



# ***“Kill Me Instead of Them”***

A Report on the Resilience of Karen Women Village Chiefs





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Women Village Chiefs*

By the Karen Women's Organization  
March 2020

## Acknowledgements

We wish to express gratitude to the women village chiefs who shared their stories for this report. We are also grateful to Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) for their financial support of this publication and long-standing solidarity in our work.

KWO and AJAR began a partnership in 2016. Since then we have worked together to raise the voices of women and highlight their resilience, particularly in leadership and advocacy related initiatives.

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# Organizational Background



The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) was formed in 1949 and re-organised in 1985. Currently KWO has a membership of more than 60,000 women living in Karen State, Burma and in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. KWO is a leading indigenous women's organization working in protection and our programs directly serve women, girls, children, and the most vulnerable people in our community. We promote women's leadership, gender sensitivity and community ownership in all aspects of our work. KWO is active in four main sectors: Organising and Information Sharing Program, Education Program, Health Program and Social Welfare Program.

**KWO Vision:** In a federal Burma, all communities have gender equality, the protection and promotion of indigenous people's rights, human rights, and justice.

**KWO Mission:** KWO is an ethnic women's community-based organization that empowers women so they have capacity and power to solve their own problems and participate in decision-making that will affect their lives.

KWO participates in the struggle to stop all kinds of oppression of women and of children and provides support for communities along the Thai-Burma border and in Karen State, Burma.

# Introduction

In 2010, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) published a report titled 'Walking Amongst Sharp Knives' which **shared stories of Karen village chiefs** being targeted by the Burma Army and the subsequent abuses they experienced.

The concept of women occupying a position of leadership in villages is not new in Karen society. Traditionally, they held the role of spiritual village leaders and were responsible for making sure local rules and traditions were enforced. Women started to serve as village chiefs in the late 1960s.

This report, 'Kill Me Instead of Them,' continues to bring **visibility to the challenges** faced by Karen women in leadership positions, in addition to how they have used their agency to **protect their communities** against threats and attacks by the Burma Army. It is our hope that this analysis sheds light on the risks that women face when they take on leadership roles, and how protection mechanisms can be strengthened for their overall well-being and security.

This report also highlights the strength and courage of women village chiefs amidst armed conflict. For decades, a culture of military impunity and a weak judiciary have allowed perpetrators of human rights violations to get away with widespread crimes against civilians. **The lack of justice** for survivors of abuses is continuing until today. Our recommendations at the end of this report make clear the actions that are needed to preserve the dignity of women leaders who have faced systematic abuses by Burma Army soldiers. KWO will **continue to advocate** for long overdue protection mechanisms to hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable.



# Methodology

There were 109 Karen women village chiefs interviewed for this report, who represent 4 districts, 8 townships and 68 villages. Information for this report was collected from the beginning of 2016 to the end of 2019.

Since KWO and AJAR started working together, we have organized and successfully run Participatory Action Research (PAR) workshops on Strengthening Women Survivors. A KWO staff member trained by AJAR conducts all of the interviews using qualitative research methods, which involve narrative data collection.

The women who participated in the interviews for this report have all been directly and/or indirectly impacted by human rights violations. Most of the women who attended were survivors of human rights violations. The names and identities of the women in this report have been changed for their security. Village names have also been purposefully left anonymous. Our analysis refers to the testimonies by the name of the township or district.

This report does not include all of the women village chiefs in Karen State. As such, this report is not intended to speak for all the voices of women leaders. There are still many women village chiefs in Karen State who are continuing their very important work but are not ready to share their experiences because of security and surveillance fears and challenges.

The interviews were conducted in Karen language and translated into English.

The PAR workshop included several activities adopted from AJAR:

1. 'Stone and Flower' activity where women were invited to choose a stone or flower to describe whether the rights to truth, justice, healing and a life free from violence existed in their personal, family and community life. Their choice was then discussed further.
2. A timeline to understand the violence experienced by women before, during and after conflict
3. A community map to show where the violations they experienced took place, as well as other important locations from their story
4. Resource mapping where women shared experiences of their livelihood before and after conflict
5. Body mapping to demonstrate how the human rights violations impacted their bodies
6. Photo stories to communicate the meanings of locations
7. Memory boxes of important items to them that are symbolic of their life experiences





# History of Karen Women as Village Chiefs

*This timeline shows how historical phases of the conflict in eastern Burma saw changes in leadership at a local level. In times of escalating conflict, men fled to avoid recruitment and persecution by the Burma Army. Women filled these gaps and served their communities until situations stabilized.*

## 1974-76

During this time, the Four Cuts operation was implemented by the Burma Army.

This was a strategy to isolate Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) by cutting off their supplies to food, funds, recruits and information. In 1976, a few women started to take up the role of a village chief thinking it would just be a short term position, but these women ended up serving for a long time.

## 1980-94

Due to ongoing heavy military offensives in Karen State, most of the men dared not stay in the village as they were afraid of being arrested, forced to porter and killed. Most of the women and children were left behind in the village and needed to come up with a plan to assign the village head. More women started taking on the role of village chief as the Burma Army began advancing its operations into Karen territories along the Thai border. They started serving terms lasting from two weeks to one month. Most villages had two village heads, who rotated in turns and supported one another.

## 2012

After 60 years of fighting, the KNU signed a ceasefire in 2012. However, sporadic clashes continued to take place, compromising the safety and security of civilians. There was a resulting decrease in the number of women village chiefs.

## 2013

Most of the women stopped working as village chiefs during this time due to the changing political context and bilateral ceasefire agreements. Although a few women continued to take on a leadership role, community attitudes began to shift back toward a reliance on male leadership. This was difficult for women leaders, who felt like they were no longer needed as the situation stabilized.

Among the 109 women village chiefs interviewed, only seven continued to hold their positions as village chiefs, and another four took on other leadership roles in the community. A few of them were still acting as a village advisor, or providing social services in some capacity.



## 1995-99

Fall of Karen Headquarters of Manerplaw and loss of large areas of Karen territories. The Burma Army expanded their presence into lowland areas close to the Thai border. More villages began appointing women village chiefs due to the continued heavy offensives, involving widespread human right violations. From these years women village chiefs gained more trust from their community by dealing with the Burma Army in tactical ways.

## 2015

The KNU became one of eight EAOs to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, which was the product of two years of negotiations aimed at bringing an end to the decades long conflict across Burma. Four years later, civilians have expressed feeling safer in ceasefire areas but the NCA has failed to bring an end to civil war.

## 2020

Fighting has escalated in Southeastern Burma with over 3,000 civilians displaced by the Burma Army's road expansion project into KNU-controlled areas.

## 2000-2010

Women village chiefs continued to serve their communities through a period that saw less frequent clashes, but no decrease in human rights violations. Women village chiefs gained more admiration for their work, but their lives and families remained at risk during times of confrontation with the Burma Army.

### 2005

In 2005, Burma moved the seat of government 320 kilometers north to Naypyidaw, which is located close to Taw Oo, a Karen National Union (KNU)-controlled area although designated as part of the Bago Region by the Burmese government. A massive military offensive ensued which seriously impacted civilians and led to the establishment of internally displaced person (IDP) camps in 2006.

### 2008

Padoh Mahn Sha Lah Phan, the Secretary General of the KNU, was assassinated, marking an escalation in clashes and sparking tensions on the ground. The Burma Army also began a 'scorched earth policy' that forced villagers to flee mountainous border regions.

### 2010

In 2010 fighting escalated between the Burma Army and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) forcing over 10,000 civilians to flee. Women village chiefs attempted to bring a sense of stability.

# Executive Summary

This report is based on testimony of 109 Karen women village chiefs who served during the decades of heavy fighting before the 2012 ceasefire between the Karen National Union and the Burmese government. It describes their courage and strength in their leadership roles, despite the many different types of human rights violations they experienced.

Abuses suffered by the women village chiefs included the extra-judicial killing of friends, family and relatives at the hands of the Burma Army. Some shared that they had been porters (forced to carry military supplies day and night by the Burma Army) and others had been subject to torture. During these difficult times, their situations were made worse when the military deprived them of food and water and a lack of access to clean facilities to wash and clean themselves. Across this report, women showed courage, determination, empathy and bravery.

During their time as village chiefs, their lives were always at risk. They were also often captured and detained as a fear-mongering tactic. Many of the survivors were used as human shields when the Burma Army was attacking the bases of opposition forces. Additional violations included being forced to walk ahead of the troops in case of landmines and to guard the roads day and night. The women chiefs were also publicly humiliated. One woman was tied up, red ants put all over her body, and then ordered to dance or she would be killed.

Psychological distress was felt by all the women leaders, who were tasked with the great responsibility of protecting their villages and communities. Despite this, the women regularly showed remarkable strength in overcoming their fears and making sacrifices to protect and uphold the rights of their communities.

Abuses that were experienced or witnessed by women village chiefs also included:

- Crucifixion
- People burnt alive
- Rape
- Torture
- Arbitrary executions
- Beheading
- Slave labour

In response to the threats and intimidation they faced, Karen women village chiefs regularly demonstrated quick thinking and answers to the Burma Army's presence and requests. Their intuitive ability to seek solutions to these demands enabled them to establish and secure relationships with different armed groups and villagers. The village chiefs in this report served at least one-year terms, with many taking on much longer terms lasting between 10 to 37 years.

Of the many coping mechanisms women village chiefs adopted to ensure the safety of themselves and their villages, the most common tactics were strong negotiating skills; intelligence and quick thinking; natural management and planning skills; controlled stress and fear management; as well as courage and commitment to their communities. Their consistent steadfastness in situations of great uncertainty attests to their natural strength as community protectors.

In sharing their experiences of trials and triumphs for this report, women village chiefs offered a comforting sense of solidarity and strength to one another. All of the women interviewed expressed hope for the future, for their families and for the new generation of young people to not have to carry the same burdens. They remain optimistic for a free, fair and democratic Burma.

Following the ceasefires in 2012 and 2015, men have again become willing to assume the role of village chief. Communities' tendency to be more accepting of male leadership has compromised the efforts of women who want to continue to lead, but also want to respect the interests of their community.

As a result, only a few women have continued on as village chiefs. Among the 109 women village chiefs interviewed, only seven continued to hold their positions as village chiefs, and another four had taken on other leadership roles in the community. A few of the women who had served as village chiefs are still acting as a village advisor, or providing social services in some capacity.

However, the testimony in this report clearly shows the unique skills of women as leaders and advocates for their communities. It is urgently needed for these skills to be recognized. Barriers to women's leadership in all levels of governance remain an area of concern to KWO. Through our work, KWO is committed to creating more spaces for women to be leaders while dismantling cultural norms blocking gender equality for all.

While the abuses documented in this report took place over ten years ago, the Burma Army is continuing to commit crimes on a widespread scale – including systematic rape -- with impunity. KWO is calling for international pressure, including sanctions, to push for the Burmese government to end military impunity, and for the Burma Army to immediately cease all offensives throughout the country, and withdraw from ethnic areas, so that inclusive political negotiation towards federalism can begin.

# Background of The Karen

The Karen people are one of Burma's major ethnic groups, living mostly in the mountainous eastern border region and central delta area. The Karen population is estimated at between 6.5 and 8 million.

The Karen people have their own unique language, culture and traditions. For over 70 years, the Karen people have faced brutal political restrictions, economic exploitation, and cultural suppression at the hands of Burma's military regimes. The Burma Army's policies, which aim to defeat armed ethnic opposition groups by eliminating sources of food, finance, recruits and intelligence, have caused widespread military aggression and economic abuses in Karen State. The Burma Army has relied on exploiting the local civilian population for labour, food and money, and has forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of civilians in order to control and exploit them.

The population in Karen State has also faced systematic human rights violations. Men, women and children have suffered arbitrary arrest and execution, torture, murder, forced displacement and appropriation of land, and forced conscription of civilians into army support roles. Women and children have

been raped and sexually abused. Systematic offensives by the Burma Army have been designed to terrorize and subjugate Karen civilians. Administrative policies (only offering education to Karen children in the Burmese language, for example) ignore and are slowly destroying the unique culture of the Karen people.

In October 2015, the oldest armed group in Burma – the Karen National Union (KNU) was one of eight ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) who signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). The NCA was the product of two years of negotiations aimed at bringing an end to the decades-long conflict across Burma. Nearly five years later, the NCA has failed to bring an end to civil war, notably because the Burma Army is regularly expanding its operations in KNU-controlled areas, and has violated the terms of the NCA on numerous occasions by failing to protect civilians by forcibly taking money, property, food, labor and services.







# Challenges as a Woman Village Chief

*The village chief is the main advocate in the community. They are responsible for negotiating with the Burma Army and other armed groups. They must adhere to administrative responsibilities such as collecting taxes, supplies or services from villagers. There is no financial incentive as a village-chief. To earn an income while they fulfil their responsibilities, many women have to work to cultivate their livelihoods at night. The villagers in turn show their solidarity and appreciation to village-heads by contributing to the village chief's meals and basic needs.*

*Women take on an incredible amount of responsibility when they become village chiefs. This process begins in a village meeting when they are nominated after an informal period of observation, while they are evaluated on their skills, capacity and experience.*

*Women who have experience in politics or social work are considered strong candidates. They are then elected by consensus and expected to carry out a term of at least one year, though they can take on the role and its responsibilities for as long as they want. In the beginning, the village chiefs took on the position on a rotating basis, where they served between 15 days and one month. However, most women ended up working for at least six months to more than thirty years. The majority of the women interviewed for this report became village chiefs when they were in their late 20s and early 40s. The youngest village chief started at age 15, and the oldest began at 58.*

*Women village chiefs face challenges not only from the Burma Army, but also from their own community and families. The following section details some of these challenges.*

## Village Expectations

Traditionally, the role of the village chief has been held by men. However, as the persecution of male village chiefs by the Burma Army escalated, due to accusations of them being supporters or sympathizers of armed resistance groups, more women were asked to take on the position. In their roles as village chiefs, women were aware of the expectations the community had of them to protect and prioritize their needs over those of the Burma Army soldiers. The ability of women to lead with compassion, empathy and understanding was evident in their interactions with the Burma Army, who used threatening behavior to force women leaders into meeting their demands. Nonetheless not all communities were responsive to having a woman leader, resulting in long periods of time passing before they were accepted as the voice of the village.

Traditional and cultural barriers to recognition of women as leaders made it more difficult for them to assert their roles with confidence in their communities. There are also cultural beliefs that suggest a village is weak if it is led by a woman, which can cause tensions in the community. Despite close working relationships that many Karen village chiefs have had with civil society organizations, such as KWO, there are few formal channels that have been made available to women to build their skills

and experience. Even as they break and transcend these barriers, women are held to a higher standard of performance and criticism based on the assumption that because they are a woman, they are less qualified.

There were also misconceptions at the village level which made the work women did as chiefs much more difficult. For example, if the Burma Army requested villagers to come to their base to porter, cook and clean, often the village chiefs went with them as acts of solidarity -- for days or months at a time, which caused villagers to suspect that they were married to Burmese soldiers.

## Family Pressures

The role of a village chief is made more difficult for women by the fact they are expected to balance their responsibilities while also serving as the primary caregiver in the home. This means that in addition to the responsibilities as a village chief, they are also still expected to fulfill domestic responsibilities including providing care for the elderly and for the sick. They are trusted to ensure their household is maintained with washing, cooking and cleaning all taken care of while in their leadership position. This differs from male village chiefs who upon taking on the position typically pass their responsibilities onto their female family members.

As the leadership role was outside of what was traditionally considered appropriate for women, not all families were accepting of their daughters, wives or sisters in the position. In several interviews, women shared that their husbands divorced them because of the obligations the position of village chief demanded of them. This included being away for long periods of time at the base camps of the Burma Army and traveling at night, which women are not supposed to do. For women with young children, the role was made even harder if they were nursing or pregnant. Mothers who were village chiefs felt compromised in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. In one interview, a woman village chief had to leave her 3-day-old baby with her husband to travel to the Burma Army base.

However, not all families needed convincing. Some were proud and showed their support by taking on the village chief's domestic duties so that she could work for the community effectively. The youngest village chief was 15 years old when she took over the position of her father. Her father had the respect of the community and had taught her how to perform the responsibilities. In this case, the young woman inherited the respect of the community.

Women who held the position for longer periods tended to be single, or older with children who had left the village to study or work. Pressures for a woman to balance a family life with that of the village chief was difficult. Traditional roles are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of family ties, and challenging such dynamics could be quite burdensome for the woman.

A village chief from Doo Tha Htoo District, who took on huge responsibilities during times of heavy fighting, revealed that she sacrificed her marriage when she became chief, as her husband did not understand and divorced her.

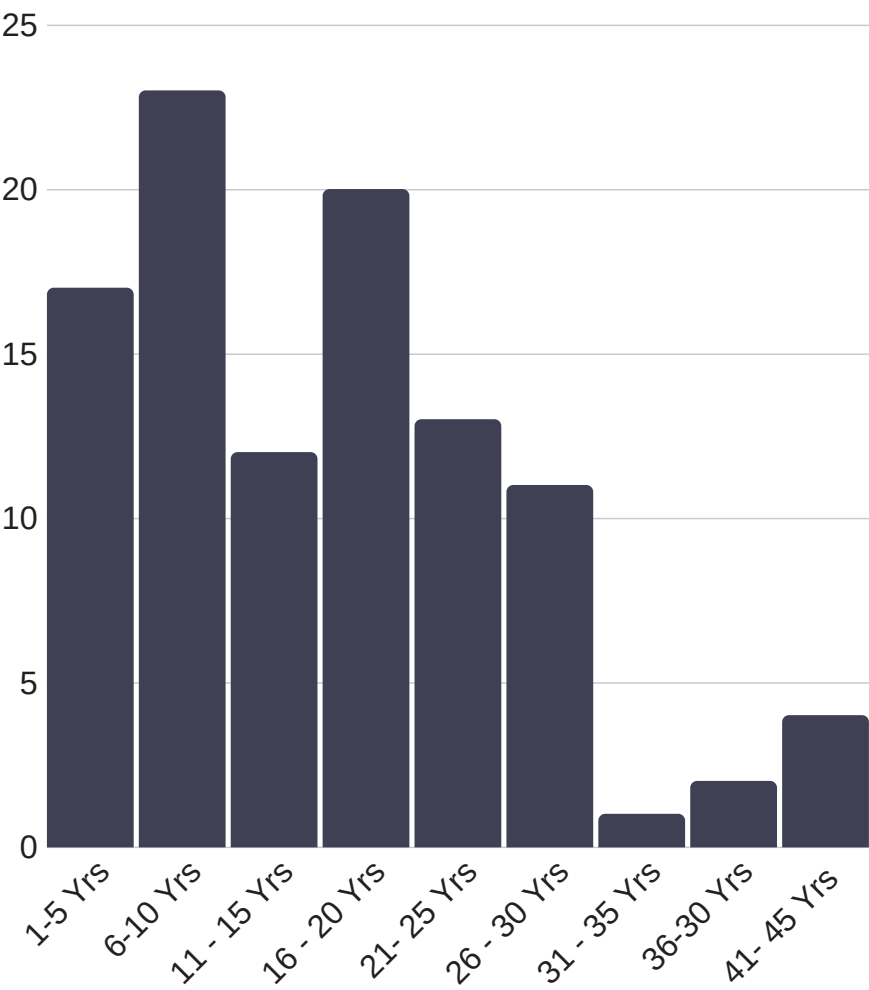
# Threats & Intimidation Tactics by the Burma Army

Women were elected as village chiefs in the hope that they would be treated more leniently than men, however this was largely untrue. In fact, women chiefs faced similar threats from the Burma Army, including intimidation, arrest, physical violence, torture and death. They also faced an increased risk of conflict-related sexual violence for not cooperating or meeting the immediate demands of the soldiers.

Younger leaders often experienced more disrespect from the soldiers, particularly if they were nursing young children or were pregnant. They had to deal with attempts by the Burma Army to delegitimize their authority as leaders because they were also caregivers. The soldiers would use discriminatory and offensive language to berate women and undermine their status as leaders.

Across the interviews from women village chiefs, several were survivors of rape and sexual violence. Sexual violence in conflict, in addition to other human rights violations committed by the Burma Army, largely takes place with impunity which increases the chances of such crimes being recommitted.

Years Women Worked as a Village Chief



## Coping Mechanisms

*Strong Negotiating Skills &  
Will Power*

*“I never act in a way that causes misunderstanding.”*

*Intelligence*

*“I have two eyes and use both sides in seeing things.”*

*Natural Management &  
Planning Skills*

*“I always have to think ahead.”*

*Controlled Stress & Fear Management*

*“You can’t tell me what to do, I’ll do what is needed for my  
villagers”*

*Courage and Commitment to Their Communities*

*“I can die but I would not let my people die.”*

# 1

## Strong Negotiating Skills & Will Power

*“I never act in a way that causes misunderstanding.”*

Participatory approaches to leadership established the women as strong negotiators. They were intuitive but remained non-confrontational in their efforts to control situations and prevent them from escalating. In this way, they showed empathy to all sides involved and worked to provide solutions that everyone could benefit from. As a result, women village heads tended to have stronger relationships with various stakeholders.

In several cases KWO documented, women village chiefs and their communities were arbitrarily arrested and accused of being Karen soldiers. These accusations could have devastating consequences and so interventions were necessary in negotiating for the release of civilians, such as providing funds or materials. In one case, Burma Army soldiers had arrested a villager with no explanation. When the village-chief went to release him, she had to negotiate a fee of 300 000 Kyat.

“Whenever people got arrested, the result was to exchange money and materials to release the villager,” she said.

Living in a situation where there were many actors operating in the villages meant that women village chiefs needed to manage their relationships effectively. They needed to be brave as well as have strong negotiation skills.

Villagers, regardless of their age, were targeted by the Burmese soldiers and tortured on several occasions. A woman village chief who held her position from 1990 to 2017 recalled a day two boys went to the forest. When they returned, Burmese soldiers saw them and accused them of being KNLA soldiers.

“I saw the two boys were tied with rope being pulled by the soldiers with physical force. I decided to approach the Captain and asked him to release them. I told him to tell his soldiers to stop pulling the boys and release them.”

The Captain told her he would continue to patrol their village area and requested her to provide him with sticky rice and other materials. He asked her for many things, which she delivered in order to have the two young boys released. She also experienced similar threats from Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) soldiers who frequently made demands to her and the villagers.

Even in high-risk situations, the women chiefs were not afraid to raise their voices when they were negotiating or to talk back as a way of asserting their concern and commitment to their communities.

***In several cases KWO documented, women village chiefs and their communities were arbitrarily arrested and accused of being Karen soldiers.***

## 2

## Intelligence

*“I have two eyes and use both sides in seeing things.”*

Testimonies from the interviews of village chiefs revealed several occasions when Burmese soldiers came to villages, arrested them and detained them at military bases where they were asked many questions. In these incidents, the women village chiefs showed quick thinking in order to protect their communities.

When one village chief failed to volunteer five villagers as porters, she was beaten up, forced to pay a fine and provide a pig and chicken to the Burmese soldiers. They told her that they would go to another area and if they were killed, she would be responsible. In response she told them, “I will not take responsibility. You are the enemy and they will definitely shoot you when you come. If you do not want them to shoot you, do not go there. Go back to your base.”

This village chief had taken on her position because at the time there was heavy fighting and men were fearful of taking on the leadership role. They were worried that they would be beaten by Burmese soldiers so they fled. Without a village head, the community suffered and so she decided to be the village head.

Another village chief from Takre Township recalls the strategic thinking that was involved in replying to the questions asked by the Burma Army:

*“I had to respond wisely to avoid any threats whenever I was faced with a situation where I had to meet the Burma Army.”*

The women chief's commitment as a protector of the community was always at the forefront of their responsibilities. Having the ability to

***“I had to respond wisely to avoid any threats whenever I was faced with a situation where I had to meet the Burma Army.”***

focus on problems that arose and address them with solutions in line with the community's needs was a tactic used to maintain the safety of the village.

In another incident which demonstrated quick thinking, a village chief from Ta Nay Cha Township was met by a Burma Army captain who threatened to kill her because she came late to the military base camp. During this time, he had detained three men and three women. Even though she did not know who they were, the village chief pretended she did and told them they were from her village and demanded their release. When the Captain released the women and refused to release the men, she went on to say that the men needed to be released for religious purposes. The Captain listened and agreed it was an act of bad faith to detain religious figures and subsequently released them.

The women chiefs' also gave examples of when they cleverly used language and a sense of humor to appeal to the Burma Army. Their engagement strategies were deeply rooted in ensuring the survival and greater common good of the community.

# 3

## Natural Management and Planning Skills

*“I always have to think ahead.”*

Though it could be difficult to plan ahead, given the unpredictability of the demands made by the Burmese soldiers, the women village chiefs showed great foresight in managing to protect their communities.

A village chief from Takre Township recalled a time when she had to hide materials as the Burma Army approached her village: “When they questioned me, I knew I had to respond wisely to avoid any threat,” she said.

Another village chief from Noe Takaw Township shared that she had to pay attention to the political situation so she could try to anticipate the actions of the Burmese soldiers as it related to the Karen armed groups. She recalls this as a point of difficulty where she had to work between and under the two parties’ administration: “I always had to be aware of the situation so that no one’s life was at risk.”

The village chiefs also organized meetings to keep the villagers aware of what was happening, and to consult them on how to proceed in the most beneficial way, given the demands of the Burma Army and Karen soldiers. Even if villagers did not come, the village chiefs continued to try and make space for them to be heard. They were always thinking ahead about the best possible outcome that would guarantee the safety of themselves and their villagers.

The village chiefs also had to rally the community together in times of extreme danger. In a testimony from a village chief from Doo Thadu District, she recalls the ‘nightmare’ of what it was like having Burmese soldiers in their village because of their

brutality and the fears it brought to their community.

“Men continued to live in fear in the village which resulted in family instability as people tried to flee and live in different, safer areas. I had to organize and tell the villagers to come back to live in the village so that we could overcome the challenges together,” she shared.

Many of the women village chiefs were illiterate or came from backgrounds with little to no education. Despite this, the women made decisions based on their experience and from trial-and-error situations. They did not let their lack of formal education stop them from standing up to the Burma Army.

The village chiefs recognized that it was important to keep the Burma Army soldiers busy at their base so that they did not come around to harass villagers or make problems. They also tried to respond to the demands of the soldiers quickly to avoid any retaliation against the villagers.

A village chief from Doo Tha Htu District responded to the requests of the Burma Army based on the situation;

“If a soldier comes with an empty weapon I will not give anything. Similarly, when they come and ask me to deliver something and they have a gun, I meet the request immediately.”



## 4

## Controlled Stress and Fear Management

*“You can’t tell me what to do, I’ll do what is needed for my villagers”*

Despite the constant threat of violence from the Burma Army, women village chiefs always sought to hide their fear, to demonstrate to their communities that they could handle the responsibility and to also show the Burma Army that they were strong minded and determined. In addition to suppressing their fears, they also hid signs of physical or psychological distress, despite the Burma Army’s relentless use of degrading, violent tactics to gain information from innocent villagers

A village chief from K’reik Township was faced with many difficult situations when she was a village chief for 23 years. At a time when the conflict was increasing and men were fleeing to other locations to hide, one day, the Burmese soldiers arrested a villager. Despite her fears, she approached the soldier to demand that the villager be released.

“The soldier slapped my face. Even though I was faced with difficulty, or risked my life I tried my best to work for the community.”

These violent, physical confrontations were degrading and dehumanizing attempts by the Burma Army to make the women village chiefs look weak in front of their communities. However, the women continued to stand tall and not let the intimidating presence of the Burma Army soldiers make them lose confidence or their sense of pride and dignity.

In another attempt to strip the women village chiefs of their integrity, the Burmese soldiers came to a village in K’reik Township and requested all of the villagers to leave. They threatened the village chief and told her they would burn down all of the homes. The

soldiers tied her, put red ants all over her body and asked her to dance. If she did not follow the order, they said they would kill her. She shared that she faced many situations like this but still felt an obligation and loyalty to her village to show strength.

“I am satisfied with working as a village chief and helping my community. I am so proud to do this as a woman. I am willing to take on the task to show my bravery for the village while others were afraid to take on the task,” she shared.

As part of their resilience and selflessness, the women never put their personal problems before those of their villagers. While they struggled at times to earn an income or suffered from psychological trauma associated with the stress of the demands of the Burma Army, they kept calm. In times of crisis, when it came to responding to the needs of their communities, they recognized their role as the advocate and provider. Interactions with community-based justice systems and pathways to justice were considered when villagers were abused or assaulted. Their authority, though sometimes questioned, remained unwavering as they worked to address the specific needs of their community which required attention.

Several women shared that they were able to overcome these challenges through religious prayers or meditation.

## 5

## Courage and Commitment to Their Communities

*“I can die but I would not let my people die.”*

To protect and preserve the dignity of their communities, women village chiefs have gone to extreme lengths of sacrifice by volunteering themselves or refusing when Burmese soldiers made demands of their villagers. Their unwavering commitment to serve often jeopardized their security further. This can be seen in several experiences women village chiefs shared in responding to portering demands. The Burma Army has taken advantage of civilians by forcing them to carry materials, such as weapons and food on journeys through marked and unmarked territory for decades. Demands for forced labor were made to the village chief, where the standardized practise came with even greater risks for women, who were sometimes raped or sexually assaulted when they were portering for the soldiers. Portering is a burden placed on the entire community and one that women leaders had to deal with often.

One village chief described how she had volunteered herself when Burmese soldiers had come into her village demanding porters. Most villagers had fled and gone into hiding to avoid being asked to be porters – due to the risk of being killed by the Burmese soldiers or landmines. After having a difficult time finding people to porter, she recalls:

“At last, I found two people to come with me to porter. We were told to go and carry the injured soldiers back to our village. Then we had to carry them to another village. We told the soldiers that we would not go. They told us not to make excuses. However, I knew that if anything happened I would be responsible. While we were walking, a mortar shell dropped but did not explode. The Burmese Captain found a place to hide, with the two other

villagers lying behind my back. I had a fear that the soldier did not have any humanitarian sense, which could see us all killed. During this fighting, one soldier died and some were injured. We were attacked twice close to the KNU controlled area.”

When women did not cooperate with requests by the Burma Army for their villagers to porter, they were abused further. A village chief from Doo Tha Doo District remembers when Burmese soldiers arrived at her house and called for her to come out:

“When I came down from the house, the soldiers slapped my face three times. They also beat up my body. They said I must find a porter for them,” she says.

A village chief from Noh Ter Kaw Township recalls a similar incident:

“When the Burmese soldiers ordered me to provide a porter and the villagers were fearful, I said I cannot deliver the porter. The soldiers arrived, yelled at me, beat me and told me to find a porter. I suffered wrist pain for three months.”

A village chief from Ta Nay Cha township shared a time when there was intense fighting in the village, and many men ran away to avoid being captured and tortured. She stayed strong in the midst of uncertainty stating, “I could have died, but (if I had run away) I would have let my people die, so I did everything I could to protect them. I knew they were scared so I did not want to add to their worries.”

Women village chiefs and their villagers also experienced being falsely accused of activities they did not commit. In these times, staying calm was crucial to maintaining the peace and controlling the situation. A village chief from Doo Tha Htu District shared a time when the Burma Army arrived in the village and accused her of having a gun and communications device to communicate with the Karen Army.

“I responded that they could do anything they wanted to me but my villagers are ordinary people who work daily to survive. They do not have or own anything and they are not soldiers.”

Being a village chief meant being put in situations where their lives were on the line, safety compromised and futures not guaranteed for themselves or their communities.



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*“When I came down from the house, the soldiers slapped my face three times. They also beat up my body. They said I must find a porter for them.”*

# Conclusion



The voices and experiences of the women in this report have demonstrated great strength, resilience and courage. In spite of circumstances that continue to threaten the safety and well-being of themselves and other villagers, all of the women village chiefs remain focused on continuing to advocate for peace for their people in Burma. Their greatest fear collectively is that the younger generation will be unfairly be forced to carry the burden of conflict and face the same set of violence and threats as they had.

Justice for Karen communities who have been victimized or killed by the Burma Army soldiers is largely inaccessible. The women village chiefs worked to defend and protect their communities with the knowledge and understanding that if they did not, there would be no accountability for their suffering. Fear mongering tactics are used to abuse and threaten civilians who demand justice in a court of law. Additionally, protections granted to soldiers through the 2008 Constitution and the 1959 Defense Services Act make it very difficult for a Burma Army soldier to be prosecuted and charged.

Despite the many intimidating and fearful experiences that the women village chiefs in this report were forced to confront daily, their resilience is admirable and shows the lengths they are willing to go to uphold the dignity and integrity of their Karen communities. However, more support and advocacy are needed to bring visibility to Burma's weak rule of law. Communities in Karen State and across Burma have been and are still victimized by a justice system that is not acting in the interests of the people.

Women village chiefs regularly sacrificed themselves for the future generations by stepping up to the challenges at hand. In addition to showing exceptional bravery, they never failed to put the needs of their communities first. The experiences of the women village chiefs in this report is a true testament to their commitment, even in the most dire circumstances.

KWO stands in solidarity with their messages of power and strength and calls for a free, fair and peaceful Burma. We will continue to amplify their message in all channels of our work.



# Recommendations

## **To the International Community:**

1. The international community must increase pressure -- through sanctions and suspension of development cooperation -- for an end to the Burma Army's military offensives and human rights violations throughout the country, so that inclusive negotiations towards a new federal constitution can begin.
2. The international community must ensure that the whole situation of Burma is referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) by the UN Security Council, or that an ad hoc tribunal is created, in order to hold the military accountable for violating the human rights of ethnic people and innocent civilians.
3. Genuine efforts must be made by international stakeholders, such as donors and diplomats, to listen to the concerns of ethnic people and their hopes for a peaceful Burma.

## **To the Burma Government:**

1. The NLD government must work with EAOs to move forward with the peace process, rather than allowing the Burma Army to take ownership.
2. The NLD government must stop pretending that Burma's legal system – which lacks independence and impartiality, and which allows soldiers to continue to evade accountability through institutionalized impunity – can deliver justice.
3. The NLD government must adopt a mechanism to strengthen women's leadership which includes protections for their overall security and well-being, as well as consequences for those who try to undermine their leadership with threatening actions and behavior.

## **To the Burma Army:**

1. The Burma Army must immediately withdraw all troops from contested ethnic areas.
2. The Burma Army must immediately halt military operations throughout the country until political issues can be resolved through negotiations.

## **To the KNU:**

1. Recognition of women's leadership as one that should not be questioned on the basis of any socio-economic factors such as age, gender or status, and for the rights and responsibilities of women to be respected across all levels of leadership.
2. Socio-counselling services must be made available to ensure women village chiefs are able to cope with the daily stresses that being a village chief demands.

## **To KWO supporters:**

1. Continue to support KWO in advocating to bring recognition for women village chiefs, while supporting our calls for justice through local, domestic and international mechanisms.
2. Participate in campaigns addressing injustice not only by KWO but also other organizations/agencies that make calls for the same causes.
3. Encouragement of women village chiefs by inviting and consulting with them to work on projects that can strengthen their leadership capacities for their community.

# “Kill Me Instead of Them”

*A Report on the Resilience of Karen Women Village Chiefs*



By the Karen Women's Organization  
March 2020