

Examining the Roles of Women in the Armed Resistance Movement in Karen State, Myanmar

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Abstract

This study explores women's participation in the 2021 armed resistance movement in Karen State, Myanmar—an area deeply affected by ongoing conflict. While armed struggles are often portrayed through a male-dominated lens, the extent of women's involvement, motivations, and struggles remains underexplored. This research seeks to address that gap and highlight women's unique experiences in conflict-affected areas to promote more inclusive and effective post-conflict solutions. Using qualitative research methods, the study draws on in-depth interviews and observations of key participants, including members of the Karen National Union, civil society members, and individuals involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement. These methods were employed to gain an understanding of women's roles, motivations, and the socio-cultural challenges they face in the resistance movement. The findings reveal diverse and challenging roles of women—from supporters and community organizers to leaders—highlighting a remarkable shift in traditional gender norms. Women in Karen State have increasingly taken public and political responsibilities, redefining their roles from passive victims to active agents of change. The study underscores the transformative impact of women's participation in shaping local governance and advancing gender equality within conflict and post-conflict settings.

Keywords: Women in politics, Women in Karen State, Women rights in Myanmar, Women in armed resistance movement in Myanmar

Introduction

Myanmar has experienced one of the world's longest-running armed conflicts since its independence, driven by struggles over ethnic minority rights, autonomy, and self-determination (Nyein, 2019). Initiated with other forms of reforms in the early 2010s, the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) seeks to reach a negotiated agreement between the Ethnic Resistance Organizations (ERO) and the Myanmar government. However, the NCA was never an answer to bring an end to the conflicts in Myanmar (Mathieson, 2021). Despite various peace initiatives, armed conflict has persisted, particularly in ethnic regions including Karen State, which has long been affected by military violence and humanitarian crises. Following the military coup on 1 February 2021, violence against civilians, pro-democracy activists, and resistance groups escalated

nationwide. For Karen state, it is once again becoming a key target of military operations. The coup was widely rejected by the civilian population, leading to mass protests, civil disobedience movements, and the emergence of armed resistance across the country.

As a country that had been under the rule of military dictatorship for decades, Myanmar has become a man-leading society where the decision-making processes are commended by men. Myanmar's political landscape has historically been shaped by male-dominated decision-making structures, resulting in the persistent underrepresentation of women in political and community leadership. Although Myanmar has formally committed to women's rights through international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

(CEDAW), deeply rooted cultural norms, religiosity, and militarism still continue to limit women's meaningful participation in politics and conflict-related decision-making processes (Byrd, 2021). Following the events of the 888 uprising, which saw women actively taking roles on the front lines, over five hundred women were imprisoned due to their political activities (Bhattacharyya, 2023). Nevertheless, the post-coup context has contributed to a visible shift in women's roles, particularly within ethnic communities where women have increasingly emerged as active participants and agents of change rather than passive victims of conflict.

Despite growing recognition of women's participation in conflict settings, their involvement in the armed resistance movement following the 2021 military coup remains underexplored, particularly in Karen State. Existing accounts of resistance continue to privilege male-centric narratives, offering limited insight into women's motivations, the roles they assume, and the barriers they face in sustaining meaningful participation. Therefore, understanding women's experiences and contributions to the 2021 armed resistance movement is essential for several reasons. First, women's active involvement in the resistance movement challenges the traditional narrative that portrays women as victims of conflict. Instead, it sought to recognize their efforts and resistance in the movement. Second, examining the roles of women in the armed struggle displays the unique challenges faced by women in the conflict zone which is necessary to build inclusive and effective strategies for post-conflict reconstruction. Last but not least, examining the empowerment of women in the resistance movement provides valuable insights for gender equality globally. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining women's participation in the armed resistance movement in Karen State, focusing on their motivations for joining the movement, and the roles they undertake with the challenges shaping their experiences within conflict-affected communities.

Objectives

1. To explore the key factors motivating women in Karen State, Myanmar, to participate in the armed resistance movement in Karen State

2. To examine the diverse roles and contributions of women within the armed resistance movement in Karen State

Materials and methods

Type of research

This study used both primary and secondary resources. To address the research objectives, the researcher employed a qualitative approach which is most suitable to adequately answer the research questions. The literature review was used to summarize and analyze all the relevant research to get a better understanding of women participation in the armed resistance movement. Primary data were collected through semi-structured key informant interviews with six participants, including Karen National Union (KNU) officials, Civil Society Organization (CSO) officers, and individuals who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Secondary sources were used to complement the primary data, enriching the findings and supporting a comprehensive analysis of the topic.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data source to address the research questions in this study. A total of six participants from diverse backgrounds were interviewed to explore their perspectives on the topic. Although the study includes six participants, this number is sufficient for a qualitative study, as data collection reached theoretical saturation, with no new themes emerging in the later interviews. Participants were selected based on their direct relevance to the research questions, allowing for in-depth exploration of experiences rather than broad generalization.

Interviews were carried out online due to participants' availability and security considerations, and researcher ensured that the participants were well-understood about the aims and objectives of the research. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. To protect the participants' safety and privacy, the names of the participants will be named as participant A, B, C, D, E, F. The interview

data were transcribed and manually reviewed using an inductive approach. The researcher carefully read the transcripts multiple times to identify recurring ideas and patterns, which were then organized into key themes relevant to the research questions. The interviews were conducted between the period from February 28 to March 26, 2024.

Results

1) Women's participation in the resistance movement was driven by injustice, suffering, and desire for change

This section addresses the first research objective by exploring the key factors that motivate women to participate in the armed resistance movement in Karen State. Findings indicate that women's motivations are shaped less by ideological alignment alone and more by lived experiences of injustice, violence, and prolonged marginalization. Across all interviews, participants emphasized that remaining silent in the face of oppression was no longer viable, and suffering itself became a catalyst for action. Direct experiences of loss, injustice, and state violence functioned as powerful mobilizing forces, strengthening women to seek change and resist military control.

Participants highlighted a growing awareness among women of their own value and agency within society. Participant D asserted that women understand their value and importance, and they have become open-minded about challenging traditional roles and engaging in political struggle. Participant E, for instance, has mentioned that her motivation to join the CDM developed by a profound sense of injustice and the refusal to live under the control of the military junta who are not capable of managing the country. Moreover, witnessing the military's suppression of the public further enhanced her decision to take a stand. Participant F's experience echoed a sentiment shared by many women in Karen State who have been experiencing a profound injustice perpetrated by the junta. The period following the 2021 coup marked a notable increase in women's participation, driven by a collective desire for political, social, and economic reform. This motivation extended beyond personal grievances to include solidarity with marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals, reflecting a broader vision of inclusive democracy.

However, increased participation did not necessarily translate into meaningful or sustained involvement. Feelings of marginalization and lack of recognition have led some women to withdraw from the movement, underscoring the distinction between numerical participation and meaningful participation. In spite of that, the argumentation of women's increased participation in armed movement still was a positive development as it would be a "meaningful participation" to sustain progress, Participate A argued. Women's participation in politics has indeed seemed to improve, yet gender discriminatory practices persist. Therefore, as emphasized by participants, women's engagement must involve decision-making power and respectful recognition in order to contribute to long-term progress.

Two key obstacles identified were religiosity and militarism. As religious conservation communities, despite progress, people in Myanmar still have beliefs about the responsibilities and roles of women and men. Religiosity may enforce the traditional gender roles and provide a vision of women as caregivers and home keepers rather than seeing them as activists or leaders. In addition, when it comes to militarism, it glorifies the narratives of Male-Centric Dominance which praises the idea of strength and normalizes violence. Therefore, it appears that women's political representation has increased both on local and international level during the last decades. However, it remains doubtful to achieve meaningful participation. As the United Nations (2019) has emphasized, democracy is built on inclusion, equal treatment, and participation. Without equal opportunities for women, democratic transformation remains incomplete.

2) Women redefine traditional roles by taking active roles and diverse positions in the resistance movement

This section addresses the second research objective by examining the diverse roles and contribution of women within the armed movement in Karen State. Women have increasingly undertaken active roles that challenge traditional gender stereotypes and demonstrate their capacity to lead within the community. Since the 2021 military coup, women have participated both in armed resistance and in essential community support activities, highlighting a shift from

passive observers to proactive agents of social and political transformation.

Contributions of women varied across different forms and perspectives; Participants observed. Even before the military takes power in 2021, Karen was one of Myanmar's most affected regions by the civil war and has needed humanitarian aid for a long time. Airstrikes and armed conflict during the coup resulted in significant casualties and distractions, leading to urgent need for emergency response. Participant A added that women are working on the front lines to respond to the needs of displaced people in the conflict-affected area. To support this, Participant D (Personal Communication, 2024) mentioned her experience: "We have to head to the city to purchase the groceries and then deliver them to areas affected by conflict. Junta's soldiers are likely to question less if they see women." This shows how women use social expectations to stay safer in conflict zones while meeting essential community needs.

In addition, Participant B, C, D agreed that in areas controlled by the KNU, women are not only soldiers but

also key actors who play strategic and organizational roles that can strengthen the movement's infrastructure and amplify community voices. Additionally, there are women who also contribute to the movement as healthcare providers at the frontlines or education officers in the Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps as well. Participant F (Personal Communication, March 18, 2024) shared her role as a healthcare responder in the camp: "I am grateful for the opportunity to apply my knowledge and care to my community's health. I believe it is an utmost role and a symbol of solidarity. [...] Initially, I was drawn to the movement due to a particular perception, but now I found myself surrounded by hope."

These findings indicate that women's engagement in the movement is multi-dimension, including both combat and civilian sectors, and underscores the importance of recognizing women as leaders, problem-solvers, and agents of change rather than as sole victims of conflict.

Table 1 Women's participation and roles in the resistance movement

Topic	Sub-topic	Quote (participant)
1) Women's participation in the resistance movement was driven by injustice, suffering, and desire for change	motivation from personal & collective suffering	"Women understand their value and importance, and they have become open-minded about challenging traditional roles and engaging in political struggle." (participant D)
	Motivation from injustice and oppression	"My motivation to join the CDM developed from a profound sense of injustice and the refusal to live under the control of the military junta who are not capable of managing the country." (participant E)
	Desire for social, political, and economic changes	"Women believe in the need for political, social, and economic reform in Myanmar, and therefore they understood the need to stand in solidarity." (Participant C)
2) Women redefine traditional roles by taking active roles and diverse positions in the resistance movement	Active involvement in humanitarian aid and IDP support	"We have to head to the city to purchase the groceries, and then deliver them to IDP camps." (participant D)

Topic	Sub-topic	Quote (participant)
	Healthcare provision and community support	“I am grateful for the opportunity to apply my knowledge and to care for my community’s health. I believe it is an utmost role and is a symbol of solidarity.” (participant F)
	Participate in advocacy, fundraising, and campaign	“Women soldiers are usual but there is a higher number of women involved in advocacy and humanitarian aid efforts. ” (participant B, C, D)

Discussion

1) Understanding women’s motivations and roles in the armed resistance movement

In relation to the first objective, the findings reveal that both men and women are motivated to join the resistance movement not only by a shared resistance against military authoritarianism but also by a collective aspiration to dismantle Myanmar’s military-centralized political system and establish a federal democracy that guarantees self-determination for ethnic minorities and all. This aligns with Thant (2021), who noted that many young people in Myanmar relate the military junta with censorship, propaganda, and poverty—conditions often referred to as a “dark age.” These shared experiences of deprivation and repression have inspired both men and women to resist, driven by the hope of creating a future with justice and equality. As Fishbein, Hkawng, and Brang (2024) similarly observed, despite coming from different ethnic, social, and organizational backgrounds, young people involved in the resistance movement are united by common political goals and a shared vision of a just and democratic future.

While both men and women share the common motivation of restoring justice and democracy, the findings indicate that gender significantly shapes their specific reasons for joining. For men, motivations often center on the defense of territory, the preservation of honor, and fulfilling their perceived role as protectors of their communities. These notions are deeply rooted in cultural and social expectations of masculinity, compelling men to take up arms as a demonstration of courage and responsibility. The threat of forced military conscription—requiring men aged 18 to 35 to serve at least two years in the junta’s army—further reinforces

these motivations by highlighting the resistance movement as both an act of survival and honor (Kyi and Thida, 2024). Thus, for many men, joining the resistance presents not only a political choice but also a gendered obligation shaped by social norms and state coercion.

In contrast, women’s motivations are often intertwined with personal experiences, social injustice, and gender-based violence. The findings highlight that many women joined the movement as a means of challenging systemic inequalities that have long marginalized them. Several participants described intergenerational suffering, noting that their families and communities had endured repression since their grandmothers’ time, encouraging them to refuse silence any longer. For many, the resistance movement represents both a political and personal opportunity to break free from restrictive gender norms and to redefine their place in society. Participant D, for instance, emphasized that as women have become more aware of their rights and social importance, they increasingly view involvement in the armed struggle as a platform to raise their voices and contribute to reshaping Myanmar’s socio-political landscape.

Women’s motivations also shape the types of roles they assume within the resistance movement. The findings show that many women channel their frustrations and aspirations into advocacy, education, and humanitarian assistance— areas that are often overlooked in male- dominated resistance structures. Through these roles, women amplify marginalized voices, provide life- saving assistance to conflict-affected civilians, and strengthen community resilience. Their contributions, while sometimes less visible than

combat roles, are vital to sustaining the social fabric of resistance movements and ensuring that humanitarian and human rights concerns remain central to the struggle. This finding reinforces existing research emphasizing women's transformative impact in conflict settings, where their leadership and care-oriented approaches foster both survival and solidarity.

Overall, the findings suggest that women's participation in Myanmar's resistance movement goes beyond symbolic representation. It signifies a profound transformation in social consciousness—where resistance is not only a fight against political oppression but also a struggle to redefine gender roles and representations within the broader pursuit of democracy. Women's active engagement highlights the necessity of understanding armed resistance not merely as a military phenomenon but as a multidimensional movement driven by diverse forms of courage, care, and political vision.

2) Implications of women's participation in the resistance movement

In relation to the second research objective, the findings demonstrate that women's active participation in the resistance movement in Karen State has profoundly challenged gender norms that traditionally confined women to domestic and supportive roles. Interview data show that women are not only involved as combatants but are also contributing as humanitarian responders, healthcare workers, advocates, and community organizers. This diversification of roles reflects a significant shift in gender dynamics within the movement and illustrates women's capacity to engage meaningfully in both political and security-related domains.

Furthermore, the empowerment experienced by women through their participation in the movement appears to extend beyond the immediate context of armed struggle. As noted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (n.d.), post-conflict settings can create critical opportunities to reconstruct social norms and institutions in ways that promote gender equality. In line with this, the findings suggest that women who have taken on leadership, advocacy, and service-oriented roles within the movement are likely to continue demanding inclusivity and representation in future political and social reforms.

The resistance movement, therefore, functions not only as a site of immediate empowerment but also as a catalyst for longer-term social transformation.

However, this empowerment is not a simple process. Participants highlighted internal tensions and unequal power relations that continue to limit women's influence in decision-making processes within Karen society. These challenges indicate that empowerment is neither linear nor complete. Nevertheless, women's increased participation and visibility within the resistance movement demonstrate its transformative potential and highlight the importance of addressing gender inequalities in the creation of an inclusive and representative post-conflict reconstruction in Karen State and beyond.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research paper has explored the roles of women in the 2021 armed resistance movement against the military regime by highlighting the contribution of women and the motivation behind their increased participation. This paper also studied the impact of women's involvement in the armed resistance movement while answering the two research questions.

Despite the country being conservative on traditional gender roles, the political upheaval of 2021 showcased a remarkable level of women involvement, with many recognizing the movement as primarily driven by women. Women have emerged as prominent figures on the front lines, actively engaged in arming themselves, providing crucial technological support like drone operation, and serving as frontline healthcare responders. While women soldiers are usual, there is a remarkable increase of women engaging in humanitarian aid efforts, advocating for marginalized voices, and mobilizing grassroots efforts. Yet in Karen State, women face significant challenges in participating fully in various aspects of society. They are often considered as weak and are not given the same opportunities as men. Although women and men joined the resistance movement on the same start, it is noticeable that most of the top positions, especially in decision making bodies, are currently occupied by men. Some women have even withdrawn from the movement, feeling discouraged and undervalued, as they perceive themselves as being of little significance. Hence, it is crucial to ensure meaningful participation for women,

where their full potential is recognized, and opportunities are equitably shared with them.

Therefore, women's meaningful inclusion in the armed resistance movement is essential to upholding gender equality and human rights while strengthening the foundation of political institutions and promoting democracy. When women hold leadership positions, they serve as role models for future generations of girls and young women. Thus, women's inclusion in politics is not only a matter of justice and equality but also of building more inclusive and democratic communities.

Recommendations

Moving forward, it is crucial to identify proactive steps that can be taken to overcome the challenges and barriers that hinder women's full participation in the armed resistance movement in Karen State. In order to ensure that women obtain the same opportunity as men, the recommendations are:

1. The ERO leaders need to implement measures that ensure equal opportunities for women in the leadership positions within the resistance movement or forwards. This includes setting policies that encourage women's participation and representations and saving spots for a minimum level of women representation.

2. The ERO leaders must provide more training, mentorship, and resources to address the challenges and needs faced by women and empower women to take on leadership roles, plus providing network and support for women to engage and overcome the obstacles.

3. Society also needs to raise awareness and challenge gender stereotypes by promoting a culture of inclusivity and recognize women's contributions on par with men. Individuals should change their mindset and values about feminism and opportunities should be given to those who deserve, not based on status or gender.

4. Both the ERO leaders and society should take proactive actions to ensure the security and safety of women participants, addressing concerns about harassment or violence. The ERO leaders should enact laws that protect women from gender-based violence and discrimination. Society also needs to cooperate and hold perpetrators of gender-based violence accountable and speak up against all forms of discrimination.

5. It is essential to ensure that women's perspectives and priorities are taken seriously in the

decision-making process. Therefore, it is crucial to create platforms for women to speak out and participate in shaping the agenda.

6. The international community should also provide financial support and logistical support to women-led initiatives and organizations, enabling them to implement programs focused on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The authors used generative AI tools to assist with language editing and grammar improvement. The authors remain fully responsible for all conceptual development, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions.

CRediT author statement

Naw Eh Min: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing—Original draft preparation. **Tanuwat Rinnanont:** Supervision, Writing—Review and editing.

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