



**KWO STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY  
MARCH 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017**



**"BE BOLD FOR CHANGE"**

On this day we, the Karen women from Burma, living in refugee camps and in our homeland in Burma which we call "Kawthoolei", celebrate the achievements and recognize the resistance to oppression by women here and all over the world. We stand today in solidarity with all women who choose to resist oppression, especially those who survive in conflict zones, as we have done for generations.

Today is the 106<sup>th</sup> time that International Women's Day has been celebrated and the international theme chosen for this year is "Be Bold for Change". It is good to be reminded that if we want to see good changes in our society we need to be brave, have courage, take risks, find and work with our allies, identify problems and solve them together.

There are a number of changes we demand to see in our own communities and national context:

1. More women in the KNU leadership, at all levels.
2. For our community and leaders to encourage and actively promote women in leadership positions at all levels in all sectors.
3. More women genuinely participating in Peace Talks in Burma.
4. A stop to harassment of women, verbally and physically. Harassment is a tool used by men to keep women down and out. If you do it, or see it, take action to stop it.
5. The KNU and the Myanmar Government have both already made national and international commitments to a basic quota of 30% women's participation in decision making at all levels and especially in politics. We want those who have made commitments, to be held accountable for those promises.
6. We want to see concrete action plans from the KNU and from the Myanmar Government respectively, for how you will achieve your commitment of 30% women's participation.

Today we want to shine a light on Karen women who have actively resisted the oppression we live under. Women who are left out of the history books, and whose achievements and contributions are not officially recognized. These are women who worked tirelessly to make change, to serve the best interests of the people, who faced great danger with courage and humility. They are women who have made enormous personal sacrifices, lived with poverty, cared for children and family members and for neighbours. All of you know these women. They are our mothers and sisters, our aunties, daughters and grandmothers. They are the village chiefs who stood bravely in the place of men in times of conflict. They are the teachers and healthworkers, the students and workers, the leaders and members of organizations. Karen women have made and continue to make essential contributions to the processes of change. Our work is often not noticed, and not praised. We often are kept out of the decision-making positions, kept away from the tables of power.

Because of conflict in our homeland we have become refugees. For more than 30 years Karen people have struggled for a life of dignity in camps. Refugee life is never an easy one

and is becoming harder and harder for us as basic services and resources are being reduced each year. Refugees are not allowed out of camps to earn our own incomes, to try to increase control in our lives. We struggle still just to have enough to eat, to have a say in how we are governed, and in what and how assistance is given us.

Because of a lack of peace and safe economic development for so many years in our own country, many Karen people have had to leave and have become migrant workers in other countries, often living at high risk, doing jobs in unregulated conditions, far from family and culture. Many of them are women who still support families back home.

Let us be inspired today, let us not give up hope, let us continue to resist. To women and men in all situations, we ask that you look now to bold Karen women whose example we can follow. We look to P'Doh Naw Zipporah Sein, Vice Chair of the KNU. Look to P'Doh Naw Myaing Poe, Chief Justice of the KNU. Look to Louisa Benson, Pi Mary Ohn and Theramu Kah Ree. We see their achievements and we see that positive change is possible, even under oppression, that women can find freedom and power for ourselves and with others.

We stand today in solidarity with all our sisters who are in struggles of resistance, who are in Kawthoolei, who are migrants or who are refugees, and our sisters in conflict zones all over the world. Today we give you our hand in friendship and we commit ourselves to be bold for change.

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