexual violence perpetrated not only by the military, but even more widely; this is also due to a complete breakdown of the state justice system, and reported cases at the community level are often settled using traditional customary laws.<sup>13</sup>

2 This study is not publicly available.

3 The term EAOs is commonly used in reference to the armed and political movements operating in Myanmar. This report refers to EROs instead of EAOs, as some major ethnic movements, including the KNU and the KNPP, renamed themselves as such after the 2021 coup and in reaction to the military’s effort to undermine them and neglect the roles of ethnic revolutions during the National Ceasefire Agreement period.

4 Warren, R. et al. (2018) *Women’s Peacebuilding Strategies Amidst Conflict: Lessons from Myanmar and Ukraine*. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, p.15.

5 Hedström, J. and Olivius, E. (2020) Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion: Women’s Experiences of Post-War Development in Myanmar. *European Journal of Development Research*, 32(2): 379-403, p.381, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-020-00255-2>.

6 *Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security in Practice: The Failed Case of Burma*. (2014) Global Justice Center. Available at: <https://www.globaljusticecenter.net/blog/30-publications/legal-tools/502-security-council-resolutions-on-women-peace-and-security-in-practice-the-failed-case-of-burma>.

7 *Access to Justice for Women Survivors of Gender-Based Violence Committed by State Actors in Burma*. (2016) Available at: <https://www.womenofburma.org/reports/access-justice-women-survivors-gender-based-violence-committed-state-actors-burma>.

8 Nagel, D.R.U. et al. (2021) *Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Through Multilateral Sanctions: Learning from Myanmar* The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, p.12.

9 Human Rights Watch. (2017) “All of My Body Was Pain”: *Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma*. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0d48bd4.html>.

10 Bala, A. (2018) *Rohingya Crisis: Sexual Violence against Women and Adolescent Girls in Myanmar*. Department of International Relations. BSMRSTU, Gopalganj. p.8.

11 Ibid., p.13.

12 Women’s League of Burma. (2021) *Barriers at Every Turn: Gender-Based Violence Against Ethnic Women in Burma*. Available at: <https://www.womenofburma.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Barriers%20at%20every%20turn%20-%20eng.pdf>.

13 Women’s League of Burma. (2022) *August-September Situation Update of Burma/Myanmar*. Available at: <https://www.womenofburma.org/reports/august-september-situation-update-burmayanmar>, p.5.

Before the coup, there was relatively limited space to reflect on the WPS agenda in Myanmar. In spite of Myanmar's legal obligation to promote women's rights and the WPS agenda, the government lacked awareness of WPS and failed to understand its international obligations.<sup>14</sup> The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement and its Department of Social Welfare is one of the agencies mainly responsible for promoting the WPS agenda, both through the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW), and the technical working groups on WPS for the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs (MNCWA).<sup>15</sup> Both entities lack a dedicated budget, and there remains no National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS.<sup>16</sup> Even though the NSPAW was envisaged as a framework for a future NAP, it does not endorse the area of 'women and conflict' under the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the agenda was reframed as 'women and emergencies' to encompass both situations of armed conflict and natural disasters, which reflects the Myanmar government's lack of acknowledgement of the existence of an armed conflict.<sup>18</sup>

National CSOs have been working on the promotion of the WPS agenda since 2012. Indeed, the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), signed in 2015 between the government and several EROs, committed to keeping women's participation in the political dialogue process at 30 percent. Nevertheless, this target was never even close to being reached, and no control mechanism was put in place to ensure that effective efforts would be undertaken towards this goal.<sup>19</sup> Despite a principled commitment to promote gender equality and integrate the WPS agenda,<sup>20</sup> women have not been significantly involved in formal peace talks, nor in the various NCA mechanisms addressing peace and security.<sup>21</sup> Women also hold few leadership positions within EROs, though it must be noted that EROs have involved more women in peace talks than the Burmese military.<sup>22</sup> Finally, a *Deed of Commitment for the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict and Towards the Elimination of Gender Discrimination* for non-state armed actors was launched in 2012, which only the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Chin National Front (CNF) have signed in Myanmar.<sup>23</sup>

It can be noted that the ongoing conflict, the instability following the coup, as well as direct targeting by the military junta continue to cause threats to women activists.<sup>24</sup> Currently, the government-led institutions that promote gender equality and deliver services have ceased delivering.<sup>25</sup> Many organisations working for women's rights, gender equality and security sector reform have also halted their activities following the coup.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, armed clashes across Myanmar continue to trigger displacement and affect civilians throughout the country. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s report,

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- 14 Price, C. and Sengupta, P. (2020) *Listening to Women Peacebuilders: Perspectives on Women, Peace and Security from Kachin and Northern Shan States, Myanmar*. Oxfam & Trócaire. p.8.
- 15 ASEAN Secretariat, USAID, and UN Women. (2021) *The ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)*, p.47. Available at: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ASEAN-WPS-Study-01082021.pdf>.
- 16 Price, C. and Sengupta, P. (2020) *Listening to Women Peacebuilders: Perspectives on Women, Peace and Security from Kachin and Northern Shan States, Myanmar*. Oxfam & Trócaire, p.8.
- 17 Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. (2015) *Women, Peace and Security Policymaking in Myanmar*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, p.4. Available at: [https://www.agipp.org/sites/agipp.org/files/agipp\\_policy\\_brief\\_1\\_eng.pdf](https://www.agipp.org/sites/agipp.org/files/agipp_policy_brief_1_eng.pdf).
- 18 The Peace Support Fund. (2017) *The Women Are Ready: An Opportunity to Transform Peace in Myanmar*, p.21. Available at: [http://www.paungsiefacility.org/uploads/3/0/1/8/30181835/the\\_women\\_are\\_ready\\_english\\_1.pdf](http://www.paungsiefacility.org/uploads/3/0/1/8/30181835/the_women_are_ready_english_1.pdf).
- 19 Kolås, Åshild and Leitanthem Umakanta Meitei (2019) *Women in Ethnic Armed Organizations in Myanmar: Numbers and Narratives, GPS Policy Brief*, 1. Oslo: PRIO.
- 20 The Union Peace Conference committed to four principles on the promotion of gender equality:  
1. Establish a Union republic democracy and federal system, where no citizen is be treated differently;  
2. Aim to ensure 30 percent involvement of women in each sector is to be encouraged; 3. Establish and implement policies that prevent gender-based violence; and 4. Increase the capability of women to support gender equality.  
See details on page 48 of "The ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)."
- 21 ASEAN Secretariat, USAID, and UN Women. (2021) *The ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)*, p.47. Available at: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ASEAN-WPS-Study-01082021.pdf>.
- 22 Kolås, Åshild and Leitanthem Umakanta Meitei. (2019) *Women in Ethnic Armed Organizations in Myanmar: Numbers and Narratives, GPS Policy Brief*, 1. Oslo: PRIO.
- 23 Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. (2017) *International Standards Guiding Gender Inclusion in Myanmar's Peace Process*. No.3 Policy Paper, p.21. Available at: [https://www.agipp.org/sites/agipp.org/files/international\\_standards\\_guiding\\_gender\\_inclusion\\_in\\_myanmars\\_peace\\_process.pdf](https://www.agipp.org/sites/agipp.org/files/international_standards_guiding_gender_inclusion_in_myanmars_peace_process.pdf).
- 24 Nagel, D.R.U. et al. (2021) *Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Through Multilateral Sanctions: Learning from Myanmar*. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, p.13.
- 25 Olivius, E., Hedström, J. and Mar Phyo, Z. (2022) *Women, Peace and Security in Myanmar after the 2021 Military Coup*. Department of Political Science, Umeå University.
- 26 Nagel, D.R.U. et al. (2021) *Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Through Multilateral Sanctions: Learning from Myanmar*. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, p.14.

the number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Myanmar has reached 1,443,000,<sup>27</sup> increasing the need for urgent humanitarian aid, reproductive health care and protection.<sup>28</sup> In fact, according to the WLB's 2022 briefing, domestic and sexual violence is rapidly increasing, and poverty has doubled since March 2022, with 40% of the population living below the poverty line. Women have been disproportionately impacted by sexual exploitation and trafficking by both civilian and military power holders.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, women, particularly ethnic women, have faced oppression shaped by gender, ethnic and religious identities.<sup>30</sup>

Following a general overview of the situation of women and girls in Myanmar, the remainder of this section delves into the two ethnic territories that are the object of study, namely the Karen and Karenni territories, and the respective EROs governing these areas, the KNU and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP).

The KNU, with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) as its military wing, is Myanmar's oldest ERO.<sup>31</sup> It was established in 1947 with the aim to pursue equality and self-determination under a genuine Federal Union, and began its armed struggles with the Myanmar government in 1949.<sup>32</sup> The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) is one of the main civil society organisations (CSOs) advocating for women's rights and gender inclusion in the Karen movement. The KWO has officially mandated roles in relation to the KNU structure, but it has much greater independence than KNU departments, operating with its own constitutions and internally determined mandates.<sup>33</sup>

Similar to the KNU, the Karenni people began their armed revolution in 1948, following the murder of the Karenni leader by the military.<sup>34</sup> The KNPP, formed in 1957, with the Karenni Army (KA) as its armed wing, is the main independent ERO active and politically recognised in the Karenni State for its pursuit of Karenni rights and self-determination.<sup>35</sup> The Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO), formed in 1993, and one of the main CSOs advocating for women's rights and gender inclusion in the Karenni State, along with other women's organisations, operates in close coordination with the KNPP. It was first initiated by the KNPP as its women's wing, and it became an independent CSO after 2003.

In both the KNU and KNPP territories the situation for women and girls improved to some extent after the start of the peace processes following the inauguration of President Thein Sein in 2011, and when the first civilian government took position under the NLD in 2015. The KNPP signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the government at the national level in 2012, which lasted until 2021, while the KNU was party to the 2015 NCA. Following a decrease in fighting in both territories (though fighting remained in some areas), the rights of women and girls seemed to improve in terms of movement, livelihood opportunities, security, public participation and access to information.

During the same period, due to awareness-raising efforts led by many community-based organisations (CBOs), CSOs and NGOs, the understanding of women's rights, human rights and reproductive rights increased, as well as opportunities for information and education in the country. As a result, CSOs working in these territories reported a significant reduction in cases of domestic violence and sexual harassment. Still, substantial improvement efforts were required as the baseline for these issues was low.

In 2021, the military coup ended these slightly positive trends, and a greater number of women were displaced to nearby villages and further away to the jungles along the Thai-Burma border, and some crossed over to the existing refugee camps on the Thai side.

27 UNHCR. (2022) *Myanmar Emergency – UNHCR Regional Update*. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96701>.

28 Women's League of Burma. (2022) *August-September Situation Update of Burma/Myanmar*. Available at: <https://www.womenofburma.org/reports/augustseptember-situation-update-burmamyanmar>.

29 Ibid.

30 Price, C. and Sengupta, P. (2020) *Listening to Women Peacebuilders: Perspectives on Women, Peace and Security from Kachin and Northern Shan States, Myanmar*. Oxfam & Trócaire, p.13.

31 Loong, Shona. (2022) *The Karen National Union in Post-Coup Myanmar*. Stimson Center.

Available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2022/the-karen-national-union-in-post-coup-myanmar>.

32 Karen National Union website. About the KNU. Available at: <https://www.knuhq.org/public/en/about/background>.

33 Jolliffe, K. (2016) *Ceasefires, Governance and Development: The Karen National Union in Times of Change*. 2015<sup>th</sup> Edition. Asia Foundation, p.26.

34 Smith, M. (2002) *Burma (Myanmar): The Time for Change*. Minority Rights Group International, p.17.

35 Linnéa Blomquist. (2020) *Ambiguous Agency: Care and Silence in Women's Everyday Peacebuilding in Myanmar*, Department of Political Science, Umeå University, p. 7.



### 2.3. Methodology

The research presented here is based on a qualitative and participatory methodology, and involves members from both movements (approved by the leadership) as ‘insider experts’ throughout the design, data collection and analysis stages.

The main questions investigated were:

- ☐ How do armed and political movements in Myanmar, specifically the KNU and KNPP, relate to the WPS agenda in their discourse and practice? How is it integrated into their internal regulations, policies, declarations and governance practices?
- ☐ What challenges have been met in the implementation of these policies?
- ☐ What factors and actors have influenced the positioning of the KNU and KNPP regarding the WPS agenda?
- ☐ Looking forward, how can external actors (both international and local) support and strengthen internal efforts to promote women’s participation and protection in areas controlled or influenced by the KNU and KNPP?

Prior to the fieldwork, desk research was conducted in order to review the state of the field regarding the implementation of the WPS agenda in Myanmar, in ERO territories, and in areas controlled by the KNU and KNPP in particular. Given the limited amount of data on these movements’ policies and practices related to women’s participation and protection (and for the KNPP in particular), some initial information was also gathered through conversations with women leaders from both movements.

The data collection process was led by a local researcher in collaboration with two insider experts, one from the KNU and one from the KNPP. After reviewing and providing inputs on the research methodology, the insider experts and the local researcher travelled to the territories of the KNU and KNPP to conduct semi-structured interviews. The field research included a total of 47 interviewees (28 women and 19 men) from the EROs’ leadership, associated CSO groups, community women, leaders from the women’s movement in Myanmar and external experts. All interviews used and quoted in this report were conducted face-to-face or online from late August to early October 2022.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Some of the interviews were also recorded on video, and used for a short film produced alongside this report: <https://youtu.be/k3-ZL4vN80I>

Several challenges were encountered during the field research:

- ☐ **Security:** Both movements find themselves in a critical situation, due to ongoing intensive fighting and attacks by the Burmese military, including airstrikes and shelling. Military attacks can take place anytime and anywhere within the movements' territories. Due to the consistent fighting in and around the areas of both movements, it was challenging for the researchers to travel within the territories deeply inside Myanmar; focus had to remain on the areas bordering with Thailand. Despite the security support provided by the movements, the researchers faced limitations reaching certain areas in order to collect detailed information on policy implementation at the local level. In addition, any 'external' visitor requires extensive time and budget in order to ensure their safe transportation from the border to the territories.
- ☐ **Prioritisation of political issues:** Not only the military situation, but also the political situation constituted a challenge, as the movements were busy with key political considerations that took priority over research on women's rights. Thus, in the critical situation during which the research took place, the majority of participants were travelling constantly and had very tight schedules due to political meetings and their organisational commitments.

Despite these difficulties, working with insider experts proved to have many advantages, which helped in mitigating the aforementioned challenges.

- ☐ **Sensitive engagement:** With the support of the insider experts, the overall methodology and data-gathering tools and processes were tweaked to better reflect the perspectives of the movements and the local contexts, accounting for any gaps and internal and external sensitivities within the respective movements. For example, despite ongoing security issues, the insider experts were able to travel around the territories with escorts arranged by their movements.
- ☐ **Trustful relationships:** Likewise, existing relationships of trust enabled the insider experts to make appointments with interviewees despite their tight schedules, and find moments during the day and night to catch interviewees in between appointments. Some interviews had to be conducted over two or three sessions, as more time was not available. Such engagement strategies would have not been appropriate or even possible without the insider experts, as they required not only lots of patience, but a good amount of local knowledge and personal relationships. The insider experts also received good support from their own movements in coordinating and arranging the interviews.

Hence, one of the major strengths of working with insider experts is that it creates more **local ownership** leading to more commitment, willingness and contribution from the movements.

Based on the wealth of primary data collected and analysed by the local researcher and two insider experts, the following sections of this report will present the findings from both EROs under study, focusing on internal perceptions by leaders and members of the KNU and KNPP and women's organisations close to them on the following topics: their understanding of gender, women's rights and WPS (**Section 3**); the formal policies and regulations on WPS put in place within the political and governance structures of both EROs (**Section 4**); the state of implementation of these policies, and the current practices on women's participation (**Section 5**) and women's protection (**Section 6**); the factors and actors contributing to gender awareness and the promotion of WPS in the ERO territories (**Section 7**); and the challenges and needs which women are facing in securing and advancing their rights, due to cultural factors, limited resources and support mechanisms, and security gaps caused by conflict dynamics (**Section 8**). Finally, the report concludes with a synthesis of key findings (**Section 9**) and key recommendations for EROs, national and international NGOs and donor governments (**Section 10**).



### 3. The Meaning and Understanding of Gender and WPS

**This section discusses the understanding of the concepts of gender and WPS among leaders and members of the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), as well as CSOs associated with them.**

#### 3.1. Understandings of Gender

There is a general understanding across various parts of the **KNU movement** that gender<sup>37</sup> is about equality between men and women, including other gender identities, and that all should be equal. Yet upon closer examination, there are differences in understanding between the KNU and the CSOs close to it. Among the KNU leadership, the majority of interviewees defined gender as equality among humans regardless of having male, female or other gender identities, but they were less outspoken against gender stereotypes and their impact on the roles and responsibilities typically assigned to men and women. The understanding of women leaders and CSO leaders – especially from the KWO – was different from the majority of male leaders in the KNU. The former clearly associated ‘gender’ with socially constructed roles, norms and practices that result in gender discrimination, to which women are more vulnerable. These gender stereotypes, they argued, have greatly affected roles within the movement, forcing women to be in the backlines rather than in leadership roles. One female CSO leader identified the failure to recognise gender discrimination as a real problem:

“The KNU’s ‘equality’ means ‘to treat all people the same,’ but (this implies) ignoring gender discrimination and its impacts on gender roles.”

<sup>37</sup> There is no exact word for ‘gender’ in Burmese, but it is usually explained with different words, so interlocutors often use the word directly in English instead.

When it comes to the Karenni territory, there is generally a common understanding of the meaning of ‘gender’ across the KNPP movement. All interviewees agreed that there should be equality regardless of different gender identities and there should be no oppression of women. In fact, the difference between the KNPP and the CSOs lies in how thoroughly the term ‘gender’ is understood. Within the KNPP, the majority of local leaders and members have less familiarity with the term ‘gender.’ One simply stated that women and men are equal even though the term ‘gender’ itself seemed a little bit strange to him; while a female member admitted that she did not know what it meant. A few top leaders of the KNPP have the same depiction of gender as CSO leaders working for women’s rights, gender equality and human’s rights. They described it as the socially constructed stereotypes of men and women, which have an impact on the division of roles and responsibilities between men and women in society, traditionally constructing men as the leaders and women as the followers, and enhancing discrimination against women. CSO actors also recognised the impact of gender stereotypes on the political, social, economic and cultural spheres where women are more vulnerable to discrimination and GBV. One male CSO leader stated: *“In short, gender is about fighting for equality between different gender identities.”*

### 3.2 Understandings of WPS and Participation and Protection Rights

Unlike the term ‘gender’, KNU members and civil society actors have a common understanding of the concept of **WPS**, and especially of the importance of peace and security – referring to it as stability, safety and peaceful livelihoods. Respondents, especially those from CSOs, stressed the obligations of EROs to implement WPS in their territories. When it comes to the pillars of WPS, the majority of KNU leaders placed greater emphasis on women’s participation and related policies than on the need for policies and commitments for protection. However, they also understood the connection between both pillars, by acknowledging the importance of women’s participation at all levels of the political process, in order to reflect the different needs of women for protection in decisions and policies. Respondents therefore recognised the fact that when women’s participation was lacking at the decision-making level, this had a negative impact on the other pillars of the WPS agenda.

In the case of the KNPP, the understanding of WPS also varies among different levels of leadership. Most interviewees agreed on the importance of women’s protection and participation in order to reflect their voices and needs in decisions and policies, even more so as women and children are the most vulnerable populations during armed conflict. One female CSO leader emphasised both the need to involve men and the interdependence between the need for protection and the rate of participation of women in decision-making, stating:

“Emotional and physical insecurity are the main limitations to reach leadership positions for women. For women to have peace and security, it is very important that all men in our society, including husbands and the respective leaders, must understand the situation and the feeling of women and they need to cooperate in promoting the rights of women and girls.”

Unlike some top leaders of the KNPP, the majority of departments and local leaders of the KNPP showed limited awareness about WPS, as acknowledged by an interviewee: *“I heard about it, but I am not sure what it means and refers to.”* Two local leaders also recognised that they did not know anything about WPS.

When it comes to a more detailed understanding of ‘**participation**’, interviewees from both movements described it as an active involvement in different levels of the organisation, from the training to the most important decision-making level; they specifically highlighted the importance of women’s participation in decision-making in order to reflect their voices and the needs. One male leader from the KNU stated: *“I think if a woman leads, she will be able to make fundamental, practical and effective decisions.”* Among

the KNPP movement, one male leader also acknowledged that *“Women have resilience, commitment, responsibility and they are more careful in financial matters.”* However, the essence of participation was still often framed within existing gender roles, in particular among male leaders, highlighting the importance of women’s participation for women’s-related issues. One of them said:

“In particular, there can be gaps that men can’t notice or understand regarding women’s issues. There will [only] be the right decisions on women-related issues when there is women’s participation.”

One KNPP leader emphasised the importance of women’s participation by describing the socially constructed characteristics of mothers as an important factor: *“By nature, women as mothers have more concerns about the difficulties and troubles for their children and family. With this nature, women reflect more comprehensive thoughts in their decisions.”*

In turn, all respondents expressed a general understanding of the need for women’s **protection**. *“Protection is like a fence which protects from different dangers,”* said one top male leader of the KNU. Most mentioned women as vulnerable to the impact of violence and conflict, and also highlighted them as the most resilient group in society. A KNU CSO male leader said: *“There must be protection for equal rights, women’s human rights violations and protection from discrimination and abuses.”* However, there was a slight variation in perception on women between KNU members from the central and regional levels. While the majority of the interviewees, including the KNU leaders, emphasised women as a ‘vulnerable group’, some local KNU leaders described them being ‘naturally weak’ as the trigger for their greater protection need. By contrast, in describing women as ‘vulnerable’, female CSO leaders reflected on the impacts of gender norms, stereotypes and discrimination on women’s daily lives, which expose them to more risks than men. One Karen CSO leader highlighted:

“When we talk about Women, Peace and Security, women need to feel not only physical security, but also being comfortable in the work they are doing in their day-to-day lives. So, women also need to be involved at the decision-making level for their protection.”

Finally, one female leader from the KNU expressed her opinion on women’s responsibilities for their own protection: *“Depending on the protection from others is not enough. Women should be careful about behaviours which invite more danger, such as choosing places to stay where men are staying and wearing inappropriate clothes.”*

To summarise the findings of this section, it can be determined that the scope of understanding of gender among the four different categories of interviewees (KNU leaders, KNU-related CSOs, KNPP leadership, and KNPP-related CSOs) influenced their level of awareness on WPS. In other words, an improved understanding of gender often meant an improved consideration of the WPS agenda in the territories. Where the general assumption of everyone being equally treated within the movements prevailed, the existence of gender discrimination and its related impacts and burdens for women were topics largely absent from most of the discussions about WPS with leaders from both movements.

Most local leaders and officials from the townships and districts acknowledged having even less familiarity with the issues of WPS and gender equality than the central leadership of both movements. Although gender equality is generally accepted as an important issue in principle, in practice, both movements struggle to take women’s rights and gender equality into account because of the prioritisation of political and military affairs. This situation forces both CSOs and CBOs, and women organisations in particular, to take on the responsibility of promoting the rights of women and girls.

## 4. Formal Policies and Commitments on WPS

**This section focuses on the existing policies and commitments of the KNU and the KNPP towards gender equality and women’s rights, which directly and indirectly shape the implementation of the WPS agenda in their territories. It also touches upon ongoing efforts to develop additional policies on women’s rights and gender equality.**

### 4.1. KNU

According to all interviewees, the KNU does not have a specific policy on the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality, except for some efforts dedicated to women’s participation in its Constitution. Under Article 6, the Constitution of the KNU includes ‘Equality’ as one of its core values. Accordingly, the organisation is committed to including at least 3 women among its 55 Central Standing Committee members, at least 3 women out of 31 members of each District Standing Committee (or at least 2 women if they are difficulties to find), and at least 2 women out of 7 members of each Village Committee. Article 14 under the Principles of the Constitution further states that

“the participation of women in the different levels of the Karen National Union must be promoted.”

Even though the KNU was one of the EROs requesting at least 30% of women’s participation in the NCA, they have not yet adopted this policy for their own organisation. KWO leaders emphasised the considerable efforts they undertook during the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the KNU in 2017 to formally introduce into the KNU Constitution a 30% quota for female participants on decision-making levels throughout the organisation. Although this provision was not adopted, the decision was made to ‘principally agree’ on it.

Furthermore, the KNU has adopted various **policies** on resettlement and rehabilitation, land, education, humanitarian issues, health and welfare, forests and refugees. All these policies, such as the KNU’s Education or Health and Welfare policy, recognise ‘equality regardless of gender’ and the necessity for affirmative action. In addition, the Development Policy commits to promoting the rights of women by stating: *“Rights for women will be established to encourage women to participate in the community development programme for uplifting the standard of living of the community both by work and by decision-making.”* In 2013, the KNU also signed a *Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call for the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict and towards the Elimination of Gender Discrimination*, in which it commits to implement all necessary measures effectively.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from these measures, however, the KNU does not have specific policies on WPS-related issues. One male leader claimed:

“I don’t see any specific policies for women in the current Constitution, but we are expecting that there will be affirmative action for women’s participation in the future federal Constitution.”

<sup>38</sup> See [http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/knu\\_sexual-6bffd0548f5219cf14fa5acb9ad52479.pdf](http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/knu_sexual-6bffd0548f5219cf14fa5acb9ad52479.pdf).

Even though there are no specific policies focusing on women’s rights and gender equality, some committees have women-specific regulations informed by cultural norms and practices. One leader mentioned that *“there is no specific policy or decision on women’s protection or participation in our department but only some special consideration on ‘women should not go to this place or women should go to this place.’”*

Under the KNU structures, the KWO and the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) are linked to the Organising and Information Department. This is the official channel for the KNU to coordinate women’s and gender-related issues with the KWO, and in turn for the KWO to conduct regular advocacy and engagement on gender equality and women’s rights towards the KNU. Thanks to the consistent advocacy efforts of the KWO, the KNU is currently developing a **Gender Policy**.

There are some variations in the understanding of the existing policies among different levels of the KNU leadership. Some leaders from local levels and departments assumed that the KNU has already adopted a 30% quota for women’s participation in its Constitution, even though it only principally agreed to it, and only allocated a few seats for women. When it comes to the question of policy commitments on women, the majority of KNU interviewees firstly emphasised that women and men are equally treated, that Karen culture favours women, and that there is no discrimination against women in KNU policies. However, looking closer, all acknowledged limitations and challenges in fulfilling gender-related policies and commitments in KNU territories (Section 7).

## 4.2 KNPP

The KNPP encompasses two main institutions, the KNPP party and the KNPP government (also known as the ‘Karenni government’), both of which are regulated through different **Constitutions**. These two institutions are closely connected, since the chairperson of the KNPP party is the prime minister of the KNPP government, and the vice-chairperson stands as deputy prime minister. Women leaders interviewed for this study confirmed that there are no specific laws and policies on women and gender equality in the KNPP Constitution, but only a general clause on equality and justice for all. One top leader of the party assessed that “the party doesn’t feel or see the gender discrimination within the party. Therefore, there is no plan to make a specific plan for gender as an issue.” However, the party decided to promote women’s participation in the last Congress election, by listing at least 10 female candidates in the next Congress term. One top leader highlighted that

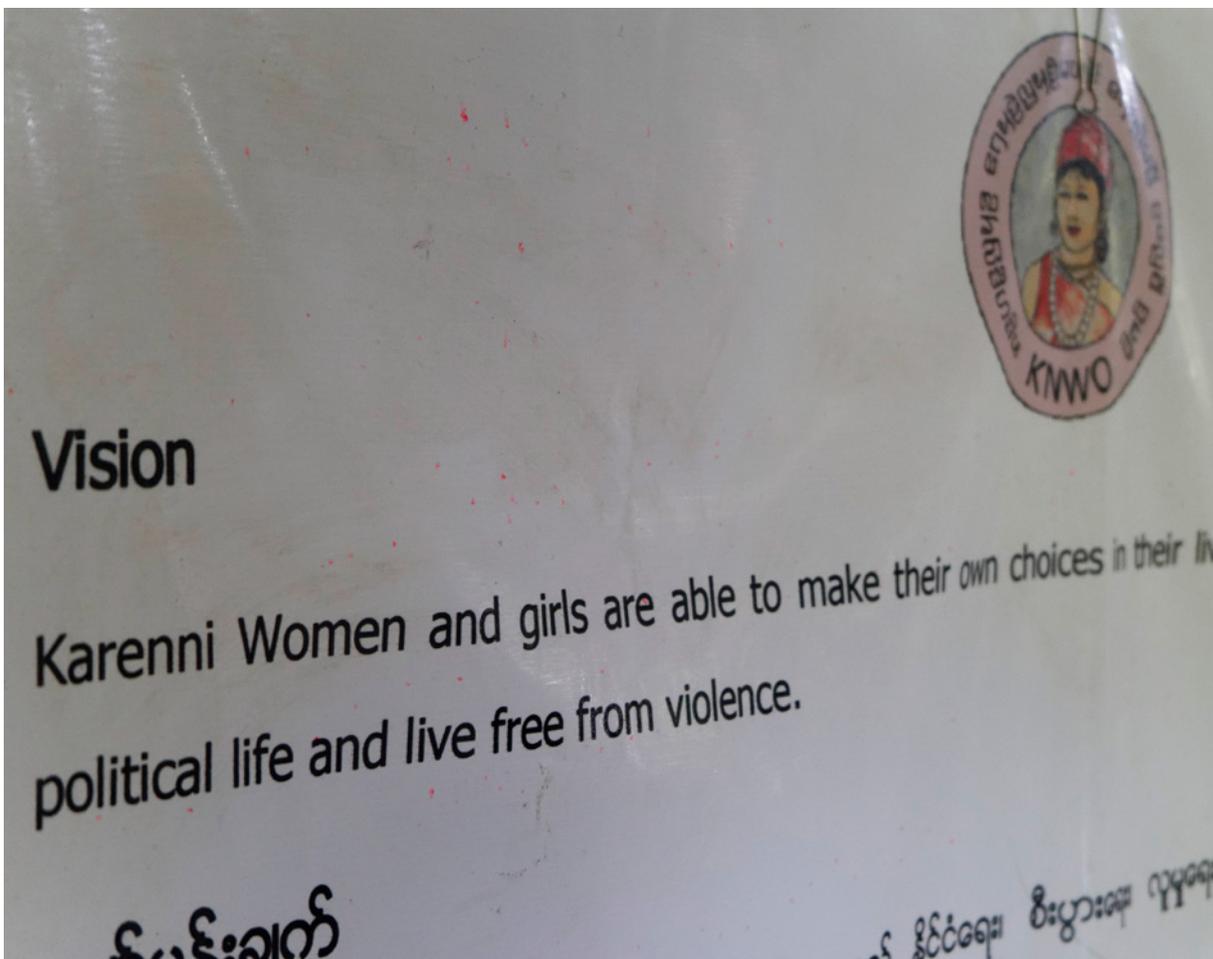
“as an action plan to fulfil this aim,  
a women’s leadership programme was launched this year.”

While the party does not have any gender-specific regulations, the Constitution of the KNPP government includes one article on women’s rights. Article 21 states: “the participation of women in legislative, executive and judicial branches of Karenni State Governance must be promoted.” Some KNPP leaders and CSO leaders noted that the 4<sup>th</sup> draft of the future Karenni State Constitution, initiated by the KNPP and confirmed in 2015, has more provisions on gender inclusion, but it is still under development.

The understanding of KNPP interviewees regarding gender-related **policies** and regulations is mixed. Some top leaders of the KNPP clearly stated that neither the party nor the governance bodies have adopted any formal policies on women’s participation, whilst other KNPP leaders and some CSO representatives mistakenly understood that there was already a 30% quota system in place. There was also limited knowledge on Geneva Call’s *Deed of Commitment on sexual violence and gender equality* among the interviewees. Some interviewees did not have any information whether the KNPP had signed it or not,

while most of the leadership mentioned its commitment to it. According to Geneva Call, the KNPP has not signed this specific *Deed of Commitment*, only the one protecting children in armed conflict. Even though the KNPP does not have any specific policy and laws on women’s rights and gender equality, it created CSO platforms where women’s organisations, such as the KNWO, can coordinate their engagement for advocacy and recommendations for women’s rights and gender equality.

To summarise the findings for this section, the KNU and KNPP share a lot of similarities in terms of policy development on WPS. Both organisations have introduced a few formal rules and regulations in their constitutions and other guiding frameworks to promote gender equality and women’s rights in their territories, especially with regard to women’s participation. However, not all interviewed members and leaders have a clear understanding of these policies. On a positive note, both organisations are in the process of developing specific gender policies. The next two sections will review current practices in implementing existing commitments and other efforts undertaken to advance and improve the situation of women and girls within both movements, regarding their opportunities to participate in decision-making (Section 5) and the implementation of their protection rights (Section 6).





## 5. Current Practices regarding Women’s Participation

**This section explores the current level of participation by women in all organisations and activities of both movements, and the steps undertaken to promote women’s participation in their territories.**

### 5.1. KNU

According to the majority of KNU members interviewed for this study, despite the limited internal policies on women’s participation (see Section 4 above), the KNU has always encouraged women’s participation in leadership, as well as in trainings and other meetings. All interviewees mentioned that empowerment programmes and activities to promote women’s participation are mainly led by their dedicated **women’s organisation**, the KWO. Even though the KWO claims itself as an independent CSO which is supporting a Karen revolution, the KNU considers the KWO as its women’s wing, which opens up a space for women’s participation, engagement and advocacy on women’s rights and gender equality through that channel.

Most female interviewees highlighted their concerns on the critically low percentage of women’s participation in **decision-making bodies** of the KNU. Currently, only 4 out of 55 members of the Central Standing Committee (CSC) and only 1 out of 11 members of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) are women. One out of 4 female CSC members is also KNU’s Justice Chief, but as noted by a female KNU leader, almost all judges at the township and district levels are men. There have been efforts to provide training for women to become judges in the KNU, to help mitigate this issue. Some KNU leaders confirmed that there was very limited women’s participation at the township and district leadership levels, even though the exact numbers are not known to the movement. They also pointed out that there were more female village heads in some districts, but according to a CSO interviewee, those women have low gender awareness, similarly to most male leaders. The highest position held by a woman in the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) is Colonel, which is a woman serving under the Military Medical Branch. All interviewees mentioned that women were more present in the implementation and activities levels than in decision-

making levels. A female CSO leader stated that the few women represented in the leadership of the KNU’s 14 departments were mostly assigned to education, health and other social sectors.

Despite the impact of ongoing fighting, some female KNU and CSO leaders reported positive developments regarding women’s **education**. For example, women and girls both from KNU-controlled areas and areas of mixed control have gained greater opportunities to access formal and informal education, even since the coup. The KNU provides pre-school and high school education in the territories it governs. In addition, they argued that through awareness-raising and advocacy efforts, mainly led by the KWO, more women assumed leadership roles, became empowered to speak out for their rights, and were able to access justice.

In terms of **gender equality**, the majority of male KNU leaders and some female KNU leaders shared their perception that, culturally, women are given priority as compared to Karen men and are fully entitled to equal rights in KNU territory. However, many CSOs leaders and some KNU leaders disagreed, stating that women lack the opportunity to focus on public participation, as they need to provide for their families’ survival and well-being, especially when their husbands are involved in the fighting. Thus, alongside GBV and oppression, women hold double care burdens during the conflict. These challenges will be further analysed in Section 7.

## 5.2 KNPP

Since 1979, the KNPP has initiated several processes to form a **women’s organisation** to support the Karenni Revolution and to organise social support. In 2003, the KNWO was formed and became an independent CSO rather than a wing of the KNPP. According to leaders from both organisations, there is regular coordination and engagement between the KNPP and the KNWO in order to exchange political updates and discuss issues related to women’s rights and gender equality. Furthermore, the KNWO provides recommendations to the KNPP through regular midterm meetings. A former female KNPP leader recalled a Youth and Women Committee, which led coordination and monitoring work on women’s and gender issues for the KNWO in 2017, but became inactive after a few years due to a lack of allocated budget, unstable human resources and the absence of an action plan.

The majority of KNPP leaders claimed to have encouraged greater women’s participation in both the government and the party. In support of its **action plan** to have at least 10 female candidates in the next Congress term, the party started a women’s leadership programme in early 2022 in order to have more women active within the party (as briefly mentioned under Section 4.2 above). This programme was highlighted by CSO leaders as a good practice from which other EROs could learn. One female KNPP leader acknowledged that legal training opportunities were made available by the KNPP. However, similarly to the KNU, most interviewees identified women’s organisations such as the KNWO as the main actors in implementing empowerment and capacity-building programmes to promote women’s participation.

Despite these efforts, all interviewees assessed women’s participation in **decision-making bodies** of the KNPP to be critically low. Since 2021, there has been only one woman in the CEC and only 2 women as alternate Central Committee members, who are not eligible to be candidates in their first term, according to a KNPP policy. Many KNPP leaders saw this as a step back from the previous congressional term, when 4 women were elected to the CEC. Other KNPP leaders were more optimistic about progress towards reaching 30% female party members. Acknowledging that few women participate in the five ministries of the KNPP government, many leaders confirmed that most women take part in KNPP activities as members rather than at the decision-making level. For example, under the Ministry of Health, there is only one woman in a leadership role but a great number of female staff. One KNPP leader estimated around 150 female soldiers serving in the KA (the armed wing) under the Ministry of Defence of the KNPP government, but they are mostly serving in the backlines as trainers, medics, or in support roles such as sewing and cooking. The KNPP also included women on its formal peace negotiation committee before the coup, but most women participated as office team members and technical support staff since there were very few female CEC

members. Since the coup, the KNPP has been engaged in the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), a political body formed by a coalition of elected Members of Parliament, EROs and other anti-regime groups to bring together forces opposed to the coup. One of the two KNPP representatives in the NUCC is a woman.

It is also interesting to note that there is greater commitment to women’s participation in the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC), formed in the wake of the coup by different groups in the Karenni State, including the KNPP. Its purpose is to promote national equality, justice, democracy and self-determination through collective leadership until a Federal Union is to be established. This body implements a gender quota in practice: women represent more than half of the 37 representatives and 8 out of 15 members of the Constitution Drafting Committee, according to some KNPP and KSCC leaders.

Within its territory, the KNPP has set up **local administrative bodies** under the supervision of the Ministry of Home Affairs. According to a ministry official, some women are part of these structures at the township and district levels, but they mainly work as office staff, except for one female district chairperson. The KNPP also operates in two Karenni Refugee camps in Thailand, one in the Mae Hong Song district and one in the Mae Sariang district. It does not have full control over those camps, but only indirect influence through KNPP members involved in the camp committees, where a limited number of KNPP women took up roles as judges and health coordinators. Moreover, in the 245 new IDP camps set up since the coup, temporary emergency administration committees were formed by different groups present in the camps. In the KNPP-controlled Daw Oo Ku IDP camp, 5 out of 12 camp administrators are women. In the majority of the camps, the administration is independent from the KNPP, with fewer women in leadership roles.

Summarising this section, it can be assessed that while both movements demonstrated a general understanding of the importance of women’s participation in decision-making, current practices reveal a need for more gender awareness within the two organisations, and in leadership structures in particular. Women are more frequently included at the implementation level rather than at the leadership level, and the few women who took up leadership positions faced obstacles to their active participation, given the lack of support systems. These challenges will be examined further below. On a positive note, external experts interviewed for this study confirmed that in comparison to other EROs, the KNU and the KNPP are among the movements with the strongest women’s participation and the most inclusive governance structures, especially due to the very proactive role of women’s organisations. Moreover, both organisations have proved that having formal policies in place is an effective strategy for the advancement of women’s participation.





## 6. Current Practices regarding Women’s Protection

**This section analyses the current situation of women and girls in both Karen and Karenni communities regarding their safety and security, their access to justice and protection mechanisms, and related rules, regulations and institutions.**

### 6.1. KNU

The KNU extends its administration to 7 districts, 26 townships, and a number of villages where women can access the KNU’s justice system. Although the KNU does not have specific laws governing GBV, female CSO leaders stressed that the *Kawthoolei* laws<sup>39</sup> of the KNU **justice system** integrate laws concerning violence against women. The majority of CSO leaders also highlighted the ways the KNU’s justice system is more effective than that of the military junta: it is less expensive, more accessible in terms of language, and less time consuming. According to a female Chief Justice, the KNU justice system has made reforms to increase their gender-responsiveness and sensitivity to gender issues. For example, there are women in charge of case investigation, female doctors for rape survivors, and certain supportive guidelines in place, such as avoiding the re-traumatisation of survivors in the investigation process. The number of women in the police force and the justice department is also increasing, though numbers remain quite low. There is also increased legal awareness among the Karen communities regarding GBV and related reporting systems. Under the Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW), the GBV programme is jointly run by the Legal Technical Support Group (KLAC), which is part of the KNU Justice Department; the KLAC leads legal processes and the KDHW oversees health-related issues. Despite these efforts, all interviewees agreed that policies protecting women and girls need to be more effectively implemented and done so system-wide.

<sup>39</sup> *Kawthoolei* is the unofficial name of the proposed state that the Karen have sought to establish in Myanmar since the beginning of the Karen conflict in the late 1940s.

When it comes to women’s protection from human rights abuses, and especially GBV, almost all policy developments and law enforcement efforts have been handled by the KWO. KWO leaders highlighted how reported cases of GBV primarily come to them over other institutions; in response they assume the coordination role and provide legal support, shelter and other assistance, such as counselling and medical support for female survivors. Even though the KWO is in the process of drafting specific laws regarding violence against women, leaders who were interviewed underscored the gaps among the KNU’s own implementation efforts and its dependence on the KWO as significant challenges for effectively promoting and implementing protections for women in the Karen territory. A male KNU leader also highlighted the role of the KWO in promoting women’s rights:

“I don’t know how to measure the progress, but KWO is working in that area...  
There is more understanding within the movement  
that there are at least specific needs for women’s protection and  
more understanding on women’s rights among the communities.”

## 6.2 KNPP

According to its Department of Home Affairs, the KNPP government is organised into 3 districts, 16 townships, and a number of villages, **with dedicated administrative bodies** to which women in the communities can reach out for their protection. However, these KNPP governance structures have systemic issues and are currently undergoing a reform process. For instance, interviewees mentioned how the KNPP’s Justice Department is currently under review and working to reform their penal codes, criminal laws and customary laws. One KNPP leader from the Justice Department highlighted the need for more awareness and technical support on the handling of GBV and other gender-related issues. According to many interviewees, most cases are handled by township committees through customary practices, which are seen as ineffective and raise concerns of gender discrimination (see below).

In the justice departments of the Refugee Camp Committees (there is one for each of the two **Karenni camps**), where the KNPP has indirect influence through their members, there are gender guidelines for handling GBV cases. Beyond these, there are no specific laws or regulations, according to a KNPP committee member and judge. CSO leaders also mentioned how the new IDP camps, established since the coup, have formed temporary emergency administration committees with local groups to address crime (including GBV) through customary practices. The same interviewees noted that the KSCC has formed various committees for different sectors of government, but there has yet to be a committee charged with legislation. Moreover, it was assessed by CSO leaders that members of Karenni State Police under the KSCC possess limited awareness of gender issues.

The majority of interviewees spoke to the lack of a functioning justice system governing KNPP territory, and noted the lack of effective methodologies for addressing the protection of women and girls. A female CSO leader noted, *“we don’t know where to report since there is no system.”* As a result, **women’s organisations** must take on the responsibilities for women’s protection, such as providing shelters, awareness and legal assistance. However, the KA, as the defence sector of the KNPP, does support the safe travel of KNWO members across Karenni areas when leading legal processes for GBV cases, though these security protections are mainly conflict-related.

Finally, despite the acute challenges caused by the active conflict (Section 7), some interviewees also emphasised the increasing level of activism regarding women’s rights and politics in the Karenni territory. Some CSO members perceived how women in refugee camps and those who have recently arrived in the IDP camps enjoy more security and stability as compared to women in the villages, since the KA provides security in the camps, along with the presence of social support groups.

Comparatively speaking, the data from both movements show how when it comes to implementation efforts for women’s protection, the KNU and KNPP have made fewer concrete efforts to address women’s protection. Though the majority of interviewees were able to identify specific needs surrounding women’s issues, the two organisations have yet to implement more effective measures protecting women from GBV. The KNU has made some advancements towards reforming the justice system to become more gender-sensitive and gender responsive: the head of the KNU Justice Department is a woman and a former KWO leader, and the KWO certainly holds influence when it comes to women’s protection. However, both movements did emphasise their dependency upon women’s organisations regarding the issue, and in some ways continue to transfer responsibilities for women’s protection to them.

In addition, informal systems of civil society support for legal assistance, advocacy and outreach have been heavily affected by the coup and the subsequent intensification of the armed conflict, hindering women’s communication and access to supports concerning protection issues, as pointed out by a representative of an INGO. Geographical variations and structural differences between the two movements also remain factors that affect the degree to which implementation of related policies can occur. The KNPP is currently reforming its administration structures, but given the rise in conflict throughout the Karenni State, it faces increased limitations reaching women in remote communities. Other challenges connected to limited gender awareness and practices of gender discrimination within the justice departments of both the KNU and KNPP will be reviewed in the next section. Finally, the lack of systemic frameworks and mechanisms enforcing and enhancing women’s protection within both movements greatly hinders the work of CBOs and CSOs in promoting the rights of women and ensuring their access to justice.



## 7. Conducive Factors and Actors

**This section highlights the set of actors and factors – both internal and external to the movements – that have positively influenced the movements in promoting and sustaining the participation and protection of women and girls in their territories.**

### 7.1. Internal Factors and Actors

All interviewees from both movements agreed on the importance of internal advocacy on WPS, which they said must be long-term and sustainable. Most respondents mentioned **leaders within decision-making bodies** as the most influential actors. In fact, some women from the KNU positively emphasised the role of several open-minded male leaders in effectively advocating for women’s rights and gender equality within their organisation. External stakeholders from the international donor community also noted that certain ERO leaders were more likely to go ‘slightly off the path’ of gender stereotypes if they did not perceive there to be a threat to their leadership role.

KNPP leaders also highlighted the importance of **younger generations** for possible future transformative change and reforms within the organisation, since the mindset of senior leaders was harder to change. Interviewees from international CSOs signalled the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda as a potential bridge between the WPS agenda and the structures of EROs.

The key roles of **women’s organisations**, CBOs and CSOs working on women’s rights and experts on those issues were repeatedly highlighted by interviewees from both movements, as well as external actors. It is noticeable that both movements have existing platforms for CSOs, which create opportunities for advocacy and help influence the EROs in promoting gender equality and the WPS agenda. While the KNU and the KNPP greatly depend on women’s organisations to provide expertise and an arena for women’s participation, and to take on responsibilities related to women’s issues, this represents both a burden and an opportunity for CSOs, as it provides a channel for influence and effective engagement with the leaders of the KNU and the KNPP.

Within the territories under their control or influence, both movements are keen to be recognised as good governance actors and to secure collective support and acceptance by their people. As representatives of the donor community, EROs perceive themselves more as governments than armies, and therefore require more inclusive decision-making processes. This interest in sustaining **local legitimacy** creates an entry point for advocacy efforts and pressure from local and external actors upon EROs to effectively implement the WPS agenda within their territories.

### 7.2 External Factors and Actors

The military coup in 2021 created many acute challenges for the people of Myanmar, but also gave rise to new political dynamics and opportunities to advance collectively on WPS issues. CSO leaders from the KNPP highlighted **collective leadership in the current revolution period** as a positive factor contributing to women’s participation and gender inclusion, since movements have developed a common understanding on these issues, often working through common platforms and engaging with other stakeholders. External actors interviewed for this study also mentioned the influence of the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs), which were formed out of the civil disobedience protest movement against the military coup and remain present in the territories controlled by the KNU and KNPP. Since the PDFs – whose members largely originate from urban areas – are more inclusive in their structures and are comparatively less affected by a gender discrimination mindset, they have, according to external actors, been able to help the EROs recognise the advantages of having more women involved, also as fighters.

External actors also highlighted **contextual factors** of the two movements, such as geography and religion, to be conducive to progress on WPS. The presence of both movements along the Thai border and the predominantly Christian communities represented therein have exposed the movements to missionary groups and other civil society or church-led organisations. This has, according to external observers interviewed, resulted in more exposure by the movements to international discourse on WPS than which is found in other EROs without these characteristics.

With regard to international actors, female leaders from both movements brought up the role of **donors and foreign embassies** as influential actors in supporting, and advocating for, the effective implementation of women’s rights. They highlighted the role of donors in not only providing funding and technical resources to improve policies and practices, but also in exerting pressure on power-holders in both movements. According to an interviewee, “EROs need international recognition and the legitimacy from their own people. They have the willingness to prove that they are a good government in their territories in the face of the global and local communities. They have to give in to the pressure of their own movement and the international community, such as embassies and donors. The embassies have a greater influence on the EROs to push and pressure for the implementation.” ERO leaders also expressed their wish to be perceived and treated as government actors by international donors. One female KNPP leader stated:

“If they see EROs as the government within the areas, they will engage them for different issues. Not just training, but also humanitarian aid, health issues, and other things that they offer to other countries.”

One female KNU leader highlighted that substantive and consistent advocacy by **international women’s movements** and global policy advocacy for gender inclusion and the WPS agenda are also pushing the ERO to take action, or at least to consider including women’s participation in its organisational agenda. International actors interviewed for the study also highlighted the pressure exerted by **regional bodies**, such as ASEAN, upon the EROs to demonstrate a deeper commitment to women’s participation and protection. However, some representatives from national and international civil society organisations have questioned the overall sustainability of measures that are implemented due to external expectations rather than internal convictions.





## 8. Implementation Challenges and Opportunities

**This section reviews the challenges and obstacles that women and girls face when it comes to participating meaningfully in decision-making and being adequately protected from violence and other infringements on their rights. Information gathered from a wide range of respondents from both movements, combined with interviews with country experts, show that factors which hinder the fulfilment of women’s rights are partly cultural, partly caused by capacity and resource gaps, and partly related to the conflict dynamics occurring since the February 2021 military coup. This section also highlights a few avenues and opportunities to bridge the identified gaps and address areas of concern.**

### 8.1. Overcoming Cultural Challenges

Across both movements, the issue of cultural norms and gender stereotypes came to the fore as a major challenge to adopting and implementing policies on women’s meaningful participation and protection in ERO territories. For instance, within the KNU movement, many interviewees recognised that women’s roles are socially constructed to limit them to being mothers, housewives and followers, thereby preventing their participation in public and political spheres.

In both movements, the dominance of **leaders with conservative mindsets** was considered to be the greatest hindrance to the development and implementation of gender policies, while the strengthening of existing advocacy channels for women’s CSOs was heralded as the most effective way to enforce gender policies. For example, most KNPP leaders mentioned several discussions were held focusing on ways to increase women’s participation on different organisational levels, but noted these discussions failed due to the presence of conservative leaders within the organisation. As confirmed by a KNWO interviewee,

“KNWO is doing advocacy on reforming the [KNPP] policies, but it is challenging due to... male leaders with conservative ideas in the decision-making levels.”

Many female interviewees also pointed to practices of **gender discrimination** at the local and central levels of both movements. One female KNU leader stated:

“they [male leaders] just think men are better than women. Due to this mindset, they couldn’t even elect 7 women among the 24 female delegates for the positions of 55 members in the Central Standing Committee during the last Congress. They have concerns that women are talkative and create more debates and long discussions.”

Many interviewees also found the existence of deep-rooted gender norms and stereotypes based on **traditional practices** within the communities to be a hindrance to adequately addressing women’s protection needs. For example, according to some Karen CSO leaders and a female GBV survivor, in townships where most of the cases were handled through traditional practices, no effective actions were taken – especially if the perpetrators were considered to be powerful or if the leaders were not gender-sensitive.

By contrast, not all leaders interviewed (male and female) considered traditional practices to be a determining factor leading to gender discrimination. By lending insufficient attention to the impact of gender norms and stereotypes, these leaders tend to **lack awareness** around the need for effective policy development on women’s participation and protection. One male leader acknowledged this: “*They said ‘Why do women need extra rights?’ Even though the KNPP leadership encourages greater women’s participation, they never try to understand or solve the root causes.*” In fact, according to a female leader from an ERO close to the KNPP, the reluctance to enforce policies on women’s and gender equality is reflected across different EROs throughout the country:

“Many male leaders think that having policies for women’s and gender equality generates a negative understanding from the public, that people would think there is a policy because there is gender discrimination. Many leaders think there is no need for a specific policy because there is no gender discrimination.”

Another challenge raised by Karen CSO leaders was that some of the existing policies and commitments seemed to have resulted from external pressures, rather than from a proactive internal decision within the KNU leadership, which has hindered effective implementation and the development of systematic action plans.

## 8.2 Bridging Capacity and Resource Gaps

The gaps in **organisational capacity and human resources** were identified as another major challenge for effective policy implementation. A female KNU leader explained, “*the KNU signed Geneva Call’s Deed of Commitment on sexual violence and gender equality, but there is no capacity, no human resources and no systematic action plans for all these processes.*”

Leaders from KNPP’s Justice Department also identified the lack of gender awareness, technical support, knowledge on international laws regarding women, and the lack of an adequate budget as the greatest challenges facing the implementation of protective measures for women. Many interviewees from both movements highlighted the need for awareness-raising and capacity-building activities and trainings throughout all organs of the EROs, including the military branches.

Other interviewees emphasised women’s limited resources as the main barrier to becoming part of the leadership. They highlighted the impact of gender norms and gender roles on women, which place more **caring and family burdens** upon them, and impede their participation in decision-making. One male KNU leader said, “*All departments have capacity-building trainings, but women have more care*

*burdens. They can't leave their children with the fathers when they have to travel.*" One female KNPP leader confirmed the impact of care burdens on her political journey:

"Even though I had a deep commitment to the revolution and politics, I couldn't escape from the family burdens. My husband could not make an income due to his time in politics. He just focuses on politics. The responsibilities came on my shoulders."

Many female leaders from both movements also claimed they had to work much harder than the male leaders to gain recognition and acceptance from within their organisations and communities. However, as they pointed out, a limited number of women at the table could not create significant change when primarily surrounded by conservative male leaders.

A female KNU leader also raised the need for **effective support mechanisms**, including affirmative actions for women: *"There should be a gender budget for babysitter costs and travel expenses considered when inviting women to the meetings. Due to lack of such considerations, women were left behind."* A female KNPP leader added,

"Since there is no support, women can no longer bear the challenges. They have to carry their family burdens."

Female leaders from the KNPP also stressed their need to explore, to extend and exchange knowledge and skills, and to receive technical support. One female KNPP leader said, *"Giving the position is not enough. There must be opportunities for more experiences, creating spaces and (providing) more support."* Leaders from women's organisations from both movements pointed to the need for empowerment and capacity building for women, as well as awareness-raising training aimed to end the practice of gender discrimination.

By contrast, some leaders of the KNU highlighted the **responsibilities of women** for their limited participation in political life. One top leader pointed out: *"The number one point is their [women's] interests to participate and their ability in order to fulfil at least 30% of women's participation."* He continued, *"Most women are not interested in politics, and they don't see peace and conflict as politics."* In the KNPP, most leaders also stressed the women's own lack of confidence and willingness to take up leadership roles. In the eye of some male leaders, the lack of capable and available women can become a justification for insufficient levels of women's participation. This results in a 'chicken and egg' scenario, as many male leaders claimed they were unable to fulfil the policies in place because of women's limited resources, but many female leaders claimed there were less women participating because of the lack of effective policies and practices.

At the same time, when there exists a lack of recognition regarding the need for women's empowerment and efforts to promote gender and women's rights within an organisation, there is often a responsibility and **dependency upon women's organisations** to 'deliver' qualified women to address this work. This is an unsustainable solution for women's participation. A female KNU leader called upon her organisation to fulfil its obligation to implement and promote women's participation:

"There is only the KWO. But I want everyone to be responsible and every department of the KNU is responsible. It is not only the KWO's responsibility to develop women's capacity. It is also the KNU's."

Many female respondents recommended that the KNU deepen its commitment to its own obligations to promoting women's participation and protection rather than relying on women's organisations and CSOs.

In addition, despite some efforts for legal reform, female leaders from both movements pointed to the lack of specific **policies, rules and regulations** around women’s participation and protection. A female KNU leader said, *“If there is a law for women’s participation, there will be women in leadership roles. So, the laws must be enforced to make it happen.”*

### 8.3 Mitigating the Impact of the Conflict on Women’s Rights in ERO Territories

*“After the coup, women spent their time mostly running from the fighting.”* – Female CSO leader

The situation of increased military presence, fighting, shelling and airstrikes since the 2021 coup has taken a toll on Karen women and girls, and **challenged their basic rights** by limiting their freedom of movement, their means of communication and their access to healthcare and justice. According to documentation from the Karen Human’s Rights Group (KHRG), women have been forced to give birth and to take care of their newborns in caves and jungles, without access to adequate maternal care. According to one male KNU leader,

“Women have more security concerns during conflict... They have to give birth while running from fighting, which is specifically a challenge for them too. Even though women need private spaces, they could not have it during the fight.”

The majority of female interviewees from all categories also highlighted an increase in GBV and domestic violence during the conflict in their territories. Despite the presence of the KNU justice system at the village, township and district levels, and the added presence of the KWO and the KYO, interviewees brought up many challenges for women’s protection in their territories. In the KNU territory, a main source of insecurity remains the ongoing airstrikes and artillery shelling by the military junta.

Similar challenges are faced by Karenni women and girls. Following the coup, there has been an increase in fighting throughout the Karenni State, resulting in approximately 200,000 new IDPs. A majority of these are women and children, who face greater insecurity and are in dire need of scarce humanitarian aid. Female CSO leaders highlighted an increase in GBV and domestic violence in the territory, paired with insufficient access to justice, due to the breakdown of the justice systems of the KNPP and the state alike. Except for some legal systems in place in the refugee camps on the Thai side, and the security provided in some IDP camps, women and girls in the Karenni territory lost most of their rights. One CSO leader mentioned the lack of reproductive rights for women as one of her main areas of concern, including miscarriages and having to give birth while running from the fighting. Women are targeted with sexual violence by different powerholders who have more impunity for their crimes because of the conflict and the cultural norms. Women are forced to take on more burdens for their livelihoods and for their families, and they are often held responsible for the violence they have experienced. A female CSO leader highlighted that the presence of other armed and political movements in ERO areas, presents many complications, including risk of sexual violence, and that specific policies should be put in place to address violence committed by other groups in the territories.

Interviewees emphasised their movement’s **‘priority on fighting’** as one of the main hindrances in the promotion of the rights of women in girls in the territory. One local KNPP leader highlighted, for instance, that since the coup, they mainly focused their efforts on providing food supplies to the revolutionary armed forces (KA), rather than on community management.

**Access to vulnerable women** is also a major issue. Before the coup, KNPP’s administration could reach most of its territories. Even though it did not focus on the implementation and promotion of the rights of women and girls, CSOs such as the KNWO extended their awareness-raising and advocacy efforts, and social support services to the communities. The 2021 coup and the increase in fighting throughout the Karenni State put an end to these activities. A KNWO leader stressed that they could no longer operate their programmes in their usual areas due to security considerations, and that there were many limitations in reaching women in the community, which made it difficult to assess the situation on the ground. The lack of access for women’s organisations may well reinforce the situation of impunity for perpetrators of GBV in the territory, as survivors cannot access assistance and support.

All interviewees from both movements also stressed that the current fighting and political violence have increased **challenges for women’s participation**, as they are dealing with the emergency protection of the lives and livelihoods of their families and communities, as well as the day-to-day management of their families within a militarised context. The increased risk of GBV greatly affects the willingness of women to participate in different levels of decision-making, limiting the reflection of their voices and needs in the discussions. Nevertheless, many respondents emphasised that women’s experiences in the conflict must be recognised and amplified, and women should be encouraged to share stories of their experiences and resilience.

Finally, some interviewees pointed out the **responsibility of external actors** to leverage and apply diplomatic pressure against the military junta, especially with the aim to end military attacks targeting civilians throughout the countries. A female KNPP CSO leader asserted that

“the international community should be effectively mobilised internationally in order to designate no fly zones in Myanmar via the United Nations.”

Mitigating the impact of repressive state actions against civilians will directly contribute to enhancing women’s protection and participation in conflict-affected territories.



## 9. Conclusion

**This concluding section summarises key insights from the field research by reflecting on various perceptions and assessments within the KNU and KNPP on the integration of the WPS agenda in their internal policies and governance practices; the implementation challenges which they have faced; and the factors and actors which have influenced their positioning on these issues.**

### ☰ The KNU, the KNPP and the WPS Agenda

As a starting point, the empirical research conducted in Karen and Karenni territories clearly indicates that the two armed and political movements – or EROs – do indeed engage with the WPS agenda, although they face various challenges in doing so. The fact that the EROs are developing some work on the issue, and are allowing women’s organisations to develop such work, and rely on them for expertise, should be emphasised. Both movements agreed to be part of the research, allowed one of their members to get involved in the project as an insider expert, and facilitated travel and access to a wide range of interviewees in the midst of a very complicated security and political situation – all this is a testament to their genuine interest in the topic.

The respective leaderships have some knowledge on the topic and are willing to engage on the WPS agenda. Although some leaders had limited knowledge on the topic, they still showed a willingness to engage with the research. When it comes to the pillars of WPS, a greater emphasis was placed on women’s participation and related policies than on the need for policies and commitments for protection. However, the connection between both pillars was recognised, notably through the fact that when women’s participation was lacking at the decision-making levels; this had a negative impact on the other pillars of the WPS agenda, such as protection. Inversely, victimisation through GBV was seen as an impediment to women’s public and political participation. The absence of analysis on gender discrimination and its impacts, linked with a recurrent perception of women as a naturally ‘weak’ group, rather than ‘vulnerable’, seems to have created a situation in which women are perceived as needing protection, at the same time as being seen as carrying the main responsibilities for women’s empowerment and gender equality. Therefore, when it comes to the substance of WPS, the emphasis is primarily on women’s participation in leadership roles with a mandate to discuss ‘women’s issues’.

CSOs working in the areas consider that the EROs have obligations to implement WPS in their territories, stretching beyond their obligations to protect women according to International Humanitarian Law. The CSOs have privileged access to geographical areas and can influence the policies and regulations of the EROs. Nevertheless, the CSOs cannot bear the sole responsibility for advancing the WPS agenda internally, and the leaderships need to invest their own resources to advance on certain issues, such as policies and their implementation, local legislation and justice. On a positive note, the EROs are showing a willingness to listen, learn and expand their work on the implementation of the WPS agenda. This is an indication that follow-up work may be possible – and welcome.

### ☰ Integration into Policy

In both movements, there have been some nascent efforts to introduce and enforce norms and regulations to advance women’s participation and protection, although these are still limited and require further development and implementation. Opening up CSO platforms where women’s groups can intervene and engage on issues related to women’s rights have worked as channels for advocacy for policy development and implementation within the two movements. The research also confirmed that formal policies have a greater effect than verbal encouragement and commitments. In the KNU, actions to put quotas for women’s participation in its Constitution have reinforced more practical efforts on women’s participation, and have brought more women into leadership roles than in the past, even though these numbers are still limited.

Signing the *Deed of Commitment on sexual violence and against gender discrimination* also contributed to basic awareness training within the KNU; women’s empowerment training was conducted by the KNPP following its decision to involve more female candidates.

A prevalent misperception seems to exist amongst a number of leaders that the creation of specific policies such as gender policies would constitute a sign or recognition of a weakness or flaw. On the contrary: the development of a gender policy is a sign of strength and maturity, a decision to address challenges that stem not from the organisations, but from widespread cultural stereotypes that the organisation can take part in eliminating. For example, countries with the smallest gender gaps are usually the first ones to sign conventions for women’s rights and prepare resolutions in favour of women’s rights. It is a positive sign that both the KNU and KNPP are overcoming such limitations as they are in the process of developing specific gender policies.

### ☰ Integration into Practice: Participation

Even though both movements demonstrated a general understanding of the importance of women’s participation at different levels, the current status of women in both EROs reveals a need for more gender awareness in order to counter the influence of ‘conservative mindsets’ on decision-making levels. Given existing mindsets, women have been more present at the lower or implementation levels rather than at the leadership level. When women have been found to lead departments or sectors, greater efforts have been made to address the needs and the rights of women. But few have been able to reach such leadership roles, as there remain obstacles to their active participation such as the lack of support systems.

Nonetheless, in comparison to other EROs in Myanmar, the KNU and KNPP show some of the strongest participation by women and have some of the most inclusive governance structures – especially due to the very proactive role of women’s organisations therein. At the same time, the lack of the recognition of the need to promote gender and women’s rights as the responsibility of each organisation has fostered a dependency on women’s organisations to ‘deliver’ qualified women. Likewise, the lack of capable and available women within the organisations has become a justification for insufficient participation by women. However, both organisations will continue to face challenges regarding women’s participation as long as affirmative actions and support mechanisms for women remain absent.

It was noted by some participants that women’s participation was not always meaningful, and that women were sometimes invited as ‘observers’ in political discussions or exchanges, rather than involved as ‘contributors’. Nevertheless, on a positive note, even at an initial or observer stage, participation can be seen as a gradual process to be encouraged and supported. If women are there as observers, they can observe to learn how to act on their own.

### ☰ Integration into Practice: Protection

In comparison to their implementation on women’s participation, the movements have undertaken fewer concrete efforts for women’s protection. Still, efforts are being made, and there is agreement regarding the specific needs of women and their protection. The KNU has taken specific actions to reform their justice system to become more gender-sensitive and gender responsive, while the KNPP is in the process of reforming and building more effective governance structures to have better access to women in its areas.

However, the (still) limited gender awareness and use of customary practices within the justice departments of both the KNU and KNPP has limited access to justice for women in need, as most traditional practices involve processes that favour the perpetrators – often men in positions of power. Both movements emphasised their dependency on the associated women’s organisations for protection activities, especially for handling human rights abuses such as GBV. Activities supporting legal assistance, advocacy and outreach have also been heavily affected by the intensification of the armed conflict.

One of the interviewees, a top leader of one of the EROs, likened protection to “*a fence which protects from different dangers.*” The fence is an interesting metaphor for protection, as compared to the more commonly used shield. Indeed, just like real-life protection measures, a fence is not always as solid and infallible – it frequently has holes, needs regular maintenance and checking, etc., making protection a mitigation measure that requires constant commitment. On a positive note, the EROs seem to maintain an overall understanding of and commitment to protection, but the development of tools (politics, structures, capacities, resources, etc.) is largely lacking and should be supported by external actors.

### ☰ **Conducive Factors and Actors**

Both movements identified a similar set of internal and external actors who have contributed to or influenced the movements’ abilities to promote and implement women’s participation and protection in their territories. Internally, they emphasised the roles and responsibilities of leaders – both male and female – within decision-making bodies, and placed high hopes in the younger generations of leaders who are more likely to be sensitive to the WPS and YPS agendas alike. The existence of open-minded male leaders in both movements may also lead to creation of alliances for internal advocacy within the organisations.

Women’s organisations, CSOs working on women’s rights, and gender experts operating in the areas of influence of both EROs also act as advocacy and capacity-building platforms for the promotion of gender equality. Externally, international donors such as foreign embassies, and regional actors such as the ASEAN are seen as crucial players, both in terms of their provision of funding and technical resources to make the implementation happen, and for the leverage they apply on power-holders in ERO-controlled territories.

A wider range of contextual factors and arenas were also identified as conducive to the promotion of WPS by both movements, such as the collective leadership platforms set up in the wake of the 2021 coup. A broad consensus is shared among stakeholders on these platforms in favour of inclusive leadership. Furthermore, the KNU and KNPP are part of a group of EROs situated near the Thai border – this proximity has given them greater exposure to international discourse on WPS.

### ☰ **Challenges and Opportunities**

The KNU and the KNPP face similar challenges to policy development and implementation. Along with the effects of ongoing conflict, a dominant conservative mindset has proven to be the greater hindrance for both EROs when it comes to developing gender policies and strengthening existing advocacy channels for women’s CSOs to be more effective in enforcing these policies. Efforts are further hindered by a systemic lack of awareness regarding both gender and WPS. Women also lack support systems for overcoming their caring and family burdens; this further impacts their abilities to become resilient and enhance their expertise and confidence through meaningful participation.

The political situation has greatly impacted the process of promoting women’s rights in both territories; under the current political crisis, both organisations consider the WPS agenda subordinate to fighting. Yet, the political willingness of leadership will play the most important role in any substantive organisational change, and this must start with accepting the importance of women’s participation at all different levels as part of the political agenda. Any support or capacity building provided now, during the conflict, may pay off later in terms of women’s participation in future dialogue processes, negotiations and political transitions, paving the way for a more inclusive process, and, in the end, society.

# 10. Recommendations

**Based on the identified areas of progress, challenge, need and opportunity related to the advancement of the WPS agenda in the territories governed by or under the influence of the KNU and KNPP in Myanmar, this report concludes with a number of recommendations that have arisen from the interviews and consultations conducted for this research.**

## Recommendations for ERO Leadership:

- **Engage in discussions and exchanges in order to increase knowledge about the WPS agenda and challenges to its implementation.** This report can serve as a baseline regarding current attitudes and awareness regarding the progress towards and challenges of implementing the WPS agenda, and is a good step towards further progress.
- **Build capacity within the organisation to address gender issues and the WPS agenda, while continuing to cooperate closely with women’s organisations.** By building their own capacity to implement participation and protection programmes for women, ERO leaders can help reduce the burden on women’s organisations, thus making their own implementation measures more systemic and sustainable.
- **Integrate awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts concerning gender issues within the justice, security and defence sectors.** Developing increased awareness and capacity regarding gender issues – on every level of the organisation – can be key to improving women’s access to justice and protection and counter the influence of traditional customary practices, which often favour perpetrators.
- **Continue to reinforce efforts to review existing policies, rules, regulations and laws by identifying areas for improvement.** While there are some existing policy and legal tools for the protection and promotion of women’s rights, revisions could help identify concrete gaps and barriers limiting women’s participation, hindering effective protections and reinforcing gender discrimination. This work could be done across the organisation and focused within specific departments.
- **Develop action plans for the implementation of new policies, rules, regulations and laws.** Such action plans should address the integration of important new tools – an organisation-wide gender policy, for example – not only within the administration, but also within the military branches (EROs could integrate the policy into military training curriculums, for example).
- **Create support systems for women within the EROs.** Without the possibility of participation, women cannot develop their skills and confidence to participate. In order to facilitate women’s participation in decision-making bodies – be it on women-specific issues, or in general – a support system that considers and addresses hindrances to their involvement should be developed (including, but not limited to, addressing women’s family care burdens).
- **Establish internal bodies for coordination and monitoring on issues faced by women and youth.** Such bodies could support and follow-up on the implementation of policies and other tools, but also require the allocation of sufficient funds for their functioning. Formal structures could be set up at the department level to address challenges and offer mitigation measures.

- **Maintain an openness towards reassessing widely used concepts and beliefs.** This could include exchanging the concept of ‘weakness’ of women and girls with a that of ‘vulnerability’, or including an analysis of the impact of resorting to traditional practices to address the rights of women and girls.
- **Support perceptions of the work to protect women as a joint responsibility for both men and women.** Because of their unique and vulnerable position in society, women and girls are at greater risk of abuse and violence. Therefore, the responsibility to counter such risks and extend their protection is a collective responsibility and should be shared by both men and women.
- **Support the sharing of women’s experiences within the conflict.** Whether they are part of the EROs, the broader movement, or community, women’s experiences of violence exacerbated by the conflict could be shared, in private and, when appropriate, public, in order to develop mitigation strategies, promote learning and counter the normalisation of violence and discrimination against women.
- **Include the issue of women’s participation and protection at all levels of the ERO as part of its political agenda.** It is true the defence of women’s rights is also the defence of the rights of one’s people. Women’s liberation cannot be seen as separate from the struggle, but as an integral part of it. EROs should jointly address and advance WPS efforts with other stakeholders as part of a common political platform, such as the NUCC, and the state constitution drafting process, to ensure that gender inclusion is integral to political transition processes.

#### Recommendations for International CSOs, Donors and Policy Actors:

- **Collaborate closely with and support local CSOs.** Local CSOs, especially women’s organisations play a key role in the implementation of the WPS agenda. A continued support to and cooperation with them on any issue related to the WPS agenda and gender is crucial both for the success of the actions and their sustainability.
- **Engage in a dialogue with women and men in leadership and other relevant positions.** Through inclusive dialogues on the status of and next steps for the implementation of women’s participation and protection, external actors can help empower ERO leadership to expand their work at both policy and implementation levels. Such platforms can also help ERO leaders internalise WPS norms – ethically and strategically – and appreciate the added value of involving women in decision-making processes.
- **Build the capacity of men as well as women.** Capacity-building support for men can give them the chance to become co-owners of the participation and protection work; capacity-building support for women can allow them to increase their confidence to engage in political discussions. By only focusing on women, the responsibility is laid entirely on them; this hinders men from taking ownership of the issue.
- **Provide technical and logistical support for capacity-building processes.** By building EROs’ capacity to address gender issues and the WPS agenda internally and supporting the development of a comprehensive process, also through logistical means, external actors can bring momentum to and support the sustainability of the work, especially as resources remain scarce.

- **Provide technical support for policy review and development.** By supporting the EROs and their associated CSOs in policy review and development, international CSOs can help them overcome technical limitations.
- **Help develop and implement a support system for women within the EROs.** This may include funding for gender budgets and self-led economic empowerment, supporting projects aimed to guarantee women and girls' access to health services and justice in ERO areas, and supporting peer-learning programmes for women to gain experience and knowledge on overcoming inclusion barriers.
- **Conduct awareness-raising and advocacy activities within the communities.** Whether done directly, through school curriculums or through the media and other platforms, awareness-raising activities and the promotion of positive stories are fundamental ways to address gender discrimination limiting women's participation and protection.
- **Help create spaces for exchange.** Such spaces can be between formal and informal actors and structures, as women tend to have a more prominent leading role in informal spaces. It could be of added value for ERO leaders to exchange with various women leaders outside the movements in order to get their input on how they can improve security for women and girls based on their experience. Further, supporting coordination among women (especially leaders) could help them connect more efficiently and effectively, even in smaller numbers.
- **Provide documentation and stimulate reflections.** Given the limited capacities and resources available within the EROs for working on the WPS agenda, external CSOs can help document and encourage informal spaces for reflection on the implementation of the WPS agenda, even in the midst of the current emergency situation.
- **Finance longer-term projects addressing the WPS agenda in ERO areas.** Short-term projects can be a hindrance for trust-building and sustainable engagement with EROs or within their areas. Funding should also be regulated through more flexible arrangements, allowing beneficiaries – including CSOs and INGOs working with EROs – to conduct their work informally and unconstrained by stringent financial reporting regulations. To the extent possible, such support could be extended to the WPS and gender work of the EROs themselves, including on women and girls' health and access to justice.
- **Walk the talk.** When engaging with EROs and promoting discourse on the WPS agenda, communication should be delivered in a consistent manner, come from the highest level of international agencies, and, when possible, include male leaders. This would help underscore that promoting and protecting women and girls' rights is a joint responsibility of both women and men.

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