**Where are the women in Myanmar’s peace process?**

Karen News December 30, 2015 • Author - By Thin Lei Win/ Myanmar Now

Of three new union level committees set up after the ceasefire agreement was signed, only three out of 96 members are women. None are from the government.

YANGON (Myanmar Now) – Women have been consistently excluded from Myanmar’s peace negotiations and their continued absence could undermine the success of the talks aimed at ending long-running ethnic conflicts that have displaced more than half a million people, women’s rights activists say.

The exclusion at talks of representatives of more than half of Myanmar’s population is particularly egregious given that women have suffered disproportionately in the wars that have raged in the country’s borderlands for more than half a century.

Rape and sexual violence, especially of ethnic women and girls, are rampant and well-documented, and human rights groups have accused the Myanmar army of committing abuses with impunity in conflict zones.

“The long-term impact of conflicts are on women,” Nang Raw Zakhung, a female activist from conflict-torn Kachin state told Myanmar Now.

“Even if it is the men who die or are wounded in the conflict, it’s the women – wives and mothers – who have to look after the rest of the family,” added Zakhung, assistant director of Shalom (Nyein) Foundation and one of the few women who have been involved in the peace process in her role as technical advisor to the coordinating team set up by ethnic armed groups.

The nationwide peace process, underway since 2011, has been wholly male-dominated with women barely visible, despite a rhetoric of inclusiveness.

With two weeks to go before the start of a landmark national conference on peace, female politicians and women’s rights activists are voicing concern that the exclusion of women would undermine prospects for long-term peace.

Among two major government committees that negotiated the ceasefire from 2011 to 2015 – the 52-member Union Peacemaking Working Committee (UPWC) and the 11-member Union Peacemaking Central Committee (UPCC) – there were only two women, according to the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP). Both were in the UPWC.

One of the women, Kachin lawmaker Doi Bu, told the audience at an event on women and peace on Dec. 17 that her participation was in “name only”.

“We did not get the opportunity to really air our concerns…. And even when we did, we were only given five minutes to talk about gender issues,” she said. “We were always being told, “This is a discussion on war, so women should not be involved”.”

Women were also poorly represented among the ethnic armed groups negotiators, with just two women included, one of them Naw Zipporah Sein, Vice-President of the Karen National Union.

LEAN IN?

On Oct. 15, the Myanmar government and eight ethnic armed groups, including the Karen National Union, signed the so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement amid much fanfare.

But the deal fell short of its nationwide billing given that seven other groups, including the powerful Kachin Independence Army and United Wa State Army, declined to sign as the government refused to include several smaller groups in the deal.
The three new committees set up to implement the NCA and continue the peace process has a grand total of three women out of 96 confirmed members, said AGIPP.

One represents a political party and two are from ethnic armed groups. None are from the government.

Myanmar’s peace agreement would be fairer and more sustainable with women’s participation, said Nan Nan Nwe, general secretary (2) of the Pa-O National Liberation Organisation, one of the signatories of the NCA. Yet attempts to adopt a gender quota into the nationwide ceasefire talks failed. Currently, the agreement only says there should be “a reasonable number” of women representatives.

Such vague and subjective wording offers no guarantees for women’s meaningful participation in the peace processes and contravenes Myanmar’s obligations under international laws, say women’s rights groups.

“As we are the ones who suffer the consequences of it, we are also the ones who wrack our brains to think about achieving peace. That’s why women’s strengths, views and approval should be sought,” Zakhung said at the Dec. 17 event organised by the Swedish embassy and AGIPP.

The lack of women at the negotiating table is symptomatic of entrenched patriarchal attitudes in Myanmar. Despite the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi, who led her National League for Democracy to a landslide victory in the Nov. 8 elections, the country remains socially conservative, with relatively few women in leadership roles.

PEACE CONFERENCE
The President’s Office announced last week that the Union Peace Conference will be held on Jan. 12, 2016. It will be attended by 700 delegates from the government, parliament, military, political parties, ethnic armed groups, ethnic leaders and other “appropriate” individuals, according to media reports.

Some have questioned the speed and manner in which the outgoing administration is pushing through the peace process, but the key issue for women’s rights activists is how many women will be invited to attend.

They worry that if women are poorly represented in the conference, it could set a standard and make it harder for women to participate in the future.

“We are concerned because the date of the conference is getting close. If anyone asks, we tell them there are these competent women, but then they always say, ‘Would they really want to do it? Can they give time?’ It’s like they’re looking for excuses,” said Zakhung.

“Looking at what’s happening to the new Union-level committees where there are very few women, there’s a strong chance the same thing would happen again at the conference. We need to work on (changing) that,” she said.

AGIPP is calling for a minimum 30 percent quota of women to be included in the political dialogue, the next step of the peace process. It also says the 30 percent quota should be seen as a starting point, rather than a ceiling.

Thu Wai, vice-chair of the 45-member Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), told local media on Dec. 20 that he supported the 30 percent quota for women attendees at the conference.

“We will try to include as many women as possible. If there are women who are really competent, of course we will include them,” he said.

Zakhung, also one of the founding members of AGIPP, however, said determining “competence” is a subjective issue.

“How do you measure competence? Is it based on academic qualification, how many years you’ve been in politics, or how familiar are you with the topics that will be discussed at the conference?” she told Myanmar Now.
A MAN’S WORLD
For AGIPP, the low participation of women in the peace process is “indicative of the parlous status of women in Myanmar”.

Women’s participation in the public sphere in Myanmar is still limited, and female politicians regularly face ridicule, intimidation and harassment, ranging from husbands and family members who feel women do not belong in politics to smears and personal attacks by other politicians or the media.

There are currently only two female ministers at the union level, and less than 5 percent of Myanmar’s parliament members are women. This will increase to 12 percent in the new parliament which convenes at the end of January.

Doi Bu, the Kachin parliamentarian and member of the UPWC, said her male colleagues would constantly make excuses for women to be left out of the peace process, a reflection of the wider discrimination against women in Myanmar.

“The (men) regularly told me the roads are so bad and it’s not easy for women to travel to these places where the talks (with the ethnic groups) were held. I told them that my own constituency is very far and remote and I go there,” she said last week.

Doi Bu had some advice for women politicians and activists: “Please don’t wait to be called. We have to push for it ourselves.”

*This article first appeared on *Myanmar Now* on 29/12/2015.